



Father Reentry and Child Outcomes

Terry-Ann Craigie
CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Eleanor Pratt
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Marla McDaniel
URBAN INSTITUTE

November 2018

The number of US children facing the prospect of having a parent in prison or in jail at some point during their childhood is growing.¹ More than half the incarcerated population in prisons is parents with children under the age of 18 (Glaze and Maruschak 2010). More than 2.7 million children have an incarcerated parent, and many more have experienced a parent's incarceration at some point.² Research finds that parental incarceration negatively affects children's physical, mental, and emotional health.³ One might presume that child outcomes improve when a parent returns from incarceration, but the evidence shows that reentry can be difficult for parents and their children.

In this brief, we use the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to explore children's behaviors when a father is incarcerated and when he has been released, and we compare those outcomes with those of children whose fathers have never been incarcerated.⁴ We seek to understand if the negative child outcomes from parental incarceration persist even after parents return home.

We also examine these differences by gender and race and ethnicity. Incarceration rates vary greatly by race, with black men almost six times more likely to be imprisoned than white men (Carson 2018). In fact, incarceration is such a prevalent experience in the lives of black men that some scholars have begun describing incarceration as an increasingly routine "life-course event."⁵ Black children are disproportionately impacted by parental incarceration, making up nearly half of all children with a father in prison (Craigie 2011; Glaze and Maruschak 2010). Because of restricted sample sizes, we could not analyze race, ethnicity, and gender at the same time. So, while we could compare boys to girls and

could compare children of black, Hispanic, and white fathers to each other, we could not compare boys and girls by race and ethnicity.

Our analyses show that boys whose fathers are serving time in prison or jail exhibit more frequent behavioral problems than boys whose fathers have not been incarcerated. Children of incarcerated black and Hispanic fathers also exhibit more frequent behavioral problems than the children of black and Hispanic fathers who have never been incarcerated. We do not see similar effects of incarceration on children of incarcerated white fathers compared with children of white fathers who have never been incarcerated. After a father leaves jail or prison, the adverse impacts of incarceration on behavior persist for boys (but not girls) and for black and Hispanic children.

Literature Review

Children are highly susceptible to negative experiences as they grow up. Traumatic experiences, like the incarceration of a parent, can have critical impacts on child well-being. While children can be resilient, they can also experience great harm under adverse circumstances. And though children might not always verbalize their stress, their behavior even as toddlers can indicate potential future psychological difficulties (Dodge and Pettit 2003; Shaw and Gross 2008).

Research confirms that family dynamics and structure, as well as parents' levels of education, access to steady employment and income, and health, can influence what psychologists refer to as *externalizing and internalizing behaviors* in children (Edwards and Hans 2015; Vilsaint et al. 2013). Children with externalizing behavioral problems might misbehave at home, school, or child care by fighting or screaming. Children with internalizing behavioral problems might refuse to speak, sulk often, lack energy, or be timid and self-conscious. See box 1 below for definitions of these types of behavior. These behaviors might indicate challenges with emotion management and self-regulation, which can have long-term impacts on children's success as adults (Murray et al. 2015; Shonkoff 2016).

BOX 1

Definition of Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors

Externalizing behaviors: Outward displays of emotion, including aggression, defiance, and violence.

Internalizing behaviors: Introverted behaviors like sadness, withdrawal, anxiety, and depression.

Source: Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn (2010).

What Happens When a Father Is Incarcerated?

The collateral consequences—or the ongoing indirect social and civil penalties—associated with incarceration are not only numerous, but also detrimental to the person incarcerated as well as to his or

her family members. A parent's incarceration increases a family's economic strain and instability, because of lost earnings (Glaze and Maruschak 2010; Johnson 2009; Pew 2010) and increased financial needs caused by the costs associated with incarceration (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest 2003; Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011; Phillips et al. 2006; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011). Staying in contact as a family during incarceration is expensive, with high-priced phone calls, travel to distant prisons, and court costs.⁶ Further, studies find that children with incarcerated parents face an increased risk of homelessness; this is especially true for black children.⁷ Research has also found that young children might be likely to experience food insecurity after a father who had been living with them has been incarcerated (Cox and Wallace 2016; Turney 2015).

Incarceration also disrupts relationships and increases family instability. Spouses with an incarcerated partner are more likely to divorce or separate, owing to high marital stress, stigma, and geographic separation. Incarceration and subsequent relationship dissolution might impact father-child contact (La Vigne, Davies, and Brazzell 2008; Lopoo and Western 2005; Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011; Turney 2015; Turney and Wildeman 2013).

While fathers are incarcerated, mothers, coparents, or caregivers often become gatekeepers for managing father-child visits and contact, which can affect the child's opportunities to build or maintain a relationship with his or her father (Clarke et al. 2005; for a review of parent-child visiting practices, see Cramer et al. 2017 and Martin 2017). Families often have to shift child care arrangements, and children might need to be cared for by grandparents or other relatives (Travis and Waul 2003). Incarceration takes away resources from families, leaving fewer resources to provide the care children need (Hairston 2007; Turney 2014b).

The incarceration of a parent also has detrimental consequences on children's health and well-being (Foster and Hagan 2013; Martin 2017; Morsy and Rothstein 2016). It can lead to or worsen attention problems and externalizing behaviors like aggression (Craigie 2011; Geller et al. 2009, 2012; Haskins 2015; Turney 2014a; Wildeman 2010; see also Murray et al. 2009 for a review). Further, parents' incarceration is associated with increased child self-reports of antisocial behaviors (Haskins 2015). A parent's incarceration has also been linked to learning disabilities, developmental delays, and speech and language problems in children (Johnson 2009; Turney 2014a). Some studies find that effects are stronger for children whose fathers lived with them before the incarceration, but effects are still significant for children and fathers who lived apart (Geller et al. 2012). Other studies find that a father's incarceration is associated with increased physical aggression in sons but not daughters (Wildeman 2010). These impacts are also related to race, with evidence that incarceration particularly intensifies externalizing behaviors among black and Hispanic children (Craigie 2011).

When studying how a parent's incarceration affects children, researchers have focused primarily on children's outcomes during the incarceration as opposed to outcomes after the parent's release. Among studies focused on family outcomes following an individual's release, very few have examined children specifically. However, these studies suggest that formerly incarcerated individuals and their families might fare worse than previously understood.

