Children of Incarcerated Parents: an Overview

What We Know

› More than 10 million persons are incarcerated worldwide (145 per 100,000 in the population); the United States has the highest incarceration rate (655 per 100,000), whereas 53% of countries have incarceration rates of 150 per 100,000 or less(32)
• Approximately 2.6 million (4%) of children in the United States have an incarcerated parent at any given time;(34) and 5–8% of U.S. children will have a parent in jail or prison at some point in their childhoods(15)
• Racial disproportionality throughout the criminal justice system has left Black, Hispanic, and Native American children in the United States particularly vulnerable to experiencing parental incarceration(1,18)
  – In the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), one in six respondents experienced parental incarceration by adulthood. Twenty-six percent of Black participants and 20% of Hispanic participants had an incarcerated parent, compared with 15% of White participants(18)
  – In the 2016–2017 National Survey of Children’s Health, the number of children who had a parent ever incarcerated varied significantly by race: 6% of White children, 7% of Hispanic children, 15% of Black children, and 19% of Native American children(1)
• Poverty and low education are also associated with increased risk of parental incarceration(15)
› Parental incarceration affects children in different ways depending on the child’s developmental stage, the child’s pre-incarceration relationship with the parent, the impact of parental incarceration on the family’s economic well-being and functioning, and the child’s resilience and supports(5,11)
• Children who have a bond with the incarcerated parent may display acute emotional and behavioral responses to his or her absence, including shock, grief, fear, tearfulness, powerlessness, anger, diminished confidence, withdrawal, bedwetting, anxiety, aggression, and school problems(5,7,13,25)
  – These responses may be intensified if circumstances surrounding the parent’s arrest were traumatic or if the child is not given developmentally appropriate information regarding the parent’s situation(25)
  - Researchers indicate the importance of protecting children whenever possible from being exposed to the traumatic event of seeing their parent arrested(2)
• Parental incarceration often has a significant financial impact on the family, including(11)
  – loss of wages if the parent was employed
  – increased expenses (e.g., legal costs, collect calls, transportation to visit the prison)
  – long-term impact on the parent’s ability to secure employment, housing, or public assistance after release
• Parental incarceration affects family structure and caregiving patterns(25,29)
  – Maternal incarceration is associated with lower quality or dissolution of romantic relationships, poor parenting, and financial hardship, impacts that can last for years after release(35)
Fathers who have been incarcerated often are less involved with their children even after release and provide less support than fathers who have never been incarcerated\(^{(22)}\).

- Mothers who have found a new partner in the father’s absence may restrict the father’s access to his children, in part to preserve the new relationship\(^{(23)}\).

The majority of imprisoned mothers were primary caregivers prior to incarceration, often as single parents, and their absence tends to have more serious implications for the child’s living situation, including separation of siblings and temporary placements with the non-custodial father, grandmother, other relatives, and/or foster care\(^{(25)}\).

Approximately 40% of children in foster care have experienced parental incarceration\(^{(36)}\).

- Parents whose children are placed in foster care are at risk of permanently losing their parental rights depending on the length of their incarceration. In the United States, the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) authorizes states to initiate termination of parental rights proceedings when a child has been placed in foster care for 15 months in a 22-month period\(^{(4)}\).

Parental incarceration disrupts parent-child attachments and family relationships\(^{(9,11,21)}\).

- The child’s response to the parent’s absence depends in great measure on the nature of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration. If the parent was not involved, his or her absence may have little impact. If the parent was violent or abused substances, his or her absence may be experienced as positive\(^{(5,11,25)}\).

- Contact between the child and parent is essential to maintaining their relationship, but prison policies and conditions often act as barriers to visitation (e.g., incarceration far from the child’s home, intimidating visit procedures and conditions, exorbitant rates for collect phone calls)\(^{(11)}\).

- In a 2018 study, researchers found that in a sample of fathers and mothers who were released from prison, only 10% of parents lived with their children in the year following their release, and only half of the children had at least weekly contact with the parent. Parents who lacked stable housing were less likely to have consistent contact with their children in the year following their release; the quality of the relationship between parents also influenced the likelihood of contact between the formerly incarcerated parent and the child\(^{(38)}\).

- There is often significant stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent. Children may experience shame, rejection, or isolation; parental incarceration also may impact their self-concept and pro-social behaviors. In a 2018 study, researchers found that parental incarceration was associated with increased likelihood of having friends who had more antisocial behaviors, potentially leading to a decrease in prosocial behaviors and relationships and an increased sense of belonging with more antisocial peers\(^{(6)}\).

- Adolescents with a currently incarcerated parent or one who has been incarcerated in the past will often report feeling that they had to grow up too fast, had unanswered questions, and/or felt shame or stigma\(^{(12)}\).

