



# Violence issues and child well-being: A study on incarcerated families in Kelantan

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### ABSTRACT

Children and youth today seem to have more stressor and difficulties in their everyday life especially when a parent goes to prison. Children with incarceration issues receive little attention, but the issue so widespread; concern for the well-being of the effected children has been raised. Incarceration brings long term effects to family members by increasing violence among children; impeding children to have a better picture of their life which directly and indirectly affects children's well-being. Growing up with violence issues surrounding them is a crucial and devastating experience for the children. Using six selected domains based on the suggestion from Land and colleagues (2001), we assessed the effects of violence issues on children's well-being with incarceration issues in Kelantan. There are four items of violence being correlate with child well-being score; bullying, disturbance, stigmatization and isolation. These were selected based on the current literature related to children violence. The relationship between children's well-being score and violence affects were examined in 75 children aged 8 to 17 years with family incarceration issues in Kelantan. Through the findings indicated that children with a higher level of isolation, stigmatization, bullying and disturbance tend to have a low score of the child's well-being. Children simultaneously indicated that isolation, stigmatization, bullying and disturbance always occurred and was related to their parent's incarceration status. The negative perception they received also made the children a victim of bullying and thus more isolated.

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### Introduction

#### Well-Being: Child Right Perspective and Ecological Perspective

The meaning of child well-being has been defined and understood in various ways based on different perspectives and according to nationality, gender, ethnicity, class, birth order in addition to many other factors. This was supported by Lippman (2007) who stated that the concept of well-being has wide and non-specific concepts with plural definitions. According to Camfield et al. (2009), well-being is an umbrella term encompassing different concepts addressing all aspects of life. However, the definitions of children well-being were a little bit different and thus making it even more complex because it also included developmental perspectives. From a child's right perspective, well-being could be defined as the realization of children's rights and the fulfillment of the opportunity for every child to be all she or he could be in light of a child's abilities, potential and skills. The degree to which this was achieved could be measured in terms of positive child outcomes, whereas negative outcomes and deprivation point to a neglect of children's rights (Bradshaw et al. 2007).

A growing awareness of children's rights and well-being has brought a revolution that led to the increase of state and social responsibility for children. There were multiple reasons for this transformation and some were directly reflected by the changing concepts of childhood, historic debates regarding the importance of children to state development and differing views about public responsibility to children (B.G. McGowan, 2005). During the early years, most research on well-being involving

children only viewed them as a second actor in the research. However, recent work has demonstrated increased attention on promoting the well-being of children and views them as a main subject of research (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Dwivedi and Harper, 2004).

According to child right perspectives, a child in particular shall be provided the opportunity to be heard and capable of forming his or her own views. In this condition, other parties should not presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views. The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child is a human right's treat which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of children. The convention deals with child specific needs and rights and requires states to act in the best interest of the child. The states that ratified, accepted, or acceded to it should protect children from any abuse action, exploitation, discrimination including privacy interference. The convention also obligated signatory states to make sure that parents exercise their parental responsibilities to fulfill children developmental needs and to provide them with better picture of their well-being.

Ben-Arieh (2006) emphasizes that children's development and implicitly their well-being was mediated by personal and environmental factors, including individual capacities, relationships, cultural values and expectations. Schor (1995) for example, defined children's well-being related to the influences of the close environment to the children. He said that children's health and well-being was directly related to their family's ability to provide them with their essential physical, emotional and social needs. Keith and Schalock (1994) used a wide scope

of the concept to refer their definition of children's well-being as a general view of the person's feelings regarding his/her life circumstances, including personal problems and some questions about family. On the other hand, Martinez and Duke (1997) refer to a specific component of children's well-being "self-esteem, purpose in life and self-concept of academic ability (self-confidence)".