What Happens When a Father Reenters Society?

Returning citizens face many challenges, including housing insecurity, difficulty finding and keeping employment, food insecurity, health problems, and mental health and substance abuse challenges.⁸ Even staying out of prison and meeting supervision requirements proves challenging for many. For example, in the 1980s, around 70 percent of parole terms were successfully completed, but today completion has dropped to 33 percent.⁹

When formerly incarcerated parents return home, they often struggle to find work because of job discrimination, a lack of job skills or work experience, and weakened job referral networks (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2016; Pager 2003; Pager, Western, and Sugie 2009; Western 2002; Western and Pettit 2000).¹⁰ Formerly incarcerated people also face housing insecurity caused by limited income and “one-strike” policies in public housing,¹¹ which hampers family functioning and returning parents’ ability to obtain stable employment.

Returning citizens have high rates of physical and mental health issues as well as substance abuse problems (Roman and Travis 2006; Schnittker and John 2007; Sentencing Project 2012; Wildeman and Muller 2012). More than half of parents incarcerated in state prisons are estimated to have mental health problems (Glaze and Maruschak 2010). In addition, formerly incarcerated people reenter society with hepatitis C, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS rates higher than the general population (Travis and Waul 2003). These health consequences impact not just the person formerly incarcerated, but also his or her family. Studies find that women with incarcerated family members have an increased likelihood of poor health (Lee et al. 2014; Wildeman and Muller 2012), as well as increased risk of depression and emotional distress (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest 2003; Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012).

How Does a Father’s Reentry Affect Children?

Research to date provides little information about effects on children when fathers return home, especially whether children’s poor behavioral outcomes persist after parents are released from prison or jail. To help fill this gap, this brief focuses on disentangling the effect of a father’s incarceration and release from the effects of other risk factors that might heighten the chances that children of currently and formerly incarcerated fathers exhibit behavioral problems. Using data on families living in several large, urban US cities, we set out to answer the following research questions:

- How does child behavior, both externalizing and internalizing, change when fathers are incarcerated? Do these behaviors differ from the behavior of children whose fathers have never been incarcerated?
- How does child behavior change when fathers return from prison or jail? Do these changes differ from children whose fathers have never been incarcerated?
- Does child behavior resulting from a father’s incarceration and release differ for boys and girls and for children of black, white, and Hispanic fathers?

Data, Variables, and Methods: A Brief Overview

This study uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) to address the research questions. The FFCWS samples both married and unmarried couples, but it chiefly focuses on unwed parents living in large, urban US cities. In the first year of the study (i.e., baseline), nearly 5,000 couples were sampled and interviewed shortly after the birth of their child (referred to as the *focal child* in the FFCWS). Follow-up interviews were conducted when the focal child was approximately 1, 3, 5, and 9 years old.

The FFCWS collects information on fathers, including whether they were incarcerated at the time of each interview. Because we are interested in understanding children's behaviors after a father is released from prison, we focused on comparing outcomes for three groups of children: those whose fathers were incarcerated at the time of the interview, those whose fathers had been incarcerated but were released by the time of the interview, and those whose fathers had never been incarcerated. Of the near 5,000 fathers in the FFCWS sample, 2,065 had been incarcerated at some point during or before the study. Among those 2,065 men, 589 were incarcerated at the time of at least one round of the survey,¹² and 1,821 were released from prison or jail at least once after the focal child's birth.

The FFCWS also collects information on child behaviors at ages 3, 5, and 9. Our analyses use two different scales for child externalizing and internalizing behaviors, which serve as our outcome measures (box 2). At each interview, the child's parent or caregiver (typically his or her mother) would answer questions about the child's behavior, specifying whether the actions were "(=1) not true," "(=2) sometimes true," or "(=3) often or very true."¹³

BOX 2

Externalizing and Internalizing Behavior Measures

Examples of externalizing behavior measures: Can't wait turn, can't concentrate, defiant, demanding, destroys others' things, easily frustrated, hurts animals/people without meaning to, gets in fights, hits others, angry moods, selfish/won't share, stubborn/sullen/irritable, doesn't seem to feel guilty after misbehaving

Examples of internalizing behavior measures: Clings to adults, acts too young for age, avoids eye contact, feelings hurt easily, doesn't answer when spoken to, refuses to participate in games or activities, unresponsive to affection, self-conscious or easily embarrassed, worries, cries a lot, fears doing something wrong

Finally, the FFCWS provides demographic information on children and parents (e.g., age, race, gender, education), and information on family structure, parents' health, substance use, and economic measures such as earnings, welfare participation, and employment status. As the literature explains, factors such as substance abuse or mental health problems, low earnings, and unemployment can

increase an adult's risk of crime, arrest, and incarceration; these same factors are also associated with a higher risk of behavioral problems in children.

To distinguish current and postrelease effects of paternal incarceration, the study differentiated fathers who are currently incarcerated from those who have reentered society. The study constructs binary indicators to distinguish these two groups. The current incarceration indicator equals 1 if the father is incarcerated at the time of the survey interview and 0 otherwise. The reentry or postrelease indicator equals 1 if the previously incarcerated father is out of prison or jail at the time of the survey interview and 0 otherwise. In this way, incarcerated and reentering fathers are each compared with the base group, fathers who have never been incarcerated. This regression framework allows us to compare the effects of a father's current incarceration and reentry on child behavioral problems.

A Profile of Incarcerated Fathers

Box 3 below highlights some key differences found in FFCWS between fathers who have been incarcerated and fathers who have never been incarcerated.

BOX 3

Compared with Never-Incarcerated Fathers, Incarcerated Fathers Are...

- three years older,
- 50 percent less likely to be white,
- 80 percent more likely to be a high school dropout,
- twice as likely to be single,
- 60 percent more likely to have anxious/depressive symptoms,
- likely to be alcohol or drug dependent (85 percent),
- twice as likely to be unemployed, and
- earning 50 percent less annually.

Source: Princeton University and Columbia University, "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study," 2002–2010, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

These differences between incarcerated and never-incarcerated fathers suggest that incarcerated fathers' experiences differ in ways that might also contribute to their children exhibiting more behavioral problems independent of the incarceration. We therefore control for these differences in our analyses to isolate the unique effects that incarceration and a subsequent release might have on children's outcomes.

