

The Effectiveness of the Intervention for Children of Incarcerated Parents

Linda Wang

*Guangzhou Foreign Language School, Guangzhou, China
cslwang@163.com*

Abstract. Children of Incarcerated Parents (CIP) are a highly vulnerable group who face severe psychological and behavioral problems. However, targeted interventions for this group remain limited. This literature review examines the effectiveness of three categories of intervention programs for CIP: direct child-focused support programs, family-function restoration programs, and caregiver-focused support programs. It also examines key factors that affect intervention effectiveness in existing research. The findings illustrate that these three intervention types differ slightly in their overall effects. The direct child-focused support programs have a high early termination rate and can only bring slight improvements in the social connections of CIP. The family-function restoration programs are affected by certain policy-related factors, and their long-term psychological benefits for these children have not been fully confirmed. The caregiver-focused support programs appear to be the most promising and sustainable intervention. This is because this category of program can stabilize the microsystem of CIP by enhancing the caregivers' caring skills. This review also finds that individual-level factors and environmental-level factors are two moderating factors affecting the intervention effectiveness. Current research on CIP still has many limitations, including a lack of differentiated intervention design and rigorous research methodology, and a sample pool dominated by U.S. participants. These findings further highlight the relative advantages of caregiver-focused support programs and identify directions for future research.

Keywords: Children of Incarcerated Parents, Intervention Effectiveness, Caregiver Support, Attachment Theory, Ecological Systems Theory

1. Introduction

CIP refers to children with one or both parents in prison, a vulnerable group in recent years [1]. Maruschak et al. conducted a survey and concluded that approximately 1,473,700 U.S. children have at least one parent in a state prison or a federal prison [2]. More recently, Wildeman et al. estimated that in the United States, approximately one in every 12 children has a parent in prison [3]. Despite their large population, these children rarely get targeted help, and their needs are often overlooked in the judicial system [4]. The current situation of insufficient support faced by this group highlights the necessity of exploring the effectiveness of different CIP intervention strategies, which is precisely the core value of this study.

1.1. Psychological impacts

CIP are confronted with problems such as discrimination and lack of parental companionship, which may have a negative impact on their mental health [5]. Compared with children in the general population, CIP are significantly more likely to experience mental health problems [6]. Specifically, Davis & Shlafer identified six mental health indicators while studying CIP: internalizing symptoms, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, self-injurious behavior, diagnosis of mental, emotional, or behavioral problems, and treatment for mental health concerns [5]. These indicators cover emotional distress and actual mental health problems, reflecting the various mental health challenges that CIP is facing. All seven results showed that children whose parents were in prison faced a higher risk of adverse mental health outcomes. Beyond measurable clinical symptoms, adult children of incarcerated parents also endure unique ambiguous loss because of persistent uncertainty and social stigma, which further complicates their long-term grief regulation and interpersonal bonding capacity [7].

1.2. Behavioral impacts

Apart from psychological issues, CIP also exhibits some behavioral problems. For instance, Davis & Shlafer demonstrated in their study on the CIP that substance abuse is a significant behavioral risk factor for this group [8]. To be specific, compared with youth without parental incarceration experience, those with currently incarcerated parents are 4.06 times more likely to use marijuana, 4.03 times more likely to misuse prescription drugs, and 5.33 times more likely to use tobacco. Apart from drug abuse, CIP also has another common behavioral problem: antisocial behavior. Murray et al. conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis and concluded that there is a significant association between parental incarceration and an increased risk of antisocial behavior in CIP [9]. More details about the behavioral problems of CIP will be discussed in the later sections.

2. Theoretical foundations

The psychological and behavioral problems of CIP can be explained by several psychological theories. According to the attachment theory proposed by Bowlby, establishing a stable emotional bond with parents is necessary for children to have good mental health [10]. Consequently, the fact of parental incarceration deprives CIP of a stable emotional bond with their parents, which may increase the risk of insecure attachment patterns.

Bronfenbrenner proposed the ecological systems theory, which suggests that dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment can affect the psychological and behavioral characteristics of children [11]. For CIP, the most crucial environmental levels are the microsystem and the exosystem. Parents belong to the microsystem, which directly interacts with children. However, parental incarceration deprived CIP of such interaction, which is harmful to the mental health of CIP. The exosystem is the external environment that acts indirectly on CIP, such as family economic conditions and social policies. Parental incarceration may lead to a decrease in family income and may also cause CIP to be discriminated against in the community. Such an exosystem will further negatively affect the mental health of CIP.

Both attachment theory and ecological systems theory offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges faced by CIP. Attachment theory explains the relational mechanisms. Parental incarceration breaks stable emotional bonds of CIP, depriving them of a safe base to manage emotions and handle stress. Ecological systems theory highlights environmental

amplification. The loss of a stable microsystem and disruptions to the exosystem of CIP further worsen the mental health of CIP.

