

Parental Incarceration and Children's Wellbeing

Kristin Turney and Rebecca Goodsell

Summary

A half century ago, relatively few US children experienced the incarceration of a parent. In the decades since, incarceration rates rose rapidly (before leveling off more recently), and today a historically unprecedented number of children are exposed to parental incarceration. In this article, Kristin Turney and Rebecca Goodsell walk us through the evidence that parental incarceration impairs children's wellbeing throughout the life course. Given the fact that already vulnerable children are also the most likely to experience having a parent behind bars, they write, these trends increase inequality among children.

After documenting the scope of parental incarceration, Turney and Goodsell review mechanisms that may link parental incarceration to children's wellbeing, such as the parent's physical absence, the trauma associated with the criminal justice process, and the stigma of having a parent in jail or prison. They also review research into how parental incarceration affects four aspects of children's wellbeing: behavior, education, health, and hardship and deprivation. In each of these areas, parental incarceration has detrimental consequences for children.

The authors then turn to programs designed to improve the wellbeing of children of incarcerated parents. Interestingly, they note, despite the fact that fathers' rather than mothers' incarceration appears to have worse consequences for children, many such programs focus on incarcerated mothers—although some aim to treat both parents, or the family as a whole. Yet, they find, few such interventions have been conclusively shown to improve children's wellbeing during and after parental incarceration. Turney and Goodsell suggest three other types of interventions that might help reduce disparities among children of incarcerated parents: programs that strengthen parents' relationships, increase families' economic wellbeing, and treat parents' substance abuse.

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Incarceration rates in the United States increased fivefold from the mid-1970s through the turn of the 21st century. And although the rates have stabilized and even declined slightly since then, incarceration remains a relatively common experience for poor and minority adults in this country.¹ The men and women who are confined in local jails and state or federal prisons are connected to their families before, during, and after their incarceration. They are sons and daughters, romantic partners, and parents, and they contribute to households financially, emotionally, and in other ways.

The rapid rise in incarceration over the past half century has meant a precipitous increase in the number of children exposed to parental incarceration. Currently, 2.6 million children—or 4 percent of the population under age 18—have a mother or father behind bars, and many more children have experienced a parent's incarceration at some point in their lives. Given the considerable number of children exposed to parental incarceration, many of them vulnerable long before their parents were confined, it's not surprising that scholars have increasingly investigated incarceration's intergenerational consequences.

How does a parent's incarceration affect children's wellbeing? Research suggests that the incarceration of parents, and especially of fathers, is associated with poor outcomes for children. By and large, parental incarceration has negative consequences—even after taking into account the other vulnerabilities that endanger these children, such as family instability, poverty, parental substance abuse, and living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Compared to other children, those who experience

parental incarceration suffer impairments across four domains of wellbeing: behavior, education, health, and hardship and deprivation.² Increased awareness of parental incarceration's negative intergenerational consequences has led to interventions that aim to reduce inequalities between children with incarcerated parents and those without.

Demographic Trends in Incarceration

Incarceration was relatively rare in 1970, affecting about 161 of every 100,000 US adults. That proportion increased steadily over the following decades, to a peak of 767 per 100,000 adults in 2007. Today, 670 of every 100,000 adults are confined to jails and prisons.³

As incarceration has grown, more and more children have been exposed to parental incarceration. About half of all inmates have at least one child.⁴ Parental incarceration is no longer a rare event experienced by only the most disadvantaged children. Recent nationally representative estimates from the 2011–12 National Survey of Children's Health show that 7 percent of children under age 18 have experienced the incarceration of a parent with whom they live. Since some children in the sample were quite young, it's almost certain that more children will experience a resident parent's incarceration at some point in childhood. And if we consider specific groups of children, parental incarceration is even more common. For example, estimates from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study—a sample of urban children born to mostly unmarried parents around the turn of the 21st century—show that by age nine, about one-third experienced paternal incarceration and one-tenth experienced maternal incarceration.⁵

