

How Parental Incarceration Harms Children and What to Do About It

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

About 5 million children (approximately 7% of all minor children) have experienced the incarceration of a residential parent at some point during childhood.

Paternal incarceration induces household instability, increases the risk of childhood homelessness, and increases dependence on public assistance.

Decarceration efforts with support and rehabilitations programs promote stability and health for vulnerable families.

Policies and interventions must respect variability among prisoners and their families and support local- and state-level reforms.

ABSTRACT

While parental incarceration was once an event that only a tiny fraction of American children experienced, it is now a common event for American children—especially African American children. In this policy brief, we document the mostly negative consequences of parental incarceration on children, focusing especially on the consequences of paternal incarceration for children, and describe policies that not only would diminish rates of incarceration but also would help children who have already been affected by parental incarceration. We seek to demonstrate that parental incarceration is common, unequally distributed, and largely detrimental to child well-being, although the harmful effects of parental incarceration are more settled for paternal incarceration than for maternal incarceration.

The scope of the criminal justice system has grown substantially. In 1980, about 500,000 people were incarcerated in prisons and jails. That number had 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 not just inmates but also parents.³ Children of incarcerated parents are not well represented in national surveys or administrative data; as a result, calculating how many people have ever had a parent incarcerated is extraordinarily difficult. 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 childhood.⁴ These estimates are most certainly undercounts because they are restricted to children with currently incarcerated parents or children who experienced the incarceration of a parent who lived with them; the true number of people who have ever had this experience is unknown.

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} There is little debate about the following, however: Mass incarceration arose from a series of policy choices and was not the “natural” result of fluctuations in the crime rate.^{9,10} Examples of such choices include mandatory-minimum policies that require incarceration for some crimes, so-called three-strikes policies that have dramatically increased sentence lengths, and policies like the war on drugs that have drastically increased the risk of imprisonment for women.¹¹

As a result of such policy choices, and even with imperfect estimates of the number of children affected, it is clear that parental incarceration is common. Yet this is not the only facet that deserves attention, as the concentration of parental incarceration among the most marginalized segments of society is also a vital concern. In one survey, 44% of Black women and 32% of Black men reported having a family member incarcerated, compared to just 12% of White women and 6% of White men.¹² 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.¹³

Parental Incarceration Burdens Vulnerable Families

Parental incarceration creates significant burdens for families. Incarceration—and contact with the criminal justice system more broadly—increases, sometimes dramatically, family instability, unemployment, socioeconomic disadvantage, substance use, and mental health problems, to give just a short list.^{9,14} Because the children who experience parental incarceration already live in families that disproportionately struggle with many of these issues, the harms that stem from having a parent incarcerated build on a broad array of difficulties that these children already face. The available research on children of incarcerated parents varies with respect to quality, but the most rigorous work confirms that parental incarceration is a new and consequential source of harm for an already-vulnerable group of children.

For many children, parental incarceration worsens well-being and increases disadvantage. Research on the effects of paternal incarceration is better established in large part because paternal incarceration is more common (and hence better represented in large data sets, thus leading to stronger tests that make it easier to identify the particular causal effects of parental incarceration, relative to maternal incarceration, for children). Such research is clear that paternal incarceration is harmful for most children. Maternal incarceration is more variable; children of incarcerated mothers appear to be subject to more instability before and as a consequence of incarceration. One thing that is clear from the research we review here is that 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. Only the children of parents who are

unusually unstable, have serious mental health and substance abuse problems, or are especially violent appear less harmed by parental incarceration. Importantly, however, these children do not appear to benefit from it either. As a result, policies that address underlying problems as an alternative to incarceration are likely to benefit all children. Criminal justice policies that seek to enhance the well-being of children of incarcerated parents should not, therefore, focus just on the “low-hanging fruit” of individuals incarcerated for drug crimes or other nonviolent crimes. Similarly, policies that reduce trauma and uncertainty related to arrest, court processing, and incarceration would benefit all children, regardless of the characteristics or quality of the relationship they have with an incarcerated parent.

Hidden Costs of Paternal Incarceration

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

²² In a series of analyses, we estimated the effect of paternal incarceration on several important determinants of child well-being. Our estimates suggest that paternal incarceration increased internalizing problems like depression and anxiety (5%–6%), externalizing problems (4%–6%), and aggression (by 18%–33%) (see Figure 1). Paternal incarceration is strongly linked to more serious consequences as well; it increased the risk of infant mortality by 47%–49% and childhood homelessness by 94%–99% (see Figure 2). Because of large racial disparities in the likelihood of experiencing paternal incarceration, Figure 3 uses historical incarceration rates to show how further increases in the incarceration rate have led to increases in racial disparities in childhood disadvantage.

