

How Parental Incarceration Harms Children and What to Do About It

by Sara Wakefield, Ph.D. and Christopher Wildeman, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Until recently, parental incarceration affected the lives of only a tiny fraction of American children. Today, it is a common, mostly negative occurrence. Research shows that parental incarceration is unequally distributed, and largely detrimental to child well-being. Policies that shorten incarceration rates and help the children affected are recommended.

Scope of Parental Incarceration— Research Findings

- The scope of the criminal justice system has grown substantially. In 1980, about 500,000 people were incarcerated in prisons and jails. That number ballooned to more than 2.3 million by 2007.^{1,2} Such high rates of incarceration have implications for children and families because most people who serve time are also parents.³
- In 2010, researchers from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that about 1.9 million children younger than age 18 had a parent currently incarcerated.³ A more recent survey estimated that about 5 million children (approximately 7% of all minor children) had experienced the incarceration of a residential parent at some point during their childhood.⁴
- The cause of mass incarceration in the United States is a source of debate among scholars, and a massive research literature is devoted to the topic.^{5,6,7,8} However, mass incarceration arose from a series of policy choices and was not the “natural” result of fluctuations in the crime rate.^{9,10}
- The concentration of parental incarceration occurs among the most marginalized segments of society. In one survey, 44% of Black women and 32% of Black men reported having a family member incarcerated, compared to 12% of White women and 6% of White men.¹¹ These disparities are evident among children as well; another study estimates that although just under 4% of White children will experience the incarceration of a parent before their 14th birthday, parental incarceration affects at least 25% of all African American children.¹²

Parental Incarceration Burdens Vulnerable Families

- Parental incarceration creates significant burdens for families. Incarceration increases, sometimes dramatically, family instability, unemployment, socioeconomic disadvantage, substance use, and mental health problems.^{9,13}

- Because children who experience parental incarceration already live in families that struggle, the harm that stems from parental incarceration builds on the difficulties that they already face. The available research on these children varies in quality, but the most rigorous work confirms that parental incarceration is harmful.
- For many children, parental incarceration worsens well-being and increases disadvantage. Research on the effects of paternal incarceration is better established because paternal incarceration is more common. Research states that paternal incarceration is harmful for most children. Maternal incarceration is more variable; children of incarcerated mothers appear to be subject to more instability both before and because of incarceration.
- There is little evidence that the consequences of parental incarceration for children differ for parents convicted of violent crimes, drug crimes, or other nonviolent crimes.

TALKING POINTS

- About 5 million children (approximately 7% of all minor children) have experienced the incarceration of a residential parent at some point.
- Paternal incarceration prompts household instability, increases the risk of childhood homelessness, and increases dependence on public assistance.
- Decarceration efforts need support and rehabilitation programs to enable family stability and health.
- Policies and interventions must respect variability among prisoners and their families and support local- and state-level reforms.

Hidden Costs of Paternal Incarceration

- Paternal incarceration prompts household instability, increases the risk of childhood homelessness, and increases dependence on public assistance.^{14, 15, 16}
- Maintaining family contact with incarcerated parents leads to additional and significant costs. One study found that families of inmates may spend up to one-third of their income on cards, letters, and visits.¹⁷
- Paternal incarceration is indirectly costly for families as well as taxpayers. Paternal incarceration introduces a cascade of problems, including mental health and behavioral problems in children, thus reducing school performance and leading to grade retention.^{18, 19, 20, 21}

Children with Mothers in Prison

The children of incarcerated mothers are an extraordinarily high-risk group. Yet the research on whether maternal incarceration negatively affects these children is unclear. Some research suggests that maternal incarceration inflicts massive harms.^{16, 17, 22, 23} Other research suggests that poor outcomes are driven by other risk factors such as high levels of financial instability and economic hardship—that precede maternal incarceration.^{24, 25, 26} Regardless, interventions to directly help these children are likely to yield substantial benefits.

Conclusion

Parental incarceration is now common and concentrated among the most vulnerable families. Particularly when fathers are incarcerated, this event further disadvantages an already-marginalized group. Policies that

both decrease imprisonment and provide support will yield substantial benefits.

Please see full brief for a complete list of references. References also are available upon request

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- **Account for children from the point of arrest:** Consider families in criminal justice decision making. At the point of arrest, police officers require training to address children's safety and well-being.
- **Explore alternatives to incarceration for primary caregivers:** Allow family responsibility exceptions. Employment often justifies weekend jail sentences,²⁷ and family connections can be leveraged in much the same way. Prisoners who maintain family contact are less likely to return to the system and have lower rates of misconduct.^{28, 29, 30}
- **Prioritize family connections while incarcerated:** Prioritize proximity to the family when selecting secure facilities if alternatives to incarceration are not possible. Inmates connected to their family are less anxious, less traumatized, and less likely to offend again, thus easing costs for their families.¹⁸
- **Pay attention to what takes the place of incarceration:** Assist families and children in addressing the underlying substance abuse and mental health problems that often lead to incarceration.³¹ In turn, these programs can improve family and child well-being.
- **Criminal justice reform must address violence:** Refrain from limiting criminal justice reform to certain categories of inmates. Prisoners are as varied as families, and reform efforts directed at one category may not reach many other children.^{31, 32}
- **Criminal justice reform should be local:** Develop local policies to generate a greater impact and address the variability across inmates and their families. An overemphasis on the federal system makes little sense given the small size and idiosyncrasies of that population. Reform that targets fewer than 200,000 prisoners is less consequential, considering the more than 1.3 million prisoners in state facilities or the more than 8 million people who pass through local jails each year.³³
- **Move from parent-focused to child-driven interventions:** Create child-centered policies that address household instability, material disadvantage, mental health and well-being challenges, and educational deficits that flow from parental incarceration.



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