

Never-Ending Chain of Crime: Defining the Vicious Cycle from Parental Incarceration on Children in Liangshan

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Abstract

Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture is located between latitude 26°03'–29°18' N and longitude 100°03'–103°52' in Sichuan, China. It is a region entangled by deep-rooted poverty, elevated crime rates, and educational deficit. This environment has precipitated a severe dilemma wherein a substantial number of Liangshan's children are at risk of being left behind. Sichuan's Provincial People's Court reported that from 2012 to 2016, Sichuan holds a drug-related crime of 29,747 cases, ranked fourth nationally (Chuguang). This critical factor of parental incarceration, predominantly due to drug trafficking offenses, exacerbated the issue of children being left behind in Liangshan.

Parental incarceration is an on-going issue across the world. Multiple researchers have consequences of economic hardship, children's criminal involvement, parent-child detachment, educational deficits, and psychological challenges, profoundly impacting the children (Murray et al.; Luk et al.; Herreros-Fraile et al.). On top of the single effects, several researchers have referred the vicious cycle of parental incarceration as the inter-generational effects of parental incarceration, driving teen-theft, drug use, and other crime involvements (Dobbie et al.; Herreros-Fraile et al.). However, there is a noticeable gap in defining the vicious cycle of incarceration on children in the context of Liangshan. This paper, therefore, analyzes preceding studies, analyzes the intergenerational impact of each single effects of parental incarceration on children in Liangshan, and defines a Liangshan-based cyclical impact of parental incarceration on Liangshan's children.

Keywords: Liangshan, parental incarceration, children, vicious cycle

1. Single Effects Within the Cycle

To dissect the impact of incarceration that will lead to children's offenses, it is essential to notice the effects of parental incarceration initiated before the imprisonment. The pre-incarceration issues include poverty-led harsh living conditions, limited parental educational

achievement, and circumscribed parental job opportunities (Wright and Seymour). Such issues continue and exacerbated during and after parental incarceration. With these problems on the surface, children are impacted more profoundly after parental incarceration. The direct effects of incarceration in Liangshan can be analyzed from the following three

aspects.

1.1 Economic Hardship

After the incarceration of fathers and mothers, families tend to lose their major source of income. A study demonstrated that the average family income after incarceration is estimated to be 22 percent lower than the family income before incarceration. Even in the year after the release, the average family income remains 15 percent lower than the year before incarceration (The Pew Charitable Trusts). The working quality will also be affected after incarceration. Another study concluded that fathers who have experienced incarceration perform significantly worse in the labor market, are less likely to be employed around their child's third birthday, and earn less hourly and over-course wages compared with other workers (Geller et al.). Due to a lack of financial resources, families with incarceration experiences are more likely to experience "material hardship" and significant residential instability, as seen from their frequent movements (Geller et al.). With income, employment, and residential issues, children in families with incarcerated parents are more likely to live in harsher conditions, suffer from the shortage of necessities, and experience frequent transitions of living environments, leading to unstable lives.

In Liangshan, a key target of poverty alleviation in China, poverty problems prevail. Calculated from government annual reports, the GDP per capita in China for the first half of 2023 is calculated to be 41763 yuan per person. However, in Liangshan, the GPD per capita is only 20700 yuan per person (Yun and Qinhu), around half of the Chinese GDP. Agriculture has been the major source of income for people living in the suburbs of Liangshan. Different from typical agriculture industry, Liangshan residents are petty peasants. According to Encyclopedia of China, petty peasants refer to individual farmers engaged in small-scale farming ("Search list — Encyclopedia of China database"). Such type of agricultural mode drives the issues of under-labor, due to shortage of land resources and seasonal labor, and man power shortage, due to the increase of workers migrating to other provinces (Ruan). This mode of production organization of small-scale peasant economy led to long-term poverty in Liangshan. In 2022, the annual per capita disposable income of all residents was 18,977.76 yuan (Leibo County Bureau of Statistics). With

the loss of a significant source of income in families experiencing incarceration, it could be inferred using this data that the monthly family income for those families is around 2000 CNY, which is often under the lowest insurance standard in Sichuan of 533 CNY per person (within a family of four or more) (Dan Li). Under this economic crisis, most children with parental incarceration in Liangshan with pre-incarceration issues of poverty, are significantly affected by economic hardship.

