

**Parental Incarceration in the United States:
Bringing Together Research and Policy
to Reduce Collateral Costs to Children**

American Bar Foundation's Workshop at the White House

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TAKE AWAY POINTS



Session 1

Christopher Wildeman:

1. Paternal imprisonment is common for black children, 1 in 4 of whom experience this event. Fully 1 in 2 black children of high school dropout fathers experience this event.
2. Risks of paternal imprisonment for white children remain small (roughly 1 in 30), although roughly 1 in 13 white children of high school dropout fathers experience this event.
3. Maternal imprisonment is rare for black and white children. Even black children whose mothers did not complete high school have only a 1 in 20 chance of experiencing this event.

Joyce Arditti:

1. Criminal justice policy has not been formulated with family functioning and child well-being as an explicit concern. The overreliance on criminal sanctions and incarceration not only incapacitates offender parents, but has enhanced the “collateral consequences” to children.
2. From a family process lens, a primary pathway for child effects involves the quality and stability of children’s day to day care. Parenting and family relationships are often altered by a parent’s incarceration; non-incarcerated parents and caregivers may be distressed and unprepared for changed parenting roles and additional responsibilities.
3. Prison visitation is a critical and paradoxical family process that represents the most proximal form of contact between incarcerated parents and their children. Visitation can “help and hurt” as it is a context of connection *and* traumatic separation for children and their family members.

Amanda Geller:

1. Given the millions of families with a parent incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or at risk of future incarceration, the disruptions associated with parental incarceration are of serious concern for public policy.
2. Most incarcerated parents had been their children’s primary source of financial support, and had either lived with their children prior to incarceration, or had contact with their children through visitation.

3. Families with incarcerated parents are at increased risk of compromised parent-child contact, economic hardship, and housing instability, among other challenges. Whether incarceration causes these challenges or identifies pre-existing disadvantage, there are numerous opportunities for public policy to help families mitigate the risks they face.

Session 2

Terry Ann Craigie:

- 1) The study investigates the relationship between parental incarceration and behavioral problems in five-year old children.
- 2) The study finds that paternal incarceration exacerbates early externalizing behaviors in general, and especially for black and Hispanic children. The effect on internalizing behaviors is not statistically different from zero overall.
- 3) The findings suggest that children of incarcerated fathers are vulnerable to future incarceration and consequently, their behavioral problems should be diagnosed and effectively addressed.

Sara Wakefield:

1. Paternal incarceration increases children's mental health and behavioral problems. The increase is consistent and global, influencing both internalizing and externalizing problems, and is apparent across a number of datasets. The relationship is much less consistent for maternal incarceration, though the reasons for this are unclear and a source of continuing debate.
2. At least for these outcomes, black and white children respond in much the same way to paternal incarceration and the effects are similar in size and magnitude. In other words, black children are no more (or less) harmed by the incarceration of their father.
3. However, vast racial disparities in the likelihood of experiencing the incarceration of a father mean that parental incarceration is a significant factor driving black-white gaps in childhood wellbeing. These effects are much larger than similar estimates produced for adult men.

Raymond Swisher:

- 1) Research consistently shows that parental incarceration is strongly associated with delinquency in both adolescence and the transition to adulthood. This relationship is observed across both boys and girls, and across racial and ethnic subgroups of the population.
- 2) The relationship between parental incarceration and depression is more nuanced, and varies by the adolescent's gender, whether the parent ever lived with the child, and history of family

violence.

Rosalyn Lee:

1. A review of the literature indicates:
 - a. associations between incarceration and population level health.
 - b. gaps in our understanding of impacts of parental incarceration on child health across the life course (e.g., from birth outcomes through adult health).
2. Parental incarceration history (PIH) may influence child health:
 - a. directly or indirectly.
 - b. via exposure to biological or physiological risks (e.g., infectious disease transmission, stress exposure) and or socio-economic risks (e.g., lack of resources, violence exposure).
3. Though most early studies focus on child/adolescent *behavioral problems and mental health*, two recent studies linked PIH to a *proxy of physical health* (i.e., BMI) and multiple *physical health outcomes* in young adults:
 - a. Our study (Lee, Fang, & Luo 2013) utilizing nationally representative, longitudinal data ***found associations between parental incarceration history and 8 of 16 health outcomes in young adults [5 physical health problems (migraines, asthma, high cholesterol, HIV/AIDs and fair/poor health) and 3 mental health problems (anxiety, depression, and PTSD)], distinguished by parent gender***. Paternal incarceration was associated with each of the 8 outcomes. Maternal incarceration was associated only with depression.
4. Future Directions
 - a. Though methodological challenges remain, including the need for better data, future research should strive to:
 - i. Employ comprehensive approaches to investigate health impacts of exposure to parental incarceration across developmental stages and health outcomes.
 - ii. Investigate potential risk factors and mechanisms that span the social ecology (e.g., individual, familial, community, & societal levels of the social ecology).

Session 3

Emily Bever Nichols:

1. History of household member incarceration (HMI) during childhood significantly increases the likelihood of extended school absences and school drop out, beyond the

influence of heightened economic strain.

2. History of extended HMI (e.g. cousin, uncle) increases the likelihood of absence and drop out, while parent and sibling incarceration does not, supporting the need for research beyond parental incarceration.
3. Policy and programming should focus on expanding school-based services and drop out prevention to youth with HMI, and especially youth with extended HMI who are likely not receiving services.

