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Challenges of caregivers and needs of children with parents in a Nigerian prison

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Abstract: Background

Separation of a parent from the family as a result of incarceration has both short-term and long-term effects on the family, even after release from prison. This study is a report of factors and challenges of the family left to adapt to the changed circumstances of separation from parent(s) who are incarcerated.

Methods: This was a cross sectional study carried out on 89 caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated at the Agodi prison, Ibadan who gave informed and written consent to interview their families.

Results: Most caregivers had little or no formal education (69.7%) and 67.4% are into petty trading or subsistence farming. A major-

ity of the caregivers reported the need of schooling (85.4%), provision of food (84.3%) and medical care (71.9%) as major challenges, only 25% received any form of support to meet these needs. Twenty-nine (32.6%) respondents reported receiving financial support to provide for the child's feeding. Some caregivers 21 (23.6%), obtained loans to cope with the financial needs of the children while only 3 (3.4%) received support from family or other non-governmental organisations.

Conclusion: The caregivers of children of prison inmates face significant challenges in meeting the needs of feeding, health and schooling. Support structures and policies to address these gaps are required.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the number of prison inmates have significantly increased the world over with consequential increase in the number of children with one or both parents separated from family through incarceration.¹ In 2012, the United States of America had about 2,228,424 prison inmates and over 2 million children had a parent in prison during the same period.² In 2020, there are 81, 343 people incarcerated in the United Kingdom,³ while in 2019 South Africa had a prison population 162, 875.⁴ With one or both parents in prisons substantial number of children are left to the care of the parent not in prison or other family members. As of 2016, the Nigerian Prisons Service reported that "there was a total of 63,142 adult prison inmates" suggesting that at least 60,000 children left to the care of one partner or other caregivers.⁵

Men are usually the primary breadwinners and play significant roles in shaping family ethos. Therefore, their absence due to incarceration often place a huge burden on the family left because of loss of income, emotional disruption, and unemployment even after the father returns home. Every family need shelter, clothing, proper nutrition, and love. In the absence of one or both

parents due to incarceration, the children under the care of single parent or other caregivers often suffer from feelings of fear, anger and depression that may cause emotional withdrawal, poor school performance and delinquency.⁶⁻⁸

Children of prison inmates, in addition have special need for counselling and targeted therapy to address the challenges and stigma that come with incarceration of parent(s).^{6,9} Most correctional facilities often focus on the care of prison inmates with limited consideration for the families left behind.^{6,9,10}

In most developing countries, Nigeria inclusive, a disproportionately high number of prison inmates are from low socioeconomic status. The partners in these settings are also often socioeconomically disadvantaged, and for most women, they are often unemployed with little or no social welfare support system for the care of the family of prison inmates. However, the challenges faced and social supports for children of prison inmates in Nigeria are scarcely documented in literature. This study, therefore, evaluates the needs and challenges of children with incarcerated parents in Nigeria.

Methods

Study design

This was a cross sectional study carried out at the Agodi Prison; a medium security prison in Ibadan metropolis. The study was part of a larger study evaluating the health status and needs of prison inmates at the Agodi prison, Ibadan. The consent to visit children of prison inmates in the home settings where the family lived. The information concerning the place of abode of the family before incarnation of the prison was obtained from their prisoner. The contact phone number(s) of the caregivers were obtained from the inmates and the study personnel scheduled appointments for home visits.

Study setting: According to prisonstudies.org, there are 240 prisons in Nigeria. The study involved caregivers and families of children of male inmates of the Medium Security Prison Agodi, Ibadan in southwest of Nigeria. Agodi prison houses mixture of male convicts and suspects awaiting court trial; therefore, we refer to all inmates as incarcerated persons. There were 108 male inmates who have spent at least 6 months during the four-month period of the study.

