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Research Article

Experiences of Delinquent Children of Incarcerated Parents

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the experiences of delinquent children of incarcerated parents. The findings of this study served as supplementary guidelines for appropriate interventions and programs to minimize the delinquency of children of incarcerated parents.

This study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically the phenomenological method. This inquiry utilized ten (10) informants from Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu, Philippines. Using a validated interview guide with open-ended questions prepared by the researcher, the informants were all interviewed individually. Colaizzi's thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected.

Three themes summarized the positive experiences of the informants. These were: Overcoming Adversities Through Support System, Perseverance in the Midst of Despair, and Optimism Towards Survival. As to the negative experiences, the themes revealed were: Victim of Misfortune, Susceptible to Destruction, and Demotivated by the Daunting Challenges. The theme of Scarcity of Resources and Lack of Guidance highlighted the push factors of the informant's delinquency.

The study suggests that government organizations and the community work together to improve support systems and programs for children of incarcerated parents. This will help their well-being, prevent delinquency, and uphold their rights.

Keywords: *Delinquent Children, Parental Incarceration, Experiences, Push Factors, Intervention Programs*

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Background

Childhood experiences play a vital role in a child's development. They have their initial learning experiences throughout these years, which will later serve as the foundation for their cognitive, emotional, and social development. It is our responsibility as members of society to completely optimize these early years of children's lives to ensure a peaceful and productive country. It is critical to instill a sense of social responsibility in children at a young age so that they can contribute to their communities (Sigue, 2019).

However, parental incarceration shatters every child's hope. It may harm the lives of children. The circumstances of it may be traumatic for children to start with, and the physical and emotional absence of a parent may hinder the behavioral and cognitive development of children. They may also experience stigma and shame that could impede their interaction with other people, including their learning. It may also contribute to the family's economic hardship, given that the financial support of parents is diminished (Turney & Goodsell, 2018).

It give children a reason to engage in delinquent behavior to survive. It is one of the many factors that contribute to children's delinquency. On the other hand, child delinquency is criminal activity, chronic antisocial behavior, or disobedience by a child that the child's parents are unable to control (Legal Dictionary, 2015). In the Philippines, it refers to criminal acts performed by children under the age of 18. These children shall be exempt from criminal liability but will be subjected to an intervention program unless they did the act willingly (GovPh, 2006). It has been a major problem throughout the years in the whole world (Sigue, 2019).

Studies show that many children of incarcerated parents experience developmental problems such as cognitive delays, regression, and poor coping skills (Child Welfare League of America, 1998). Gabel (1995) noted that being separated from a parent can cause behavioral issues, while Brahman (2002) highlighted the social and emotional effects on the family, including broken relationships, loss of income, childcare problems, and financial strain due to legal and travel expenses.

Parental imprisonment is widely recognized as a traumatic event that affects children's growth in many ways. It can lead to emotional and psychological issues, substance use, school difficulties, and health problems (Johnson & Arditti, 2023). Kjellstrand et al. (2020) found that children with imprisoned parents face different developmental risks such as delinquency and even suicidality. They emphasized that these risks vary depending on the child's personality and environment. However, strong parent-child relationships, consistent and non-harsh parenting, mentally healthy parents, and low family stress can serve as protective factors that help lessen these negative effects.

Globally, parental incarceration is an important but often overlooked issue. According to Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) it is estimated that there are 2.6 million children in the US and 800,000 children across Europe (Minson, 2019) who were affected by the incarceration of their parents.

In the Philippines, the problem is also evident. In 2018, there were reported numbers of children who had experienced this. The country held the sixth-highest prison population out of 21 Asian countries. Last 2019, an estimated 215,000 people were incarcerated (Ingram, 2020). The Juvenile Justice Welfare Council (2020) report stated that there were 3,776 children detained in various jails across the country in 2016, which decreased to 1,720 in 2017 and 825 in 2018. As of December 2019, there were 49 children detained in jails, while around 2,578 children were placed in youth detention homes.

In Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu, a rapidly developing area in the province, child delinquency remains a concern. From the year 2011 to 2018, the percentage of recorded juvenile delinquents in this city was 79.1%. The most common crime committed by these children was theft, followed by drug-related crimes prohibited by Republic Act No. 9165, robbery, rape, and sexual abuse (Baguio et al., 2018).

Although many studies have been conducted on the lives of children who have incarcerated parents, few studies have focused on delinquent children of imprisoned parents, particularly in Cebu. This absence highlights

the need to understand their experiences and push factors of their delinquency.

The study investigated the experiences of delinquent children of incarcerated parents and the push factors of these children's delinquency. The researcher was interested in identifying the possible ways and means to address the problems commonly faced by these children, which might be a great aid in lessening delinquency. In addition, this study was created to recommend appropriate interventions and programs to minimize the delinquency of children of incarcerated parents.