- For adolescents who experienced parental incarceration, researchers found that they used at least one of the following methods to maintain a prosocial identity\(^{(22)}\):
  - The youth would maintain a physical separation, an emotional separation, or both between themselves and the incarcerated parent.
  - The youth would view the parent as a negative role model, meaning that he or she holds up that parent as an example of how not to behave.
  - The youth would frame their experience positively and say that having a parent who was incarcerated helped form their identity and the person they are.

The impact of parental incarceration on children is also influenced by social and cultural factors, including attitudes regarding crime and incarceration, sentencing laws, prison policies, and public welfare programs, all of which vary by country\(^{(5)}\).

- To minimize the negative impact of parental incarceration, there are prisons and jails that have instituted extended visiting programs\(^{(31)}\).

- Researchers found that having more contact with an incarcerated mother could potentially reduce the negative impact of the incarceration on the child. They also found that the mothers reported feeling more able to build and maintain a relationship with the child, enjoyed being able to have physical contact, and appreciated having some privacy away from the child’s current caregiver\(^{(31)}\).

In addition to extended time, visitation must be of high quality in an improved physical setting and with the provision of activities to engage children\(^{(31)}\).
• Recidivism may prevent the parent from resuming or maintaining a parental relationship \(^{(21)}\)
  – In a study of children born to women in prison, most mothers were arrested at some point following their release and 53% experienced a subsequent episode of confinement \(^{(21)}\)
  – 35% of the children experienced foster care and the parental rights of 31% of the mothers were terminated by the time the child was 10 years old \(^{(21)}\)

Children with incarcerated parents experience multiple adversities in addition to those directly related to the parent’s prison stay \(^{(5,20,21,34)}\)

• The parent’s incarceration typically follows a progression of involvement with the criminal justice system \(^{(5,21)}\)
• Incarcerated parents report high incidences of psychosocial issues, including substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems, a history of childhood abuse, poverty, unemployment, and lack of a high school diploma or equivalency certificate. They are more likely to have been children of incarcerated parents with substance abuse and mental health issues \(^{(5,20)}\)
  – Incarcerated mothers have significantly higher rates of substance abuse, mental health issues, and past trauma than fathers and particularly need services that focus on these areas \(^{(20)}\)

Children with incarcerated parents are at risk for a variety of emotional, behavioral, health, and developmental problems; however, there is limited research that teases out the impact of incarceration from that of other family and social risk factors \(^{(5,11,25,29)}\)

• In a meta-analysis of research from seven countries, researchers found an association between parental incarceration and antisocial behavior in children, but not between incarceration and child mental health, substance abuse, or academic problems \(^{(25)}\)
  – Researchers conducted a study on substance use among a large sample of youth who either currently (1.8%) or previously (13%) had an incarcerated parent. Theories for this increased risk included the traumatic separation from a parent, the strain on the family, genetic risk, or environmental exposure \(^{(8)}\)
  – Those with a currently incarcerated parent were at the higher risk for the use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances \(^{(8)}\)
  – Those with a current or previously incarcerated parent were 1.5 times more likely to try alcohol at age 12 or younger and to meet criteria for substance abuse or dependence, and 2 times more likely to use prescription drugs, marijuana, tobacco, alcohol, or to binge drink \(^{(8)}\)

• In a large U.S. study, data analysis showed that at 5 years old, children whose fathers were incarcerated had a higher incidence of aggressive behaviors, particularly boys and children who resided with the father prior to incarceration. A possible effect of recent incarceration on attention was found, but no association was found with internalizing problems or verbal ability \(^{(11)}\)
• Researchers of a study found that children with incarcerated parents reported more deviant behavior but could not show that community mentoring programs were improving outcomes. In fact, researchers found that those children who participated in Big Brothers, Big Sisters had more incidences of cheating. The researchers hypothesized that the emphasis that program places on academics may have resulted in struggling students feeling as if cheating was their only option \(^{(24)}\)
  – A higher incidence of behavior problems, particularly among boys, has been linked with maternal depression and stress related to the father’s incarceration \(^{(29)}\)

• Results from another U.S. study indicate that paternal incarceration is significantly associated with behavioral problems of children even after adjusting for background characteristics such as race and economic status \(^{(39)}\)