While on the other hand, some in early childhood research believe that child development and their well-being should be understood in an ecological approach. The ecological approach is very important to be understood because it acknowledges the interdependence of child, family, community and society. According to Gillian Pugh (2007), children and young people always see their family and friends as the most important influence on achieving good outcomes. She also wrote that:

wellness or wellbeing is both an individual and a collective concept, something that is measured in terms of individual lives, but is very often delivered through families and communities. This ecological approach, which ground work with children and young people in their families, and within the community and the culture in which they are growing up has been central in informing the policies....

Bronfenbrenner (1998) argued that human abilities and their realization depend to a significant degree on the larger social and institutional context of individual activity. He suggested that human development could be analyzed in terms of systems. Recognition of the relationship provides a key to understanding developmental changes not only in children but also in adults who serve as primary caregivers-mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers and so on. In order to develop either intellectually, emotionally, socially or morally, a child is required to participate in progressively more complex activities with a person that child could develop a strong, mutual, emotional attachment and who were committed to the child's well-being and development for life.

Prilleltensky and Nelson in their book "Promoting Family Wellness and Preventing Child Maltreatment" in 2001 also argued that in order to understand the development of child wellbeing, we should look at the overall systems around the children. Wellness actually was an ecological concept in which child well-being was determined by the level of parental, familial, communal and social wellness. They also proposed that child well-being was predicated on the satisfaction of material, physical, affective and psychological needs. In this context, the family played an important role to present a supportive, affectionate and gratifying relationship that would promote the personal development of family members and the collective well-being of the family as a whole.

In relation to the concept of ecological perspectives of well-being (or wellness) it could be argued that a child's well-being was determined by the level of parental, familial, communal and social wellness. Well-being was not only about to be seen as an important concept in the context of the child's developing well-being but it extends to the idea of collective well-being which is at the heart of community.

#### **Violence against Children of Prisoner**

Children of prisoners always had been largely overlooked although there was evidence that incarceration could bring long term adverse effects not only on a child's development but also bring disastrous effects to their overall well-being. Imprisonment of father, mother or both could be debilitating to children emotionally and practically. Imprisonment also had left much stressors, difficulties and burden to the other family's members such as social isolation, extra burdens of childcare,

difficulties of maintaining contact and perhaps most devastating, when it comes to the cause of a child's behavior. The number of children with parents in prison has grown dramatically recently and has brought a revolution to the research of the children's condition while their parents were in prison. Isolation, bullying, disturbance and stigmatization were often mentioned as one of the adverse unintended consequences of parental imprisonment (Arditti et al, 2003).

Violence that happened to children cannot be acceptable or tolerated. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines violence as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse. Children with parents in prisons were routinely exposed to physical and psychological violence in their residence, school, among their peers, family networks, neighborhoods, social services setting and so forth. Recent research indicated that parental incarceration caused other family member to cope and struggle with complex behavioral conditions including chronic substance abuse, poverty, community crime, poor academic and occupational prospects and violence among peers and community (Greene et al. 2002; Katz 1998). Violence against any child might cause serious harm, impact the child's well-being and violence perpetrators should be held accountable for their actions.

According to the Kinner et al. (2007), children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms were uncorrelated with parental imprisonment once socio-economic status, parental mental health and substance use, parenting style and family adjustment were taken into consideration. They concluded that the association between parental imprisonment and adverse youth outcomes may be accounted for by established social and familial risk factors and one such factor may be exposure to violence in homes and communities. Children also had to stand on the deception and trauma because of the separation, living arrangement problems, stigma and antisocial behavior. Children faced the effects of violence issues in their live in a number of different ways. Hester et al. (2000) reviewed that violence against children sometimes could impact their behavior and emotional well-being and cognitive abilities and attitudes. Generally, children living in abusive environments tend to have more frequent behavioral and emotional problems.

Children of prisoners also experience ostracism, disapproval in the community and scorn because of their association with imprisoned parents. Ann Cunningham (2001) revealed that loss of a family member because of incarceration seldom elicits sympathy and support from others, stigma and the feeling of isolation associated with being the family member of a prisoner was central to many of the difficulties that children and other family member had to face. This might also be compounded by the perception of the community that prisoner parents were intrinsically bad parents. Children might feel stigmatized because of the situation including the nature of the crime, the attitude and perception of the community and the individual child's character. Crimes viewed as abhorrent by community members; such as murdered and sexual abused against children seemed to attract greater stigma and point of view of the community to the family's members of prisoners.

