

Validation of the “scale of concerns of imprisoned parents
with regards to their children”

Validazione della “scala delle preoccupazioni dei genitori incarcerati rispetto ai loro figli”

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Abstract

The way of practising and expressing parenthood of people in prison is completely different from the experience of the rest of the population. This study aims to find out the main concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children. 122 fathers and mothers participated (respectively 80.3% and 19.7%) from two prisons in Northern Italy (M=44.10 years, range 24-75). The “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children” was adapted from Spanish to Italian. After exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, three factors were obtained with a good fit index (RMSEA=.06; CFI=.98; TLI=.97; SRMR=.05) and a high overall reliability ($\alpha=.95$). These factors were: fear of rejection and distancing from children ($\alpha=.94$); fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours ($\alpha=.80$); concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence ($\alpha=.78$). Significant differences were found according to crime, nationality, age, sentence length, maintaining parents-child contact before and during imprisonment, visits and phone contact with children, relationship with the primary caregiver. Perceived concerns vary between parents convicted for mafia crimes and for ordinary crimes. Younger parents have greater concerns. Maintaining contact with the children by telephone or visits reduces the level of concern. A negative relationship with the primary caregiver increases fear of distancing. Urgent measures should be taken to preserve children’s right to maintain regular contact with their parents and to enable fathers and mothers to keep contributing to their offspring’s integral development.

Keywords: Prison, parenting, parents’ concerns, parent-child relationship, factor analysis.

Riassunto

Il modo di vivere la genitorialità di chi è in carcere è completamente diverso dall’esperienza del resto della popolazione. Questo studio si propone di scoprire quali sono le principali preoccupazioni dei genitori detenuti nei confronti dei figli. Hanno partecipato 122 padri (80,3%) e madri (19,7%) di due carceri del Nord Italia (M=44,10 anni, range 24-75). La “Scala delle preoccupazioni dei genitori incarcerati rispetto ai loro figli” è stata adattata dallo spagnolo all’italiano. Dopo l’analisi fattoriale esplorativa e confermativa, sono stati ottenuti tre fattori con buoni indici di adattamento (RMSEA=.06; CFI=.98; TLI=.97; SRMR=.05) e un’alta affidabilità complessiva ($\alpha=.95$): paura del rifiuto e dell’allontanamento dai figli ($\alpha=.94$); timore per il benessere dei figli e lo sviluppo di comportamenti problematici ($\alpha=.80$); preoccupazione per l’impatto emotivo dell’assenza paterna o materna ($\alpha=.78$). Sono state riscontrate differenze significative in base al reato, alla nazionalità, all’età, alla durata della pena, al mantenimento dei contatti con i figli prima e durante la detenzione, ai contatti telefonici/visite con i figli, al rapporto con il caregiver primario. Le preoccupazioni percepite variano tra i genitori condannati per reati di mafia e per reati comuni. I genitori più giovani hanno maggiori preoccupazioni. Il mantenimento dei contatti telefonici o di visita con i figli riduce il livello di preoccupazione. Una relazione negativa con il caregiver primario aumenta la paura del distanziamento. È urgente promuovere azioni per preservare il diritto dei bambini a mantenere contatti regolari con i genitori e per consentire a questi ultimi di continuare a contribuire allo sviluppo integrale dei figli.

Parole chiave: Carcere, genitorialità, preoccupazioni dei genitori, relazione genitori-figli, analisi fattoriale.

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Introduction

In 2022, the Italian prison population reached 56,605 people (Italian Ministry of Justice, 2023). Nearly half of them were parents, therefore it can be estimated that 60,000 children and adolescents currently have at least one parental figure in prison (Associazione Antigone, 2022). These numbers reflect the large amount of people experiencing a parent-child relationship within the Italian prison context, where the challenge for many consists of preserving and nurturing this relation (Venema et al., 2022). Thus, while it is true that the responsibility for the crime lies with the individual, its negative effects extend to a systemic level, affecting the whole family unit (Bartlett, 2019; Desiderio G. et al., 2021; Harrison, 1997; Robertson, 2007). In the same line, Norman and Enebrink (2020) state that while a parent is in prison, children experience a significant loss in their daily lives and may experience emotional distress due to the separation. Other studies have linked incarceration to children's health problems such as anxiety, depression and sleep, eating or behavioural disorders. In addition, parental incarceration can lead to instability in family life, as it might involve changes of residence, school and social environment, as well as limiting the economic security, among other aspects (Arditti et al., 2005; Grattagliano et al., 2018; Kazura 2001).