3. Classification of intervention programs for CIP

Given the substantial size of the CIP population and the long-lasting nature of their psychological problems, attention to how parental incarceration affects children's mental health has grown rapidly in recent years. In order to protect their physical and mental health, the researchers have developed various types of intervention measures. Although the implementation details of the intervention projects are different, they can be classified into three main categories based on their core purposes [12].

3.1. Direct child-focused support programs

The first category is the direct child-focused support programs, which aim to help CIP overcome their difficulties through companionship and guidance by people other than their parents. This category focuses on emotional support. To replace the absent parental emotional bond with supportive companionship, researchers designed some mentoring programs for CIP. For example, Conway and Keays developed a mentoring intervention for CIP [13]. In their evaluation, some participants reported small improvements in social connection. However, the program did not produce meaningful changes in their problem severity or functional levels.

3.2. Family-function restoration programs

The second category focuses on restoring family functions. Specifically, such intervention aims to repair the parent-child relationship by improving the prison visitation policy and providing education to the parents. This program is aimed at repairing the parent-child relationship by maintaining contact between parents and CIP. For example, Charles et al. created the Enhanced Visits Model to enhance parent-child contact for families with incarcerated parents [14]. To evaluate, this program helped reduce the stress of CIP during prison visits and improved overall parent-child interaction quality.

3.3. Caregiver-focused support programs

The third category is the caregiver-focused support programs. By providing caregivers with training in caring ability and psychological counseling, it could help them better care for CIP. For example, Poehlmann-Tynan et al. implemented an intervention plan that provided educational materials to caregivers [15]. Specifically, this helped caregivers talk honestly with children about parental incarceration, so they could better support their children's emotions. After the implementation of this plan, the researchers found that children showed more positive emotions during their visits to the prison.

4. Study aims and research questions

CIP faces both physical and mental health challenges that directly threaten their development. Even though the problem is quite serious, there is still not enough targeted help for CIP. This highlights that there is still a clear gap in promoting social equity for this marginalized group. Previous reviews

mostly focused on a single intervention category. Very few studies have compared the long-term effectiveness of the three CIP intervention categories under the same research framework.

This literature review aims to address a core question: How do different interventions for CIP differ in child-level outcomes, relationship outcomes, and program feasibility? To address this core issue, this article proposes three sub-questions for analysis and discussion. First, how do direct child-focused, family-function restoration, and caregiver-focused programs affect the psychological and behavioral outcomes of CIP? Secondly, how do these interventions influence family and relational processes, including parent-child relationship quality and caregiver-child communication? Thirdly, what individual and environmental factors may affect the effectiveness of the programs? Overall, this review first compares intervention categories, then examines moderating factors, and finally discusses gaps and implications.

5. Differences in intervention effects among three types of CIP programs

5.1. The effectiveness of direct child-focused support programs

Across available studies, direct child-focused mentoring programs show limited evidence of improved psychological or behavioral outcomes of CIP. Although some studies reported modest improvements in social connection, high rates of early termination make such feasibility difficult to sustain. The core of direct child-focused support programs is to provide continuous adult companionship and targeted guidance for CIP. Among this category of intervention, the mentoring intervention is the most representative form. Across evaluations, mentoring interventions produce few sustained improvements for CIP. Specifically, there were only modest gains in social connection and no consistent reductions in behavioral or emotional problems. For example, Conway and Keays conducted a quantitative assessment of two mentoring interventions involving 103 CIP [13]. The results showed that children in the BBBS mentor group did not show significant improvements in problem severity or functional level over the 7-month and 13-month follow-up periods. Instead, their strength scores significantly decreased. While Shlafer et al. found that mentor-child pairing was associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms, this positive effect was undermined by high early termination rates [16]. During the experiment, 32% of pairs ended within 6 months. The main reasons for such termination include scheduling conflicts and family mobility.

These results suggest that the mentoring program is challenging to produce stable and positive effects. The fundamental reason for this is that the mentoring program is highly susceptible to external mobility factors. Thus, such factors can lead to the termination of the mentoring relationship. From the perspective of attachment theory, the mentoring program aims to replace the absent parental emotional bond of CIP with supportive companionship. However, the high early termination rate suggests that these interventions often fail to meet the core need of CIP. Without a continuous emotional support relationship, the CIP cannot establish a secure attachment to buffer the negative impacts of their parents' incarceration.