Just as incarceration is more common among some groups of people than others, children have different risks of experiencing parental incarceration. The most commonly reported risk factors are race/ethnicity and social class. Recent estimates suggest that by age 17, 24.2 percent of non-Hispanic black children and 10.7 percent of Hispanic children—but only 3.9 percent of non-Hispanic white children—will experience parental incarceration. When we add social class to the mix, we see even more striking disparities. For example, among children of parents without a high school diploma, 62.1 percent of non-Hispanic blacks are exposed to parental incarceration, compared to 17.4 percent of Hispanics and 14.6 percent of non-Hispanic whites.⁶ Parental incarceration is also concentrated among children in rural areas, children with unmarried parents, children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and children whose parents have been previously incarcerated or have a history of substance abuse or violence.⁷

Parental incarceration massively strains family life, with cascading consequences for children.

Linking Parental Incarceration to Child Wellbeing

Parental incarceration may be bad for children for a number of reasons. To begin with, a parent's physical absence from the household may be traumatic for children. The circumstances surrounding the incarceration—such as witnessing criminal activity, arrest, or judicial proceedings—may also be traumatic. The trauma experienced

by the children, as well as the corresponding loss resulting from the incarcerated parent's physical and emotional absence, may hinder children's behavioral and cognitive development.⁸ Children of incarcerated parents may also experience stigma and shame that impede their social interactions and learning.⁹

Parental incarceration also massively strains family life, with cascading consequences for children. For example, it increases families' economic hardship. Incarcerated parents, many of whom were helping to support their families financially before their confinement, can't earn substantial income during incarceration. At the same time, they accumulate fines, fees, and legal debts. Upon release, the stigma of a criminal record makes it difficult for them to find work and makes them more likely to avoid mainstream institutions such as banks, hospitals, and schools. Parental incarceration also increases the likelihood that parents will separate or divorce, and heightens conflict among couples who remain together. It also impairs the parenting and mental health of the incarcerated parent and the children's caregivers. Because income, relationship stability, parenting, and mental health are all crucial for children's wellbeing, it's likely that parental incarceration leads to poor outcomes for children through all of these mechanisms.¹⁰

Selection into Parental Incarceration

Trauma, stigma, and strain are commonly suggested as other mechanisms through which parental incarceration harms children's wellbeing. But an alternative explanation is that children of incarcerated parents have suffered from disadvantages

even before their parent's incarceration, and that these disadvantages—not the parent's incarceration per se—are what harms their wellbeing.¹¹ To be sure, before their parent is incarcerated, such children have generally experienced many hardships at higher rates than their peers, including family and caregiver instability, poverty, exposure to violence, parental substance abuse, and parental criminality. Thus the association between parental incarceration and children's wellbeing may stem from these experiences. And some children—for example, children of violent or substance-abusing parents—may even benefit from (or at least not be harmed by) parental incarceration.

Paternal versus Maternal Incarceration

Another possibility is that paternal incarceration affects children's wellbeing differently than maternal incarceration does. On the one hand, maternal incarceration may be more consequential, because a mother's incarceration may bring more family instability than a father's. Children often continue to live with their mother when their father is incarcerated, but children of incarcerated mothers usually experience a complex set of living arrangements—perhaps with their fathers, with extended family members, or in foster care. The household instability produced by a mother's incarceration could be especially consequential for children's wellbeing.

On the other hand, paternal incarceration may be more consequential to children's wellbeing. Incarceration isn't unusual for poor and minority fathers, but it's less common among poor and minority mothers, likely because of policy and practice decisions. And mothers who

are incarcerated are likely to be more disadvantaged on average than fathers who are incarcerated. Thus it's possible that fathers' incarceration has harmful consequences for children directly, whereas the association between maternal incarceration and children's wellbeing results not from the incarceration itself, but rather from such factors as poverty, substance abuse, and mental health problems that are associated with incarceration.¹²

Consequences of Parental Incarceration

What are parental incarceration's consequences for US children? It can be difficult to separate the ways parental incarceration impairs children's wellbeing from the disadvantages those children experience before their parents are incarcerated. Identifying causal relationships between parental incarceration and children's wellbeing would require a study that randomly assigned children to have incarcerated parents or not—an experiment that would be both unethical and infeasible.