Method

This study focused on the lived experiences of delinquent children of incarcerated parents using a phenomenological approach. The focus of the phenomenological inquiry is what people experience concerning some phenomenon or other and how they interpret those experiences. It is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of a particular situation. The primary goal of this approach is to develop a comprehensive description of the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2013).

Furthermore, this study was conducted in Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu, Philippines. It is a first-class, highly urbanized city, and it is geographically located in the province of Cebu. Additionally, this study was conducted in Barangay Calawisan, Lapu-Lapu City. Moreover, purposive sampling was utilized as participants were deliberately selected based on their experience. The study involved ten (10) participants, all of whom had committed delinquent behavior during their childhood or adolescence. Some of the participants had been imprisoned but were already released at the time of the interview, while others had been reported for delinquent acts at the barangay level. All participants were male and were already adults during the conduct of the interview. Their ages at the time of incarceration or reported delinquency ranged from 9 to 17 years old, while their ages during the interview ranged from 19 to 45 years old. Importantly, all participants were children of incarcerated parents, providing a common social and familial context relevant to the phenomenon being explored.

In addition, these ten individuals were subjected to in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the researcher designed and used an interview guide for the in-depth interview to enable the researcher to identify the lived experiences of the informants. The interview guide has informed consent to invite the subjects formally and for them to voluntarily and freely provide the information needed to attain the objectives of this research. The initial segment of the questionnaire aimed to ascertain the informants' experiences throughout their parents' incarceration, encompassing both positive and negative aspects encountered by the individuals. The subsequent section of the questionnaire was designed to identify the push factors contributing to the informant's delinquency. Following the approval of the interview guide crafted by the researcher, the researcher sought permission from the barangay chairman of the chosen locale of the study to ensure the involvement of informants before conducting the interviews.

The researcher used an audio recorder to ensure that she kept a good record during the in-depth interview, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim before the data was analyzed. The data gathered from the informants during the in-depth interview was analyzed through Collaizi's 7 steps of data analysis. The responses of the participants during the interview were transcribed and translated individually. From the interview transcriptions, significant statements were extracted, and core meanings were formulated. The formulated meanings with commonalities or common key ideas were then grouped into clustered themes.

The researcher ensured that during and after the conduct of the study, the research participants were not subjected to harm in any way whatsoever. In addition, respect for the dignity of research participants was also prioritized. Full consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study, in which an informed consent form was given to them, and it was sure that the participants had signed it. The duly signed consent includes the voluntary participation of the participants in the interview and answering the questions according to their satisfaction. Moreover, any deception or

exaggeration about the aims and objectives of the research was avoided.

Furthermore, trustworthiness consists of four different components: credibility, the validity of the findings; transferability, the applicability of the findings to other contexts; dependability, the reliability of the findings at another time; and confirmability, the objectivity of the researchers while carrying out their research.

Credibility refers to the degree to which the research represents the actual meanings of the research participants or the truth value. It is seen as the most important aspect of measure in establishing trustworthiness because credibility essentially asks the researcher to clearly link the research study's findings with reality in order to demonstrate the truth of the research findings.

Meanwhile, transferability is important for the application of research findings because policy and management can rely on data, conclusions, and recommendations from a single or a small number of research projects, often relying on evidence from a variety of contexts that are not the same as the one in which applications will be made. The researcher made explicit connections to the cultural and social contexts that surround data collection. This means talking about where the interviews occurred, the general setup of the environment, and other aspects of data collection that help provide a richer and fuller understanding of the research setting. Thus, constitutes the ideas that the research study's findings could be applicable to other contexts, situations, times, and populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

On the other hand, dependability is also important to trustworthiness because it establishes the research study's findings as consistent and repeatable. The researcher aimed to verify that their findings are consistent with the raw data they collected, making sure that if some other researchers were to look over the data, they would arrive at similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions about the data. This is important to make sure that there is nothing missed in the research study, or that the researcher is not sloppy or misguided in her final report (Sandelowski, 1986; Polit et al., 2006; Streubert, 2007).

While, confirmability was established through the consent papers that the informants completed before the interview began. Their willingness to participate in this project is further demonstrated by their signatures on the consent forms. The combination of these four terms constitutes the trustworthiness criteria, thus forming conventional pillars for qualitative methodology (Phillimore & Goodman, 2004).

Lastly, the participants were given a copy of the interview guide to use as a reference/guide throughout the interview process. The interview guide was thoroughly explained, particularly those questions that required additional emphasis and explanation.