Participant recruitment

Only male inmates who had been incarcerated for at least 6 months and had children were recruited into the study. This is because we consider this period as the minimum duration for which fathers' absence from home could adversely affect the health and well-being of their family. Eighty-seven of 108 eligible inmates were approached to participate in the survey and gave their written informed consent to be interviewed and have their families visited.

Ethical considerations

Written permissions from the prison authorities were obtained before carrying out the study. In addition, the protocol was reviewed by the University of Ibadan/ University College Hospital Ibadan Ethical Review Committee.

Results

Demographic and Socio-economic Profile of caregivers
A total of 89 caregivers, caring for a total of 131 children of prison inmates were interviewed. The ages of the caregivers left behind to manage the affairs of the family ranged from 18 - 80 years with a mean (SD) of 40.47 (16.5) years. Most of the caregivers were females (86.5%) and were mostly mothers (47.2%) and grandmothers (34.8%) (Table 1). Most caregivers belonged to the lower socioeconomic classes. A majority of household managers are petty traders or subsistence farmers (69.7%) and 11.2% are unemployed (Table 2).

Table 1: Current caregivers of head of household of inmates

| Current Caregiver | No. | % |
|-------------------|-----|------|
| Father only | 1 | 1.1 |
| Mother only | 42 | 47.2 |
| Grand mother | 31 | 34.8 |
| Grand father | 5 | 5.6 |
| Aunty | 4 | 4.5 |
| Uncle | 1 | 1.1 |
| Neighbour | 1 | 1.1 |
| Missing | 4 | 95.5 |
| Total | 89 | 4.5 |

Table 2: Occupation of current caregiver

| Occupation | No. | % |
|--|-----|------|
| Unemployed/student | 10 | 11.2 |
| Petty trading/subsistence farming | 62 | 69.7 |
| Junior civil servant/primary school teacher/artisan | 10 | 11.2 |
| Intermediate civil servant/high school teacher | 1 | 1.1 |
| senior civil servant/tertiary school teacher/management staff of private company | 2 | 2.2 |
| Missing | 4 | 4.5 |
| Total | 89 | 100 |

Table 3 shows that 39.3% had no formal education and 28.1% had primary level. More than 60% of the families earned less than 20,000 naira (\$125 US Dollars) a month and a similar proportion consequently had less than \$125 USD a month as disposable family income (Tables 4 and 5).

Fifty-five families had a child each, 26 had two children each and 8 had three giving a total of 131 children of prison inmates. About two-third (66.7%) of the caregivers live in rented apartments: 36 (63.2%) were living in one room, 10 (17.5%) lived in two rooms and 11 (19.3%) in 3 or more rooms.

Needs of children and support received by caregivers
The various proportions of perceived needs of the children varied from need for food, clothing, medical care, education, or vocational training (Table 3) The majority of the caregivers recognize these needs but only a few, about 25%, receive any form of support to meet these needs (Table 4).

Table 3: Highest level of education of caregiver

| Level of Education | No. | % |
|--------------------|-----|------|
| None | 35 | 39.3 |
| Primary | 25 | 28.1 |
| Secondary | 24 | 27.0 |
| Higher | 4 | 4.5 |
| Missing | 1 | 1.1 |
| Total | 89 | 100 |

Ability of care givers to cope with the added responsibility of caring for the child

Only 28 (31.5%) respondents reported being able to cope with the financial responsibility of caring for the child's education. As a result of this increased financial responsibility of caring for these children, 28 (31.5%) caregivers have experienced a decline in family income since taking on the care of the child and for 21 (23.6%),

they have had an increase in medical cost. Most caregivers have employed various means of coping with this added financial burden, Table 5. Among the caregivers, 31(34.8%) have had to sell personal belongings to fend for these children, 14 (15.7%) have had to stop the children from going to school due to financial constraints and 5 (5.6%) admits the child have had to engage in hawking or child labour to meet some of these needs. In addition to these measures taken, a large proportion of the caregivers 77.5%, have resorted to various religious interventions as a way of coping, including daily prayers in 74.2 %, for the early return of the parents from incarceration.

