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# **KIDS COUNT in Delaware**

*University of Delaware Center for Community  
Research and Service*

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## **Literature Review: The Effects of Parental Incarceration on Minor Children**

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## **Summary**

The United States currently has the largest prison population in the world, with over 2.2 million people incarcerated in the nation's jails and prisons (Walmsley, 2013). Concurrent to this expansive incarceration population, more children in the country are affected by parental incarceration than in any other country. Approximately 2.7 million children in the United States have a parent who is currently incarcerated (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), and over 10 million children are affected by current or past parental involvement in the criminal justice system (Reed & Reed, 1997).

Children with parents in prison or jail are likely to see disruptions in continuity of care, which can lead to severe instability in the child's life. These children are more susceptible to a variety of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes, including depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior, and attention and social problems (Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Children of incarcerated parents are also at greater risk for delinquency themselves, as there has been found to be a robust link between occurrence of parental incarceration and delinquent behaviors in their children (Roettger & Swisher, 2011).

Parents who go to prison or jail are unable to provide financially for their children while they are incarcerated, and due to the loss of income and institutionalized stigma that come with being incarcerated, they often have difficulty finding sustainable employment once they are released. Fathers who have been incarcerated have been shown to make significantly less, hourly and annually, than those who have never been incarcerated, and on average, spend less time employed per year (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Over half of incarcerated parents report that they are the primary source of financial support for their minor children, and these children often directly suffer the effects of their parents' loss of income (Glaze and Maruschak, 2010). Parental incarceration has a destabilizing effect on an already at-risk population, which puts these children at a greater likelihood of experiencing a variety of adverse outcomes. The collateral costs of the United States' immense prison population include the psychological, behavioral and economic effects on the children of those who have been incarcerated, which can lead to a continued cycle of delinquency between generations.

## **Introduction**

The United States has the largest prison population in the world, with over 2.2 million people incarcerated (Walmsley, 2013). This number has risen significantly in recent decades, and in the late 1970s factors including tougher laws and stricter sentencing guidelines caused the prison population to begin a dramatic rise of approximately 6 percent annually (Blumstein, 2011).

Similar to the exponential growth of the United States prison population, the population of children with incarcerated parents has also drastically increased over the past several decades. Between 1991 and 1999, the number of minor children with a parent in state or federal prison rose from 936,500 to 1,498,800 (Mumola, 2000). By 2010, this number had risen to over an estimated 2.7 million children, which accounts for 3.6 percent of the total United States population under the age of eighteen (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010).

The rate of parental incarceration disproportionately affects minority children. While 1 in 28 children in the United States has a parent in prison or jail, more than 1 in 9 African American children in the country has an incarcerated parent, a rate that has more than quadrupled in recent decades (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Over 25 percent of African American children will ever have their father imprisoned, compared to just 3.1 percent of white children. Among African American children whose fathers did not complete high school, this risk increases to 50.5 percent (Wildeman, 2009).

The effects of the criminal justice system on minor children extend far beyond just parental incarceration. An estimated five million children nationally have a parent under some sort of criminal justice supervision, including arrest, incarceration, parole or probation. Additionally, five million children have a parent who has at some point been under such supervision, meaning that an estimated 10 million children in the United States have been affected by current or past parental involvement in the criminal justice system (Reed & Reed, 1997). The prevalence of parental imprisonment has made growing up with an incarcerated parent a common and distinct form of childhood disadvantage that affects American youth more than children in any other country (Wildeman, 2009).

Parental imprisonment has varied and wide-reaching effects on minor children. Qualitative and quantitative data show that parental incarceration affects children adversely in a myriad of ways, including socially, psychologically, and economically.

### **Caretaking Issues**

Children with parents in prison or jail are likely to see severe disruptions to continuity of care, and the incarceration of either parent creates an increased likelihood of residential instability for the child involved (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009).

There are major disparities in child care when looking at the differences between maternal and paternal incarceration. While 88 percent of fathers in prison identified the mother as the primary caregiver of at least one of their children, 42 percent of mothers identified their child's primary caregiver as the maternal grandmother, and 23 percent identified other relatives (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). While paternal imprisonment often leads to a child remaining with their

biological mother, maternal imprisonment is more likely to displace the child, which can cause deleterious instability.

Children of single mothers are disproportionately affected by continuity of care issues when experiencing maternal incarceration. Mothers entering the criminal justice system have been found to be generally raising their children as a single parent. Due to a lack of a significant other to take over parental responsibilities, children of these women have a high probability of being subjected to temporary placements with family, friends, welfare systems or a combination of these placements (Miller, 2006).

Parental incarceration presents unique challenges in the caretaking of the children affected. Instability and lack in continuity of care can predispose children to a variety of other emotional and behavioral issues.

### **Psychological and Behavioral Outcomes**

Children of incarcerated parents are susceptible to a wide range of long and short-term psychological, emotional and behavioral issues. Causes such as separation from their parent, social stigma, and the trauma of having a parent imprisoned can have deleterious effects that manifest in a variety of ways. These children may suffer from emotional disorders such as depression, anxiety and in some cases, even post-traumatic stress disorder (Miller, 2006). Studies have also found higher rates of problem behaviors and serious delinquency among these youth, with the association between parental incarceration and problematic behaviors strengthening over time (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011).

Separation from a parent, especially during the formative years, can have a traumatic effect on children, and children separated by their parents due to imprisonment are at a greater risk for certain negative outcomes than children experiencing parental separation for any other reason. A study performed by Murray & Farrington examined the effects of parental imprisonment on the behavior of boys through adolescence and adulthood. They found that parental imprisonment is a strong predictor of negative outcomes, including antisocial behaviors and delinquency, even up to the age of 40 (Murray & Farrington, 2005).

