

HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES: THE IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON DEPENDENT CHILDREN

BY **ERIC MARTIN**

Children of incarcerated parents face profound and complex threats to their emotional, physical, educational, and financial well-being.



Family members of incarcerated individuals are often referred to as “hidden victims” — victims of the criminal justice system who are neither acknowledged nor given a platform to be heard. These hidden victims receive little personal support and do not benefit from the systemic societal mechanisms generally available to direct crime victims, despite their prevalence and their similarities to direct crime victims.¹

Children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system, in particular, face a host of challenges and difficulties: psychological strain, antisocial behavior, suspension or expulsion from school, economic hardship, and criminal activity. It is difficult to predict how a child will fare when a parent is intermittently or continually incarcerated, and research findings on these children’s risk factors are mixed.

However, research suggests that the strength or weakness of the parent-child bond and the quality of the child and family’s social support system play significant roles in the child’s ability to overcome challenges and succeed in life.² Therefore, it is critical that correctional practitioners develop strong partnerships with law enforcement, public schools, and child welfare agencies to understand the unique dynamics of the family in question and try to ensure a safety net for the child and successful re-entry for the incarcerated parent.

This article summarizes the range of risk factors facing children of incarcerated parents. It also cautions against universal policy solutions that seek to address these risk factors but do not take into account the child’s unique needs, the child’s relationship with the incarcerated parent, and alternative support systems.

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Scope of the Problem

The massive increase in incarceration in the United States has been well publicized. In the 1970s, there were around 340,000 Americans incarcerated; today, there are approximately 2.3 million.³ One consequence of this dramatic increase is that more mothers and fathers with dependent children are in prison. Since the war on drugs began in the 1980s, for example, the rate of children with incarcerated mothers has increased 100 percent, and the rate of those with incarcerated fathers has increased more than 75 percent.⁴

Current estimates of the number of children with incarcerated parents vary. One report found that the number of children who have experienced parental incarceration at least once in their childhood may range from 1.7 million to 2.7 million.⁵ If this estimate is on target, that means 11 percent of all children may be at risk.⁶ The rate of parenthood among those incarcerated is roughly the same as the rate in the general population: 50 percent to 75 percent of incarcerated individuals report having a minor child.⁷

Relying as we often do on a few statistics to describe a national phenomenon, we can easily be misled to believe that all segments of the population equally share the burden of parental incarceration. A closer examination of the numbers, however, reveals that communities of color are more at risk: Data from 2007 (the most recent data available) show that African-American children and Hispanic children were 7.5 times more likely and 2.3 times more likely, respectively, than white children to have an incarcerated parent.⁸ Also, 40 percent of all incarcerated parents were African-American fathers.⁹ The burden of parental incarceration on these communities has changed over time. For example, about 15 percent of African-American children born

in the 1970s had a parent who was incarcerated. Twenty years later, the rate had nearly doubled to 28 percent.¹⁰

Unfortunately, parental incarceration is only one of a series of separations and stressful situations facing children whose parent is involved in the criminal justice system. If we consider the full continuum of the criminal justice process — arrest, pre-trial detention, conviction, jail, probation, imprisonment, and parole — the number of children affected is significantly larger. For example, if we include parents who have been arrested, the estimate of affected children rises to 10 million.¹¹ Although research to date has focused more on children with incarcerated parents than on children with parents in other phases of the system, the two groups may share many of the same risk factors and needs. Policymakers and practitioners must understand these characteristics to develop effective systemic responses.

Parental Incarceration and Child Risk Factors

Although each case is unique and each child responds differently, research has established that a parent's incarceration poses several threats to a child's emotional, physical, educational, and financial well-being.