1.2 Psychological Issues

Psychological problems develop more frequently among children with parental incarceration. According to research, children who have experienced parental incarceration tend to have more aggressive emotions, and display anxious or nervous behaviors commonly (Dyer). In a study conducted by Geller and her colleagues, children with past experiences of parental incarceration experience subtle elevation on the CBCL subscale of aggressive behavior, "with an adjusted difference of 1.2, representing 19% of a standard deviation in the national sample" (Geller et al.). Parental incarceration can adversely affect a child's immediate emotional state and also have long-lasting effects on their health and social opportunities. Research suggests a correlation between parental incarceration and an increased propensity for children to develop a range of cognitive and physical health challenges. There is a heightened incidence of learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), developmental delays and speech or language impairments, asthma, and obesity (Beresford et al.).

The implications of parental incarceration on children differ according to age. Study shows that children before 16 years old show more externalizing problems, with 9 years experiencing more attention problems, overweight, emotional difficulties, and low school engagement, and children 9 to 16 years old tend to experience more ADHD. On the other hand, children above 16 years old tend to have more "suicidal ideation and attempts" (internalizing problems) (Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney). Children in adolescence experiencing parental incarceration experience an escalation in the probability of various psychiatric diagnoses, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Conduct

Disorder, Oppositional-Defiant Disorder, and depression (Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney). The multifaceted implications of parental incarceration on children's psychological health hinder their social opportunities and harm their lives.

In Liangshan, children-parental separation is also one major factor of psychological issues for children. Qingsong Liu, a prison officer in Liangshan revealed the prison policies of prison visiting of Sichuan Panxi Prison: parents and children are allowed to have a monthly 5 minute video communication and an annual 1 hour visit without physical contact in prison. According to Urban Institute's study, non-contact prison visit lack privacy and drives children's mental insecurity (Cramer et al.).

1.3 Education Deficit

Education is an important indicator of children's prospects; however, several studies have shown a negative correlation between educational attainment and parental incarceration (Martin, Poehlmann-Tynan, and Turne). Herreros-Fraile et al. founded that parental incarceration is linked to poorer school performance, lower educational achievement, higher absenteeism and dropout rates, and more attention problems (Herreros-Fraile et al.). The deficit in education in Liangshan is aggravating the situation. According to statistical data, in 2014, Liangshan had only three public village-level kindergartens, with a gross enrollment rate of 50.73% for the three years preceding school. By the end of 2021, the state boasted 3,704 kindergartens and early childhood education centers. The gross enrollment rate for preschool education in the state reached 85.02%. In 2015, a shortage of nearly 6,000 primary and secondary school teachers was reported. By 2019, this gap had significantly narrowed, though a deficit of over 3,000 teachers remained. Though the educational resource deficit is mitigated through time, it is still intensely short, leaving more narrowed education opportunities for incarcerated children. Such educational issues could lead children of incarcerated parents into inter-generational consequences. According to Pew Charitable: children with paternal incarceration experience suspensions from school at a rate 19 percent higher than other children, which is positively related to later crime and later poverty.

2. The Vicious Cycle

The impact of incarceration on children is not confined to a single effect; instead, it will implicate a series of chain reactions. For instance, the economic hardship that often follows parental incarceration can heighten the likelihood of children engaging in illegal activities. According to research, Children with parental incarceration are six times more intended than their peers to commit crimes in the future (Cox). Furthermore, educational deficits not only limit access to knowledge but also impede the development of positive values. This educational shortfall strengthened attachment theory, which suggests that children construct their cognitive frameworks based on parental behavior and often emulate their actions.