Joseph Murray (2007) in his article concluded that even close friends and relatives might disown or otherwise stigmatize families of prisoners. This action caused some children to feel ashamed and caused pressure especially when they were at school. Some children had reported moving to another school and made new friends because they received verbal abuse from other children at their old school. In some situations, children

might act aggressively towards anyone insulting them or their imprisoned parent. Other research indicated that the effect of experiencing environmental violence during their child development were likely to include risky and delinquent behavior such as sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, truancy, running away and property crime as they grew older (Osofsky, 1999; Thornberry et al., 2004; Widom, 1995). Children who experienced violence due to the incarceration of their parents tend to receive little social support because they withdrew from peers to avoid violent actions from happening again.

Some researchers disclosed that children were not the direct targets of acts of discrimination, children were aware of societal attitudes toward stigmatized groups from a very young age. They understand that they had been a subject of discrimination, stigmatization which thus made them a victim of bullying. Awareness of stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors can also prevent people from seeking help either because doing so may give away their stigmatized status, or subject them to devaluing attitudes and treatment by members of helping professions (Schomerus et al. 2009; Vogel et al. 2007). Consistent with these findings, Benaquisto and Coulthard (2008) concluded that the fear of shame and stigma had a much more debilitating effect on families than the way in which they were actually treated.

The increase in family incarceration issues recently has raised more concerns on well-being of effected children. The limitations of the literature about violence against children and its effect on the well-being of the children with family incarceration issues were because most of the previous research focused on the effects of incarceration to the spouse, children delinquency and to a lesser extent, on adolescents. Research on the connection between violence and well-being that included children often examined children as a second actor in the research and most of the information received was based on interviews with parents and caregivers only. However, recent work has demonstrated an increased attention to promoting well-being in children and views them as a main subject of research (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Dwivedi and Harper, 2004).

The growing concerns on the child's well-being in Malaysia could be shown clearly with the higher levels commitment of government through the implementation of a National Policy on Children in July 2009. Objectives of the policy are to highlight the rights of the child to survive, protection, development and participation, all of which are in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) the government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995. This was followed with an introduction of various national laws related to child protection. However, scientific acceptance of children's right to speak for themselves about their well-being due to family incarceration was still less wide-spread in Malaysia. Thus, this lack of research has resulted in less literature about what exactly they face and the exact number of effected children in Malaysia.

#### Methodology and Data Collection

The objective of this study was to report on the relationship between violence against children of prisoners and their well-being based on the research that had been done before. This paper is organized as follows; Section One and Two would highlight the meanings of child well-being from a child's right perspective and ecological perspective while Section Two highlights the literature pertinent to the study followed by methodology in Section Three. Section Four discusses about the results and finally Section Five comes up with the conclusions of the overall study.

In order to obtain the data, this study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, using three techniques which include; questionnaire, interview and observation. The data collection processes' using both methods was carried out together at the same time in early 2011. The respondents for this research study were selected purposely from families with incarceration issues. The questionnaires for this research were distributed to the selected participants around Kelantan State, Malaysia. The questionnaire consists of four sections but children were only required to answer demographic sections, the well-being needs section by ticking at the respective boxes and perception of their well-being section by ranking their answers based on a semantic scale. Children's caregivers were also asked to answer and complete D section which contained questions about the caregiver daily life.

In the present study, the selections of component indicators for child well-being were based on the suggestion from Land and colleagues (2001). They suggested six constituent domains for child well-being such as health, material needs, educational attainment, safety, spiritual and housing/environment. For the questions about the effects of the family's incarceration to the child's well-being, there were four items that included in violence group such bullying, disturbance, stigmatization and isolation. In order to measure and examine the relationship between four items of violence group and child well-being score, correlation analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 17 (SPSS 17) were formed to calculate the results. The results from the calculation of the correlation also had been used to rank most affected children well-being's indicators.