Given the barriers to experimental studies, researchers have relied almost exclusively on nonexperimental data. Below we review key findings from this research across the four domains we named above: behavior, education, health, and hardship and deprivation. Though most of the research we review can't show causality, it's clear that children of incarcerated parents are worse off in a number of ways than children whose parents aren't incarcerated.

Behavior

The most consistent finding is that parental incarceration, and especially paternal incarceration, has harmful consequences for

children's behavior. Several studies find that children exposed to paternal incarceration are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, such as destroying things or demanding a lot of attention. For example, one study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine behavioral differences between five-year-old children who had and had not experienced paternal incarceration in the previous two years. Using a rigorous methodological approach to strengthen causal inference, the study found that children of incarcerated fathers more often exhibited physically aggressive behaviors, defined as destroying things, getting in fights, and physically attacking people, as reported by caregivers. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions. For example, another study using Fragile Families data suggests that the consequences of paternal incarceration extend to other types of behavioral problems among nine-year-old children—for example, caregiver-reported attention problems and internalizing behaviors, such as being withdrawn or anxious, or child-reported delinquency.¹³

Fewer researchers have looked into the relationship between maternal incarceration and children's behavior. One recent study, again using Fragile Families data, examined the link between maternal incarceration and caregiver- and teacher-reported behavioral problems at ages five and nine. Differences in behavioral outcomes between children who did and didn't experience maternal incarceration largely disappeared after accounting for such factors as the mothers' race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and substance abuse. Another study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to find that maternal incarceration in childhood or adolescence was associated with depressive symptoms in

young adults. Taken together, these studies suggest that the harmful behavioral effects of maternal incarceration may emerge over time.¹⁴

Education

Recent studies provide some evidence that children with incarcerated parents, and particularly those with incarcerated fathers, have trouble progressing through school. For example, paternal incarceration during early or middle childhood has been associated with poorer cognitive outcomes among nine-year-old children, as measured by reading comprehension, math comprehension, and memory. Research also suggests that, in elementary school, children of incarcerated fathers are more likely to be held back a grade, placed in special education, or suspended. Their previously incarcerated fathers (though not their other caregivers) are also less likely to be involved in the home or school, which stems at least partly from a broader proclivity to avoid involvement in social institutions such as schools, hospitals, and political organizations. And other research suggests that older children of previously incarcerated fathers have lower educational attainment, poorer academic performance, and more school absences than children whose fathers were never incarcerated.¹⁵

As with behavior, fewer researchers have focused on how mothers' incarceration affects children's education. By and large, the research so far suggests that maternal incarceration isn't independently associated with educational outcomes among young children. One study found that the observed association between maternal incarceration and verbal ability among nine-year-old children disappeared after controlling for

pre-incarceration characteristics.¹⁶ Two other studies, drawing on 12 years of data on elementary school children in the Chicago Public School system, found that maternal imprisonment wasn't associated with changes in reading or math scores. And surprisingly, children of imprisoned mothers were less likely to be held back a grade. However, those two studies compared children exposed to maternal prison incarceration to children exposed to maternal jail incarceration. Children exposed to maternal incarceration may not be the most appropriate comparison group, as even a short jail stay can disrupt family life in a way that has cascading educational consequences.¹⁷

As with behavioral outcomes, research on older children has found maternal incarceration to be associated with a lower chance of college graduation, suggesting that the harmful educational consequences of maternal incarceration may increase over time. The same study also found that children whose schoolmates have incarcerated mothers may suffer consequences even if they themselves don't have incarcerated mothers.¹⁸

