Chapter 7
Foster Care Youth With an Incarcerated Parent

Regina Gavin Williams
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2424-0204
North Carolina Central University, USA

Jennifer Barrow
North Carolina Central University, USA

ABSTRACT

Children and adolescents are removed from their homes and placed within foster care due to various concerns. One entry point to foster care that presents various challenges to the mental, emotional, and behavioral stability and adult-sufficiency of youth are those with an incarcerated parent. Research indicated that 20-30% of foster care youth have an incarcerated parent. Yet, the children of incarcerated parents are often understudied when it comes addressing the issues and needs of foster care youth. This chapter will focus on the role out-of-home care plays on youth who are in foster care due to the incarceration of a parent. The barriers foster care youth with an incarcerated parent experience will be examined, and the intersection of parental criminal justice involvement and child welfare involvement will be explored. Protective factors, practice, and policy implications for human service professionals supporting youth in foster care who have an incarcerated parent will be shared.

INTRODUCTION

Children enter into the foster care systems in various ways. Foster care youth have been removed from their families by the court system or through voluntary foster care placement (i.e. a biological parent/guardian either unable or unwilling to take care of the child). Foster care is a temporary living situation in which youth can be placed temporarily with relatives (i.e., kinship foster care), in non-relative foster homes, in therapeutic or treatment care, or may live in a residential group home (Kirk, et l., 2013; Curtis, 1999). Longer-term placement options may include adoption or allowing the adolescent to age out of foster care at the age of 18 or 21 years-old. Some of the most common reasons that children are removed...
from their homes and placed within foster care include neglect (61%), parental drug use (32%), the inability for caretaker to cope (14%), and physical abuse (13%) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). One entry point to foster care that presents various challenges to the mental, emotional, and behavioral stability and adult-sufficiency of youth are those with an incarcerated parent.

A risk factor for a child’s involvement with a local child protective services (CPS) is parental involvement in the criminal justice system (Gifford et al., 2020). This may occur due to the parent violating criminal laws while also behaving in ways that could endanger their children, or violating laws related to parent abuse and neglect (Gifford et al., 2020). Child welfare involvement and parental incarceration may also occur due to other risk factors such as family instability and dysfunction, poverty, parental mental illness, increased neighborhood violence, maternal history of physical and sexual abuse, and parental substance abuse (Hoffman et al., 2010; Williams, 2017). For example, parents’ substance use can lead to their criminal involvement while also insinuating that the home environment is unsafe for a child, thus leading to CPS involvement (Austin, 2016). It may also occur if the parent being involved in the criminal justice system causes a hindrance on familial resources which can then increase the risk for child maltreatment (Kirk & Wakefield, 2018). Moreover, it may occur when a parent’s incarceration and absence from the home forces a child’s placement into the foster care system (Gifford et al., 2020). According to U.S. data collected from 2002-2011, research found that higher adult incarceration rates were affiliated with higher caseloads for foster care (Edwards, 2016). In 2017, seven percent of youth were in foster care due to the incarceration of a parent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, & Children’s Bureau, 2018). Other research indicated that 20-30% of foster care youth have an incarcerated parent (Seymore, 2001). Furthermore, parental incarceration is recognized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) with a distinguishing factor from other ACE’s being the combination of stigma, trauma, and shame associated with a child having an incarcerated parent (Hairston, 2007). Yet, the children of incarcerated parents are often understudied when it comes addressing the issues and needs of foster care youth (Haywood & DePanfilis, 2007).

Foster care youth tend to have a higher rate of juvenile justice system involvement as compared to non-foster care youth (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Research noted that foster care youth are more likely to engage in criminal behaviors as a result of a number of issues such as an unstable living environment, school issues and absences, and substance abuse and untreated mental health concerns (Bruskas, 2008; Neely-Barnes, 2011; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Furthermore, researchers noted that youth who “age out” of the foster care system at 18-years-old are more likely to be incarcerated as adults. In this regard, 25% of youth formerly in foster care will be incarcerated within the first two years upon leaving the foster care system (Zlotnick et al., 2012; Sloan, 2014). These concerns speak to the growing need for human service professionals and supportive adults to provide prevention services to youth while in foster care in an effort to reduce the number of foster care youth being dually involved in the juvenile justice system. It is, however, important to note that there is often a misperception that children who have an incarcerated parent are more likely to be predisposed to criminal activity or more likely to be incarcerated as compared to their peers, yet there is no existing research to confirm this notion (National Resource Center on Children & Families of the Incarcerated, 2014).

This chapter will focus on the role out-of-home care plays on youth who are in foster care due to the incarceration of a parent. The barriers foster care youth with an incarcerated parent experience will be examined, and the intersection of parental criminal justice involvement and child welfare involvement will be explored. Protective factors, such as a nurturing and strong caregiver experience, that buffer
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