



## Understanding the Impact of Paternal Incarceration on Children's Schooling

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Parents play an important role in their children's lives, and parental involvement in elementary schooling especially affects children's welfare. An impressive body of scholarship suggests that children's health, development, and economic fortunes suffer in many ways if their parents serve time in jail or prison. Because the number of school-aged children in the United States with currently or formerly incarcerated parents sits at record levels, there is a clear need to better understand how mass incarceration furthers inequality and exclusion across generations. This includes unravelling the precise links among families, schools, and the criminal justice system.

Schools are **conduit institutions** that offer access to resources and avenues of economic mobility and social integration. In addition, schools do **surveillance** by keeping formal records and making direct connections to other public agencies – including the police. Formerly incarcerated parents may be wary of such school functions, making them reluctant to engage fully with their children's schools. Our new study indicates that paternal incarceration is indeed a unique marker of disadvantage. Both incarcerated fathers and children's primary caregivers have reduced involvement in children's education at home and at school– and fears about surveillance held by previously incarcerated fathers help to explain this reduced involvement.

### Why Parent Involvement in Schooling Matters

Parental involvement in schooling encompasses actions fathers, mothers, and other primary caregivers take at home or at school to promote their children's learning and convey educational expectations. Home-based involvement includes efforts such as helping with homework, reading with children, communicating expectations, and providing access to books and educational materials. School-based involvement can include visiting the school for conferences or events, participating in parent-teacher organizations, chaperoning field trips, and communicating with teachers and administrators.

Parental involvement is known to boost children's academic achievement and reduce the likelihood that pupils will drop out or have behavioral problems. Such involvement strengthens ties to school and enhances parents' ability to advocate for their child, providing access to information networks integral to children's success. By contrast, parents with lower levels of involvement – or who avoid schools altogether – reduce their children's access to resources, information, and avenues of social integration. And such parents may convey feelings of institutional distrust.

### Understanding the Impact of Paternal Incarceration on School Involvement

Assuming that fathers sent to prison or jail previously had some level of involvement with their children's schools, scholars have theorized about reasons why they might withdraw from further involvement. <https://scholars.org>

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- Work by the sociologist Sarah Brayne on “system avoidance” suggests that people who have been involved in the criminal justice system purposely avoid later engagement with surveilling institutions. Fathers who have served time may thus choose to refrain from activities that require interaction with the school, such as volunteering or attending parent-teacher conferences.
- Criminal justice professor Sarah Lageson has explored how many parents “opt-out” of meaningful interactions with community institutions because of stigma or fear of having their online criminal records discovered by teachers, school officials, other parents, or their own children. Opting-out can occur preemptively because parents feel they will be barred from schooling activities such as volunteering – given that extensive background clearances are required in some states – or because previously incarcerated parents worry about stigma or embarrassment. In fact, opting-out can occur even if charges were minor or ultimately dismissed, because online criminal records loom large in our digital world.

## Larger Implications and Possible Remedies

Paternal incarceration, coupled with increased institutional surveillance, leads to lower levels of parental involvement in children’s schooling. This, in turn, undercuts children’s educational success and families’ ability to build trust with schools. As the number of young school-aged children with incarcerated parents grows, there may be strong, lasting, and negative consequences from this vicious cycle. The long-term prospects of children with current and formally incarcerated parents are likely tightly linked to the children’s schooling, yet teachers often interpret parental involvement as a sign of the value parents place in their child’s educational success. However, a father’s avoidance of his child’s school may not flow from lack of caring, but from fear of stigma or adverse consequences from his previous record. Similar processes can influence the behavior of other marginalized populations, such as undocumented parents who worry about apprehension when interacting with their children’s schools.

Clearly, the country needs social policies that take into account the varied ways families, schools, and the criminal justice system interact. Untangling the secondary harmful effects of parental incarceration – including harms to children’s schooling – is necessary to prevent reproducing inequalities from one generation to the next. Research that helps educators and policymakers better understand issues that arise for children and families where a father has served time can help in the design of supportive measures.

Research so far suggests that involvement by previously incarcerated fathers in their children’s schooling can be encouraged to the degree that parents come to understand schools as safe spaces. To the degree possible, schools need to avoid seeming like one more surveilling institution to families that have already experienced the stress of an imprisoned parent. Doing everything possible to increase parental involvement by the formerly incarcerated is important, because such steps are likely to strengthen family-school partnerships and improve the chances for educational success for a growing segment of all American children.

Read more in Anna R. Haskins and Wade C. Jacobsen, “**Schools as Surveilling Institutions? Paternal Incarceration, System Avoidance, and Parental Involvement in Schooling.**” *American Sociological Review* August 2, 2017 (online-first article, June 2017). <https://scholars.org>