According to Arditti et al. (2005), intergenerational transmission of the prison pattern has been observed, through the inheritance of poorer mental health in children and adolescents, and a 10% increased risk of developing conduct problems that could lead them to follow in their parents' footsteps. However, the development of these outcomes appears to be conditioned by a number of factors, such as child's age, previous relationship with the incarcerated parent, sentence length, resilience and the support they may receive (Martín and Pellegrino, 2020). In addition, during the sentence, prisoners not only have to deal with physical barriers, which reduce the frequency and quality of contact with their children, but they also have to face the stigma associated with their status (Besemer et al., 2018).

At the same time, life in prison can be stressful and traumatic, which can impact on parents' ability for effective communication and problem-solving. It is well known that parenting from prison presents unique and significant challenges that are not experienced by parents outside of prison. These difficulties can lead incarcerated fathers and mothers to experience feelings of loss, failure and guilt as they cannot be as present as they would like in their children's lives (Pellegrino y Martín, 2022a).

This is why the Council of Europe (2018) in its recommendation CM/Rec (2018) has called on its Member States to increase efforts to ensure that the detention or imprisonment of parents does not have a negative impact on their relationship with children. It seeks to promote an active participation of incarcerated parents in the decision-making process affecting their children, including decisions about their care and wellbeing. Although parents have the right to practice parenting from prison, as long as it is not contrary to the best interests of the child and certain conditions are met (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), it has become evident that there are multiple conditioning barriers that prevent them from doing it in a proper way. Therefore, it is common for imprisoned parents to experience fear and concern about their ability to parent from prison and on how to continue contributing to the wellbeing of their children. Finally, the recommendation encourages further research and studies on “family” in the prison context, in order to better understand its reality and to design effective intervention programmes. In this line, this study aims to find out what are the main concerns of incarcerated parents regarding their children.

Methodology

Hypothesis statement

Knowing that most imprisoned parents have emotional bonds with their children and wish for a better future for them, we asked ourselves which might be the main concerns that they could have while in prison. During the study design, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is a relationship between the type of crime committed by imprisoned parents and the fear of rejection and distancing from their children.
2. Fear for children's wellbeing and development of disruptive behaviours differs by gender and age, being higher among women and young parents.
3. The nationality of imprisoned parents influences the levels of concern, being foreign parents more likely to experience fear for their children's wellbeing and development of disruptive behaviours and to feel concern about the emotional impact of their absence.
4. Being able to maintain contact with children and external caregivers has a positive influence on reducing fear of rejection and distancing from children as well as fear for their children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours.

Procedures

In order to carry out the study, authorisation was requested to the competent regional agency of the Italian penitentiary administration. This entity approved access to all modules of two penitentiary centres in the north of Italy.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that before using the “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children” (Pellegrino y Martín, 2022b), a pilot trial was carried out to validate the quality of the Italian translation from Spanish, following the guidelines of the International Test Commission (Hernández et al., 2020).

Due to the characteristics of the target group, characterised by low cultural levels and not being used to filling in surveys by themselves, along with the presence of cognitive deterioration, consumption of toxic substances and mental health problems, it was decided to administer the questionnaire individually and face-to-face (1 interviewer - 1 interviewee). For this purpose, a team of researchers was trained to access the residential modules of the prisons to realize the interviews.

To recruit participants for the study, non-random sampling methods were used, namely the snowballing technique: the first interviewed persons invited other parents they knew to participate in the study. It is important to highlight that participation in the study was completely voluntary and anonymous.