Result and Discussion

The study utilized qualitative phenomenological research using Colaizzi's methodology, which utilized the seven steps of data analysis. The informants were encouraged to narrate their experiences in their vernacular language, Cebuano, to clearly express their thoughts and feelings for the purpose of capturing the whole insight of the phenomenon of this study. The informants' responses were transcribed and translated for readability. The interview transcriptions were assigned line numbers and coded systematically, from which significant statements were extracted. The core meanings were formulated from the selected significant statements of the informants. The formulated meanings with the same thoughts were organized into cluster themes. There were seventeen (17) cluster themes created from the formulated meanings and thereafter re-grouped and formed seven (8) emergent themes. The following themes have been formulated and comprehensively discussed by the researcher to better describe the experiences of delinquent children of incarcerated parents.

- I. Experiences of the informants during parents' incarceration
 - A. Positive Experiences
 1. *Overcoming Adversities Through Support System.* This theme describes how the children of incarcerated parents relied on their neighbors and community to survive the sudden hardships they faced. After their

parents were sent to prison, their lives shifted from stability to financial and emotional struggle. With limited resources, the children learned to work at a young age by selling vegetables, fishing, or doing construction tasks to help meet daily needs. However, as support lessened and their situation worsened, some were pushed toward risky and unlawful activities just to survive. Despite these challenges, the presence of a support system initially gave them strength and hope to endure their difficulties.

This theme is anchored on Social Control theory, which offers the justification for why people obey rules. Social control theory suggests that the strength and durability of an individual's bonds or commitments to conventional society inhibit social deviance (Hirschi, 1969). This theory explains how behavior conforms to what is generally expected in society. Social control theories, however, focus primarily on external factors and the processes by which they become effective.

People with less to lose are more inclined to commit a crime. Emotional tie between people or to a community is the most significant part of the social relationship. If a person is close to his or her parents, he or she is more likely to avoid committing crimes in order to preserve the relationship. As a result, if parent-child ties are disrupted as a result of parental incarceration, the kids are less likely to refrain from criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969).

2. *Perseverance in the Midst of Despair.* This theme unravels how some of the informants addressed the difficulties in life that they went through. During the researcher's interview, some informants continued to live their lives and made every attempt to survive. The support and guidance they got from their family also inspired some of the informants to continue their studies. They believed that persevering through this rough phase was essential, not only for themselves but also for their family to be able to survive. According to them, their determination to survive life despite the trials

and sufferings they faced while their parents were incarcerated was vital to their survival.

According to Lewin's Change Theory (1947), the movement or change stage involves a shift in one's thoughts, feelings, or behavior toward a more beneficial state. Some informants reached this stage and were motivated to pursue their education in hopes of proving to others especially their neighbors that they could rise above the stigma of having incarcerated parents.

The more they are invested and engaged in prosocial, structured activities (study habits), like school or leadership in a club or sports team, the less likely they are to engage in deviant activities. They simply do not have the time because they are invested in pro-social activities. However, when they cannot find or are not involved in conventional activities that bring them joy and where they feel like they belong and are needed, they are more likely to invest in unconventional activities (Hirschi, 1969).

3. *Optimism Towards Survival.* This theme highlights the resilience and positive outlook of the informants despite the challenges brought by their parents' incarceration. Growing up without a parent is inherently difficult, as children lack consistent love, care, and emotional support. The absence of a family breadwinner often forced them to confront life's hardships on their own. Yet, some informants showed optimism and they strived to maintain a positive attitude and focus on survival. Their ability to find hope amidst adversity reflects their resilience and determination to overcome difficult circumstances.

This theme is anchored on the Social Control theory by Hirschi (1969) determined that connections to people in the creation of a relationship are important factors in delinquency. In other words, social bonds matter. As a result, commitment is the second attribute in social bond theory. A person's level of commitment is determined by their level of effort in achieving conformity. The level of dedication to con-

formity, also known as ambition or aspiration, influences whether or not a person chooses to conduct a criminal act. Children no longer in their parents' care are prone to a lack of commitment to society and conformity due to the foster system's misplacement/inconsistent lifestyle, and single-family lifestyles (Corless, 2014).

B. Negative Experiences

1. *Victim of Misfortune.* This theme captures the hardships the informants faced during their parents' incarceration which caused emotional distress and contributed to feelings of depression and anxiety. These challenges pushed many of them to seek comfort and belonging through peer groups.

This theme is supported by Interactional theory, which proposes that when bonds to conventional society are weakened, however, the person acquires greater behavioral freedom. No longer bound to the straight and narrow, several alternatives become available to the individual, including the opportunity to engage in delinquent behavior. For that to occur, however, some mechanism that channels the behavioral freedom towards specifically delinquent conduct is required. This is especially so if one is concerned with explaining persistent and serious delinquency rather than isolated, non-patterned acts of delinquency. Associations with delinquent peers and the learning environment they provide are the primary mechanisms for cultivating both delinquent beliefs and delinquent behavior. As delinquency is learned and reinforced, it is apt to become a stable part of the person's repertoire (Thornberry et al., 1991).

