

# Psychological Impacts on Children with Parents in Prison: Scoping Review

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## Psychological Impacts on Children With Parents in Prison: Scoping Review

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### KEYWORDS

Children, parents in prison, psychological impact

### ABSTRACT

Children who have parents in prison will certainly experience changes in their lives, especially in mental health. The study aimed to examine the impact of mental health on children with parents in prison. This study uses the 2015 JBI guidelines to conduct a scoping review using the Google Scholar, Scopus, Pubmed, Science direct, and Springerlink databases. The inclusion criteria used were articles with children whose parents were in prison, written entirely in English, using quantitative or qualitative study designs, and published between 2012-2022. The articles obtained were 122 articles. There were nine articles that met the inclusion criteria and passed the article quality assessment. The study result found that the situation of children with parents in prison had a positive and negative impact on their mental health. Other parties such as families, school psychologists, and caregivers play an important role in children's mental health. Future research can examine the effectiveness of the intervention by involving families, and schools for children with incarcerated parents.

## INTRODUCTION

Childhood is one of the stages of development experienced by each individual. Children need full attention from parents so that their growth process can run optimally. However, if a separation between parents and children, will interfere with the growth process (Smith & Young, 2017). One form of separation is parental incarceration. Prison has been shown to disrupt the dynamics of family life. The experience of parental imprisonment can impact the process of family formation as the child grows up (Weijer et al., 2020). In addition, a custody breakup can strain the parent-child relationship. Therefore, it is essential to build a good communication pattern between imprisoned parents and children (Amankwaa, 2020).

Children with imprisoned parents are a vulnerable population who have a high risk of developing mental health problems (Davis & Schlafer, 2017). Depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and substance use disorders are common among children whose parents are in prison (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021). Parental detention also often causes children to be traumatized by ongoing stressors (Arditti & Savla, 2015). Children are also more likely to commit criminal behavior than adults (Finkeldey et al., 2021). These problems occur because children feel lonely and sad after their parent's arrest, so they have to adapt to that conditions (Sukhramani & Gupta, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted explaining the effects of parental detention on children. The effects such as internalizing and externalizing behavior, mental health problems, anti-social behavior truancy/school failure, substance abuse, delinquency, criminal justice involvement, and child death (Song et al., 2018). Mental health is an essential aspect of human life that needs to be considered and cared for, especially for children. As we know, parents in prison have a very bad or negative impact on the development of children and the mentality of the children left behind (Makariev & Shaver, 2010). But if we look further, imprisoned parents also positively impact their children. This is caused by children's

psychological conditions when they are with their parents and when they are not with their parents. Parents who often commit acts of violence in the household will disrupt the child's psychological condition. When the perpetrator of the violence is detained in prison, the child will feel that he is safer. This is one of the factors why parental imprisonment has a positive impact on the child's mental health. This Scoping Review will explain more deeply how the mental health impact of children whose parents are imprisoned is positive or negative.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Question***

The research question in this study is what is the impact on the mental health of children whose parents are in prison? and how is the mental health of children whose parents are imprisoned?

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

The method used in this study is a scoping review using the JBI guidelines (2015). The inclusion criteria in this study are 1. Articles with children whose parents are in prison 2. They were written in full in English 3. They were using quantitative or qualitative study designs and 4. They were published between 2012-2022.

### ***Search and Data Collection***

The data used in this study are primary. The primary data in this study came from journals obtained from search engines Google Scholar, Scopus, Pubmed, Science direct, and SpringerLink. The search for data in this study was carried out through several stages including observation, conducting library research, and documentation by storing the articles obtained in the Mendeley application. The Boolean technique used in this study to search for articles with the keywords used is "Mental health" AND "child\*" AND "parent\*" AND "prisoners" AND "incarceration" on all databases used.

### ***Article Quality Appraisal***

The screening of articles in this study went through several stages. The first stage of the article is selected through the title where the title chosen must be by the research topic. Then after the title was chosen, screening was done by looking at the title and abstract which were adjusted to the inclusion criteria set by the researcher. After the articles have complied with the inclusion criteria, the screening then evaluates the quality of the articles. The assessment of the quality of the articles in this study used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tools (MMAT) guide.