Characteristics of the sample

The sample of this study was composed of 122 prisoners from two Penitentiary Centres in Northern Italy. Of this group, 80.3% were fathers and 19.7% were mothers. Regarding the type of crime, 73% of the sample had committed ordinary crimes and 27% had been convicted of Mafia crimes and were under a high-security regime. The age of the participants ranged from 24 to 75 years ($M=44.10$, $SD=11.10$), with 72.1% being Italian and 27.9% foreigners. As for their educational level, 66.4% declared having completed basic education; 58.2% claimed to be employed on a regular basis before their imprisonment. 64.8% of participants reported being repeat offenders and having been imprisoned on more than one occasion. Regarding the contact with their children, 59.3% of the interviewees stated that they were not receiving visits from their children while serving their sentence, whereas 50.4% of them were able to maintain telephone communication with all of them. Concerning the information given to children about their parents' condition of imprisonment, there are differences depending on the gender of the parent: 57.7% of mothers in prison stated that they told their children, while only 42.3% of fathers in prison informed them about their situation. As for the main caregiver of the children, when a father enters prison in 88.3% of the cases children are left in the mother's care. However, when it is the mother who enters prison, the responsibility of caring for the children appears to be distributed between the father (47.4%) and relatives (36.8%); moreover, in this case it

increases the need to resort to children's homes or foster care (15.9%).

Data collection instruments

The study was carried out using two instruments adapted to prison contexts and previously validated by other studies (Martín and Pellegrino, 2020). The first one is a questionnaire designed to obtain information on the socio-demographic and relational dimensions of parents deprived of liberty. This test is composed of 19 questions, of which 17 are closed-ended and 2 are open-ended. The second one is the Likert-type “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children” (Pellegrino and Martín, 2022b), composed of 20 items (1-not at all to 6-very much) and translated from Spanish to Italian to be used for this study.

Data analysis

For the validation of the “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children” it was used the exploratory structural equation model, ESEM (orthogonal geomin rotation method) (Asparouhov and Muthén, 2009). Reliability (McDonald's omega) and differences between the factors were analysed, as well as the correlation between them. Finally, the descriptive validity of the obtained factors was verified through parametric tests, since the assumptions of normality were met. For the analysis of the results, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and ANOVAs for independent samples were carried out using Mplus 6.11 and SPSS V.26.

Results

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis of the “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children”

In order to determine the factorial structure, several analyses were carried out with 1 to 10 factors solutions. The selected factorial model was a three-factor one, as the number of factors corresponded to at least three significant items that could be interpreted in a single factor.

For the exploratory factor analysis, the KMO=.877 test of sampling adequacy obtained a very high value and Bartlett's test of sphericity reported a significant value ($X_{2(190)}=1231.793$; $p=.000$).

After exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, the Pellegrino and Martín's “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children” (2022b), originally composed of 20 items, was reduced to 18, which factor weights ranged from -0.282 to .912 (see table 1). From the original scale, the following items were eliminated, as they had factor loadings below .35: “he/she does not have me in his/her mind” and “he/she behaves badly because he/she does not have a father/mother to educate him/her” (see table 1).

Table 1
 Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis

Factors/Items	Factorial loads		
	F1	F2	F3
F1: Fear of rejection and distancing from children			
fear that our relationship could cool down	0.503	0.1	0.374
fear that he/she won't love me because I'm in prison	0.892	0.07	-0,081
fear that he/she will stop talking to me and will ignore me	0.912	-0.081	0.126
fear that he/she will think I have set a bad example	0.503	-0.128	-0.032
fear that he/she will not recognise me as his/her father/mother	0.892	-0.282	0.025
fear that his/her mother or father will bad-mouth me to him/her	0.912	0.021	-0.224
fear that he/she will not respect me as a parent	0.92	0.006	-0.036
F2: Fear for children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours			
fear that some people could tell him/her untrue things about me	-0.066	0.356	0.168
fear of him/her suffering for what friends or others might say about having a parent in prison	0.039	0.55	0.37
fear of him/her beginning to consume toxics substances (drugs, alcohol).	-0.026	0.771	0.189
fear that he/she will not learn values	0.013	0.835	0.106
fear of him/her dropping out of school or not finding a job	0.159	0.638	0.182
fear that one day he/she may also end up in prison	0.233	0.706	-0.015
F3: Concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence			
Concern about him/her growing up without me	-0.019	0.863	0.676
Concern that I will not be able to protect him/her from wrong friends or bad influences	0.109	0.676	0.566
Concern that he/she is suffering because I am in prison	-0.019	0.566	0.663
Concern that he/she is sad to be apated from his/her father/mother	0.029	0.663	0.863
Concern that something might happen to him/her in the outside world	-0.019	0.863	0.493

