

Evaluating the Impact of Early Maternal Incarceration on Male Delinquent Behavior during Emerging Adulthood through the Mediating Mechanism of Mastery

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Abstract : In the United States, increased incarceration rates have caused many adolescents to feel the strain of parental absence. This absence is then manifest through adolescent feelings of parental rejection. Additionally, upon reentry maternal incarceration may be related to adolescents experienced perceived excessive discipline. It is possible parents engage in this manner of discipline attempting to prevent the child from taking the same path to incarceration as the parent. According to General Strain Theory, adolescents encountering strain are likely to experience negative emotions. The emotion that is most likely to lead to delinquency is anger through reduced inhibitions and motivation to act. Additionally, males are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, regardless of experiencing strain. This is not the case for every male who experiences maternal incarceration, parental rejection, excessive discipline, or anger. There are protective factors that enable agency within individuals. One such protective factor is mastery, or the perception that one is in control of his or her own future. The model proposed in this research suggests maternal incarceration is associated with increased parental rejection and excessive discipline in males. Males experiencing parental rejection and excessive discipline are likely to experience increased anger, which is then associated with increases in delinquent behavior. This model explores whether agency, in the form of mastery, mediates the relationship between strains and negative emotions, or between negative emotions and delinquent behavior. The Kaplan Longitudinal and Multigenerational Study (KLAMS) dataset is uniquely situated to analyze this model providing longitudinal data collected from both parents and their offspring. Maternal incarceration is constructed using parental responses such that the mother was incarcerated after the child's birth, and any incarceration that happened prior to birth is excluded. The remaining variables of the study are all constructed from varying waves of the adolescent survey. Parental rejection, along with control variables for age, race, parental socioeconomic status, neighborhood effects, delinquent peers, and prior delinquent behavior are all constructed using Wave I data. To increase causal inference, the negative emotion of anger and the mediating variable of mastery are measured during Wave II. Lastly, delinquent behavior is measured at Wave III. Results of the analysis show expected relationships such that adolescent males encountering maternal incarceration show increased perception of parental rejection and excessive discipline. Additionally, there is a positive relationship between parental rejection and excessive discipline at Wave I and feelings of anger at Wave II for males. For males experiencing either of these strains in Wave I, feelings of anger in Wave II are found to be associated with increased delinquent behavior in Wave III. Mastery was found to mediate the relationship between both parental rejection and excessive discipline and anger, but no such mediation occurs in the relationship between anger and delinquency, regardless of the strain being experienced. These findings suggest adolescent males who feel they are in control of their own lives are less likely to experience negative emotions produced by the occurrence of strain, thereby decreasing male engagement in delinquent behavior later in life.

Keywords : delinquency, mastery, maternal incarceration, strain

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