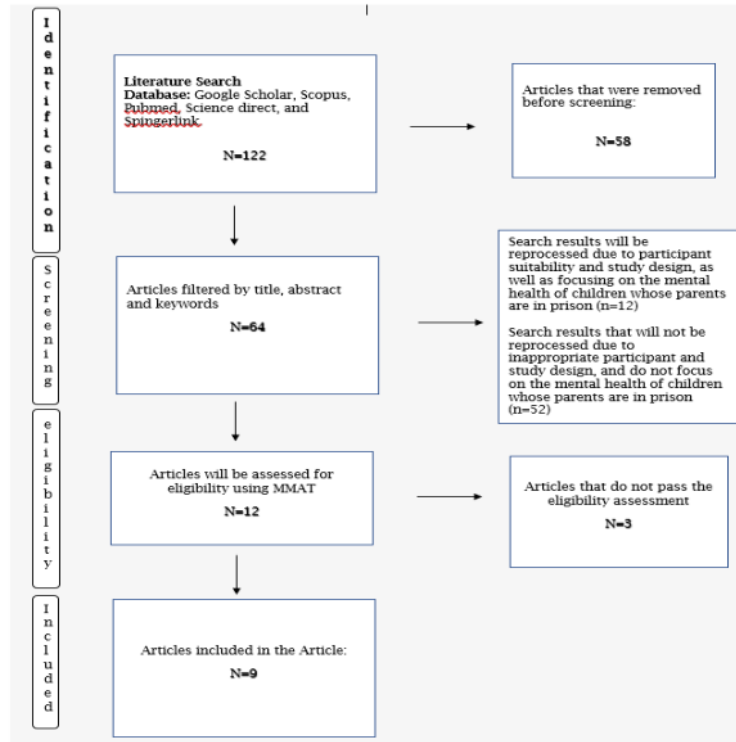


Figure 1. Article Search Stages

### Data Extraction

The data extracted from the articles in this study include research characteristics (year and country), objectives, theoretical framework, research design, methods, and results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Study Characteristics

This research consists of 9 studies that have passed the article quality assessment. All selected studies were published between 2015 and 2020. One study was from South Korea (Woo & Kowalski, 2020), one from a Polish study (Domzalska et al., 2022), one from a Palestinian study (Shehadeh et al., 2015), and six from the United States (Boch et al., 2019; Brown, 2020; Hindt et al., 2020; Jackson & Vaughn, 2017; Turney, 2017; Washington, 2018). The study design in this study includes seven articles using quantitative methods (Boch et al., 2019; Domzalska et al., 2022; Hindt et al., 2020; Jackson & Vaughn, 2017; Shehadeh et al., 2015; Turney, 2017; Woo & Kowalski, 2020). Meanwhile, two articles used qualitative methods (Brown, 2020; Washington, 2018). The sample sizes used in this study were 274 samples (Hindt et al., 2020), 15 children (Brown, 2020), 95,531 samples (Turney, 2017), 4,898 samples (Washington, 2018), 2,529 samples (Jackson & Vaughn, 2017), 219 samples (Woo & Kowalski, 2020), 613 samples (Boch et al., 2019), 192 samples (Shehadeh et al., 2015), 246 samples (Domzalska et al., 2022).

### Positive impact

Children with parents in prison do not always have a negative impact. For example, in studies that have been conducted in this research, there is one study that states that children with fathers in prison experience better mental health (Washington, 2018). In addition, children are happier and feel better.

### **Negative impact**

Several studies included in this study have shown negative impacts on the mental health of children with parents in prison. The adverse effects include declining mental health emotional problems, internalizing behaviour, externalizing behaviour, stress, anxiety, PTSD, depression, and lack of good future orientation. Three articles stated that the negative impact was the presence of emotional problems including anger, sadness, anxiety, nervousness, confusion, and embarrassment (Brown, 2020; Domzalska et al., 2022; Shehadeh et al., 2015). Three other articles stated that there were internalizing behavioural problems such as withdrawing, shutting down, changing play behaviour, worthlessness, and fear (Boch et al., 2019; Brown, 2020; Domzalska et al., 2022).

Four articles stated externalizing behavioural problems such as hitting, attention-seeking, defiance, refusing to follow directions and conflicts with peers and teachers. The challenge of enduring externalizing behaviour can lead to future criminal offenses (Boch et al., 2019; Brown, 2020; Domzalska et al., 2022; Hindt et al., 2020). Two reports state that children show behavioural problems, such as delinquency (Boch et al., 2019; Domzalska et al., 2022). Two papers state that children exhibit anxiety (Boch et al., 2019; Domzalska et al., 2022). Two articles state that children are depressed (Domzalska et al., 2022; Woo & Kowalski, 2020). Two articles say that children experience PTSD symptoms (Boch et al., 2019; Shehadeh et al., 2015). One report stated that children lack a good future orientation (Woo & Kowalski, 2020).