This scale presents adequate fit indices, such as: RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation): .06; CFI (Comparative Fit Index): .98; TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index): .97; SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual): .05. Furthermore, a high overall reliability of the scale has been evidenced: it was measured through McDonald's Omega for the whole scale ($\alpha=.95$) and for each of the three factors. The first factor (F1) measures "fear of rejection and distancing from children" with seven items ($\alpha=.94.$); the second factor (F2) measures "fear for children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours" with six items ($\alpha=.80$); the third factor (F3) measures "concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence" with five items ($\alpha=.78$).

Comparing means

With respect to skewness, the range was between -1.4 and .436, while the values of kurtosis oscillated between -1.26 and -1.5, confirming the hypothesis of normality in the distribution of the items composing the instrument (Curran et al., 1996). Based on means, participants reported a greater "fear of rejection and distancing from their children", followed by "fear for their children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours", and finally "concern about the emotional impact of parental absence" (see table 2).

Table 2
 Means of the 3 factors of the Scale

Factor	N	M	σ	Skewness	Kurtosis
F1: Fear of rejection and distancing from children	122	2.90	1.64	.436	-.1.265
F2: Fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours	85	3.53	1.28	.053	-.800
F3: Concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence	889	2.16	1.21	1.211	-.094

It should be highlighted that significant differences were found between all the factors that make up the scale ($F_{(2,120)}=222.285$; $p=.000$), with a high effect size ($\eta^2=.79$). In addition, according to the paired t-test (analysis of means for related samples), significant differences were found between F1 “Fear of rejection and distancing from children” with F2 “Fear for wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours” ($t_{(121)}=-2.768$; $p=.007$) and F3 “Concern for the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence” ($t_{(121)}=-17.092$; $p=.000$).

Anovas of the different factors in relation to socio-demographic and relational variables

On one hand, no significant differences were found in any of the three factors of the scale in relation to gender, level of education and level of recidivism of the parents. Likewise, no significant differences were found if children knew or not about their parent being in prison and/or if they were aware or not about the reason of the crime. On the other hand, substantial differences were found according to the crime committed, nationality, age, sentence

length, whether they had contact with their children before and during imprisonment, phone contact and visits. Further differences were found depending on who is the primary caregiver of their children and the quality of their relationship with him/her.

In relation to the type of crime, there are significant variations in F1 “fear of rejection and distancing from children” and in F2 “fear for their children’s well-being and the development of disruptive behaviours”. Specifically, parents convicted of mafia crimes, in contrast to those convicted of ordinary crimes, reported a greater “fear of rejection and distancing from their children” ($F_{(1,121)}=28.91$; $p\leq.000$; $d=1.17$), with a high effect size. However, regarding F2 “fear for children’s well-being and the development of disruptive behaviours”, parents convicted of mafia crimes reported less fear than those convicted of common crimes ($F_{(1,121)}=12.57$; $p=.001$; $d=.79$), with a high effect size (see table 3).

Table 3
 ANOVAs according to crime committed

Factor	Mafia crimes \bar{x} (σ)	Ordinary crimes \bar{x} (σ)	$F_{(1,121)}$	p Value	d (Cohen)
F1: Fear of rejection and distancing from children	4.09 (1.15)	2.46 (2.46)	28.91	.000	1.17
F2: Fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours	2.58 (.94)	3.61 (1.57)	12.58	.001	.79
F3: Concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence	5.44 (.60)	5.10 (1.08)	2.88	.092	-

In terms of nationality, significant differences were found only in F2 “fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours”. In particular foreign parents, in contrast to Italian parents, reported greater levels of fear ($F_{(1,121)}=15.291$; $p\leq.000$; $d=.77$), with a high effect size.

