



Understanding the Many Difficulties Faced by the Children of Imprisoned Mothers

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As rates of incarceration have increased in the United States, researchers have learned that having a parent in prison can inflict lasting harm on children. Approximately 2.7 million children currently have a parent in jail or prison, and they are more likely than other children to engage in aggressive or antisocial behavior or succumb to substance abuse. Most of these children have a father in prison. Maternal incarceration happens much less frequently, and researchers have so far not explored the situations of their offspring or the consequences for their development.

Although far fewer mothers than fathers go to jail or prison, Bureau of Justice statistics show that the number of mothers incarcerated in state and federal prisons increased by 122% from 1991 through 2007. My research collaborators and I set out to learn about the situations and development of the children of these imprisoned mothers – in comparison to the situations and development of those with neither parent incarcerated and those who had a father sent to prison or both parents incarcerated. Using a nationally representative longitudinal dataset called the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, we explored family structure, economic hardship, and other disadvantages children of incarcerated mothers face as they develop into young adults between the ages of 24 and 34 years old.

We faced the difficulty that relatively few mothers go to prison and they are hard to track in surveys. In the dataset, descriptive information comes from questionnaires completed by both offspring and parents. Completed surveys allowed us to identify whether the biological mother of a respondent was ever in jail or prison, but only 60% of the biological mothers of such children themselves completed the questionnaire – compared to about 90% of the mothers of offspring who did not report that their mothers had gone to jail or prison. We end up having less than complete information about the biological mothers of young people who report a mother going to prison, so our ability to rigorously test causal claims is limited. Nevertheless, we are able to provide a portrait of how children with incarcerated mothers experience the transition to young adulthood, and we have learned that these children experience a multitude of hardships.

Childhood Context of Maternal Incarceration

According to the nationally representative survey data we analyzed, the relatively small numbers of respondents who reported having a mother in prison were disproportionately minorities – a third of them were non-Hispanic blacks – who grew up in distinctive family arrangements and faced greater economic and social hardships than the other sets of children we considered.

- Offspring of incarcerated mothers are less likely to report having biological parents as *either* the primary maternal figure or primary paternal figure in their lives. They were not likely to have lived in a home with two parents, and instead lived with stepmothers, grandmothers, adoptive and foster moms. About 90% of our respondents with incarcerated fathers said that their biological mother was their primary caregiver, but that was true for only half of those who had an incarcerated mother. (More broadly, only about half of respondents who had either their father or mother sent to prison reported that their biological father was a primary paternal figure in their lives – compared to 82% of the respondents who did not report that either parent went to prison.)
- Almost fifty percent of the offspring of incarcerated mothers lived in households that received public assistance.
- Respondents with incarcerated mothers experienced greater physical abuse than those whose mothers were not imprisoned. More than 38% of those with incarcerated mothers reported being hit as children, and a third of them had mothers and fathers who were alcoholics. Offspring of imprisoned mothers also had greater exposure to violence in childhood – they were more likely to witness physical fights,

shootings, and stabbings.

Outcomes for Young Adults

The hardships faced by children of incarcerated mothers persist as they make the transition to young adulthood. To see how things turned out for these offspring compared to others, we tracked education and labor market outcomes, criminal activity, and violent episodes involving intimate partners.

- Young people who experienced maternal incarceration during childhood reported lower levels of education in young adulthood – about 50% reported having a high school degree or less, compared to about 27% for those who did not experience maternal incarceration. Only about one in ten of these offspring of incarcerated mothers reported having completed college or more, compared to over a third of those who did not experience maternal incarceration in childhood.
- Offspring of incarcerated mothers reported higher levels of arrests in adulthood. They reported an average of about 2.5 arrests, compared to 0.7 arrests reported by respondents whose mothers did not go to jail or prison.
- Compared to respondents whose mothers were not incarcerated, the children of imprisoned mothers became sexually active earlier in their lives and got involved in violent episodes with intimate partners more frequently. They were more often involved in all kinds of delinquent activities.

Implications for Scholars and Policymakers

Using available data, we have made substantial headway in describing the childhoods and development into young adulthood of boys and girls who had the misfortune of seeing their biological mothers sent to jail or prison. The picture is not pretty, because these young people suffer even greater family disruptions and socioeconomic disadvantages than children with imprisoned fathers or with no experience of parental imprisonment. In the future, scholars and policymakers alike can do more to investigate and take into account the multitude of hardships and extraordinary life challenges experienced by the children of imprisoned mothers.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from Lauren E. Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak, “Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2008; and Sherry Zhang and Allison Dwyer Emory, “Maternal Incarceration, Childhood Context, and Children’s Risky Behaviors in Young Adulthood,” American Sociological Association, 2014.