



Parental Incarceration and Child Wellbeing in Fragile Families

Background

Incarceration is widespread in the United States. By the end of 2004, the United States had over 2.1 million people incarcerated in jails or prisons. The majority of these prisoners are parents. As of 2002, 1,150,200 parents with 2,413,700 minor children were incarcerated in State and Federal prisons. Previous literature has shown significant negative effects of incarceration on parental employment, earnings, and relationship stability. Despite the prevalence of incarceration among parents, and the association between incarceration and negative parental outcomes, we know very little about the relationship between imprisoned parents and child wellbeing.

The literature on children of incarcerated parents is quite small and most existing studies are constrained by small or convenience samples, limited long-term follow-up, and the lack of an appropriate comparison sample.¹ However, these studies suggest that children with parents facing incarceration tend to live in high-risk environments, even without considering the potential risk for poor child outcomes associated with parental imprisonment itself. Approximately one-half of fathers sent to state and federal prisons were not living with their children before their incarceration and most of these fathers have had children by multiple partners. Parents who spend time in prison or jail also tend to be poorly educated, lack material resources, and frequently have problems with drugs, alcohol, and mental illness, each of which has been linked to poor child outcomes even in the absence of incarceration. This literature has also pinpointed developmental challenges unique to the children of incarcerated parents. Young children (ages 2-6) of incarcerated parents have been observed to have emotional problems, while school-aged children are stigmatized by their peers and display poor academic performance and behavior problems. The extent to which these problems result from the incarceration, as opposed to other risk factors faced by the families of incarcerated individuals, remains unclear.

This brief summarizes the results of an extensive analysis examining the risks faced by urban children whose parents

have been incarcerated. The findings are not meant to suggest a causal relationship between incarceration and child wellbeing. Rather, the analyses identify the extent to which the children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk for material hardship, family instability, or developmental challenges. Understanding the areas in which these children experience the most substantial risk will help identify opportunities for intervention and the judicious use of social services.

Data and Methods

The analysis uses data from the Fragile Families Study, a national study that follows a cohort of children born between 1998 and 2000 (N=4,898) and their parents in twenty U.S. cities. Parents are first interviewed in the hospital around their child's birth, and re-interviewed by phone around the children's first, third, and fifth birthdays. Approximately one-half of these families are also interviewed in their home, at which time parents provide more detailed information about their child's health and behavior, and children complete the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) to measure their cognitive development. Because the sample is representative of urban children born to unmarried parents, the data are particularly well-suited for isolating those risks uniquely associated with parental incarceration. While this analysis is based on data from both married and unmarried families, Fragile Families' oversample of non-marital births provides a large sample of children in families facing economic risks, both with and without a history of incarceration.

Measures of each child's exposure to parental incarceration are constructed based on each parents' self-report of incarceration history and their reports of their partner's incarceration history. Both parents were first asked about the fathers' incarceration history around the child's first birthday and about the mothers' incarceration history around the child's third birthday. By their fifth birthday, the data suggest that over 50% of children born to unmarried parents in large cities and 17% of those born to married parents have fathers with a history of incarceration. Likewise, by age five 10% of children born to

¹ One important exception is the Great Smoky Mountain Study (See Phillips et al., 2006) based on a random sample of public school students in rural North Carolina. As the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study focuses on an urban population, beginning in early childhood, the two serve as valuable complements to each other.

unmarried parents and 4% of those born to married parents have mothers who have spent time in prison or jail.²

To assess the association between parental incarceration and child wellbeing, a series of regression models examines the relationship between incarceration and a number of child and family outcomes, with controls for parents' background characteristics.³

Findings

Child and family outcomes are grouped into three broad categories: parents' labor force outcomes, family stability outcomes, and child development outcomes. Key findings from the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Children whose parents have been incarcerated face significant economic instability. Consistent with prior literature,⁶

Table 1: Differences in Child and Family Outcomes When Parents Have Been Incarcerated

Outcome	Father Incarceration	Mother Incarceration
ECONOMIC OUTCOMES		
Employment at Year 5	Child 40% more likely to have unemployed father	Child 17% more likely to have unemployed mother
Weeks worked in past year	Child's father works 2-4 fewer weeks per year	Child's mother works 4 fewer weeks per year
Hourly wages	Father earns 19% less per hour	---
Past-year earnings	Father earns 38-79% less over a year	---
FAMILY STABILITY OUTCOMES		
Family formation	Child 34% less likely to live with married parents Parents 32% more likely to live apart	Child 33% less likely to live with married parents Parents 26% more likely to live apart
Residential moves ⁴	Child moves 0.6 more times	Child moves 0.7 more times
Presence of Material Hardship ⁵	Children are 25% more likely to experience material hardship	---
Public Assistance	Children are 19% more likely to receive public assistance	Children are 11% more likely to receive public assistance
Foster Care	Children are 4 times more likely to face foster system contact	Children are 5 times more likely to face foster system contact
CHILD DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES		
Physical health	---	---
Aggressive behavior	Children 44% more likely to display borderline to clinically aggressive behavior	---
Anxious/depressive behavior	---	---
Withdrawal behavior	---	---
Cognitive development	---	---
--- means no statistically significant effect at $p < .05$		

² When parents' incarceration status is missing in both self- and partner-reports, their likelihood of incarceration is estimated using a multiple imputation procedure. Multiple imputation is also used for the estimation of outcome measures or confounding characteristics that are not reported by parents.

