Parental Incarceration and Family Disruption

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White House Workshop on Parental Incarceration
August 20, 2013
Background

As of 2010, 2.7 million children had an incarcerated parent\(^1\).

- Dramatic racial disparities\(^2\).
- Most incarcerated parents (~90%) are fathers\(^1\).

Incarceration introduces or exacerbates several aspects of family instability.

- Parental relationships
- Parent-child contact
- Economic functioning
- Housing

However, incarceration may also identify opportunities to mitigate family risks.
Parental Incarceration and Family Life

Most incarcerated parents had contact with their children prior to entering jail or prison.

- Approximately 46% of incarcerated fathers lived with at least one of their children³.
- More than 40% of non-resident, ever-incarcerated fathers have contact with their children via visitation⁴.
- More than 6 in 10 incarcerated mothers lived with at least one of their children³.

Incarceration tends to be correlated within families⁵.

- More than half of mothers with incarceration histories (52%) have partners who also have been incarcerated.
- Fathers with incarceration histories are 3x more likely than others to have partners with incarceration histories.
Parental Relationships

Incarceration may strain parental relationships.
- Economic strains may undermine fathers’ role as a provider\textsuperscript{6}.
- Stigma of incarceration may suggest dishonesty, undermine family reputation, raise concerns about illegal activity\textsuperscript{7}.
- Partner “on the outside” may form new relationship\textsuperscript{8}.

Men married when entering prison are more likely than non-incarcerated men to separate\textsuperscript{9}.
- Unmarried men with incarceration histories face low rates of marriage upon release\textsuperscript{9}.

Instability from incarceration or resulting relationship dissolution may undermine child wellbeing.
- However, if incarcerated parent was violent at home, incarceration could stabilize rather than destabilize.
Parent-Child Contact

The time children spend with their incarcerated parents is limited in both quantity and quality.

- Facilities are often far away, with few visiting opportunities, and conditions ill-suited for children\textsuperscript{10}.
- When parents separate, non-incarcerated parent may assume gatekeeper role\textsuperscript{11, 12}.
- Phone contact can be expensive for families\textsuperscript{6}.

Post-incarceration, fathers see declines in both co-residence and visitation\textsuperscript{4}.

Diminished contact can disrupt family routines, with adverse consequences for children.

- Although parent-child contact need not be universally encouraged, many parents seek ways to maintain contact.
Economic Functioning

Incarceration threatens family economic wellbeing.

- Most parents in state prison were their child’s primary source of financial support\(^3\).
- Prison earnings are meager\(^9\), and most incarcerated parents suffer earnings disruptions\(^3\).

Challenges persist upon re-entry.

- Formerly incarcerated individuals face challenges in the labor market\(^9\) and contribute less financially to their families\(^{13}\).
- Mothers with recently-incarcerated partners experience greater material hardship\(^{14}\), reliance on food stamps and Medicaid\(^{15}\).
Housing

Children may be moved to a new caregiver when a parent is incarcerated.
- Most children with incarcerated mothers are cared for by grandmothers\(^1\).

Incarceration may compromise families’ ability to maintain their housing.
- Formerly incarcerated individuals may be unable to obtain housing in either the private market or public housing\(^2\).
- Family members may be prohibited from housing formerly incarcerated parents\(^3\).

Housing instability has implications for children’s health, schooling, and overall stability.
Challenges for Research and Policy

Although a growing literature identifies significant family disruption associated with parental incarceration, more work is needed to distinguish causal effects from pre-existing disadvantage.

• Even if incarceration is a marker, rather than cause, of instability, it can help identify family needs that may be met through policy solutions.

• Given how many incarcerated parents are not primary caregivers, more work is needed to administratively link prisoners to their families.

Much remains to be learned about pre-incarceration family circumstances and incarceration conditions that protect against or exacerbate risk.