Findings

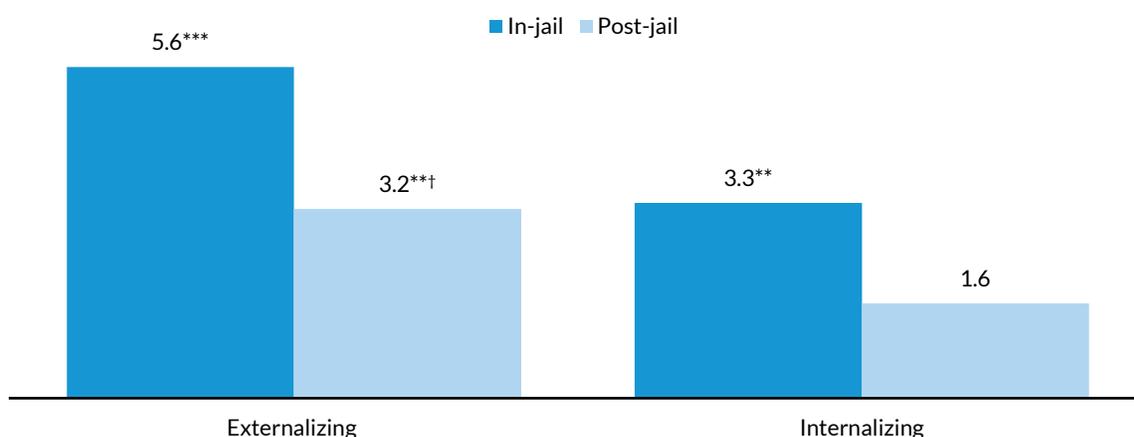
Our study answers two main research questions: (1) How does a father’s incarceration affect child behaviors? (2) How does a father’s reentry affect child behaviors? These effects are compared with children whose fathers have never been incarcerated. We use the phrase “in jail” to refer to fathers who are currently incarcerated in either jail or prison. We use the term “post jail” to refer to fathers who have been released from jail or prison.

Fathers’ Current Incarceration Has a Greater Effect on Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors in Boys than in Girls

When a father is incarcerated, we see significant effects on the externalizing and internalizing behaviors across all children in the sample (figure 1). Further analyses show that behavioral problems in boys ages 3 to 9 with an incarcerated father are significantly worse than for boys whose fathers have never been incarcerated (figure 2). We see no significant differences among girls based on a father’s incarceration. In general, when a father is incarcerated, externalizing behaviors in boys are 8.3 percent higher than in boys whose fathers have never been incarcerated.

On the other hand, externalizing behaviors among girls whose fathers are incarcerated do not differ significantly from behaviors among girls whose fathers have never been incarcerated. Internalizing behaviors follow similar gender patterns. Internalizing behaviors among boys increase by 5.3 percent when a father is currently incarcerated; in contrast, internalizing behaviors in girls do not change significantly.

FIGURE 1
In-Jail and Post-Jail Effects on Child Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors
Percent



Source: Princeton University and Columbia University, “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study,” 2002–2010, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

Notes: Results are adjusted for selection. *In-jail* and *post-jail* refer to experiences in either prison or jail.

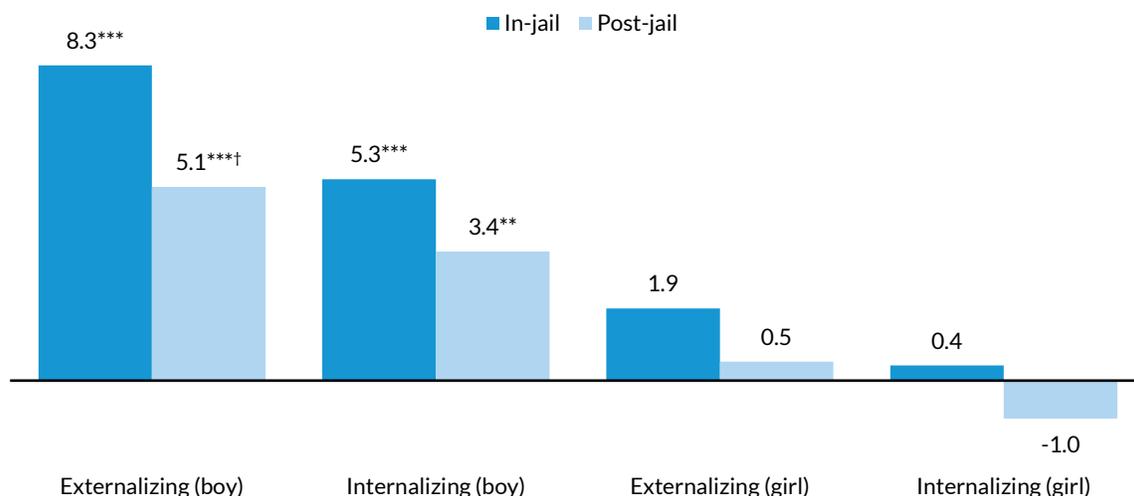
/ Difference between children whose fathers are or were incarcerated and children whose fathers have never been incarcerated is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05/0.01$ level.

† Difference between in-jail and post-jail coefficients is statistically significant at the $p < 0.10$ level.

FIGURE 2

In-Jail and Post-Jail Effects on Child Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors by Gender

Percent



Source: Princeton University and Columbia University, “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study,” 2002–2010, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

Notes: Results are adjusted for selection. *In-jail* and *post-jail* refer to experiences in either prison or jail.

/ Difference between children whose fathers are or were incarcerated and children whose fathers have never been incarcerated is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05/0.01$ level.

† Difference between in-jail and post-jail coefficients is statistically significant at the $p < 0.10$ level.