Table 4: Income profile of caregivers

| Average Monthly Income | No. | % |
|------------------------|-----|------|
| < N5,000 | 16 | 18.0 |
| N5,000 - < N10,000 | 19 | 21.3 |
| N10,000 - < 20,000 | 20 | 22.5 |
| N20,000 - < N30,000 | 12 | 13.5 |
| N30,000 - < N50,000 | 2 | 2.2 |
| >= N50,000 | 3 | 3.4 |
| Missing | 17 | 19.1 |
| Total | 89 | 100 |

*Note: N160 = \$1 USD

Table 5: Disposable monthly income of caregivers

| Monthly disposable income | No. | % |
|---------------------------|-----|------|
| < N5,000 | 12 | 13.5 |
| N5,000 - < N10,000 | 25 | 28.1 |
| N10,000 - < 20,000 | 17 | 19.1 |
| N20,000 - < N30,000 | 12 | 13.5 |
| N30,000 - < N50,000 | 5 | 5.6 |
| >= N50,000 | 4 | 4.5 |
| 2800.00 | 1 | 1.1 |
| Total | 76 | 85.4 |
| System | 13 | 14.6 |

Table 6: Needs of children as reported by caregivers

| Perceived need | No. | % | Missing |
|--|-----|------|---------|
| Medical care | 64 | 71.9 | 1 |
| Food | 75 | 84.3 | |
| School fees | 76 | 85.4 | 1 |
| Clothing | 60 | 67.4 | 1 |
| Someone to talk | 8 | 9.0 | 4 |
| Training or education | 33 | 37.1 | 5 |
| Someone to keep watch over from time to time | 10 | 11.2 | 4 |

Table 7: Support received by caregiver for care of child

| Support received | No. | % | Missing |
|--|-----|------|---------|
| Direct food assistance | 23 | 25.8 | 2 |
| Clothing assistance | 16 | 18.0 | 2 |
| Financial support for education/training | 20 | 22.5 | 2 |
| Financial support for medical care | 8 | 9.0 | 3 |
| Financial support for purchasing food in last 6 months | 29 | 32.6 | 3 |
| Any form of support in the last 6months | 62 | 69.7 | |

Table 8: Major methods adopted by care giver families to cope with extra financial burden of caring for the children

| Coping methods adopted | No. | % |
|--|-----|------|
| Our income is sufficient | 5 | 5.6 |
| We have had to take some loans | 21 | 23.6 |
| We get support from other family members/friends/social groups/NGOs | 3 | 3.4 |
| We have had to cut down on other expenses e.g. shoes, clothing, toiletries grocery etc | 7 | 7.9 |
| We have other sources of income in the absence of the absentee parent | 3 | 3.4 |
| Total | 89 | 100 |

Discussion

The “Family is affected and involved in the prison sentence. It affects everybody close”. Joseph Murray quoted an anonymous prisoner.¹¹ Incarceration affects all circumstances of the family which includes, in this study, the finances, coping strategies as they impact the family now headed by a single parent or other caregivers. In the changed circumstances of the household everyone close is affected which includes the children. Schwartz-Soicher and colleagues,¹² Carlson and Cavera,¹³ and Ferraro *et al.*¹⁴ demonstrated that incarceration of a partner or father can lead to increased economic hardship for members of his family in meeting basic needs. This study revealed that the burden of care for the family of incarcerated men in Nigeria lies mainly on mothers and grandmothers. This report further demonstrated that the care givers face the challenges meeting basic needs of providing food to members of the family and ensuring education or vocational training for the children as well as taking care of the medical needs of the family because of poor financial means. As expected, the extended family system may play a coping role in such matters in most developing countries such as Nigeria with mothers and grandmothers the second most prevalent group of caregivers. In the absence of state support, the extended family system traditionally takes care of this vulnerable group of the family, however, with the increasing economic hardship in Nigeria, the fabric of the extended family system cannot provide the desired help. These findings are ex-

pected, because of the caring and motherly nature of African women, the fear of losing custody. There is therefore the need to empower women in general and specifically women in family settings, especially when the male partner is incarcerated.