**Map 1: Kelantan State, Malaysia**



#### Demographic Data of Respondents

There were 75 respondents which included 36 boys and 39 girls and the age of the respondents was between 8 to 17 years old. All of the respondents together with their caregivers were asked to answer the questionnaire given. But not all of the respondents and their caregivers were involved in the interview. Only a few of them were interviewed based on their individual circumstances. From the demographic data obtained, 23 respondents (30.7%) lived with grandparents, 29 (28.7%) lived together with mothers, 2 (2.7%) with fathers, 5 (6.7%) with their own siblings and the remaining 17 respondents (21.3%) stayed with relatives. For the family member incarcerated, 70.7% (53) stated father, 21.3% (16) mother and 8% (6) both. 41 (54.7%) of respondents had less than 3 siblings, 1 (1.3%) more than 6 while the remaining 33 (44%) from 4 to 6 siblings. A majority 45 (60%) of respondents lived in rural area while just 30 (40%) were from urban areas.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistic of Respondent's Profile**

	Description	No. of Subject	Percentage (%)
Gender	Boy	36	48%
	Girl	39	52%
Age	8 to 12	40	53.3%
	13 to 15	27	36%
	16 to 17	8	10.7%
	Mother	29	38.7%
Care Taker	Father	2	2.7%
	Siblings	5	6.7%
	Grandparent	23	30.7%
Incarcerated Family	Relatives	16	21.3%
	Father	53	70.7%
	Mother	16	21.3%
Siblings	Both	6	8%
	4 to 6	33	44%
	Less than 3	41	54.7%
	More than 3	1	1.3%
Neighborhood	Rural	45	60%
	Urban	30	40%

**Table 2: Reliability Analysis: Cronbach's Alpha Value**

Indicator Items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Education	0.889
Health	0.750
Housing	0.899
Material Needs	0.775
Safety and Risk	0.750
Spiritual	0.792
Overall	0.928

**Table 3: Frequency of the Children Involved in Violence**

Violence Items	Frequencies		
	Never	Rarely	Always
Stigma	10	51	14
Disturbance	29	40	16
Isolation	12	52	11
Bullying	14	51	10

**Table 4: Relationship between Stigma and Child Well-being Indicators**

Item Names	Indicators	Correlation ( <i>r</i> )	Sig ( <i>t</i> )
Stigma	Education	-0.802**	0.005
	Health	-0.557	0.094
	Housing	-0.681*	0.030
	Material Needs	-0.830**	0.003
	Safety and Risk	-0.535	0.094
	Spiritual	-0.034	0.925
	Overall	-0.681*	0.030

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 5: Relationship between Bullying and Child Well-being Indicators**

Item Names	Indicators	Correlation ( <i>r</i> )	Sig ( <i>t</i> )
Bullying	Education	-0.686*	0.024
	Health	-0.395	0.258
	Housing	-0.527	0.117
	Material Needs	-0.707*	0.022
	Safety and Risk	-0.395	0.258
	Spiritual	0.000	1.000
	Overall	-0.527*	0.117

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 7: Relationship between Isolated and Child Well-being Indicators**

Item Names	Indicators	Correlation ( <i>r</i> )	Sig ( <i>t</i> )
Isolated	Education	-0.709*	0.018
	Health	-0.156	0.667
	Housing	-0.364	0.301
	Material Needs	-0.698*	0.025
	Safety and Risk	-0.547	0.102
	Spiritual	-0.203	0.574
	Overall	-0.762**	0.001

**Findings**

In this study, Cronbach’s Alpha value was calculated in order to measure the internal consistency of the items used in this study. Based on the calculation that had been formed, the value of the Cronbach’s Alpha for this study ranged from 0.750 to 0.928. This indicated good internal consistency of the items used in the scale. Table 2 below shows the Cronbach’s Alpha value based on the six indicator items used in this study.