Physical Health

In the context of parental incarceration, researchers most often study children's behavioral and educational outcomes. But some studies have considered the relationship between parental incarceration and children's physical health. Using data from the 2011–12 National Survey of Children's Health, one descriptive study found that children exposed to residential parent incarceration had more physical health problems, such as asthma (14 percent versus 8 percent) and obesity (21 percent versus 15 percent). This study had certain

limitations—it didn't look at changes over time, it didn't distinguish between maternal and paternal incarceration, and it didn't capture the incarceration of nonresidential parents. Still, its findings suggest that children of incarcerated parents are at risk for poorer health. And studies using Add Health data that followed children into young adulthood found that parental incarceration during childhood was associated with a later risk of high cholesterol, asthma, migraines, HIV/AIDS, overall fair/poor health, and, among women, obesity.¹⁹

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Hardship and Deprivation

Finally, recent research suggests that parental incarceration is associated with hardship and deprivation, even after accounting for factors that preceded incarceration. Research on this topic initially examined the economic wellbeing of children's households, mostly focusing on the financial consequences of fathers' incarceration. Incarcerated men contribute less to households economically, whether in the form of earnings or formal and informal child support.²⁰ The consequences of paternal incarceration also extend to the economic wellbeing of the children's mothers, increasing their material hardship (for example, via eviction) and reducing their assets (for example, via losing homes to foreclosure).²¹ Additionally, research finds that children exposed to paternal incarceration, especially those living

with their father prior to his incarceration, are more likely than their counterparts to experience food insecurity and homelessness.²² Parental incarceration is also associated with a greater likelihood of unmet health-care needs among children.²³

Sources of Variation

Parental incarceration may not have equal consequences for all children. For example, research consistently shows that negative consequences are most strongly concentrated among boys, and among children whose incarcerated parent was living in the home with them before incarceration.²⁴ Other research finds no evidence that associations vary by race/ethnicity.²⁵ Still, because parental incarceration is concentrated among minority children, the consequences of parental incarceration can increase overall racial/ethnic inequalities in children's wellbeing.

Relatedly, not all children have similar risks of exposure to parental incarceration. Some—such as children who have married parents or live in wealthier neighborhoods—are at low risk. But children who are living in poverty or whose parents have substance abuse problems, for example, have a high risk. These different risks of exposure to parental incarceration shape children's responses. Research shows that the consequences of both maternal and paternal incarceration are strongest among children who have the lowest risk of exposure. For these children, parental incarceration may be a particularly consequential turning point, leading to additional problems such as material hardship and family instability. Among children with a high risk of exposure, the associations between parental incarceration and wellbeing are smaller,

suggesting that these vulnerable children experience adverse outcomes whether or not their parents are incarcerated.

Limitations of the Research

Research on the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration has several limitations that may affect policies, practices, and programs. First, it relies on non-experimental data and therefore can't draw causal conclusions. The fundamental problem of causal inference is that one person can't be observed simultaneously in two states. In this case, an individual child can't be observed both experiencing and not experiencing parental incarceration. Another problem is that the most appropriate comparison group isn't clear. Most research compares children of incarcerated parents to children of parents who aren't incarcerated, but a more appropriate comparison might be to children of parents with a propensity for criminal activity (such as those who've been arrested but not incarcerated) or children exposed to other types of family instability (such as their parents' breakup).

The most rigorous studies suggest that there's a causal association between parental incarceration and children's wellbeing, especially their behaviors, and researchers should continue to use rigorous methods to understand the relationship. To better guide policies, practices, and programs, we need to document the causal relationships between parental incarceration and children's wellbeing, as well as the magnitude of these relationships. If parental incarceration directly causes harmful outcomes for children, it follows that reducing incarceration rates would diminish inequalities between children who do and don't experience parental incarceration. But

if parental incarceration is merely correlated with harmful outcomes, and if the cause of those outcomes can be traced to other factors such as economic instability or substance abuse, the most effective social policies might involve promoting employment or treating substance abuse.