Having one or both parents in prison in sub-Saharan Africa is similar to that of an orphan and therefore vulnerable, as the children are often denied knowledge of their parent's true status and contact leads to stigmatisation of the family and the children of the incarcerated and the caregivers. Children of prison inmates are therefore doubly vulnerable and are potentially at very high risk of societal rejection, neglect and occasional abandonment that may cause emotional withdrawal, failure in school, and delinquency.^[6] In the absence of one or both parents, the children under the care of single parent or other caregivers often suffer from feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, and guilt.

The high poverty level observed in this study is expected because of the high numbers of female-headed families most of the caregivers belonged to the lower socioeconomic classes in the society. This has a major effect on their ability to cater for the needs of these children, as in most instance, they are barely self-sustaining in themselves. The implication of this observation is that growing up poor increases a child's risk of school failure, poor health, and delinquency.

In this study, though a large proportion of the caregivers realized the needs of these children, less than a quarter of them reported receiving any form of support to meet the basic needs of feeding, clothing, medical care, or education of these children. The rights of children are universal and some of these are spelt out in the Child Rights Act.^[15-17] Some of these basic rights include the right to health, quality education, clothing, and food. The incarceration of one, even both parents, should not deny children in such setting these inalienable rights.

Providing for the various needs of this vulnerable group of children often depends on the extended family and cultural safety nets, often the mother of the children or grandparents. The absence of parental care, especially paternal care, and adverse socioeconomic circumstances exposes children to various societal vices and untold hardship. This is an identified cause of antisocial behaviour and consequently such individuals have been found to in turn have children that navigate a similar cycle.

One major coping mechanism employed by the caregivers of children of prison inmates was loan acquisition. This is also an expected effect of incarcerating one or both parents. Previous studies have shown that in situations of this nature debt do accrue due to the families' financial disruption and pressure on inadequate incomes of caregivers.^[18,19] In the absence of social support structures, be it in the form of the extended family systems, government or non-governmental social welfare services, individuals and families faced with the need and burden of caring for deprived children tend to employ different coping mechanisms. This in some instances exposes the children to the potential of depriva-

tion of their basic rights and at times various forms of abuse.

This study has highlighted the grossly inadequate social structure in existence for the care of children of inmates, the challenges faced, and the coping mechanisms adapted. It has also highlighted the limitation the existing structures have, thereby suggesting possible avenues for intervention. However, there are some limitations of the study. The correlates of the type of crime leading to incarceration and the issues discussed in this study are not known. This is important as it might influence the profile of caregivers, challenges faced and coping mechanisms. The small sample size did not allow for regression analysis to examine for associations. Also, the small sample size and limitation of the study to Ibadan metropolis might limit its generalizability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most children of inmates are cared for by female members in the society who are least capable of meeting their needs and guaranteeing their fundamental child rights. There is therefore the need for the development of a special welfare system to cater for these doubly disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our society. In addition, social services should be targeted at identifying this group of women and providing necessary support as these children are best catered for in their natural family setting than in foster care.

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Author's contribution

Ogunbosi BO: Concept, design, data analysis, manuscript preparation, manuscript editing and manuscript review.

Adepoju AA: Concept, design, data analysis, manuscript preparation, manuscript editing and manuscript review.

Orimadegun AE: Concept, design, data analysis, manuscript editing and manuscript review.

Odaibo GN: Concept, design, manuscript editing and manuscript review.

Olaleye OD: Concept, design, manuscript editing and manuscript review.

Akinyinka OO: Concept, design, manuscript preparation, manuscript editing and manuscript review.

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