



Children of Imprisoned Parents – Unintended Casualties of the Prison Boom

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Over the past forty years, the United States has sent extraordinary numbers of people to prison – including a disproportionate number of underprivileged young black men. Researchers have documented the ways in which U.S. imprisonment trends surpass levels in other advanced nations, and they have explored many of the economic, educational, and political effects on ex-prisoners and their communities. The ways in which imprisonment increases inequalities among groups of adult men have been thoroughly analyzed. But the devastating effects suffered by the children of the imprisoned are arguably even greater, and those costly effects serve to perpetuate and deepen economic and – especially – racial inequalities in the United States.

America's late twentieth-century prison boom transformed parental imprisonment from an event affecting only the unluckiest of children – those whose parents committed very serious crimes – into an event that is disturbingly common, especially for black children. Even for children who face problems and risks for other reasons, paternal incarceration makes a bad situation worse – leading to additional mental health and behavioral problems, increased chances of going homeless, and serious health risks, including higher rates of mortality. Parental imprisonment functions alongside a decaying public education system and concentrated economic disadvantages to deliver severe blows to life chances for poor black children.

Black Children are Much More Likely to Have a Father Incarcerated

The increased risk of paternal imprisonment as a result of the prison boom is almost entirely borne by black children.

- Today, black children in America are more likely to have their father imprisoned at some point prior to their *first* birthdays than white children are to have their father imprisoned at some point before their *fourteenth* birthdays.
- For all children, lower class position heightens the risk that parents will be incarcerated, but large racial differences remain even among children in the same class position. For example, the risk of paternal imprisonment by age fourteen for children of high school dropouts born in 1990 is much larger for black than white children. Just over fifty percent of black children of dropouts experience parental imprisonment, compared to only 7.2 percent of white children of dropouts.

Paternal Imprisonment is Usually Harmful for Children

Most people who end up in prison have had serious problems and disadvantages – they may be impulsive, struggle with serious alcohol and drug problems, and are more likely to be unemployed, homeless, and living in poverty. Some might suppose that imprisoning such parents would, on balance, help their children avoid risks. But research reveals, on average, paternal imprisonment causes extra harm to children.

- The effect of paternal imprisonment is usually harmful because the pool of inmates today has expanded far beyond the most violent or doggedly persistent offenders. Consequently, contemporary U.S. prisons house not only terrible parents, but also many who are simply inconsistent or irresponsible. Many offenders with children still care about them and can make net positive contributions to the wellbeing of their offspring.
- Parental imprisonment also creates a cascade of difficulties for the caregivers left behind. The harm is not limited to the weakened ties suffered by children who had good relationships with fathers prior to their imprisonment. Mothers, grandparents, or other caregivers have to cope with stigma, greater household instability and financial problems, and a variety of other new or heightened stresses.

Parental Imprisonment Helps Explain Racial Gaps for Children

Too little attention has been paid to the ways in which parental imprisonment accounts for a significant portion of well-documented racial differences in child wellbeing. Our research helps to pinpoint how much the racial gap in parental imprisonment contributes to overall differences in life experiences for black and white children in the United States.

- Paternal incarceration increases gaps between black and white children across a host of important outcomes. For example, different rates of parental incarceration raise racial gaps in behavioral problems by 46 percent; increase racial differences in aggressive behaviors by 24 percent; and increase racial gaps in homelessness affecting children by a staggering 65 percent. Parental imprisonment also makes blacks more susceptible to infant mortality.
- The increased difficulties suffered by children of imprisoned parents are far from temporary. Mental health and behavioral problems during childhood are some of the most important predictors of future difficulties – leading in adolescence and adulthood to educational shortfalls and difficulties finding and holding good jobs. The children of prisoners are more likely to get involved in crime themselves and have trouble forming stable families of their own. Homelessness during childhood makes recovery from other kinds of disadvantages especially difficult.

The Worst May Lay Ahead

In the last few years, many U.S. jurisdictions have shown signs of backing off from sending so many people to prison. Reformers are looking for alternatives for offenders who commit less serious and nonviolent crimes. But even if future incarceration rates are reduced dramatically across the United States, the consequences are yet to be fully revealed. A lost generation of children severely harmed by parental imprisonment is now coming of age, and the difficulties they face are sure to hamper families, communities, and the entire nation for years to come. To limit future social ills, the special challenges faced by the children of America's prison boom must be recognized and addressed as soon as possible.

Read more in Sara Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman, *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 2013).