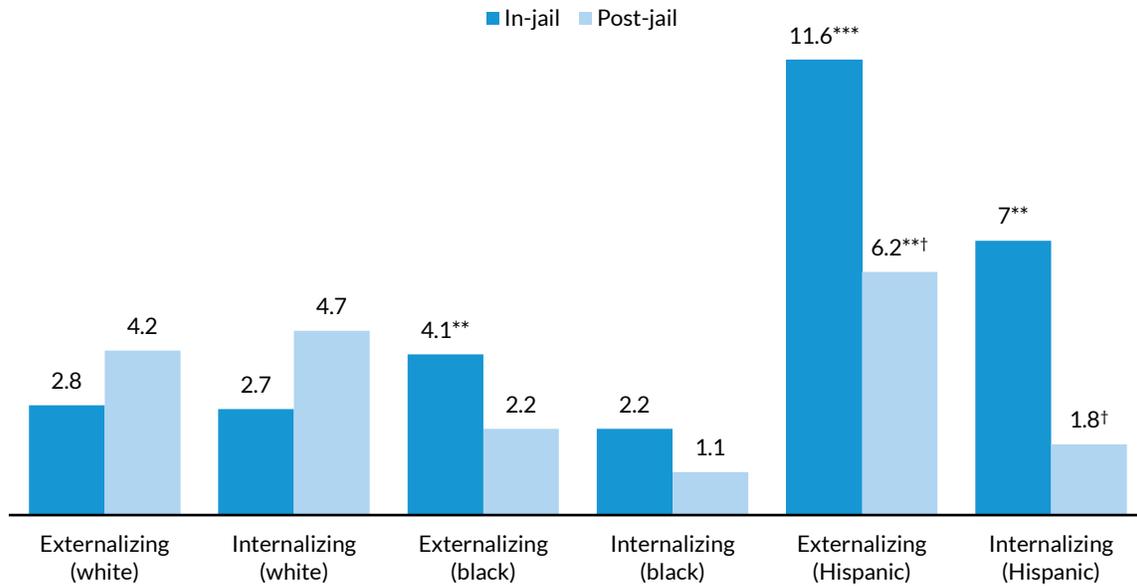
Black and Hispanic Fathers’ Incarceration Affects Their Children’s Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors

Criminal justice involvement varies by race and ethnicity. Blacks and Hispanics are almost 60 percent of the justice-involved population, despite accounting for less than 30 percent of the general population.¹⁴ One in 4 black men will be incarcerated in their lifetime compared with 1 in 6 Hispanic men and 1 in 17 white men. Since incarceration experiences and outcomes vary by race and ethnicity, children’s outcomes might as well.¹⁵ We examine how children are affected and whether the father’s race and ethnicity makes a difference.

To evaluate the differences, we compare outcomes for children of black, white, and Hispanic fathers. Figure 3 shows that the link between incarceration and children’s behaviors differs substantially by race and ethnicity. Children of white fathers do not show significant changes in externalizing or internalizing behaviors in response to paternal incarceration, compared with children of white fathers who have never been incarcerated. On the other hand, black and Hispanic children have higher externalizing behaviors by 4.1 percent and 11.6 percent, respectively, than children of black and Hispanic fathers who have never been incarcerated. In addition, Hispanic children have higher internalizing behaviors by 7.0 percent than their peers with fathers who have never been incarcerated.

FIGURE 3

In-Jail and Post-Jail Effects on Child Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors by Race and Ethnicity
Percent



Source: Princeton University and Columbia University, “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study,” 2002–2010, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

Notes: Results are adjusted for selection. *In-jail* and *post-jail* refer to experiences in either prison or jail.

/ Difference between children whose fathers are or were incarcerated and children whose fathers have never been incarcerated is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05/0.01$ level.

† Difference between in-jail and post-jail coefficients is statistically significant at the $p < 0.10$ level.

A Father’s Reentry Influences Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors in Boys but Not in Girls

While a father’s current incarceration has been shown to exacerbate behavioral problems in children, what happens after reentry is not as clear. Are the adverse effects of incarceration constrained to the time fathers spend in prison or jail? Or do they persist after reentry?

In general, reentry does not appear to pause the adverse consequences of incarceration on boys’ externalizing behaviors. Figure 2 shows that in response to a father’s reentry, externalizing behaviors in boys are higher by 5.1 percent than in boys whose fathers have never been incarcerated. This effect is, however, smaller than and statistically different from the current incarceration effect of 8.3 percent. Boys also display more internalizing problems upon reentry by 3.4 percent. Girls do not change externalizing or internalizing behaviors upon a father’s reentry.

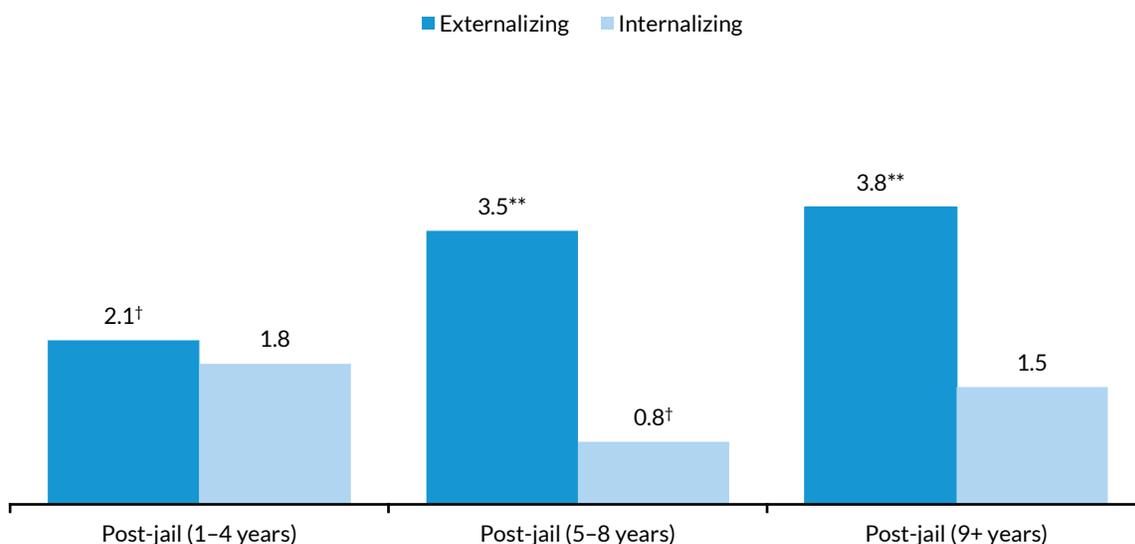
Hispanic Fathers' Reentry Has an Effect on Externalizing Behaviors in Their Children

Figure 3 shows that in response to fathers' reentry, children of Hispanic fathers show more externalizing behaviors by 6.2 percent compared with children of Hispanic fathers who have never been incarcerated. This effect is significantly smaller than the effect that current incarceration has on the children's externalizing behaviors (11.6 percent higher than for children of Hispanic fathers who were never incarcerated). Reentry effects are not significant for internalizing behaviors among children with Hispanic fathers. Moreover, reentry does not have significantly different effects on externalizing and internalizing behaviors among black and white fathers' children.