Child criminal involvement

There is particular concern that a parent's imprisonment will lead to a cycle of intergenerational criminal behavior. One statistic indicates that children of incarcerated parents are, on average, six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.¹² But risk factors rarely present themselves across all children, and these behaviors are difficult to understand or predict. One study, for example, found that children of incarcerated mothers had much higher rates of incarceration — and even earlier and more frequent arrests — than children of incarcerated fathers.¹³ Although we need more research on this relationship, this differential may speak to the likelihood that the mother, on average, is a primary support for the child.¹⁴

Psychological problems and antisocial behavior

Research on depression and aggression among children of incarcerated parents has been mixed and highly differentiated by gender, age, race, and family situation. One study, for example, found that African-American children and children who have both a mother and a father incarcerated exhibited significant increases in depression.¹⁵

Another study found that, for the most part, parental incarceration was not associated with a change in childhood aggression — but the findings were decidedly mixed. Twenty percent of sampled children did see an increase in aggression; boys who tended to be aggressive before a parent's incarceration were most at risk for a trajectory of increased aggression. Interestingly, there were some decreases in aggression: About 8 percent of the children saw a return to a stable home upon parental incarceration if their father had lived in the home prior to incarceration and had drug and alcohol issues.¹⁶

The most common consequence of parental incarceration appears to fall under the umbrella of antisocial behavior, which describes any number of behaviors that go against social norms, including criminal acts and persistent dishonesty.¹⁷ One meta-analysis of 40 studies on children of incarcerated parents found that antisocial behaviors were present more consistently than any other factors, including mental health issues and drug use.¹⁸ A separate study built on those findings by examining the presence of multiple adverse childhood experiences a child may face, including incarceration. The study found that exposure to multiple adverse childhood experiences throughout development may put children at risk for severe depression and other issues that persist into adulthood, including substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and suicide attempts.¹⁹ Antisocial behavior resulting from parental incarceration may limit a child's resilience in the face of other negative experiences, which could then compound the effects of exposure to other issues.

Educational attainment

Research has frequently found an association between children's low educational attainment and parental incarceration. But once again, the findings to date are confounding and indicate that more research needs to be done to provide a clear picture of this dynamic.

For example, one study found that parental incarceration was strongly associated with externalizing behavioral problems. The researcher failed to see a corresponding decrease in educational outcomes and other social attainment factors but assumed this was due to the limited follow-up window of data. Interestingly, the researcher did acknowledge that some children were able to develop resilience and deal with their externalizing behavior problems before suffering negative educational outcomes.²⁰ But a separate study found that children of incarcerated parents are significantly more likely to be suspended and expelled from school.²¹ More research needs to be conducted to isolate the impact of parental incarceration on educational attainment from that of other risk factors.

Economic well-being

The overwhelming majority of children with incarcerated parents have restricted economic resources available for their support. One study found that the family's income was 22 percent lower during the incarceration period and 15 percent lower after the parent's re-entry.²² (Note that this reduction of income and earning potential does not describe how limited the earning potential may have been before incarceration.) But here, too, the impact can be nuanced: Another study found that a mother's incarceration was associated with greater economic detriment, especially if the father did not live with the family. This economic loss might be exacerbated if the child lives with a caregiver who is already responsible for other dependents or with a grandparent who lives on retirement income.²³ A third study found that children of incarcerated parents systemically faced a host of disadvantages, such as monetary hardship; were less likely to live in a two-parent home; and were less likely to have stable housing.²⁴

Parent-child attachment and contact while incarcerated

If the parent is a strong support in the child's life, the interruption of the child-parent relationship will lead to or exacerbate many of the issues or risk factors already discussed.²⁵ Conversely, in some cases a child might benefit from the removal of a parent who presented problems for the child.²⁶ Any attempt to facilitate contact between the incarcerated parent and child should consider the quality of the relationship the child had with the parent before incarceration. Visits while the parent is in the facility seem to do little to build a relationship if there was not one prior to incarceration.

Research shows that visits by family and loved ones reduce recidivism among incarcerated individuals²⁷ and that strong family support is one of the biggest factors in a successful re-entry experience.²⁸ But when it comes to a child's visits, the results are once again mixed. One study reviewed the literature and found that when the parent and child have a positive relationship, visits encourage attachment and promote a positive relationship after release. When the parent and child had no relationship prior to incarceration, however, visits do not seem to be enough to promote a positive relationship.²⁹

NIJ-funded research examined the impact visits have on the child. Researchers found that when the child had a prior positive relationship with the parent, the child tended to benefit psychologically from a visit. But when there was no prior relationship with the parent, the child actually exhibited many of the externalizing behaviors discussed above, as reported by their caregivers. A positive parent-child relationship had to exist before incarceration for the incarcerated parent and child to benefit from the visit.³⁰