John Hagan:

1. World high U.S. parental incarceration rates jeopardize innocent children's rights to educational opportunities
2. U.S. College graduation rate of 40% drops to 1-2% among children of mothers who are imprisoned and about 15% for imprisoned fathers
3. Even if own parents are not imprisoned, when children go to schools where 10-20% of other parents are imprisoned, college graduation drops by half

Holly Foster:

1. Both maternal and paternal imprisonment are associated with the social exclusion of children in early adulthood.
2. College completion is part of the pathway through which parental imprisonment affects young adulthood social exclusion suggesting a point of intervention.
3. There is some evidence that paternal incarceration exerts a robust effect on young adult social exclusion in favor of a "paternal salience" hypothesis regarding the effects of the gender of the incarcerated parent on social exclusion.

Session 4

Myrna Raeder:

1. Protocols should be adopted throughout the United States concerning how the police should handle arrests witnessed by children or where the arrest will have an immediate impact on children, recognizing that in many circumstances referral to child services will not be required.
2. Judges should be better trained concerning the impact on parental incarceration on children to take better advantage of their discretion in sentencing, particularly when the defendant has committed a nonviolent crime and has sole or primary parenting

responsibility. More sentencing alternatives should be available where parents can reside with their young children.

3. To encourage visiting and reentry, prisons for women should not be located in rural areas such as Aliceville, Alabama which are distant from prisoners' homes and typically expensive to visit or inaccessible by public transportation. Judges should have the power to take distance from home into account in sentencing, as well as the power to decide where a prisoner should be housed.
4. Advocacy for "smart on crime" initiatives should be supported by evidence based research concerning intergenerational implication of current sentencing practices.

Philip Genty:

1. We know much less than we think we do about issues surrounding parental incarceration, and we still have much to learn. These issues are more complicated than we realize.

2. What we know:

- The key challenges facing incarcerated parents and their children are straightforward – time and space. Prison sentences are too long, and prisons are located too far from the families of those who are incarcerated.
- If we want to solve most of the problems facing these families, the starting point is obvious: decrease sentence lengths and incarcerate people closer to home.

3. But beyond this, researchers, policymakers, service providers and advocates oversimplify the issues of parental incarceration in at least three ways:

- For children in foster care, the rigid, time-driven ASFA model assumes that people are unable to parent meaningfully from prison and that "permanency" away from their parents will create happy-endings for the children.
- Descriptions of children who have experienced parental incarceration assume that the children's experiences are uniform. This overlooks important differences in the families' histories as well as the variety of custodial settings in which these children live.
- Discussions of "collateral consequences" of incarceration underestimate the complex ways in which parental incarceration disrupts families.

5. Parental incarceration involves an interplay of complex issues. Only by discarding preconceptions and simplistic approaches, can we hope to provide appropriate services

and support for children and families affected by parental incarceration.

Becky Pettit:

1. Data collection efforts in the United States have shifted over time in response to changes in the population, policy demands, and research interests. The United States has a constitutional mandate to collect the decennial census, the census expanded dramatically during the late 1800s with the growth of grants-in-aid through programs like the Morrill Act, and we continue to rely on surveys that use probability-based household samples initiated in the 1930s.
2. Estimates of children's exposure to parental incarceration differ greatly depending on how data are collected. Indirect estimation methods that use population data combined with surveys of inmates suggest relatively high rates of exposure largely concentrated among African American children and those who have parents who haven't finished high school. Survey data generate lower rates of exposure overall and show less race and education inequality in both rates and risks of parental incarceration.
3. There are a number of possible explanations for discrepancies in estimates of children's exposure to parental incarceration including differences in sampling (coverage) and differences in question wording. Children of incarcerated parents are very likely to be missed by surveys that draw their samples from people living in households, omnibus questions that include low-level forms of criminal justice contact generate higher rates of exposure than methods that focus on more severe sanctions like jail or prison time, and children's (and their parents') reports of criminal justice contact in surveys and administrative records depend on co-residence.

Session 5

Lorie Smith Goshin:

1. Stable, responsive relationships lay the foundation for physical and mental health across the lifespan. Available criminal justice policies to support mother-child relationships each have strengths and weaknesses. None have been compared systematically.
2. Prison nurseries are special units in which eligible imprisoned women can care for their infants. Published descriptions of U.S. nurseries show enriched developmentally-appropriate environments staffed by a mix of civilian and correctional professionals. Parenting educational and supportive programming are integrated.
3. Evidence from New York State shows the potential for prison nursery effectiveness through positive family preservation, attachment, and child development outcomes from birth to 5 years. Systematic research assessing cost-benefit is unavailable at this

time. Current geographic distribution and eligibility criteria limit equity of this policy option.

4. Diversion models (residential drug treatment, supportive housing, home-based supervision) for mothers are being explored. They address the drawbacks of prison nurseries by providing non-institutional placement and some eligibility for older and multiple children. There is a critical need for these policies to be scaled up, replicated, and evaluated.
5. Any co-residence option for criminal justice involved women and their children must involve more than just living together. Research is needed to develop or translate interventions for family and staff to support parent-child relationships and long-term family health.

Nancy Rodriguez:

1. The effects of incarceration on families are varied and complex, requiring systematic, long-term data collection from prisoners, caregivers, and children (i.e., the family system).
2. Coordination and data sharing between relevant stakeholders are key in better understanding and addressing the needs of families affected by incarceration.

De Ann Newell:

1. There is an urgency for researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to share in real time in order to change outcomes for children of incarcerated parents, to include prevention, targeted sets, and/or if the children already have problems, identifying ways to help to fix the problems. The children have been waiting for too long.
2. The Bill of rights Technical Assistance Fellowship was an initial step toward the co-sharing and collaborative learning that is badly needed. Project needs to be replicated with more researchers involved.
3. The community's role needs to be emphasized in the care and support of these children, and action research needs to be connected to these efforts.