Reentry Continues to Influence Children's Externalizing Behaviors Years after a Father's Release

How long do the effects of a father's reentry last? Figure 4 illustrates that these effects might persist for several years and increase over time. For fathers who have been released for five to eight years, child externalizing effects are 3.5 percent higher relative to children whose fathers have never served time. Even when fathers have been out of jail or prison for nine or more years, their children continue to exhibit significantly higher externalizing behaviors by 3.8 percent. Child internalizing behaviors are not similarly influenced over time by a father's release.¹⁶

FIGURE 4
Post-Jail Effects on Child Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors over Time



Source: Princeton University and Columbia University, "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study," 2002–2010, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

Notes: Results are adjusted for selection. *In-jail* and *post-jail* refer to experiences in either prison or jail.

****** Difference between children whose fathers are or were incarcerated and children whose fathers have never been incarcerated is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

† Difference between in-jail and post-jail coefficients is statistically significant at the $p < 0.10$ level.

In summary, children continue to show externalizing behaviors even after their father is released. This is especially true among boys and Hispanic children in our study. While these effects persist, they are not as large as the effects of current incarceration.

Discussion and Policy Implications

We find that a father's incarceration contributes to more frequent externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems in sons, independent of other factors such as family financial circumstances and parents' substance use or mental and physical health. We have also found that children of black and Hispanic fathers show statistically significant increases in externalizing and internalizing behaviors tied to incarceration, a relationship that is not statistically significant for children of white fathers. Additionally, behavioral problems persist in sons and among children of Hispanic fathers even after their father has been released.

Based on these findings, we present below considerations for policy, practice, and research. We contextualize our findings in the existing research to help explain why incarceration and release might affect children's behaviors; why we see different outcomes by race, ethnicity, and gender; and what program and policy responses might hold promise for reducing these negative effects on children.

What Is the Potential Link between Incarceration and Child Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors?

Research suggests that a parent's incarceration might have negative consequences for children socioeconomically, psychologically, on health and well-being, particularly through the exposure to stress and trauma (Morsy and Rothstein 2016). Our findings further support that paternal incarceration might increase children's outward behavioral problems—emotional displays, aggressiveness, or defiance—or inward behavioral problems—sadness, withdrawal, or anxiety and depression. Even after considering socioeconomic factors, we see a father's incarceration and release as strongly linked with problematic behaviors in children, suggesting that the loss of economic and other material supports is not the only reason for the outcomes. Researchers and child advocates point to additional contributors to poor child behavior, including changes in the household structure and changes in caregiving arrangements (Rodriguez 2016; Wakefield, Lee, and Wildeman 2016). The mere experience of having a father in jail or prison can be stressful and upsetting—for example, separating from a parent, sometimes receiving little or no information about what happened, visiting jails and prisons, and potentially feeling ashamed or embarrassed.¹⁷

What Might Explain the Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Differences in How a Father's Incarceration Affects His Children?

Research has not concluded why some children experience certain outcomes from paternal incarceration while others do not. Many studies examine child outcomes by race and by gender but are unable to explain *why* research finds these differences.

Incarceration is not random—it is an experience disproportionately concentrated in communities of color and communities of concentrated disadvantage (La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Visher and Courtney 2007; Visher, Yahner, and La Vigne 2010; Visher et al. 2004). Mass incarceration is a community-level phenomenon that has spillover effects for all residents (Haskins and Lee 2016). Perhaps the “double jeopardy hypothesis” (Dowd and Bengtson 1978) explains the racial and ethnic differences we observed in this study. The hypothesis suggests that those who experience multiple marginalized statuses might experience increased negative outcomes. For example, a black child would be affected by both systemic racism and having an incarcerated parent. Children facing multiple hostile conditions might have a harder time coping with a parents’ incarceration (Martin 2017).

When considering the gender differences in child outcomes, the broader literature suggests that boys are more vulnerable to disruption than girls (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2002). Some suggest that cultural expectations placed on boys emphasize “toughness” and discourage emotional expression. Boys are also more likely to lose the parent of the same gender (La Vigne et al. 2008). Other research suggests a father’s incarceration affects aggressive behavior in boys more than in girls because fathers are more involved with their sons than with their daughters (Geller et al. 2012).

Even among boys, studies have found that aggressive behaviors vary depending on other factors. For example, boys who experience paternal incarceration for the first time might experience increased aggression that diminishes when the father returns. But boys who have experienced paternal incarceration multiple times experience heightened aggression that does not diminish when their father returns (Wildeman 2010). In addition, boys with fathers who were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses in one study (Wildeman 2010) were more aggressive than those with fathers incarcerated for violent offenses. Similarly, boys who were aggressive before their father’s incarceration were most likely to show increased aggression (Dyer 2009). Studies suggest that factors like children’s prior relationship with their father matters for understanding their experiences during and after their father’s incarceration.

Research has a hard time disentangling why we see the differences in outcomes between boys and girls and between black, Hispanic, and white children. But to understand and to address the challenges facing children with incarcerated and returning parents, we need to continue examining racial and ethnic and gender differences.¹⁸

What Program and Policy Responses Might Combat the Effects on Children?

A substantial body of literature focuses on returning citizens’ need for family and community support. Research evaluating reentry programs often finds that family support is critical for a returning citizen’s well-being (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Visher and Courtney 2007; Visher et al. 2004). Formerly incarcerated people who are married are less likely to recidivate and more likely to find employment (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; Visher et al. 2009). The literature also shows a “feedback loop” whereby mass incarceration affects a community’s social and economic well-being, and it weakens the community’s ability to support the reintegration of returning citizens (Morenoff and Harding 2014).