³ Models predicting the "effects" of each parents' incarceration control for the focal parents' race, age at the time of the birth, impulsivity, cognitive ability, family history (i.e., whether a father figure – biological or social – was involved in their upbringing), level of education, residence status at baseline, employment status and wages at baseline, and family violence status at baseline.

⁴ A child's count of residential moves is estimated as the number of times his or her mother has moved since the birth. This count assumes that the mother is consistently the custodial parent and likely underestimates the difference in residential moves between the groups of interest.

⁵ Material hardship is defined as whether the mother has experienced one of the following events due to inability to pay: receiving free food, losing phone service, losing utility services, eviction, not paying full utility bills, not paying full rent or mortgage, or not seeing a doctor when one was needed.

⁶ See also Fragile Families Research Brief 38.

parents who have histories of incarceration fare significantly worse in the labor market than those who have never been incarcerated. Both fathers and mothers with incarceration histories are less likely to be employed at the time of their five-year survey, work fewer weeks out of the year, and less per hour worked. Annual earnings of fathers who have been to jail or prison are 38% to 79% below annual earnings of fathers with similar demographic characteristics who have not been incarcerated. Accordingly, children are more likely to experience material hardship when their fathers have a history of incarceration and are more likely to rely on public assistance when either of their parents has been incarcerated.

Children whose parents have been incarcerated also face significant family and residential instability, even if the parent was incarcerated before the child was born. Couples in which one or both parents have been to jail or prison are significantly less likely to be married or co-resident by their child's fifth birthday. Both parents also change residences more frequently when they or their partner has been incarcerated. Finally, children are significantly more likely to face contact with the foster care system (either by living with a foster family, or with a relative via formal kinship care) when one or both of their parents has been incarcerated.

While children experiencing parental incarceration encounter increased economic hardship and greater family and residential instability, the relationship between parental incarceration and child development is only apparent when examining child aggression. Children of fathers with incarceration histories are significantly more likely to display borderline to clinically aggressive behavior. Children whose mothers have been incarcerated also display more aggressive behavior (by a similar magnitude), but this difference is not statistically significant. On other measures of child development including physical health, anxious/depressive behavior, withdrawal behavior, and cognitive development, however, differences are slight and statistically insignificant.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Children whose parents have been incarcerated face considerable instability. Their parents perform worse in the labor market and their families are more likely to face material hardship. They are less likely to live with both their biological parents, are more likely to experience residential moves, and

are more likely to have contact with the foster care system. Children whose fathers have been incarcerated are also significantly more likely to display aggressive behavior, though they do not differ from their counterparts in terms of physical health, anxious/depressive behavior, withdrawal behavior, or cognitive development. Children whose mothers have been to jail or prison do not display statistically significant developmental differences from those whose mothers have never been incarcerated.

This analysis, as noted above, was not designed to assess whether the parents' incarceration caused the increased instability in their children's homes, or the observed difference in child behavior. While the analysis controls for a number of observable characteristics that might influence both parent criminal justice contact and child behavior, it does not attempt to control for unobserved differences that might lead one parent to become incarcerated while another does not. Nonetheless, the results suggest that whatever the cause, urban children whose parents have been incarcerated are a high-risk population, and that a parent's incarceration should serve as an opportunity to provide needed social and economic support.

For example, policymakers can address the diminished labor force participation among formerly incarcerated parents by restoring a rehabilitative component to correctional facilities and providing better employment training. To further address issues of instability, those families receiving income or child support from a parent who becomes incarcerated should be assessed to determine whether they are eligible for public assistance, or whether their benefit levels should be adjusted to compensate for the family's loss of income. Likewise, given that families where a parent has been incarcerated move residences more frequently, they should be contacted by a social services case manager at the time of an incarceration, to ensure that their support continues consistently, even if they are forced to move.

Finally, although we have not presented a causal analysis, the causal effect of incarceration on children is a pressing concern for policymakers and researchers. If paternal incarceration promotes aggressive behavior in children, imprisonment of parents may ultimately promote imprisonment among children. In this scenario, costs of incarceration may be passed from one generation to the next, producing whole groups of deeply and enduringly disadvantaged families.

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Inside...

This brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how parental incarceration is associated with parental economic outcomes, family stability, and children's development.

For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.

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