According to age, there are significant differences in relation to F2 “fear for well-being and the development

of disruptive behaviours” ($F_{(2,120)}=6.027$; $p=.003$; $d=.72$), and in F3 “concern for the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence” ($F_{(2,120)}=5.545$; $p=.005$; $d=.72$), both with a high effect size. However, there are no significant differences in F1 “fear of rejection and distancing from children” (see table 4).

Table 4
 ANOVAs by age of parents

Factor	Age 24-39 years	Age 40-50 years	Age 51-75 years	$F_{(2,120)}$	p Value	d (Cohen)
	\bar{x} (σ)	\bar{x} (σ)	\bar{x} (σ)			
F1: Fear of rejection and distancing from children	3.22(1.68)	2.84(1.59)	2.53(1.61)	1.77	.174	-
F2: Fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours	3.56 (1.44)	3.65 (1.51)	2.57 (1.37)	6.02	.003	.72
F3: Concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence	5.40 (.84)	5.30 (.93)	4.72 (1.11)	5.54	.005	.72

Post-hoc tests indicate that participants aged 51-75 years report lower “fear for their children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours” compared to those aged 40-50 years ($\bar{x}_{(51-75 \text{ years})}=2.56$; $\bar{x}_{(40-50 \text{ years})}=3.65$; $p=.006$; $d=.76$), with a high effect size, and compared to those aged 24-39 ($\bar{x}_{(51-75 \text{ years})}=2.56$; $\bar{x}_{(24-39)}=3.56$; $p=.008$), with a medium-high effect size ($d=.70$).

Likewise, participants aged 51-75 years report less “concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence” in comparison to those aged 40-50 years ($\bar{x}_{(51-75 \text{ years})}=4.72$; $\bar{x}_{(40-50 \text{ years})}=5.30$; $p=.029$), with a medium-high effect size ($d=.57$), and compared to those aged 24-39 years older ($\bar{x}_{(51-75 \text{ years})}=4.72$; $\bar{x}_{(24-39)}=5.40$; $p=.005$), with a medium-high effect size ($d=.69$). Therefore, it can be observed that as the age of the parents decreases, their concerns increase.

In relation to the sentence length, significant differ-

ences were found only with regard to F2 “fear for their children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours”. Specifically, parents who had been in prison for more than 6 years, as compared to those who had been in prison for 1 to 5 years, reported greater fear ($F_{(1,101)}=4.618$; $p=.034$), with a medium-low effect size ($d=.42$).

On one hand, in relation to whether participants maintained contact with their children before entering prison, significant differences were found only in F1 “fear of rejection and distancing from their children.” In particular, those who had no contact, as opposed to those who did, reported greater fear ($F_{(1,120)}=7.21$; $p=.008$), with a medium-high effect size ($d=.65$).

On the other hand, when asked whether they maintained contact with their children from prison, relevant differences were found in all factors (see table 5).

Table 5

ANOVAs according to whether they maintain contact with their children from prison

Factor	He/she does not maintain contact \bar{x} (σ)	He/she maintains contact \bar{x} (σ)	$F_{(1,119)}$	p Value	d (Cohen)
F1: Fear of rejection and distancing from children	3.44 (1.65)	2.59 (1.59)	7.70	.006	.52
F2: Fear for children's well-being and the development of disruptive behaviours	3.82 (1.35)	3.05 (1.50)	7.79	.006	.53
F3: Concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence	5.45(.77)	5.08(1.04)	4.25	.041	.40

Specifically, those who had contact from prison reported less “fear of rejection and distancing from their children” ($F_{(1,119)}=7.70$; $p=.006$; $d=.52$), “fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours” ($F_{(1,119)}=7.79$; $p=.006$; $d=.53$) and lower “concern for the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence” ($F_{(1,119)}=4.25$; $p=.041$; $d=.40$), all with a medium effect size.

In relation to whether parents maintain telephone contact with their children during the sentence, significant differences were found only regarding F2 “fear for children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours”. Specifically, parents who cannot communicate by phone with their children, as opposed to those who do maintain telephone communication, reported greater fear ($F_{(1,120)}=7.378$; $p=.008$), with a mean effect size ($d=.52$).