Table 3 shows details about the frequencies of the children involved in violence. There were four items of violence which included stigma, disturbance, isolation and bullying. The table shows that 51 children reported that they were rarely a victims of stigma, 14 always and 10 children reported never being stigmatized. 40 children seldom were disturbed, 29 never and 16 children were always disturbed. For the isolation items, there were 52 children reported that they were rarely isolated, 12 never and the remaining 11 children reported always being isolated. Out of 75 children of prisoners, 51 children were rarely bullied, 10 always and 14 children had never been a victim of bullying.

Table 4 presents the correlation between stigma and child well-being indicators. The item, stigma from violence group, stigma was correlated with the six child well-being indicators together with the overall score of child well-being. Results showed that stigma had a negative significant linear relationship with education ( $r = -0.802$ ), housing ( $r = -0.681$ ), material needs ( $r = -0.830$ ) and overall child well-being score ( $r = -0.681$ ). A negative linear correlation indicated that as the value of stigma increased, the score of child well-being indicators tended to decrease. The remaining three indicators; health, safety and risk, and spiritual were not significantly correlated with stigma.

The results for the relationship between bullying and child well-being indicators were presented in table 5. The results show that three indicators of child well-being were significantly negatively correlated with bullying; education ( $r = -0.686$ ), material needs ( $r = -0.707$ ) and overall ( $r = -0.527$ ). This shows that the change of value of bullying might change the value of child well-being score.

For the correlation between disturbance and indicators of child well-being in table 6, there were five indicators; health, housing, safety and risk, spiritual and overall which were not significantly correlated with item of violence, disturbance. Out of seven indicators, two indicators, education ( $r = -0.745$ ) and material needs ( $r = -0.698$ ) were significantly correlated with disturbance. Hence, these results show that these two indicators tend to increase when the value of the work decreased.

**Table 6: Relationship between Disturbance and Child Well-being Indicators**

Item Names	Indicators	Correlation (r)	Sig (t)
	Education	-0.745*	0.013
	Health	-0.156	0.667
	Housing	-0.364	0.301
Disturbance	Material Needs	-0.698*	0.025
	Safety and Risk	-0.156	0.667
	Spiritual	-0.493	0.148
	Overall	-0.364	0.301

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Results shown in table 7 indicate that education had a significant negative relationship with education ( $r = -0.709$ ), material needs ( $r = -0.698$ ) and overall child well-being score ( $r = -0.762$ ). Hence, the results indicate that the score of the three child well-being indicators (education, material needs and overall) tend to decrease when the frequency of being isolated was low. Four child well-being indicators also had a negative

relationship, but not significantly correlated, with the isolated items. The four indicators that weren’t significantly correlated were health, housing, safety and risk, and spiritual.

Table 8 represents the rank of the most affected indicators of child well-being. The results show that education and material needs were the most affected indicators. The total frequencies of affected indicators for education and material needs were four times and were ranked into number one and two. Overall child well-being was in the rank three with the three affected frequencies while safety and risk and spiritual were not affected at all with the five items from the family economic resources groups. For the housing indicators, it was ranked into number 4 with one total frequency. From the entire table above, this study also indicates that stigma has the highest influence and effects all six child well-being indicators score and also into the overall score of child well-being. However, based on the correlation that had been done, the results shows that all four items of violence had significant relationships with education and material needs.

**Table 8: Rank of the Most Affected Child Well-being Indicators**

Indicators Names	Total Frequencies	Rank
Education	4	1
Health	0	5
Housing	1	4
Material Needs	4	2
Safety and risk	0	6
Spiritual	0	7
Overall	3	3

**Discussion**

The present study assessed the relationship between four items from violence group and six indicators of child well-being together with the overall score of child well-being among children with family incarceration issues. Items of violence grouped were included bullying, stigma, isolation and disturbance. This research found that all of four items had influenced the score value of some six indicators of child well-being and overall child well-being. Thus, the results suggest that the violence issues that children face could diminish the survival capability not only for the children, but also for the other family members. They had been observed to be victims of psychological violence and sometimes physical violence by their peers and neighbors.