More research is needed to tease out when, for whom, and in what circumstances parent-child visitation should be encouraged. Although the quality of the pre-incarceration parent-child relationship is critical, further research may show that visits may be beneficial — or detrimental — at certain ages and stages of childhood development. Also, particular factors surrounding the parental incarceration, such

as whether the child witnessed the parent's arrest, could worsen the impact.³¹ The effect of parental incarceration on a child is complex and may be hard to predict, except that there is risk that the child will be substantially and negatively affected.

Policy Implications

Many children of incarcerated parents face profound adversity — as do other children facing many of the same risk factors the children experienced prior to parental incarceration. But the research shows that some children develop resilience despite the risks if they have a strong social support system.³² Through visits, letter writing, and other forms of contact, an incarcerated parent can play an important positive role in a child's sphere of support. In some circumstances, however, continued contact may have little value and even be detrimental to the child. Continued research will help policymakers and corrections practitioners better understand these complex and competing issues and make critical policy and program decisions to help children have positive life outcomes and avoid the criminal justice system.

Correctional facilities

The research shows that, in general, children whose parents are incarcerated are at higher risk for increased antisocial behaviors and psychological problems, such as depression. Whether this translates into decreased educational attainment, involvement with the criminal justice system, and other negative outcomes seems to depend on the child's resilience and his or her social support network.

The biggest predictor is the strength of the parent-child relationship. For example, if the parent lived with the child, provided social and financial support, and developed a strong parent-child bond, the long-term negative effects of parental incarceration may be mitigated if the child receives support throughout the incarceration period and is afforded opportunities to maintain contact with the parent. Correctional facilities can support the relationship by providing the child with easy access to and visitation with the parent in a child-friendly environment.

Making policy recommendations is particularly difficult, however, in cases where the parent's presence was not supportive or productive for the child or where the parent was not present at all. For example, a program evaluation of a video message service showed that a correctional facility parenting class had little impact on the quality of the parents' messages; the children largely responded to the messages based on the relationship before incarceration.³³ Thus, the prior parent-child relationship seems to be critical in determining the impact of contact from the parent. This limits the degree to which correctional officials can positively intervene to promote a relationship between a parent and a child.

Given this, correctional practitioners need to understand the relationship between the incarcerated parent and child prior to incarceration, to the extent possible, since contact between the two will likely benefit or harm one or both of them depending on the quality of their initial relationship.

Other service providers

Although a correctional facility's capacity to improve relationships and assist with the child's welfare may be limited, other service providers and partners may be able to intervene. For example, if schools were notified of the parent's arrest or incarceration, then they could address negative behaviors before they result in negative outcomes. Furthermore, as one researcher pointed out, many law enforcement agencies do not have protocols for handling a child present at an arrest.³⁴

Law enforcement and child welfare practitioners are often involved with the child before the correctional system is involved with the parent, so enhanced and streamlined communication between the various government entities could maximize the potential to provide the child whatever support is available. For example, NIJ-funded research on crossover youth cited the "one family, one judge" model, which combines cases in child welfare and juvenile justice to provide a streamlined and consistent approach to services for the child and family.³⁵ If law enforcement, child welfare, educational, and correctional

practitioners can share information on the child and family experiencing parental incarceration, then it would be more likely that the child would benefit from early intervention if he or she appears to be at risk for sustained deprivation, loss of educational attainment, or criminal activity. Such a partnership would also benefit correctional practitioners and re-entry managers, who would have better information on the child's situation and prior relationship with the incarcerated parent, which seems to be critical for the child's welfare.

Given these considerations, it appears that enhancing communication between corrections practitioners and other service providers is a good way to ensure a safety net for the child and facilitate a successful re-entry for the incarcerated parent.

About the Author

Eric Martin is a social science analyst in NIJ's Office of Research and Evaluation.

For More Information

Read an *NIJ Journal* article, "Does Parental Incarceration Increase a Child's Risk for Foster Care Placement?" at NIJ.gov, keyword: 215457.

Notes

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