Second, even though theory suggests that trauma, stigma, and family strain are the primary mechanisms that link parental incarceration to children's wellbeing, few researchers have tested these mechanisms, because of limitations in existing data. This is unfortunate, as understanding the mechanisms that underlie the associations would help to guide policies, practices, and programs. For example, if the key pathway linking parental incarceration and children's wellbeing is economic hardship, then decreasing economic hardship among children with incarcerated parents might be the best policy choice. But if the key pathway is family instability, then children might derive more benefit from policies that target parents' romantic or co-parenting relationships.

Finally, we lack sufficient data to comprehensively examine variation in the treatment of parental incarceration and in its consequences. For one thing, incarceration experiences can vary widely (for example, in such factors as frequency, duration, facility type, and custodial status). There's good reason to expect that different incarceration experiences have different consequences for children's wellbeing. For example, jail incarceration and prison incarceration may affect children differently. Jails are often closer to children's homes, making visitation easier and less expensive.²⁶ In another vein, any number of characteristics—such as family size, children's age, the gender

composition of children in the household, and the school or neighborhood context—might moderate the association between parental incarceration and children's wellbeing. If we learn what type of parental incarceration is most consequential and which groups of children are most harmed, we can target interventions toward the children who need them most.

Ameliorating the Consequences of Parental Incarceration

Given the adversities faced by children of incarcerated parents, there's a critical need to develop and implement programs to reduce inequalities between these children and others. Interestingly, though the most rigorous research generally finds that fathers' rather than mothers' incarceration has intergenerational consequences, many interventions focus on incarcerated mothers, mostly by teaching parenting skills. In the following section we review three groups of interventions: programs for mothers, programs for both mothers and fathers, and programs for parents and their children.

Programs for Mothers

Programs designed for incarcerated mothers most often aim to increase the mothers' parenting knowledge. The curricula combine objectives in several broad categories, among them improving communication, mental wellbeing, alliance with caregivers, attitudes toward parenting, child development, discipline, and behavior management. The four programs we describe below show that incarcerated mothers can benefit from such interventions.

The first, a 15-week program for incarcerated mothers, was based on the Nurturing Parenting curriculum. Researchers evaluated

eight sessions and found that overall, participants showed significant improvements in self-esteem. Participants also showed improvements in their attitudes about their expectations of their children, corporal punishment, and family roles. And in interviews conducted with some participants three months to four years after their release, mothers said that the course helped them reunite with their children.²⁷

The second was a 10-week course based on the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting program. Incarcerated mothers met weekly for 90 minutes to learn about communication, discipline, self-esteem, and appropriate ways to manage child behavior. Compared to mothers released before they could participate, incarcerated mothers who attended the program significantly increased their knowledge of child development and behavior management.²⁸

The third was an eight-session parenting class using a curriculum that aimed to reduce parenting stress, increase alliance with caregivers, develop better patterns of communication with children, and improve mothers' emotional wellbeing while incarcerated. Researchers found that compared to those who remained on a waiting list, incarcerated mothers who attended these parenting classes did not improve their alliance with caregivers, nor did they write more letters to their children. However, they did experience less distress about upcoming visitations compared to those wait-listed.²⁹

Last, researchers evaluated a 12-session general parenting class, designed to be discussion-based and experiential (for example, with mothers recording audio messages or writing letters to their

children). The course covered topics related to incarceration (such as knowledge of legal rights) and improving parental communication, self-esteem, and attitudes toward parenting. Compared to assessments before they took the course, participants significantly improved their legal knowledge, self-esteem, and parenting attitudes.³⁰