5.2. The effectiveness of family-function restoration programs

Existing research shows that family-focused programs can improve parent-child relationships and reduce the stress of visits. However, whether these programs benefit children's long-term mental health remains understudied. Family-function restoration programs aim to restore parent-child attachment by maintaining contact between parents and CIP. For example, Charles et al. designed the Enhanced Visits Model (EVM), a video-based visitation protocol designed to create a less

stressful environment during contact [14]. Most participants reported that this video technology has improved the parent-child relationship. However, this result could only demonstrate the feasibility of the plan but could not prove that the EVM had a lasting positive impact on CIP. Armstrong et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 16 studies to show the effectiveness of family-function restoration intervention [17]. These parenting interventions improve the quality of parent-child relationships by enhancing incarcerated parents' parenting knowledge and skills. Such interventions also help incarcerated parents understand the visitation process from the child's perspective and better respond to their children's emotional needs during visits.

From an attachment theory perspective, family-function restoration programs work well because they focus on repairing the emotional attachment bond between CIP and their parents. By offering low-stress prison visitation ways and teaching parents effective parenting skills, these interventions help CIP rebuild a sense of safety and stability in their lives. However, widespread implementation of such programs remains challenging as there are systemic barriers resulting from strict prison visitation policies. An Australian post-pandemic research further highlights that video visitation can serve as a sustainable supplementary contact method, yet limited visiting hours, travel costs and device access still restrict consistent parent-child interaction [18].

5.3. The effectiveness of caregiver-focused support programs

Caregiver-focused support programs show more promising outcomes for CIP. This is because they could stabilize the immediate microsystem of CIP, which is a key element in ecological systems theory. When parental incarceration disrupts the original microsystem of CIP, non-incarcerated caregivers become the new core of their microsystem. Caregiver-focused support programs offer learning resources to help caregivers improve their parenting skills. In this way, they can build a more stable family environment for CIP. For example, Poehlmann-Tynan et al. conducted a study on 71 families with 3-8-year-old CIP [15]. In this study, caregivers were far more willing to communicate openly with CIP after receiving educational resources. Caregivers could also talk about parental incarceration with CIP in ways suitable for their age. Two weeks after the intervention, the proportion of open discussion reached 93%, which is a higher increase compared with the control group. Caregivers in the intervention group also used videos and storybooks to guide CIP to express emotions. This effectively eased their negative feelings when visiting their incarcerated parents. In addition, 63% of the caregivers in the intervention group said they changed their ways of communicating with CIP. Chan et al. also conducted a meta-analysis of 20 studies and found that interventions for caregivers can significantly enhance their parenting skills [19]. Also, such interventions could reduce the psychological and behavioral problems of children.

Overall, caregiver-focused programs help caregivers improve parenting skills and the way they communicate with CIP. These changes show promise in building a more stable family environment for CIP.

5.4. Comparative analysis of feasibility and effectiveness

Taken together, existing research suggests that caregiver-focused support programs show more promising outcomes for CIP. While family-function restoration programs work well to improve family relationships, their long-term benefits have not yet been proven. On the other hand, while direct child-focused support interventions produce moderate gains in social connections of CIP, they still struggle with feasibility issues. This is largely because of high early termination rates caused by scheduling conflicts and family mobility. In contrast, caregiver-focused support programs are easier

to carry out and can create a stable family environment that is beneficial to the long-term growth of CIP. Specifically, caregiver-focused support programs can effectively enhance the parenting skills of caregivers to stabilize the microsystem of CIP. While caregiver-focused support programs may be the most promising intervention from certain perspectives, the evidence remains insufficient to conclude that any one model is uniformly superior to others.

6. Individual and environmental factors influencing effectiveness of CIP interventions

6.1. Individual-level factors

The age of CIP is related to the effectiveness of the intervention. Specifically, Poehlmann-Tynan et al. found that older CIP tend to show more positive emotions and behaviors when they visit their incarcerated parents [15]. This might be because older children typically possess stronger emotional regulation skills than younger children and can better understand the situation of their parents' incarceration.

They also found that the way caregivers communicate with CIP about their parents' incarceration is closely related to intervention effectiveness. When caregivers explained the reasons for parents' incarceration in an honest and age-appropriate manner, CIP tended to display more positive emotions during visitation. In contrast, if caregivers concealed the truth or provided distorted information, CIP tended to show more negative emotions as they grew older because they realized that they had been deceived.

6.2. Environmental-level factors

Family economic status is a key exosystem barrier that is related to intervention effectiveness. Many low-income families limited their visit frequency because of high transportation costs and video call fees. As a result, this could lower the program participation rate and overall effectiveness [20].

7. Gaps in current CIP intervention effectiveness and implications for future practice

7.1. Core evidence gaps in existing research

Current research on interventions for CIP contains notable methodological restrictions, which hinder the accumulation of consistent findings in this field.

First, most intervention designs lack clear conceptual and practical direction, which cannot fully meet the diverse needs of CIP. Most programs fail to account for individual-level factors such as the age of CIP or the way caregivers communicate with CIP about their parents' incarceration. Such factors are directly related to the effectiveness of the programs.

