



The Effects of Incarcerated Parents on School-Aged Children

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Why is this so IMPORTANT?

Having an incarcerated parent can have a detrimental effect on a school-aged child. Parent incarceration can lead to behavior problems at home and at school, negative parental relationships, frequent school absences, academic difficulties, decline in the child's overall health, and a negative relationship with a caregiver. The caregiver may be the mother, father, grandparents, aunts or uncles and they play a major role in a child's life when they have an incarcerated parent. Children experience hardships not only during the incarceration, but when the parent returns home too. Depending on the length of separation, the child and parent may have a difficult time reuniting. If a child experiences or witnesses their parent engaging in criminal activity or witness their arrest, the child's problems, such as anxiety, could begin even before the incarceration.

Behavioral Problems

There are factors in the home that contribute to a child's mental and physical health and their aggressive behaviors. Through paternal and maternal interviews over a span of years, information gathered from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, Wildeman (2010), was able to conclude the following: the relationship between a father's incarceration and boys' physical aggression is strong; however, there is not a strong association between a father's incarceration and girls' physical aggression. Wildeman also found that changes in family life other than a father's absence do not intervene between paternal incarceration and boys' aggression.

Wildeman, C. (2010). Paternal incarceration and children's physically aggressive behaviors: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. *Social Forces*, 89(1), 285-310.



Children's Risk:

A child witnessing their parent's criminal activity, arrest and sentencing can have lasting effects on the child. Dallaire and Wilson (2010) found that 37% of the parents conveyed that their child witnessed them partake in criminal activity, 26% reported the child witnessed the arrest, and 11% stated the child witnessed their sentencing. It was quite surprising to read that 26% of the parents said that their child witnessed their arrest. That is something that the child will probably never forget because they witnessed their own parent being arrested by police. Some parents went on to report that their child didn't know or realize that their parents were a part of illegal activity and that a few children had seen criminal activity and more. Parents reported that as their child was witnessing this, they seemed to have a look of panic and confusion because they didn't understand what was happening or what would happen as a result of what they were witnessing.

Dallaire, D. H., & Wilson, L. C. (2010). The relation of exposure to parental criminal activity, arrest, and sentencing to children's maladjustment. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 19(4), 404-418.

Family Environment:

*Key findings from article:

Independent of other social and economic characteristics, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to:

- ~drop out of school
 - ~develop learning disabilities, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
 - ~misbehave in school
 - ~suffer from migraines, asthma, high cholesterol, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and homelessness
- *Each of these conditions presents a challenge to student performance.

Report • By Leila Morsy and Richard Rothstein • December 15, (n.d.). Mass incarceration and children's outcomes: Criminal justice policy is education policy. Retrieved February 19, 2021, from <https://www.epi.org/publication/mass-incarceration-and-childrens-outcomes/>