Emerging research on programs serving incarcerated parents and their children suggests that promoting and improving family relationships and parenting skills during incarceration can help returning fathers and their children (Fontaine, Cramer, and Paddock 2017; Lindquist et al. 2016; Meyerson and Otteson 2009). A study of six fatherhood reentry programs around the country found that programs operating both in prisons and in the community after release could offer comprehensive services to meet the shifting needs of fathers and children (Fontaine, Cramer, and Paddock 2017). While incarcerated, fathers benefited from a range of parenting activities, including classes, father support groups, and coached communication with their children, like video diaries and phone calls. Programs also worked to establish strong relationships with correctional staff to facilitate family contact visits and make prison settings more family friendly. These programs also prioritized fathers' economic stability, recognizing that fathers with stable housing, employment, and reasonable child support orders could focus more time and energy on their children. Other studies show that prerelease planning and wraparound support services post release could ease the transition for returning parents and their families (Lindquist et al. 2016; Meyerson and Otteson 2009; Morsy and Rothstein 2016).

Researchers and advocates also recognize that complex and fluid family dynamics contribute to families' experiences, risks, and outcomes (Rodriguez 2016). Some emphasize that policymakers should consider children's needs and relationships with the incarcerated parent before making universal policies (Martin 2017).

Our study contributes to emerging research on how incarceration harms those who are incarcerated and their children, even after the incarceration experience. Like much research on incarceration and child outcomes, we find that paternal incarceration and reentry negatively affect boys, and black and Hispanic children in particular. We encourage more research on how parental incarceration affects children and how the effects might persist; this research could further help policymakers and program developers design better services for returning citizens and their children. Our findings also raise concern about long-term developmental impacts on children and whether the current sentencing policies contributing to mass incarceration sufficiently consider the full costs and consequences, including disproportionate harm by race or ethnicity, on children, families, and society.

Notes

- ¹ Katie Reilly, “Sesame Street Reaches Out to 2.7 Million American Children with an Incarcerated Parent,” *FactTank* (blog), Pew Research Center, June 21, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/21/sesame-street-reaches-out-to-2-7-million-american-children-with-an-incarcerated-parent/>.
- ² Reilly, “Sesame Street Reaches Out.”
- ³ See Cho (2010); Craigie (2011); Geller et al. (2009, 2012); Haskins (2015); Murray and Farrington (2005); Murray, Janson, and Farrington (2007); Turney (2014a); Wildeman (2010); and Wildeman and Turney (2014).
- ⁴ “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS),” Princeton University and Columbia University, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.
- ⁵ See Pettit and Western (2004), Wakefield and Uggen (2010), and Western 2002. See also Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” *The Atlantic*, October 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>.
- ⁶ See Hairston (2007) and Coates, “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration.”
- ⁷ See “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS),” <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/> and Wildeman (2014).
- ⁸ On housing insecurity, see Fontaine and Beiss (2012), Geller and Curtis (2011), and Lipsitz (2012). On difficulty finding and keeping employment, see Bushway, Stoll, and Weiman (2007), Freeman (1992), La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus (2009), La Vigne, Visher, and Castro (2004), Pager, Western, and Sugie (2009), Raphael (2014), Visher and Courtney (2007), Visher, Yahner, and La Vigne (2010), Waldfogel (1994), Western (2002), and Western and Pettit (2000). On health problems, see Travis and Waul (2003). On mental health and substance abuse challenges, see Roman and Travis (2006).
- ⁹ Coates, “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” See also Visher, Yahner, and La Vigne (2010) and Yahner, Solomon, and Visher (2008).
- ¹⁰ See also Terry-Ann Craigie, “Ban the Box, Convictions, and Public Employment,” unpublished manuscript, 2017.
- ¹¹ On housing insecurity caused by limited income, see Fontaine and Beiss (2012), Geller and Curtis (2011), and Lipsitz (2012). On “one-strike” policies in public housing, see Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016) and Geller and Curtis (2011).
- ¹² We refer to these fathers as *currently incarcerated*.
- ¹³ For additional details on variables, sample size, and reliability of the measures, see appendix A online.
- ¹⁴ Leah Sakala, “Breaking Down Mass Incarceration in the 2010 Census: State-by-State Incarceration Rates by Race/Ethnicity,” Prison Policy Initiative, May 28, 2014, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/rates.html>.
- ¹⁵ As noted above, the study does not look at race, ethnicity, and gender simultaneously because sample sizes are insufficient.
- ¹⁶ The study does not show effects over time by race, ethnicity, and gender because the sample sizes are insufficient to make inferences.
- ¹⁷ See Bilchik (2007) for a review of research.
- ¹⁸ See Haskins and Lee (2016) for discussion on examining race and mass incarceration.

References

- Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2016. "A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities." Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- Arditti, Joyce, Jennifer Lambert-Shute, and Karen Joest. 2003. "Saturday Morning at the Jail: Implications of Incarceration for Families and Children." *Family Relations* 52 (3): 195–204.
- Bilchik, Shay. 2007. "Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners." *Research in Action* 10:3–27.
- Bushway, Shawn, Michael A. Stoll, and David F. Weiman, eds. 2007. *Barriers to Reentry? The Labor Market for Released Prisoners in Post-Industrial America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Carson, E. Ann. 2018. "Prisoners in 2016." NCJ 251149. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Cho, Rosa. 2010. "Maternal Incarceration and Children's Adolescent Outcomes: Timing versus Dosage." *Social Service Review* 84:257–82.
- Clarke, Lynda, Margaret O'Brien, Randall Day, Hugo Godwin, Jo Connolly, Joanne Hemmings, and Terri Van Leeson. 2005. "Fathering behind Bars in English Prisons: Imprisoned Fathers' Identity and Contact with Their Children." *Fathering* 3 (3): 221–41.
- Cox, Robynn, and Sally Wallace. 2016. "Identifying the Link Between Food Security and Incarceration." *Southern Economic Journal* 82 (4): 1062–77.
- Craigie, Terry-Ann L. 2011. "The Effect of Paternal Incarceration on Early Child Behavioral Problems: A Racial Comparison." *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice* 9:179–99.
- Cramer, Lindsey, Margaret Goff, Bryce Peterson, and Heather Sandstrom. 2017. "Parent-Child Visiting Practices in Prisons and Jails." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Dodge, Kenneth A., and Gregory S. Pettit. 2003. "A Biopsychosocial Model of the Development of Chronic Conduct Problems in Adolescence." *Developmental Psychology* 39:349–71.
- Dowd, James J., and Vern L. Bengtson. 1978. "Aging in Minority Populations: An Examination of the Double Jeopardy Hypothesis." *Journal of Gerontology* 33 (3): 427–36.
- Dyer, William. 2009. "Investigating the Various Ways Parental Incarceration Affects Children: An Application of Mixture Regression." Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Edwards, Renee, and Sydney Hans. 2015. "Infant Risk Factors Associated with Internalizing, Externalizing, and Co-occurring Behavior Problems in Young Children." *Developmental Psychology* 51 (4): 489–99.
- Fontaine, Jocelyn, and Jennifer Beiss. 2012. "Housing as a Platform for Formerly Incarcerated Persons." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Fontaine, Jocelyn, Lindsey Cramer, and Ellen Paddock. 2017. "Encouraging Responsible Parenting among Fathers with Histories of Incarceration." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Foster, Holly, and John Hagan. 2013. "Maternal and Paternal Imprisonment in the Stress Process." *Social Science Research* 42 (3): 650–69.
- Freeman, Richard B. 1992. "Crime and the Employment of Disadvantaged Youths." In *Urban Labor Markets and Job Opportunity*, edited by George E. Peterson and Wayne Vroman, 201–38. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Geller, Amanda, Carey Cooper, Irwin Garfinkel, Ofira Schwartz-Soicher, and Ronald Mincy. 2012. "Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development." *Demography* 49 (1): 49–76.
- Geller, Amanda, and M. A. Curtis. 2011. "A Sort of Homecoming: Incarceration and the Housing Security of Urban Men." *Social Science Research* 40 (4): 1196–1213. doi: [10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.03.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.03.008).
- Geller, Amanda, Irwin Garfinkel, Carey E. Cooper, and Ronald B. Mincy. 2009. "Parental Incarceration and Child Well-Being: Implications for Urban Families." *Social Science Quarterly* 90 (5): 1186–1202.