Programs for Mothers and Fathers

We found few rigorous evaluations of parenting programs for incarcerated fathers only, but we did examine two programs designed for both mothers and fathers. One of them, *Helping Your Child Succeed*, was based on the Family Nurturing Program, which teaches democratic parenting techniques—advocating that all members of the family have a voice in family decisions. The program, which requires 10–20 hours of coursework, springs from the notion that parents must improve themselves before they can improve the way they interact with their children. Researchers measured parenting knowledge and attitudes among a sample of incarcerated mothers and fathers, and also assessed parents in programs such as substance abuse rehabilitation and community parenting. The evaluators found that all mothers and fathers (whether incarcerated or not) improved their parenting knowledge and attitudes; all fathers also improved their empathy and attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment.³¹

Another program for both mothers and fathers, *Parenting from Prison*, had a 20-session curriculum designed to strengthen family relationships and increase positive behaviors, with an emphasis on reunification after incarceration. Evaluators found that participants significantly increased their self-esteem, self-mastery, parenting attitudes,

confidence, and satisfaction, as well as frequency of communication with their children.³²

Programs for Parents and Their Children

Programs for incarcerated parents and their children usually aim to improve their interactions and move beyond knowledge to practice. One such program is based on the Rebonding and Rebuilding curriculum, designed to teach incarcerated parents who may not have experienced effective parenting themselves. Tailored for use in jails, this 24-session program focuses on such topics as child development, discipline, and communication. This program also incorporates extended structured visitation and bonding time for incarcerated mothers and their children. An evaluation found significant positive changes among participants, particularly in the areas of communication, child development, discipline techniques, ability to deal with crises, confidence in parenting ability, feelings of emotional and social support, and parenting attitudes. These findings suggest that encouraging participants to practice the knowledge and skills learned in class can effectively improve outcomes for incarcerated parents and their children.³³

Two other programs focused on improving parenting skills through interaction therapy and emotion coaching, with an emphasis on preparing mothers for their release. The first was a seven-session parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT) course with classroom activities and role-playing exercises to train participants in such areas as self-esteem, communication, and discipline. The mothers were encouraged to practice these skills outside the classroom

through various forms of communication with their children, such as letter-writing and phone conversations. An evaluation showed that mothers who completed the PCIT course had better parenting skills compared to mothers who completed a non-PCIT class. However, mothers who completed the PCIT course knew less about child development than those in the standard parenting class.³⁴

The second course was a 15-session program that taught incarcerated mothers emotion regulation and emotion coaching skills in preparation for their release. An evaluation, which included a follow-up six months after the mothers were released, found that, compared to a control group, participation reduced mothers' criminal behavior; improved their emotion regulation, depressive and mental health symptoms; and improved their ability to manage and respond to their children's emotional distress.³⁵

Another approach uses video visitation. The Messages Project, for example, facilitates communication between parents and their children by having incarcerated mothers and fathers record messages for their children to watch. An evaluation of the program found that when parents were in a bad mood before making the recording, compared to when they were in a good mood, they displayed more negative emotions on the video, and caregivers (usually a relative, partner, or former partner of the incarcerated parent) reported that the children were in worse moods after viewing.³⁶ Another evaluation found that when parents displayed a positive attitude toward the caregiver, children were more likely to have a positive mood after viewing.³⁷ These displays of positive attitude seem to indicate a positive co-parenting alliance between the incarcerated parent and the caregiver. However, the study also

found that incarcerated parents' perception of their frequency of contact with children and alliance with caregivers was more positive than that reported by the caregivers themselves, indicating unclear or inadequate communication between parents that could have adverse effects on their children.

Many programs would benefit from incorporating the hands-on application of acquired skills such as communication.

Limitations to Parenting Program Evaluations

We've highlighted a number of comprehensive parenting programs with positive implications for parents and children. But these programs and their corresponding evaluations have several limitations. For example, relatively few studies randomly assigned parents to participate in a particular program or in a control group. And the programs' effectiveness has mostly been evaluated while the participants were still incarcerated or shortly after release. We need to know more about medium- and long-term outcomes to understand how these programs influence children's and parents' wellbeing.