Second, there is limited evidence to prove the long-term effectiveness of CIP interventions. Most existing studies only measured short-term effectiveness immediately after intervention. Since these studies lack long-term follow-up research, they cannot prove whether their interventions bring lasting benefits to CIP.

Third, there are clear methodological shortcomings in these studies. Many studies only used unrepresentative samples and adopted inconsistent assessment tools. These issues weakened the reliability and validity of the results. Also, self-report bias is prevalent in existing studies. Most results relied solely on the self-reports of caregivers and program staff, so there is no reliable verification to further confirm the effectiveness of interventions.

Additionally, Most intervention designs also overlook the quality of parent-child relationships before incarceration. Studies have confirmed that this factor shapes how parental incarceration affects children's behavioral outcomes [21].

Finally, most interventions focus mainly on samples from the United States. Thus, scholars overlooked some disparities across different cultures. Different prison policies, social norms, and service infrastructures in different cultures will affect the effectiveness of interventions.

7.2. Structural biases in CIP intervention research

Beyond methodological flaws, current interventions also have clear structural biases. Most interventions are conducted within the United States, so their findings tie closely to local judicial policies and funding conditions. This uneven research setting leads to unequal access to relevant intervention services. As a result, marginalized groups in other regions still struggle with limited research focus and inadequate program funding. What's more, such regional disparity hinders the universal application of existing intervention approaches.

Reporting bias also existed in CIP research. Specifically, researchers tend to show more positive intervention outcomes in their published work, while negative results and other challenges are less likely to be emphasized. This imbalance further distorts our overall understanding of real-world CIP intervention effectiveness.

8. Discussion

This literature review examines the effectiveness of three types of intervention programs for CIP. Some evidence shows that caregiver-focused support programs show a more consistent pattern of effectiveness and feasibility. This is mainly because such interventions can directly improve the immediate microsystem that affects children's growth. This finding is meaningful because it illustrates that improving the caring ability of non-incarcerated caregivers could be an effective way to help CIP.

Based on the existing research, this review further improved the comparative analysis framework of three categories of CIP intervention programs. Theoretically, this review incorporates insights from attachment theory and the ecological system theory to analyze intervention effectiveness. Specifically, attachment theory explains how parental incarceration breaks the emotional bonds of CIP. Ecological system theory explains how incarceration disrupts the child's microsystem. These two theories help explain the advantages of caregiver-focused support programs. Such programs can repair attachment and stabilize children's microsystem, so they can achieve more stable effects in helping CIP. This review also summarizes key research gaps and practical findings from current studies on CIP interventions. This offers clear guidance to improve intervention strategies in future practice.

As a literature review on CIP interventions, this study has several limitations. First, the scope of literature selection remains incomplete. Second, this review fails to fully address the high heterogeneity across included studies. Third, this review only offers a qualitative synthesis of existing findings and does not adopt quantitative data to conduct a more precise comparative analysis across different intervention categories.

To address these limitations, future research can adopt targeted improvements. Regarding the limited range of selected literature, researchers should expand searches and include studies outside the United States. This will diversify the research sample and help the conclusions apply more broadly. Regarding the heterogeneity across included studies, researchers should apply meta-

analysis to run subgroup analyses by research design, intervention duration, and other key variables. This makes it easier to compare intervention effects across different groups and delivers more reliable analytical findings. Regarding insufficient analysis on interaction effects, researchers can develop a multi-factor interaction framework. They can adopt qualitative comparative analysis or regression analysis to explore how individual and environmental factors together affect intervention outcomes.

Taking these multi-factorial influences into account, the future CIP intervention practices need to be optimized in terms of differentiation and sustainability. First, researchers should design differentiated intervention plans. Develop specific intervention contents for CIP groups of different ages, trauma experiences, and family types. For example, provide attachment reinforcement intervention for young children, supplement parenting training for step-parenting families, and offer free technical support and transportation subsidies for low-income families. Secondly, the government can optimize prison policies and visiting conditions, promote low-stress visiting models such as video visits. The government should also promote the establishment of a cross-system collaboration network, promote the linkage among prisons, schools, community organizations, and child welfare institutions, and form an intervention synergy. Finally, provide economic support to poor families, lower the participation threshold of poor families in the intervention, and ensure the fairness and accessibility of the intervention.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, caregiver-focused support programs could be the most promising intervention programs for CIP, as they address the core microsystem disruptions caused by parental incarceration. Individual factors include the age of CIP and caregiver communication methods. Environmental factors include family economic conditions. These two are key variables that greatly affect the effectiveness of CIP interventions. The design of future intervention programs must fully consider the impact of these factors. After all, developing effective interventions can help CIP grow up healthily and promote social equity.

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