- Geller, Amanda, Irwin Garfinkel, and Bruce Western. 2011. "Paternal Incarceration and Support for Children in Fragile Families." *Demography* 48:25–47.
- Glaze, Lauren, and Laura Maruschak. 2010. "Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children." NCJ 222984. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Hairston, Creasie. 2007. "Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents: An Overview of the Research Literature." Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- Haskins, Anna. 2015. "Paternal Incarceration and Child-Reported Behavioral Functioning at Age 9." *Social Science Research* 52:18–23.
- Haskins, Anna, and Hedwig Lee. 2016. "Reexamining Race when Studying the Consequences of Criminal Justice Contact for Families." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 665:224–30.
- Johnson, Rucker. 2009. "Ever-Increasing Levels of Parental Incarceration and the Consequences for Children." In *Do Prisons Make Us Safer? The Benefits and Costs of the Prison Boom*, edited by Steven Raphael and Michael Stoll, 177–206. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- La Vigne, Nancy G., Elizabeth Davies, and Diana Brazzell. 2008. "[Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents.](#)" Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- La Vigne, Nancy G., Tracey L. Shollenberger, and Sara A. Debus. 2009. "[One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas.](#)" Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- La Vigne, Nancy G., Christy Visser, and Jennifer Castro. 2004. "[Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home.](#)" Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Lee, Hedwig, Christopher Wildeman, Emily Wang, Niki Matusko, and James Jackson. 2014. "A Heavy Burden: The Cardiovascular Health Consequences of Having a Family Member Incarcerated." *American Journal of Public Health* 104 (3): 421–27.
- Lindquist, Christine, Danielle Steffey, Stephen Tueller, Tasseli McKay, Anupa Bir, Rose Feinberg, and Derek Ramirez. 2016. *Multi-Site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting, and Partnering: Program Impacts Technical Report*. Durham, NC: RTI International.
- Lipsitz, George. 2012. "In an Avalanche Every Snowflake Pleads Not Guilty: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Incarceration and Impediments to Women's Fair Housing Rights." *UCLA Law Review* 59 (6): 1746–809.
- Lopoo, Leonard M., and Bruce Western. 2005. "Incarceration and the Formation and Stability of Marital Unions." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:721–34.
- Martin, Eric. 2017. "Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children." *NIJ Journal* 278. <https://nij.gov/journals/278/Pages/impact-of-incarceration-on-dependent-children.aspx>.
- Massoglia, Michael, Brianna Remster, and Ryan D. King. 2011. "Stigma or Separation? Understanding the Incarceration-Divorce Relationship." *Social Forces* 90 (1): 133–56.
- Meyerson, Jessica, and Christa Otteson. 2009. *Strengthening Families Impacted by Incarceration: A Review of Current Research and Practice*. Saint Paul, MN: Wilder Research.
- Morenoff, Jeffrey, and David Harding. 2014. "Incarceration, Prisoner Reentry, and Communities." *Annual Review of Sociology* 40:411–29.
- Morsy, Leila, and Richard Rothstein. 2016. "Mass Incarceration and Children's Outcomes." Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- Murray, Desiree W., Katie Rosanbalm, Christina Christopoulos, and Amar Hamoudi. 2015. "Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: Foundations for Understanding Self-Regulation from an Applied Developmental Perspective." OPRE Report 2015-21. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.
- Murray, Joseph, and David Farrington. 2005. "Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency through the Life-Course." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46:1269–78.