Many programs would also benefit from incorporating the hands-on application of acquired skills such as communication. For example, though incarcerated mothers who took a general parenting class reported improved parenting attitudes (for example, increased empathy for their children), those mothers had limited contact with their children and thus few chances to practice the skills they learned.³⁸ On the evaluation side,

studies of parenting programs, especially those that measure parenting attitudes and communication, could also measure children's perceptions of their interactions with parents. That could lead to a greater understanding of how changes in parents' attitudes and communication affect children.³⁹

Other Programs for Vulnerable Children

Most evaluations of ways to help incarcerated parents and their children focus on parenting programs. But children of incarcerated parents face many adversities. Some of those problems exist even before their parents' incarceration, while others come as a direct result of incarceration. Thus children of incarcerated parents may benefit from programs related to other aspects of the family environment. We identify three additional areas of intervention (often evaluated outside the context of incarceration) that are important for reducing childhood inequalities: strengthening parental relationships, increasing economic wellbeing, and treating substance abuse.

Relationship Strengthening

Since the 1990s, US policies have aimed to increase family stability by promoting two-parent families, using educational programs and economic incentives. In fact, the Administration for Children & Families—part of the US Department of Health and Human Services—has given more than a dozen grants to programs that aim to support families both during the father's incarceration and after his release. Rigorous longitudinal evaluations by the nonprofit research organization RTI International examined several such family-strengthening programs, focusing specifically on relationships between

parents. Among the programs evaluated were a one-time weekend couples' retreat, a 12-week relationship education course, and a reentry-focused program that incorporated reentry case management from social workers and nonprofit workers on topics such as relationships, parenting, and domestic violence.

All the programs showed some positive results, though occasionally these were mixed with negative outcomes. Parents who participated in the couples' retreat reported greater stability both in their relationships and in their co-parenting. The 12-week relationship education course improved parents' communication skills and reduced the likelihood of physical abuse. More than a year after release, fathers who participated in the reentry-focused program were less likely than the comparison group to be rearrested, but couples reported less relationship stability and therefore less contact between the previously incarcerated fathers and their children.⁴⁰

Other recent interventions that seek to improve family stability include childbirth education programs such as Family Foundations, which focuses on co-parenting, parents' mental health, parent-child relationships, and infant emotional and physiological regulation. An evaluation of Family Foundations found significant positive effects on parental support, reduced maternal depression and anxiety, and better parent-child relationships.⁴¹ One review of relationship-strengthening programs and their effects on children's development found that such interventions have significant positive *indirect* consequences for children. Because marital conflict and poor parent-child relationships can negatively affect children, this finding suggests that a

family systems approach may be better than just individual therapy.⁴² Another review found that the best predictor of a father's involvement with his children was the quality of his relationship with the children's mother.⁴³ Because incarceration can strain parents' relationships and contribute to negative outcomes for their children, relationship-strengthening interventions for incarcerated parents may indirectly reduce inequalities between their children and others.

Economic Wellbeing

Economic hardship and deprivation shape early childhood development and have repercussions for wellbeing later in life.⁴⁴ Some policies to improve economic wellbeing for low-income families have been incorporated in initiatives to promote responsible fatherhood, while other policies and benefit programs target poverty more directly. Evaluations of these programs often show that increasing parents' income can improve their children's wellbeing.⁴⁵ Several studies have examined the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a refundable tax credit for workers with low to moderate income. Using 1986–2000 data from the children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79 Children and Young Adults), one such study found that an increase of \$1,000 in annual family income, including money provided by the EITC, was associated with an increase in combined math and reading test scores in the short term. It brought the largest gains to children from disadvantaged families, younger children, and boys. One advantage of this study was that its methodology allowed it to measure the short-term effects of increased income on test scores, linking test score improvement to schedules for

EITC payment increases. Because a parent's transition to and from jail or prison often puts immediate and short-term strain on family finances, these findings suggest that an income boost may be especially helpful for children in such families.⁴⁶