• In a 2018 study, researchers found that impacts of parental incarceration (e.g., change in caregiver, separation from siblings and friends) played a larger role than non-incarceration-related risk factors in predicting internalizing and externalizing problems in children; these problems were in turn linked with poorer anger regulation \(^{(40)}\)
• In a 2017 study that examined the effects of parental incarceration on children based on their relative risk of having an incarcerated parent, an investigator found that children who had more demographic and socioeconomic advantages and thus were at the lowest risk of having an incarcerated father experienced greater adverse impacts resulting from parental incarceration than children who had greater disadvantages and higher risk. The author proposed that the impacts of paternal incarceration were less distinguishable in children who already had experienced a “saturation” of adversities \(^{(33)}\)
- Parental incarceration can lead to long-term poor physical health for the child. It is also associated with a high risk of becoming a heavy smoker and drinker in the future\(^\text{12,13}\).
- In an Australian study, researchers found that parental incarceration was associated with increased risk of developmental difficulties in 5–6-year-old children independent of sociodemographic factors\(^2\).
- Supportive responses from parents, siblings, school personnel, and peers can lessen the impact of parental incarceration\(^5\).
- Resiliency, which is the ability to conquer milestones and have achievements in the face of something that threatens typical individual development, has been studied in children with incarcerated parents. Researchers found that the children with the best outcomes had close bonds with caregivers and were more connected to their schools\(^28\).
- Potentially long-term consequences carried into adulthood can result from parental incarceration. Researchers found that individuals who had a parent incarcerated between their birth and age 1 were at a higher risk for adult depression, with 26% more of these individuals having scores indicating depression on a scale than individuals without parental incarceration. For individuals who had a parent incarcerated between the ages of 1 to 10 years old, there was a 12% increase. The researchers also noted that 48% of those who had a parent incarcerated before the individual was 1 experienced a second parental incarceration later in childhood\(^10\).
- The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has articulated a number of recommendations for children of incarcerated parents, among them:\(^30\)
  - Children need truthful explanations of their parent’s circumstances, the opportunity to be in contact with their incarcerated parent (e.g., through visits to prison, letters, phone calls) to the extent that it is in their best interest, and access to meaningful contact with their incarcerated parent.
  - Incarcerated parents should be involved in planning for their children and should be treated with respect and dignity in the child’s presence.
  - Information about supports for children and families should be readily available.

### What We Can Do
- Learn about issues affecting children of incarcerated parents so you can better assess the child’s needs; share this information with your colleagues.
- Develop an awareness of your own cultural values, beliefs, and biases and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of your clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client\(^3,16,26\).
- Practice with awareness of and adherence to the social work principles of respect for human rights and human dignity, social justice, and professional conduct as described in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Statement of Ethical Principles,\(^16\) as well as the national code of ethics that applies in the country in which you practice. For example, in the United States, social workers should adhere to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; and become knowledgeable of the NASW ethical standards as they apply to children of incarcerated parents and practice accordingly\(^27\).
- Include standardized screening for parental incarceration in social work assessments and provide information and referrals to children, parents, and kinship caregivers.
- Work collaboratively with correctional staff to provide incarcerated parents with the opportunity to gain education and vocational skills, participate in treatment for pre-existing substance abuse and mental health issues, acquire parenting skills, and strengthen their relationships with their child(ren).
- Encourage the use of parent and family support via parenting classes and visitation, support of improved adjustment for the children via therapy or community support (e.g., Big Brothers, Big Sisters), and support groups\(^19\).
  - Programs that teach emotional regulation skills may help children manage their anger and sadness and reduce risk of development of internalizing and externalizing problems\(^40\).
  - Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) is used with children aged 3–18 years who have PTSD or other emotional problems related to trauma. TF-CBT integrates cognitive and behavioral interventions with trauma-specific interventions, such as psychoeducation about trauma and common reactions, parenting skills to manage emotional and behavioral interventions, and individualized stress-management techniques and coping skills for child and parent/caregiver\(^23\).
  - Parenting interventions delivered in prisons can positively impact parenting knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors\(^32\).
• Programs that build or sustain positive relationships between children and incarcerated parents can help mitigate family disengagement that may otherwise occur when parents are incarcerated

• Community Family Therapy (CFT) can be beneficial when working with families with an incarcerated member. CFT consists of engagement at three different levels: individual and family therapy, community networking and gaining access to resources, and development of leadership skills and involvement in the local community

• Community services (e.g., housing subsidies, food assistance) can help mitigate financial consequences of parental incarceration

› Posttraumatic stress disorder, 309.81

› Link children and/or their caregivers with online resources

› Promote policies and programs that mitigate the detrimental effects of parental incarceration on children and prioritize the rights of children to contact and relationships with their parents

› Consider impact on child at arrest, sentencing, and selection of correctional facility

› Consider alternatives to traditional justice system procedures for minor offenses

› Establish child-friendly visitation procedures and settings

› Utilize phone and/or video calls to supplement visits

› Consider programs such as Girl Scouts Behind Bars to provide opportunities for children to have extended visits with their parent within the framework of a structured program that also includes education and social support

› Link children and/or their caregivers with online resources

• National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Family & Corrections Network, https://nrcfc.camden.rutgers.edu/

• Children of Prisoners Europe, http://childrenofprisoners.eu/

### DSM 5 Codes

› Posttraumatic stress disorder, 309.81

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**Coding Matrix**

References are rated using the following codes, listed in order of strength:

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<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Published meta-analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>Published systematic or integrative literature review</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Published research (randomized controlled trial)</td>
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<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Published research (not randomized controlled trial)</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Case histories, case studies</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>Published guidelines</td>
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<td>RV</td>
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<td>Published research utilization report</td>
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**References**