Moreover, the effects of parental incarceration are not experienced in isolation; they are intricately linked, thereby contributing to the vicious cycle. Psychological strains, for example, can arise from the detachment experienced between parent and child or from social stigma. A case study from Liangshan in 2022 involved a teenage girl whose father was incarcerated in the Sichuan Panxi Prison. The separation of their close relationship led to severe psychological disorders in the daughter, culminating in a suicide attempt. Such instances underscore the profound psychic trauma that can result from parent-child separation. While the intensity of these effects varies, parent-child separation can "lead to or exacerbate many of the issues or risk factors" faced by these children (Martin). Educational deficits can be a consequence of psychological and economic hardships. With psychological issues and economic instability, children with parental incarceration find it hard to maintain their academic achievements. Overall, the intricate web of challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents underscores the need for holistic interventions that address not only the direct impacts of parental incarceration but also the broader societal and structural factors that contribute to this cycle of disadvantage.

Each of the single effects contributes to the vicious cycle that children of incarcerated parents in Liangshan face. Thus, the perpetuating cycle of adversity stemming from parental incarceration can be conceptualized as a series of interconnected events: initial parental crime, parent-child detachment, multifaceted impacts of incarceration, and the potential for

subsequent delinquent behaviors in children, as illustrated in Figure 1.

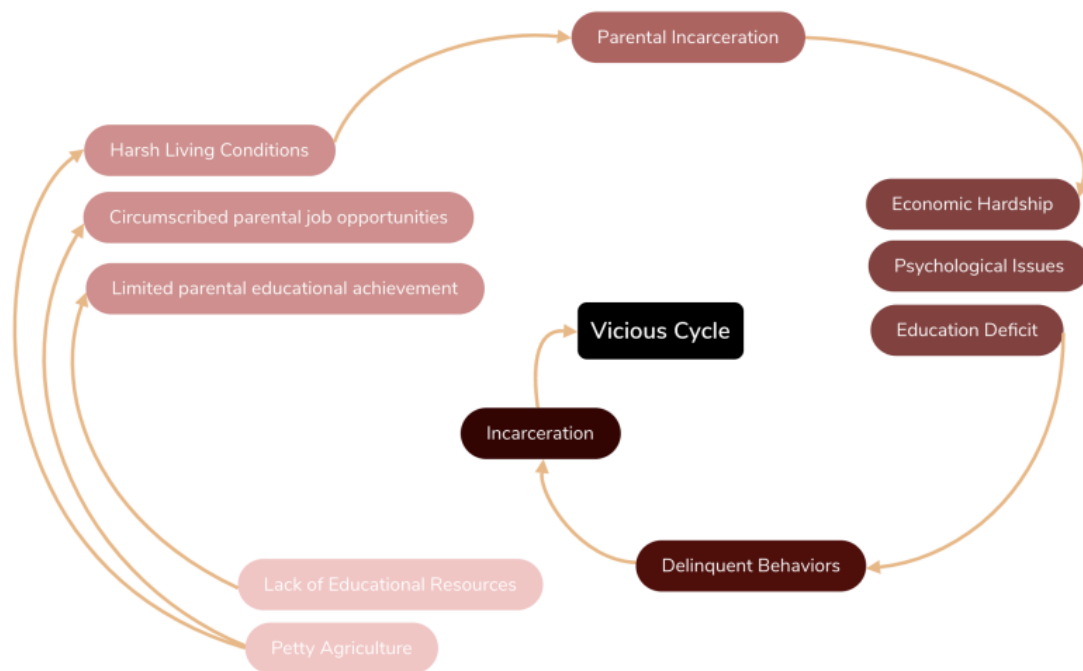


Figure 1.

2.1 Areas Suggested for Interventions

The Liangshan region, characterized by its unique economic and educational situation, presents a challenging environment of economic hardship and educational insufficiency for its children with parental incarceration. Another significant concern in the context of Liangshan is the prevalence of drug trafficking, a dominant criminal activity in the area, which contributes to the vicious cycle of parental incarceration. To address these multifaceted challenges, a comprehensive strategy is imperative. This includes elevating economic stability through targeted government interventions, such as financial transfers and government funding, bolstering the educational infrastructure through the introduction of resources and promotion of voluntary teaching initiatives, and mitigating the influence of drug-related activities by reinforcing anti-drug efforts. Collectively, these measures are essential for breaking the vicious cycle and fostering a more supportive and resilient environment for the affected children in Liangshan.

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