Children with a higher level of isolation, stigmatization, bullying and disturbance tend to have a low score of child well-being. Simultaneously children, indicated that isolation, stigmatization, bullying and disturbance always occurred and was related to their parent’s incarceration statuses. They have trouble to be friends and have relationships with other children at school or among residents. Most of the respondents expressed feelings of isolation and were disturbed by other children and sometimes by the parents. School-aged children with incarcerated parents have been observed to be stigmatized by their peers and display poor academic performance and behavior problems (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Wilbur et al., 2007). Though, a few children demonstrate success in school, most of the children described poor academic and behavioral performances in school.

In this study, children who had experienced isolation indicated that they felt that their social interactions were superficial. Many of them were self-deprecating and portrayed themselves as emotionally bland, depressed and suspicious. They also pronounced fears of social rejection and it was clear that a number had become severely socially withdrawn. Children will be rejected depending to the some extent upon their individual characteristics and upon the nature of the group by

which they were being rejected. Children rejected by another groups were normally related to the prejudices regarding religion or sometimes regarding their family matters.

According to Hanafian and Brooks (2005), having friends in addition to family is an important factor for their well-being. It was normal for the children to share problems, play together, have fun and spend time with friends. Children were at risk of being neglected from their peer group due to their family status. Against this background were children's relationships with their peers, as well as their wider social network, crucial for their psychosocial development (Hay et al., 2004). Children with parents in prison were stigmatized because they were affiliate with parents who were stigmatized. This negative perception from peers may derive children as a victim of bullying and thus lead to isolation. Children with isolation and disturbance issues may experience devaluation and discrimination in various ways and from many different sources that lead to their well-being conditions. According to Edin (2000), incarceration of any family member or both might threaten family reputation, put other family members and children safety at risk and fail to provide a respectable middle-class lifestyle.

The ways children interact with their peers had important implications on the way they should behave as adolescents and adults. Some children of prisoners had become targets of bullying behavior from their peers. There were a number of behavioral manifestations of children that experienced violence. They sometimes took a passive response such as hiding in fear or crying. But sometimes children might take more aggressive action like punching them back. Once involved in the aggressive behavior, they might use that action in order to protect themselves and family from being victims again. According to Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor (1995), many difficulties are associated with violence exposure, such as low school achievement and a high level of anger, anxiety, aggression and antisocial behavior.

Children sometimes choose not to talk about their family secret or said that their family was in prison or jail due to the realistic fears about community scorn or rejection. Children, who were chosen or asked to keep quiet, reported isolation from their friends. Forced silence adds to the trauma experienced by children because they had no one to talk with about their feelings (Johnston, 1995). They might avoid interaction with well-behaved peers out of fear and shame that the good crowd would find out about their incarcerated parents. This shame and secrecy might be fueled by the politics of tough on crime attitudes, especially when this was accompanied by media coverage which made villains of the offending parents (Kennon, 1997).

### Conclusion

From the tables and results above, this study indicated that well-being of the children with an incarcerated family member were influenced by four items from the items of violence groups. This showed that violence issued that surround children plays an important role in developing better attainment of child well-being. Through this study, what was clear enough was that families with a lack of violence issues such as stigma, disturbance, bullying and isolation helped in creating children with enough necessity, better atmosphere and capability to compete with other children in the society.

In conclusion, this research revealed that there were relationships between children's well-being and violence issues they had to face consisting of stigmatization, bullying, disturbance and isolation. Children who received greater attention from their family members and their peers either in

studies or about their everyday life, scored higher in their well-being than their counterparts. The findings of this study could provide useful implications for parents/caretakers, counselors, educators and policy makers. Since this was only a pilot study, there is much more work to be done particularly pertaining to child well-being.

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