Whether parents maintain visits with their children during the sentence, significant differences were found only in F2 “fear for their children’s wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours”. In particular, parents who are not allowed to see their children during the sentence, in contrast to those who do have visits, reported greater fear ($F_{(1,117)}=4.31$; $p=.04$; $d=.39$), with a medium-low effect size.

Depending on who is the primary caregiver of the children outside the prison, there are significant differences only in relation to F3 “concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence” ($F_{(2,119)}=3.37$; $p=.038$; $d=.52$), with a medium effect size (see table 6).

Table 6

ANOVAs according to who's the primary caregiver of children outside prison

Factor	The other parent \bar{x} (σ)	Relatives \bar{x} (σ)	Children's homes or foster care \bar{x} (σ)	$F_{(2,121)}$	p Value	d (Cohen)
F1: Fear of rejection and distancing from children	3.00 (1.65)	2.12 (1.08)	3.02 (1.79)	1.96	.145	-
F2: Fear for children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours	3.58 (1.52)	2.77 (1.12)	2.98 (1.50)	3.04	.051	-
F3: Concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence	5.36 (.86)	5.01 (.86)	4.85 (1.23)	3.37	.03	.52

According to the results of the post-hoc tests, when children are being taken care by the mother alone, imprisoned fathers report a greater “concern for the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence” than when they are in children’s homes or in foster care ($\bar{x}_{(\text{parents})}=5.36$; $\bar{x}_{(\text{home or foster care})}=4.84$; $p=.038$; $d=.49$), with a mean effect size.

As for the quality of the relationship with the main external caregiver, significant differences were found only in F1 “fear of rejection and distancing from the children”. Specifically, parents with no or poor relationship with the primary caregiver, as opposed to those with a good relationship, reported greater fear ($F_{(1,100)}=13.61$; $p\leq.000$; $d=.73$), with a high effect size.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the main concerns of imprisoned parents regarding their children. Although it is common for fathers and mothers to be concerned about their children, in the prison context the perceived lack of control over one’s own life, together with the frustration of not being able to intervene on what happens outside as one would like, contributes to the exacerbation of these concerns (Venema et al., 2022; Martín and Pellegrino, 2020; Norman and Enebrink, 2020).

As mentioned above, the factoring of the “Scale of concerns of imprisoned parents with regards to their children” of Pellegrino and Martín’s (2022b), when adapted to the Italian context, revealed three factors of concerns: 1. “fear of rejection and distancing from children”, 2. “fear for their children’s well-being and the development of disruptive behaviours” and 3. “concern for the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence”.

These findings are broadly supported and extend the results of several previous studies on parental relationships in the prison context. In this vein, Dyer et al. (2012), in a review of studies on family relationships in the penitentiary context, concluded that relationships between imprisoned parents and their children were at risk due to the disruptive effect of imprisonment, which would affect identity and parental role perceptions. Furthermore, Charles et al. (2019) report that in prison, as time passes by, parents feel they are losing their children. These authors help to explain why the greatest perceived fear is caused by rejection and distancing from children.

With reference to the second factor “fear for children’s wellbeing and behavioural problems”, Venema et al. (2022) in their systematic review found evidence of how parental imprisonment negatively affects children’s personal development and increases the possibility of them manifesting behavioural problems. Other authors, such as Moran et al. (2017), found that those parents who feel they cannot be effective with their children from prison choose to take a step back. They do not want to be visited, they do not phone, etc. In addition, parents who themselves have experienced intergenerational repetition of re-

lational patterns may notice that their children now perceive similar feelings of abandonment to those they experienced in their childhood (Binik, O. et al., 2021; Meek, 2011).

In relation to the hypothesis statement of this study, the first assumption was confirmed, as the ANOVAs showed significant differences according to the type of crime (ordinary or mafia crime). Specifically, parents convicted of mafia crimes showed a greater “fear of rejection and distancing from their children”. According to Venema et al. (2021), the characteristics of the sentence, the type and severity of the crime, as well as the circumstances of the arrest, may have an additional impact on parent-child relationship in the context of the father’s incarceration.