Children With Mothers in Prison

Before discussing the effects of maternal incarceration on children, which are hotly contested, a brief statement is in order. The children of incarcerated mothers are an extraordinarily high-risk group. Yet the research on whether maternal incarceration has a causal effect on these children is

unclear. Some research suggests that maternal incarceration inflicts massive harms.^{17, 18, 23, 24} Yet other research suggests that

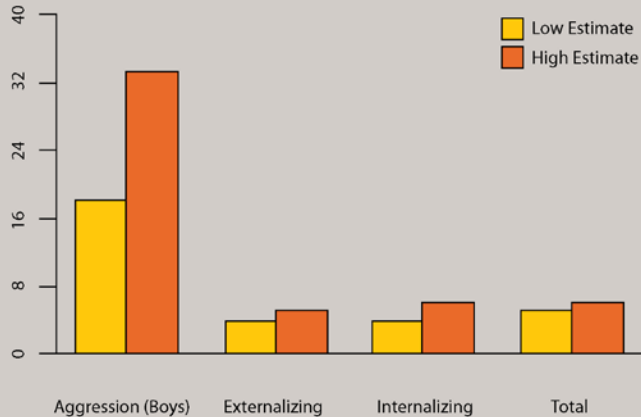
the poor outcomes of children of incarcerated mothers are driven not by maternal incarceration but by other risk factors—especially high levels of financial instability and economic hardship—that precede maternal incarceration.^{25, 26, 27}

Regardless of which of these divergent findings researchers and policymakers put more stock in, the fact remains that interventions to directly help the children of incarcerated mothers are likely to yield substantial benefits.

Conclusion

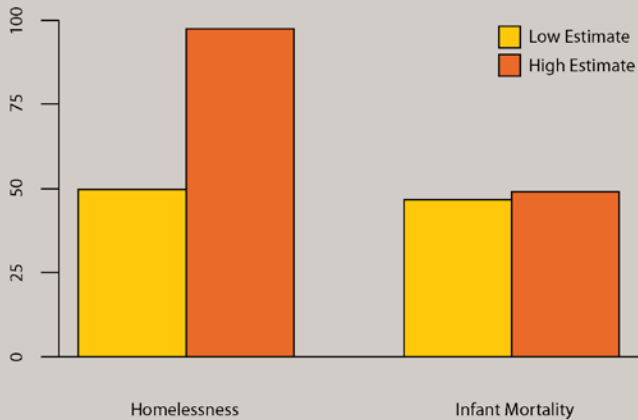
Parental incarceration is now common and concentrated among the most vulnerable families. Especially for paternal incarceration, there are also clear and strong signals that this event further disadvantages an already-marginalized group. Policies that both decrease imprisonment and provide support to the most vulnerable families will yield substantial benefits.

FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN MENTAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS DUE TO PATERNAL INCARCERATION



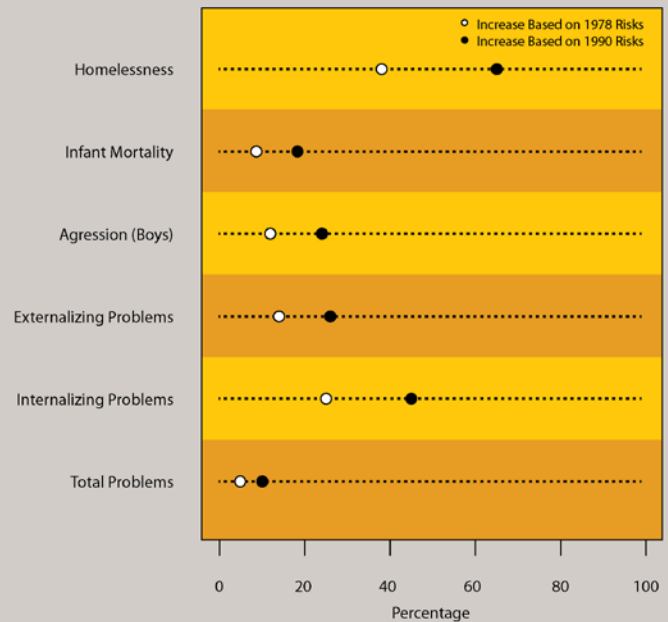
Note. Low and high estimates refer to the lower and upper bounds of causal effects estimated with a variety of statistical models. From *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*, by S. Wakefield & C. Wildeman, 2013, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 138.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN RISKS OF HOMELESSNESS AND INFANT MORTALITY DUE TO PATERNAL INCARCERATION



Note. Low and high estimates refer to the lower and upper bounds of causal effects estimated with a variety of statistical models. From *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*, by S. Wakefield & C. Wildeman, 2013, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 139.

FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN BLACK-WHITE DISPARITIES IN CHILD WELL-BEING DUE TO INCARCERATION, BASED ON PATERNAL INCARCERATION RISKS FOR CHILDREN IN 1978 AND 1990



Note. From *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*, by S. Wakefield & C. Wildeman, 2013, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 141.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The body of research on parental incarceration suggests a number of guidelines for policymakers. We outline each of them here:

- *Account for children from the point of arrest:* Families should be included and accounted for in criminal justice decision making. At the point of arrest, police officers require training to address the safety and well-being of children present during an arrest. Even when children are not present, those children whose primary caregivers are arrested immediately experience instability. Such experiences are traumatizing for children and present a clear safety risk.²⁵
- *Explore alternatives to incarceration for primary caregivers:* There are good arguments for allowing family responsibility exceptions to incarceration. Employment is often used to justify weekend jail sentences,²⁹ and family connections could be leveraged in much the same way. Such policies would account for the fact that prisoners who maintain contact with family are less likely to recidivate and have lower rates of misconduct while incarcerated.^{30, 31, 32}
- *Prioritize family connections while incarcerated:* In cases where alternatives to incarceration are not possible, policies that prioritize proximity to family when assigning the convicted to secure facilities would yield benefits. Inmates who are connected to family are less anxious, less traumatized, and less likely to recidivate. Secure facilities should prioritize contact with family, thereby easing the costs associated with family engagement while incarcerated.¹⁸ Such policies may result in safer facilities and save money by contributing to lower recidivism rates.
- *Pay attention to what takes the place of incarceration:* Policymakers who are committed to reducing incarceration should pay attention to what takes its place. Assisting families and children of incarcerated parents requires addressing underlying substance abuse and mental health problems that often lead to incarceration.³³ Similarly, the economic costs of incarceration are often linked to economic instability prior to incarceration. Programs that reduce incarceration while also tackling these underlying problems will improve health and well-being for children of incarcerated parents. Finally, family well-being is improved when reentry planning is ongoing and supported.
- *Criminal justice reform must address violence:* Criminal justice reform should not be limited to certain categories of inmates. Prisoners are as varied as families, and reform efforts directed at one category (e.g., those convicted of drug or nonviolent crimes) may not reach many children of incarcerated parents.^{33, 34} Because most prisoners in state facilities are incarcerated for violent crimes, excluding this category of prisoner from decarceration efforts offers little hope for substantially reducing the incarceration rate. Even if all prisoners convicted of drug crimes were released from prison, the United States would remain a global leader in the use of incarceration. An overemphasis by policymakers on any one category of inmate, especially one that ignores violence, represents a consequential misreading of the criminal justice population.³⁵ *Criminal justice reform should be local:* Related to the previous item, an overemphasis on the federal system makes little sense given the size and idiosyncrasies of that population. The federal prison population is small and houses a disproportionate number of serious drug offenders, immigration cases, and those convicted on weapons charges (see Figure 4). Reform that targets fewer than 200,000 prisoners is, by definition, 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.³⁶ Policies that are more local in nature are likely to have greater impact as well as appropriately address variability across prisoners and their families. For example, reforms that target drug offenders might look very different in contexts struggling with the opioid crisis from those in locales that prioritize gang violence reduction. Policymakers are likely to improve the lives of children when they make funds available for alternatives to incarceration but allow communities to direct funds to areas of greater need. Such policies would recognize the wide variety of needs and challenges for prisoners and their families.

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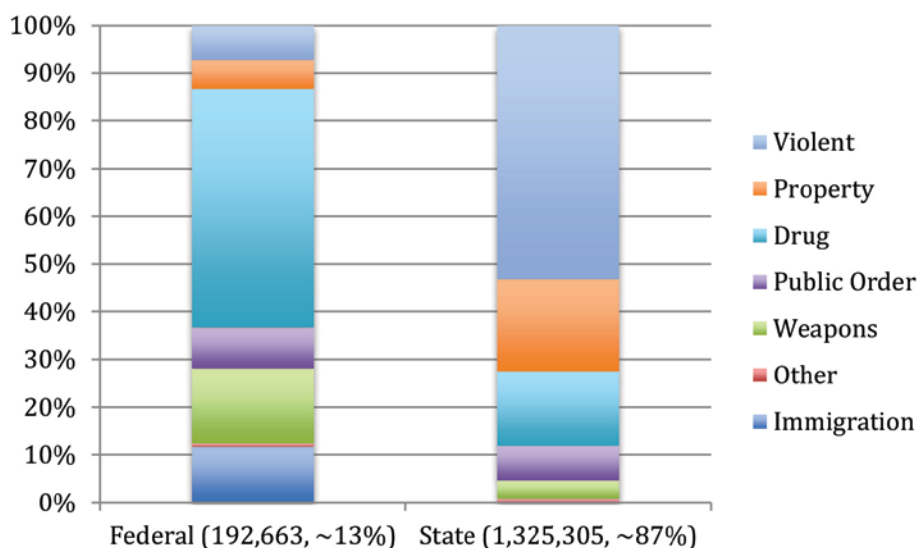
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- *Move from parent-focused to child-driven interventions:* The children of prisoners require assistance irrespective of their relationship with an incarcerated parent. While children who remain in contact with an incarcerated parent may have different needs from those who have little contact, having an incarcerated parent remains an important marker of disadvantage. Policies that address household instability, material disadvantage, mental health and well-being challenges, and educational deficits that flow from parental incarceration are child centered, not parent centered, and may assist all vulnerable children.

FIGURE 4. PRISONERS IN STATE AND FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES, BY OFFENSE TYPE



Note. From *Prisoners in 2014*, by E. A. Carson, 2015, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.