

Adaptation to Parental Incarceration Among Adolescents: A Prospective Study of Underlying Everyday Mechanisms of Mental Health

This project aims to investigate the role of lifestyle behaviors in the association between parental incarceration and mental health among adolescents. Globally over 22.5 million children with at least one imprisoned parent become hidden victims of criminal justice systems. Several decades of research consistently link exposure to parental incarceration with emotional and behavioral problems, with adolescent children exhibiting the most severe symptoms compared with younger children or adults. Previous research relied on broader stress process paradigms (e.g., stress process theory, sense of coherence, meaning making model) to understand cognitive, emotional, biological, and ecological processes in stress adaptation. However, these studies inadequately addressed the processes and underlying behavioral mechanism, the most immediate and noticeable manifestation of adaptation in children's everyday lives. Both Daily Stressor Model and Drive to Thrive theory advanced the existing understanding of stress adaptation and deposited that sustaining lifestyle behaviors is one of the basic processes for psychological resilience over time. In the context of parental incarceration, maintaining daily routines can be challenging due to sudden involuntary separation of parent(s) and a cascade of stressors such as economic hardship, family instability, and stigma. There is an urgent need to understand the behavioral aspects of everyday adaptation to parental incarceration. The current project has three aims: (1) To investigate social and environmental correlates of disruptions to lifestyle behaviors among adolescents exposed to parental incarceration; (2) To examine prospective associations between parental incarceration, disruptions in lifestyle behaviors, and mental health; and (3) To investigate the mediating role of lifestyle behaviors in the association between parental incarceration and mental health. This project consists of two studies. Study 1 will utilize Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study tracking 11,868 adolescents for three years using a stratified random sample of schools in the US. Study 2 will be a prospective study of a separate local sample of 150 adolescent children exposed to parental incarceration. Participants will complete questionnaires related to exposure to parental incarceration, lifestyle behaviors (i.e., nutrition, sleep, physical activity, leisure, school life, social relations) and mental health at baseline, 3-month, and 9-month follow-up. Overall, the project will add new evidence to the current theoretical and empirical literature on the role of lifestyle behaviors in adaption to parental incarceration. The findings will also provide one of the first empirical bases for designing prevention and intervention programs with easy-to-follow restructuring of lifestyle behaviors to improve resilience among adolescents exposed to parental incarceration.