Another possible explication for these differences could be geographical distance, as it is common for people who have committed a mafia crime to be sent to prisons far away from their context of origin. Geographical distance reduces the possibilities of contact and could condition the perception of an internal distancing between father and children. In addition, other internal reasons could coexist: several authors claim that for mafia culture “family” and “family loyalty” are very important values, therefore distancing or rejection could affect them in a deeper way (Campedelli et al., 2019; Giunta et al., 2018). Another study by Travaglino et al. (2022), analysing the intergenerational transmission of criminal practice within the Camorra, highlighted the importance of the parental model in the process of constructing the identity of children. Therefore, the possibility that children may not want to follow in the footsteps of the organisation could be a source of concern for these fathers. On the contrary, children could also experience social pressure due to their parents’ criminal background, which could generate a fear of being socially excluded because of their origin and finally lead them to distance themselves from their fathers.

Campedelli et al. (2019) found out that people convicted of mafia offences tend to be part of a criminal subculture with distorted values and norms, compared to the general population. This study also revealed that these differences remain even within prison, distancing these prisoners from the rest. It was observed that inmates convicted of ordinary crimes show greater concern for the personal development and possible conduct problems of their children. In contrast, parents convicted of mafia crimes show significantly lower levels of worry about this aspect. It is possible that they normalise their children’s disruptive behaviours as part of a ‘traditional’ mafia lifestyle (Besemer et al., 2017; Travaglino et al., 2022).

In addition, significant differences were also found in terms of years of imprisonment, with parents who had been in prison for more than 6 years expressing higher levels of concern about their children’s development and the appearance of disruptive behaviours. In this regard, Venema (2022) found that longer sentences have a greater impact on family relationship history than shorter sentences.

In association with the type of crime, significant differences were also found according to the length of im-

prisonment, with parents who had been in prison for more than 6 years expressing higher levels of concern about their children's development and the appearance of disruptive behaviours. In this regard, Venema (2022) found that longer sentences have a greater impact on family relationship history than shorter sentences.

The second hypothesis of this study suggested the existence of sex and age differences with regards to feeling fear for children's wellbeing and development of disruptive behaviours, being greater in women and young parents. This statement could only be partially demonstrated. In fact, the ANOVAs found no significant differences in relation to gender, while variations were observed in relation to the age of the parents. Specifically, it was observed that younger parents perceive a greater "fear for their children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours", as well as they experience higher "concern about the emotional impact of paternal or maternal absence". One possible explanation could be related to the fact that young parents usually have underage children who therefore present greater needs for protection and care. Roy and Dyson (2010) discovered that a common concern expressed by male inmates was not being able to financially support their sons and daughters or not being able to ensure them the expected purchasing power. This worry can be explained by the fact that in the collective imaginary still persists that it's the father figure who must provide for the family's sustenance.

With regards to the third hypothesis which distinguished levels of fear and concern depending on the national or foreign origin of the parent, significant differences could only be confirmed on one scale factor. Thus, it was found that foreign parents tend to perceive a higher level of concern than national parents when it comes to "fear for children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours". One possible interpretation of this result can be related to the difficulty of maintaining contact with their children, as many of them still live in their countries of origin, and this distance exacerbates their concerns. Furthermore, the concern for their children's wellbeing could be increased by the fact that many of them undertook their emigration to Europe in order to improve their personal lives: now that they are in prison, they cannot contribute on a financial level to improving their children's living conditions. In this sense, the study by López (2021) investigated the presence of a double stigma among incarcerated people who are also immigrants.

In relation to the fourth hypothesis raised in this study, it was confirmed the relevance of the role of the primary caregiver of their children outside prison. In fact, he/she plays a crucial role in reducing the fear of rejection and distancing from children, as well as in diminishing the concern for their children's wellbeing and the development of disruptive behaviours. Glaze and Maruschak (2010) described a systemic model composed of a triad: incarcerated parent, child and primary caregiver, mostly the mother. Our study has also observed that when the

quality of the relationship with the primary caregiver is negative, the concerns of the imprisoned parent increase.

In many cases it has been observed that difficulties among parents prior to imprisonment or that have developed during incarceration can lead to a complete loss of contact and the disruption of children's right to maintain regular contact with both parents (Dennison and Smallbon, 2015; Grattagliano et al, 2018).