Evaluations of other ways to increase family income, such as tribal casino payments for households with at least one Native American parent, show that boosts in household income are correlated with long-term increases in educational attainment when children reach young adulthood, and with decreases in minor criminal offenses. Findings from the Great Smoky Mountains Study of Youth, a longitudinal study that includes both Native American and non-Native American children in rural North Carolina, suggest that improved educational attainment and reduced criminal behavior outcomes for children in households that received tribal casino payments likely stemmed from improved parenting brought about by reduced household stress.⁴⁷ As we said above, the hardship and deprivation experienced by many children of incarcerated parents is one factor that contributes to the inequalities between such children and others; improving their economic security may help mitigate some of these disparities.

Substance Abuse Treatment

Many children of parents who have substance abuse disorders also experience parental incarceration, but few programs that target parental substance abuse have been rigorously evaluated. The research conducted so far has found that for child wellbeing, the most effective parental substance abuse programs target parenting practices and family functioning; also,

long-term programs are more effective than shorter ones.⁴⁸ One study examined the long-term outcomes of Focus on Families, a program for parents in methadone treatment and their children. Boys who participated in the program were less likely to develop a substance abuse disorder later in life, but no such effect was shown for girls.⁴⁹ Another study evaluated how therapy for men receiving outpatient substance abuse treatment (both individually and with their partners) affected their children's psychosocial functioning. Compared to other tested approaches, behavioral couples therapy—which seeks to improve relationships and change behaviors that lead to substance abuse—led to the greatest improvements in children's psychosocial functioning, fathers' substance use, and couples' satisfaction with their relationships.⁵⁰

These findings suggest that when substance abuse treatment programs for parents incorporate dimensions of parental wellbeing, such as relationship-strengthening and parenting practices, they can help improve outcomes for children. However, we need further rigorous evaluations of such programs.

Conclusions

The rise in incarceration rates in recent decades, especially among racial/ethnic minorities and the poor, has made parental incarceration a common event for already marginalized children. The trauma and stigma involved, as well as the economic and relationship strains faced by family members, often lead to harmful outcomes for children across the domains of behavior, education, health, and hardship and deprivation. Parenting programs during incarceration often focus on improving

general parenting knowledge, parenting attitudes, communication, and self-esteem. Other interventions target different factors that affect children exposed to parental incarceration, such as relationship strain, economic wellbeing, and substance abuse. Yet despite the many interventions that seek to improve the wellbeing of children from fragile families, we need more-comprehensive programs and rigorous evaluations to better understand how to help these children. We also need to develop and rigorously evaluate school- and community-based programs.

Future interventions should learn from the research on outcomes for children of incarcerated parents and aim to ameliorate social problems that occur before, during, and after incarceration. In addition, parenting programs to help incarcerated parents shouldn't operate as if in a vacuum. These programs need to tackle some of the most prominent factors that affect child wellbeing both during and after incarceration: relationships, co-parenting, economic hardship, and substance abuse. Because fathers' incarceration is consistently associated with deleterious outcomes for children, interventions should aim to include fathers. And they should also address the challenges associated with a parent's reentry after incarceration and undergo evaluation in the reentry period.

Future interventions should aim to ameliorate social problems that occur before, during, and after incarceration.

Finally, to thoroughly assess the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration and the effectiveness of interventions, we need to ensure that the data we use is well suited to the evaluation. For example, administrative data may help overcome some of the limitations of surveys, which can be affected by social desirability bias and attrition. Administrative data may also offer more complete information about incarcerated parents' contact with various services (such as government financial assistance and child protective services). And because administrative data covers entire populations, it may help us evaluate how children in rural areas are affected by parental incarceration, compared to children in urban areas for whom survey data is more likely available.⁵¹ We also need more long-term data. Following up with participants over time would tell us more about interventions' impacts as children grow older and become adults. Promising programs that are found to mitigate parental incarceration's harmful consequences should be scaled up to reach a wider population.

Endnotes

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