



A Multi-Generational Study of Families Involved with Prisons and Child Protection Agencies

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It is common knowledge that the incarceration rate in the United States is the highest of any industrialized country – and equally well known is the reality that Americans from socially and economically disadvantaged subpopulations end up in jail or prison more frequently than others. Child Protective Services involvement is also common in the United States, and many of the same families that experience incarceration of a parent also end up attracting attention from Child Protective Services workers. Using data from Wisconsin, our work, in collaboration with Maria Cancian and Jennifer Noyes, examines relationships both within and over generations between incarceration and family involvements with child protective services.

A New Study of Intertwined Family Experiences

Dealing with incarceration and involvements with child protective services are two widely shared family experiences in the United States:

- Estimates from the U.S. Department of Justice show that nearly 1.6 million people were in a U.S. prison facility at the end of 2012, the majority of whom were Black males under age 40. Incarceration rates are much higher for men than women; and they are much higher across the country and especially in Wisconsin for African Americans compared to whites. About 25% of Black children and 4% of white children born in 1990 had a parent in prison or jail by age 14.
- U.S. child protective service agencies received reports concerning approximately 6.3 million children in 2012, representing about 4.6% of U.S. children, according to estimates from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. About a fifth of these children were determined to be victims of abuse or (much more often) neglect. (Wisconsin percentages are similar but below these national proportions.) More than a quarter million U.S. children were sent to out-of-home placements. At some point between their birth and age 18, an estimated 13% of all children and 21% of all Black children are confirmed to have been maltreated at some point.

Our work seeks to unravel relationships between these two experiences – which may occur for a number of reasons. Parents may be incarcerated for child abuse or serious neglect. Children may end up in public custody when parents (particularly mothers) are sent to jail or prison and another adequate caregiver has not been arranged. Paternal incarceration may adversely influence family economic stability and maternal wellbeing, leading to instability and less effective parenting. Within generations, maltreatment of children and involvements with child protective services are associated with a range of social and emotional problems – putting adolescents in particular at extra risk of run-ins with the criminal justice system. To explore these dynamics, we exploit unique data housed at the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://scholars.org>

Wisconsin-Madison. The Multi-Sample Person File includes linked longitudinal administrative data on the full universe of participants in most Wisconsin social welfare programs, including child protective services, as well as data from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections and Milwaukee County jails.

Our Findings for Children and Adults

In Wisconsin, imprisonments and involvements with child protective services often co-occur.

- Between 2004 and 2012, eight percent of all children that ended up assessed or investigated by child protective services had a parent in state prison in the year after the report; and 11% of children whose cases were substantiated had an incarcerated parent. These proportions were much larger in Milwaukee, where parents are often in jail rather than state prison. In all, 28% of children looked into by child protective services – and 34% of those placed for care outside their homes – had a parent who was incarcerated either in state prison or county jail at some point in the next year.
- Just over 15% of Wisconsinites sent to prison between 2004 and 2012 had children involved with protective services within a year, and 6% had children placed outside the home (in Milwaukee, the proportions were nearly 18% and 6% respectively). Black people in prison were more likely than whites to have children involved with protective services or placed outside their homes. Both statewide and in Milwaukee, incarcerated women were more likely than incarcerated men to have children in such situations.

The Ongoing Story for Adolescents and Young Adults

Prison and child protective service involvements shape experiences as children grow up.

- About 18% of all 18- to 21-year-olds in state prison in Wisconsin had been involved with child protection agencies when they were 15 or 16 years old; and 8% had experienced outside-the-home placements. Milwaukee percentages were similar. But, strikingly, more than one quarter of all Wisconsin women prisoners age 18 to 21, and 32% of those in Milwaukee, had been involved with child protective services as adolescents; and about a tenth of both groups had experienced outside-the-home placements.
- Across Wisconsin, 5% of 18- to 21-year-olds were incarcerated after being involved with child protective services when they were 15 or 16. In Milwaukee, however, the proportion was 29%. Incarceration happened at even higher rates for both Wisconsin and Milwaukee young adults who had been placed outside their homes as 15 or 16 year-olds.

Implications for Social Service Provision

High levels of intergenerational overlap in incarceration and involvements with child protective services highlight the need to tailor policies about child safety and outside-the-home placements to meet the needs of offspring of parents sent to jail or prison. Children with imprisoned mothers may have the most pressing needs – and adolescents are clearly at high risk for future incarceration themselves unless they get specialized and intensive support.

Read more in Lawrence M. Berger, Maria Cancian, Laura Cuesta, and Jennifer Noyes, “Families at the Intersection of the Criminal Justice and Child Protective Services Systems.” *ANNALS of the American* <https://scholars.org>
September 21, 2016