Furthermore, our study confirms the importance of maintaining child-parent contact during the period of imprisonment, as it is a key factor in reducing parental concerns. The Italian penitentiary system allows several means of contact, which, despite the limits of each one, may be crucial for both parents and children wellbeing. These contacts safeguard the following basic rights: that children can have a healthy development, maintaining contact with their parental figures, and that prisoners can continue to exercise their parental role. In fact, inmates who maintain telephone contact or receive visits from their children report less concern for their children's development or the appearance of disruptive behaviour.

Sharratt (2014) found out that phone calls were a valuable alternative to parent-child contact especially when children found visits too distressing. High frequency telephone contact was reported to be highly valued by children when they already had a good parent-child relation before imprisonment, by contrast it was found difficult when their previous relation was negative. Similarly, the results of this study found greater fear in those parents who had no or negative relations with their children prior to imprisonment. However, all three factors of concern significantly reduced when parents reported maintaining contact with their children. Regarding the benefits of parent-child contact from prison, the literature agrees it would be appropriate to focus on the quality of this contact, rather than frequency (Besemer and Dennison, 2018; Fowler et al., 2017; Saunders, 2016).

As future perspectives, it would be appropriate to create spaces for reflection for imprisoned parents and their families, so that they could learn strategies and develop skills to improve the quality of parent-child communication (Aguiar and Leavell, 2017; Henson, 2020; Purvis, 2013).

Although this study presents interesting results, it is certainly not free of limitations. Firstly, due to the encountered difficulties of access to prisons and the use of one-to-one interviews, the sample was limited in quantity, with a total of 122 participants. In addition, the proportion of imprisoned mothers was limited, as in Italy the number of women in prison is significantly lower than men, which may have hindered the identification of significant gender differences. Other limitations relate to the impossibility of integrating the study with the feedback from caregivers, children or other family members of the prisoners, due to logistical and legal barriers. Finally, it is worth mentioning that some of the answers given by parents to researchers might be idealised, since as time in prison passes by, it is plausible that they may take distance

from the dynamics of family life, thus influencing the perceptions of their own concerns.

Conclusions

This research has shown how imprisoned parents wish to be good parents and therefore have concerns about their children's development, to the point of experiencing anxiety about the emotional impact that their imprisonment may have on their children.

In relation to the initial hypotheses of this study, it was possible to observe how parents' concerns are related to the social stigma that also affects them in prison. As we saw, they can perceive higher concerns in relation to their origin or type of crime committed. In this research, we could also see how parents themselves cannot break free from the social stigma, as their highest concern is related to the fear of rejection and of being considered by their children as a bad person.

Furthermore, related to this last consideration, they also present the concern about their children being socially stigmatised for having a parent in prison or that they may develop conduct problems. In the collective imagination fed by television, film and literature, prison is still the place where the bad guys are locked up. In the short term it seems difficult to believe that society will be able to overcome this stigma and approach inmates from the perspective of rehabilitation.

Although imprisonment negatively affects perceptions of the quality of parent-child relationship, there are different pathways to improve it (Tasca, 2018).

Concerns were shown to be significantly reduced if inmates can keep phone or visit contact with their children, as well as if they maintain a good relationship with the primary caregiver.

Finding ways to facilitate these contacts should be pursued by treatment programmes seeking to facilitate imprisoned parents to accompany their children during incarceration and to facilitate successful social reintegration (Troy et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2010).

Future interventions should prioritize attention to younger parents since, as we have seen, they are more concerned about their sons and daughters. Hence, within the prison context, it would be urgent to offer parenting education programmes, mainly directed at this group. According to Meek (2011), parenting becomes a motivational factor for inmates, as they experiment desire for personal rescue through wanting to better themselves as responsible and attentive parents. Moreover, they feel the need to be accepted by their family circle, demonstrating that they are up to the task of providing similar or better care than they themselves received.

In addition, priority should also be given to developing a broad offer of educational resources and services for supporting caregivers of children who have a parent in prison, as their needs are often not attended to. In this sense, interventions should be designed to include both

imprisoned parent and external caregiver, since greater communication and coordination among parents will reduce their concerns as well as enhance the future development of their children.

Other comments

We acknowledge that this study is original and has never been published previously nor presented to any conference/congress.

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