- Murray, Joseph, Carl-Gunnar Janson, and David Farrington. 2007. "Crime in Adult Offspring of Prisoners: A Cross-National Comparison of Two Longitudinal Samples." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 34 (1): 133–49.
- Murray, Joseph, David Farrington, Ivana Sekol, and Rikke Olsen. 2009. "Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Child Antisocial Behaviour and Mental Health: A Systematic Review." *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 4. Oslo: Campbell Collaboration.
- Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology* 108:937–75.
- Pager, Devah, Bruce Western, and Naomi Sugie. 2009. "Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 6231:195–213.
- Parke, Ross D., and K. Alison Clarke-Stewart. 2002. "From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities." Working paper prepared for the "From Prison to Home" conference, Washington, DC, January 30–31.
- Pettit, Becky, and Bruce Western. 2004. "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration." *American Sociological Review* 69:151–69.
- Pew Charitable Trusts. 2010. "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility." Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- Phillips, Susan, Alaattin Erklani, Gordon Keeler, Jane Costello, and Adrian Angold. 2006. "Disentangling the Risks: Parent Criminal Justice Involvement and Children's Exposure to Family Risks." *Criminology and Public Policy* 5 (4): 677–702.
- Raphael, Steven. 2014. "The New Scarlet Letter? Negotiating the US Labor Market with a Criminal Record." Kalamazoo, MI: W. E. Upjohn Institute.
- Rodriguez, Nancy. 2016. "Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice: The Role of Science in Addressing the Effects of Incarceration on Family Life." *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 665:231–40.
- Roman, Caterina Gouvis, and Jeremy Travis. 2006. "Where Will I Sleep Tomorrow? Housing, Homelessness, and the Returning Prisoner." *Housing Policy Debate* 17 (2): 389–418.
- Schwartz-Soicher, Ofira, Amanda Geller, and Irwin Garfinkel. 2011. "The Effect of Paternal Incarceration on Material Hardship." *Social Service Review* 85 (3): 447–73.
- Schnittker, Jason, and Andrea John. 2007. "Enduring Stigma: The Long-Term Effects of Incarceration on Health." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 48:115–30.
- Sentencing Project. 2012. "Parents in Prison." Washington, DC: Sentencing Project.
- Shaw, Daniel S., and Heather E. Gross. 2008. "What We Have Learned about Early Childhood and the Development of Delinquency." In *The Long View of Crime: A Synthesis of Longitudinal Research*, edited by Akiva M. Liberman, 79–127. New York: Springer.
- Shonkoff, Jack P. 2016. "Capitalizing on Advances in Science to Reduce the Health Consequences of Early Childhood Adversity." *JAMA Pediatrics* 170 (10): 1003–07.
- Travis, Jeremy, and Michelle Waul. 2003. *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Turney, Kristin. 2014a. "Stress Proliferation across Generations? Examining the Relationship between Parental Incarceration and Childhood Health." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 55 (3): 302–19.
- . 2014b. "The Consequences of Paternal Incarceration for Maternal Neglect and Harsh Parenting." *Social Forces* 92 (4): 1607–36.
- . 2015. "Liminal Men: Incarceration and Relationship Dissolution." *Social Problems* 62 (4): 499–528.
- Turney, Kristin, and Christopher Wildeman. 2013. "Redefining Relationships: Explaining the Countervailing Consequences of Paternal Incarceration for Parenting." *American Sociological Review* 78 (6): 949–79.

- Vilsaint, Corrie, Sophie Aiyer, Melvin Wilson, Daniel Shaw, and Thomas Dishion. 2013. "The Ecology of Early Childhood Risk: A Canonical Correlation Analysis of Children's Adjustment, Family, and Community Context in a High-Risk Sample." *Journal of Primary Prevention* 34 (4): 261–77.
- Visher, Christy, and Shannon Courtney. 2007. "One Year Out: Experiences of Prisoners Returning to Cleveland." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Visher, Christy, Vera Kachnowski, Nancy G. La Vigne, and Jeremy Travis. 2004. "Baltimore Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Visher, Christy A., Carly R. Knight, Aaron Chalfin, and John K. Roman. 2009. *The Impact of Marital and Relationship Status on Social Outcomes for Returning Prisoners*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Visher, Christy, Jennifer Yahner, and Nancy G. La Vigne. 2010. "Life after Prison: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Chicago, Cleveland, and Houston." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Wakefield, Sara, Hedwig Lee, and Christopher Wildeman. 2016. "Tough on Crime, Tough on Families? Criminal Justice and Family Life in America." *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 665:8–21.
- Wakefield, Sara, and Christopher Uggen. 2010. "Incarceration and Stratification." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36:387–406.
- Waldfoegel, Jane. 1994. "The Effect of Criminal Conviction on Income and the Trust 'Reposed in the Workmen'." *Journal of Human Resources* 29:62–81.
- Waldfoegel, Jane, Terry-Ann Craigie, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2010. "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing." *Future Child* 20 (2): 87–112.
- Western, Bruce. 2002. "Incarceration, Wages, and Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 67 (4): 526–46.
- Western, Bruce, and Becky Pettit. 2000. "Incarceration and Racial Inequality in Men's Employment." *Industrial Relations and Labor Review* 54 (1): 3–16.
- Wildeman, Christopher. 2010. "Paternal Incarceration and Children's Physically Aggressive Behaviors: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study." *Social Forces* 89 (1): 285–309.
- . 2014. "Parental Incarceration, Child Homelessness, and the Invisible Consequences of Mass Imprisonment." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651 (1): 74–96.
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716213502921>.
- Wildeman, Christopher, and Christopher Muller. 2012. "Mass Imprisonment and Inequality in Health and Family Life." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 8:11–30.
- Wildeman, Christopher, Jason Schnittker, and Kristin Turney. 2012. "Despair by Association? The Mental Health of Mothers with Children by Recently Incarcerated Fathers." *American Sociological Review* 77 (2): 216–43.
- Wildeman, Christopher, and Kristin Turney. 2014. "Positive, Negative, or Null? The Effects of Maternal Incarceration on Children's Behavioral Problems." *Demography* 51:1041–68.
- Yahner, Jennifer, Amy L. Solomon, and Christy Visher. 2008. "Returning Home on Parole: Former Prisoners' Experiences in Illinois, Ohio, and Texas." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

About the Authors

Terry-Ann Craigie is a visiting scholar at Brown University and associate professor of economics at Connecticut College. Her research interests include mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, public policy, race and gender inequality, labor markets, family structure, and child well-being. Her most recent work focuses on criminal justice reform and the collateral consequences of mass incarceration in the context of race and ethnicity.

Eleanor Pratt is an MPA student at the La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a former research analyst in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute, where her work centered on low-income families, the US social safety net, and racial inequality. She is particularly interested in how class, race, and gender affect vulnerable populations and access to social services.

Marla McDaniel is a senior fellow in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. Her research focuses on racial disparities; low-income children, youth, and families; and the programs and policy environments that touch families' lives. She is interested in the relationships between vulnerabilities and in how inequality across multiple domains—including health, education, and employment—has a compounding effect on overall health and well-being.

Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation through the Urban Institute’s Low-Income Working Families initiative. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

The authors also thank Urban Institute colleagues Margaret Simms and Lindsey Cramer for their review of this paper and thoughtful insights and feedback.



2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people’s lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © November 2018. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.