The gender of the parent incarcerated has been shown to play a role in the type of adverse behaviors exhibited by the children, which is suggested to be due to the different relationships children have with their mothers and fathers. Young adults who experience maternal incarceration are more likely to experience internalizing behaviors and are at risk for depressive symptoms, whereas those experiencing paternal incarceration are likely to experience externalized behaviors, and are at a greater risk for substance abuse problems (Foster & Hagan, 2013).

Paternal incarceration in particular has been found to be robustly associated with adverse outcomes. Wildeman and Turney looked at 21 different caregiver and teacher reported outcomes, and found that children who experienced paternal incarceration were significantly more likely to exhibit 18 of the behaviors including showing aggressive behavior, appearing anxious or depressed, attention problems and social problems (Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Paternal incarceration has been found to be positively and robustly associated specifically with aggressive behaviors, even more so than other forms of father absence (Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher & Mincy, 2011).

The social stigma of having a parent incarcerated often leads to further emotional and behavioral complications. Most children are aware of the stigma society places on crime and imprisonment, and children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system are likely to experience feelings of shame and rejection, causing them to withdraw from meaningful relationships, which can lead to antisocial behaviors (Miller, 2006).

This population of children are at-risk for a host of negative emotional and behavioral issues. The greater susceptibility to these issues, in an already at risk population, can lead to these children exhibiting delinquent behaviors.

### **Risks for Delinquent Behavior**

Several studies have found that children of incarcerated parents are more likely than their peers to exhibit delinquent behaviors and face arrest or incarceration themselves.

One study of parental incarceration among youth who were receiving mental health services showed that youth who had experienced parental imprisonment had a higher number of risk factors over the span of their life. They were at a greater risk for negative experiences such as poverty, child abuse or neglect, and parental substance abuse and mental illness. Findings also showed that children whose parents had been involved in the criminal justice system were much more likely to have faced expulsion or suspension from school, and were more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system themselves between their initial treatment and their follow up appointment several months later (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002).

Several studies have shown a link between paternal incarceration and heightened risks of delinquent behaviors. Roettger & Swisher found that paternal incarceration has been shown to be associated with a greater average propensity for delinquency in adolescents and young adults. This association holds true for both arrest and delinquency among groups of white, black and Hispanic males, suggesting that all young adults who have experienced paternal incarceration are

similarly at risk (Roettger & Swisher, 2011). These adolescents are also at a higher risk for drug abuse in the years following their fathers being incarcerated. Children who have ever experienced paternal incarceration have a heightened risk of using marijuana and other illegal drugs in adolescence and young adulthood (Roettger, Swisher, Kuhl, & Chavez, 2011).

The children affected by parental incarceration are usually already part of an “at-risk” population with a greater propensity for delinquency. Research shows that experiencing the negative effects of parental incarceration, especially the incarceration of their father, puts this population at an even more pronounced risk for delinquency and involvement in the criminal justice system.

### **Economic Effects**

The loss of income and forms of stigma that come hand in hand with imprisonment have severe and lasting economic effects on prisoner’s families and children. Parents are unable to effectively provide for their children while imprisoned, and face extreme difficulty in finding adequate and sustainable employment once they are released.

When the main source of a household's income is imprisoned, children directly suffer the consequences. Over half of the parents in prison, approximately 52 percent of mothers and 54 percent of fathers, reported that they were the primary source of financial support for their children (Glaze and Maruschak, 2010). With the breadwinner of the family gone, children often enter the homes of caregivers who already have financial hardships of their own, with the addition of a child to an already overburdened family causing even more financial strain. Grandparents or relative caregivers often face the financial burden of raising a child on their own, as public assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or foster care payments can be extremely hard to access in many of these cases (Miller, 2006).

Collateral costs from incarceration are seen when struggling families find themselves with a greater need for welfare benefits. Sugie uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to show a direct and significant association between recent paternal incarceration and a family’s receipt of certain welfare benefits. Families with recently incarcerated fathers have shown an uptick in receiving food stamps and Medicaid/SCHIP (Sugie, 2012).

Due to the social and institutionalized stigma of imprisonment, economic hardship can continue for long after the parent has been released from prison or jail. Fathers who have been incarcerated have been found less likely to be employed, either at all or consistently, and their salaries are significantly less than their counterparts who have not been incarcerated. (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper & Mincy, 2009). Men who have served time in prison or jail earn 11 percent less hourly and 40 percent less annually than their counterparts who have not been incarcerated, and have an average of nine weeks less of annual employment (The Pew Charitable Trusts,

2010). Incarceration's destabilizing effect on their job prospects, combined with the poorer relationship quality that is often a direct result of incarceration, leads these fathers to earn less and not cohabit with their children. Lack of earnings and absence of cohabitation significantly diminish the financial support the fathers provide (Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011).

Certain policies and restrictions placed on previously incarcerated individuals can adversely affect their ability to provide for their families. In many cases, depending on their charges, former prisoners are rendered unable to hold certain jobs or professional licenses, live in public housing, take out certain loans or receive food stamps (Hairston, 2002).

Procedures meant to punish the previously incarcerated individual can have severe effects on their ability to provide for their families. The direct loss of income from incarceration, in addition to the indirect loss of income caused by policies, procedures and institutionalized stigma, have lasting effects on these parents' abilities to appropriately provide for their children.

## **Conclusions**

Children of incarcerated parents are a unique and often understudied at-risk population. They are highly affected by the collateral damage of the prison boom in the United States, and are subject to a variety of negative emotional, behavioral and economic outcomes as a result. Parental incarceration places an already high-risk population at an even higher risk for negative outcomes that often leads to a continued cycle of delinquent behavior between generations.

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