### **DISCUSSION**

This scoping review looks at the positive and negative impacts on the mental health of children whose parents are in prison. Given that not many studies provide related information, this systematic scoping review approach is appropriate for understanding how the mental health of children whose parents are in prison. Of the nine journals included in this study, one journal describes the positive impact and eight journals that state the adverse effects of mental health on children with parents in prison. Thus, it can be seen that not all children whose parents are in prison have poor mental health changes. Children who experience abusive parents or parents who abuse children experience better mental health when their parents are in prison (Washington, 2018). Children are happier and feel better psychological well-being because when the father was in prison, the mother and child did not experience domestic violence. Research conducted by Wildeman et al., (2018) found that children with abusive parents only felt a little suffering when their parents were imprisoned. Therefore, the risk of mental health disorders in children who have abusive parents is small when their parents are in prison (Turney & Goodsell, 2018; Wakefield et al., 2016). However, when children have a suitable attachment to their parents when their parents are detained, their mental health also declines. This is because children are accustomed to depending on their parents who are involved in various activities, decisions, and respect opinions. Therefore, when parental detention occurs, the child will feel a loss (Slaughter et al., 2019).

Emotional problems are one of the negative impacts of parental detention on children's mental health. This can be seen in the dynamic changes experienced by children such as anger, sadness, anxiety, nervousness, confusion, and embarrassment (Brown, 2020; Domzalska et al., 2022; Shehadeh et al., 2015). Various other emotions that children experience after parental detention anger, hatred, sadness, anxiety, fear, guilt, confusion, not feeling normal, losing hope, feeling neglected, unloved, or abandoned. In addition, children will also experience problems in internalizing behaviour. These include withdrawing, shutting down, changing play behaviour, worthlessness, and fear (Boch et al., 2019; Brown, 2020; Domzalska et al., 2022). Furthermore, the detention of a father can increase antisocial behaviour, where children will close themselves off from their environment (Haskins, 2015; Slaughter et al., 2019). In addition to internalizing behaviour, problems in externalizing behaviour were also found.

Externalization problems include the child's habit of hitting, seeking attention, being defiant, refusing to follow directions, and conflicts with peers and teachers. This is supported by research stating

the same thing (Kjellstrand et al., 2019; Slaughter et al., 2019). This happens because it is influenced by several factors the child's lack of attachment to parents, undisciplined, and trauma (Slaughter et al., 2019). Furthermore, delinquency is also one of the negative impacts on children with parents in prison (Boch et al., 2019; Domzalska et al., 2022). Children will feel lost due to the absence of parents which impacts behaviour such as violence and abuse (Dawson et al., 2012). The behaviour of children with imprisoned parents is also at risk for delinquency and hyperactivity that increases continuously (Kremer et al., 2020).

Anxiety is also one of the most significant impacts (Boch et al., 2019; Domzalska et al., 2022). Children will experience a decreasing relationship with their parents after detention, so they feel anxiety which can lead to internalizing behaviour (Song et al., 2018). PTSD is also one of the visible impacts (Boch et al., 2019; Shehadeh et al., 2015). PTSD is a severe mental health condition in children of prisoners, especially when the mother is incarcerated (Gualtieri et al., 2020). Many children also experience depression due to parental detention (Domzalska et al., 2022; Woo & Kowalski, 2020). This opinion is supported by Lee et al., (2013) research. The study found that incarcerated parents increased the likelihood of their children developing depression. This increase is due to losses, disturbances, and instability in children, resulting in pressure, risky behaviour, and loss of role models for healthy living leading children to deteriorate mental health (Johnson et al., 2018; Kopak & Smith-Ruiz, 2016).

Finally, research conducted by Woo & Kowalski, (2020) found that children whose parents were imprisoned were less likely to have a good future orientation due to the child's awareness that their parents could not support their education. Awareness of the lack of financial support from their parents made the child choose to drop out of school and bury their dreams. Economic problems after the imprisonment of parents can affect children's mental health. Geller et al., (2009) say that reduced sources of money in the home during or after parents are imprisoned can affect children indirectly by instability in home finances. The absence of parents due to detention causes the child to feel unsupported. Therefore, children whose parents are imprisoned will impact low self-concept, impaired school performance, poor peer relations, behavioural changes, and isolation (Ajdini, 2012; Chung, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Imprisoned parents bring various impacts on children's mental health. Most of the effects felt by children negatively impact their mental health. For example, emotional problems, internalizing behaviour, externalizing behaviour, stress, anxiety, PTSD, depression, and lack of a promising future orientation impact children whose parents are in prison. However, besides having a negative effect, imprisoned parents can positively impact on children's mental health under certain conditions. For example, children who have abusive or violent parents have better mental health when their parents are in prison.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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