2. *Susceptible to Destruction.* The theme represents the chaotic lives of the informants due to their parents' incarceration. This profound loss significantly impacts the children, driving them into a state of emotional turmoil and vulnerability. With the lack of parental guidance and support, many of these children became rebellious, seeking solace and companionship among negative influences and delinquent peers. Moreover, the lack of positive role models and a stable support system further amplifies their

susceptibility to destructive behaviors. The absence of a nurturing environment leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by negative influences in their social circles.

According to Hirschi (1969), attachment, which includes the children's relationship with their parents, is very important, and this prevents deviance among children. But when the parent is incarcerated, the bond between them becomes weakened. The weakened bond led to frustration and pulled a child who once had a sense of social attachment into isolation. Meanwhile, in the study by Corless (2014), sudden separation and intermittent exposure to incarcerated parents can cause lasting social/emotional issues that may have a long-term effect on the development, which has the potential to lead to future delinquency.

3. *Demotivated by the Daunting Challenges.* This theme described the adverse effects of parental incarceration on their children. Informants were discouraged from their studies, so they skipped classes, missed school frequently, and even stopped going to school altogether. Furthermore, they indicated that their parents' incarceration was the source of their discouragement and that one of the contributing elements to their failure to complete their education was a lack of direction and monitoring from their parents.

It is profound and crucial to note that for children whose parents are incarcerated, the theory that they are less prone to adopt conventional theories appears to be true. This is further accentuated not only due to the lack of conventional examples but also by the negative, non-conventional example of a parent entering and exiting the corrections system as they continue to seek the next big score (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

II. Push Factors of the Informants' Delinquency

This theme was created to describe the push factors of the informant's delinquency during the incarceration of their parents.

1. *Scarcity of Resources.* This theme explores the underlying reasons why informants engaged in delinquent behavior. The informants described their childhoods as once filled with love, emotional support, and security, but their parents' imprisonment disrupted this stability. Many faced extreme financial hardship, sometimes struggling to afford basic needs such as daily meals. Conflicts among siblings over food reflected the family's deprivation, which in turn pushed some informants toward illicit activities. Several admitted that selling drugs became a way to support their families and survive under these difficult circumstances.

The separation of the children from their parents due to incarceration weakened the bond between them, and this led to the disruption of the parent-child attachment (Van de Rakt et al., 2011). Informants described feeling lost in life after their parents were imprisoned. Most of them believed that when their parents were taken to prison, their lives were devastated since they no longer had a parent to lead them. On the other hand, family bonds are linked to non-delinquency, according to the evidence. Glueck (1960) stated in their famous book *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* that the affection of the father and mother for the child was two of the greatest five predictors of delinquency, according to their research. They also discovered that delinquents' emotional relationships with their parents tended to be weaker in the other direction.

2. *Lack of Guidance.* The absence of parental supervision, coupled with the negative emotions stemming from their parents' incarceration, motivated numerous informants to engage in delinquent behaviors, as they expressed that the absence of parental oversight allowed them to act freely without restraint, contrary to when their parents were present. They claimed that their parents' absence caused them to become delinquent. They recounted how the absence of their parents' supervision or guidance granted them a sense of freedom to act as they pleased, often jeopardizing their well-being. This newfound autonomy led

them down a path of delinquency, influenced by their peer group to partake in activities such as fighting with other groups or individuals and indulging in vices like drugs, alcohol, and smoking.

The absence of parental guidance is a major contributing factor to the prevalence of deviant behavior and this is called a parenting deficiency. Children who grew up without their parents, love and discipline are the crucial elements that are typically missing. On the other hand, commitment is described as the level of commitment that an individual has to abide by legal behavior (Burton et al., 1995). They were not advised on what was right and wrong along the way by their parents, because no one was guiding or overseeing them due to their situation. The majority of the informants had engaged in criminal activity as a result of these (Glynn, 2011)

Conclusion

Support systems play a crucial role to children's well-being. The parents and guardians should be equipped through seminars and counseling to strengthen their involvement in their children's lives and prevent delinquent behavior. Agencies such as the PNP, DSWD, DepEd, LGUs, BJMP, and BuCor must coordinate in ensuring child-sensitive practices from humane arrest procedures to adequate welfare services, anti-bullying programs, livelihood assistance, and meaningful family visitation programs. These interventions help protect children from trauma, stigma, and social exclusion.

Moreover, the courts, lawmakers, CHR, and the wider community must reinforce policies and initiatives that safeguard the rights and well-being of these children. Responsible media reporting and community awareness are also vital to preventing discrimination and promoting understanding. Additionally, a multi-sectoral, compassionate approach is essential to supporting children of incarcerated parents and reducing their risk of delinquency.

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"Desseyme"

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