

Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children: Comparisons Between State and National Estimates

The Prison Journal

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/0032885519836996

journals.sagepub.com/home/tpj

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Abstract

To estimate the number of parents in state prisons in Minnesota, 2,242 adults completed a brief survey. More than two thirds reported having minor children. More women than men reported being a parent; over half reported living with their children before arrest. In a multivariate model, parent gender, residing with children pre-incarceration, and child age predicted interest in parenting programming. The current study yielded a higher prevalence of parental incarceration than national and other state estimates. Findings underscore the importance of documenting the prevalence of parents in prison and identifying programs and policies to address their needs.

Keywords

prisons, incarcerated parents, children

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, the era of mass incarceration in the United States has ushered in unprecedented growth in state prison populations. In 1978, the state imprisonment rate (per 100,000) was 119 (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2016). After reaching a high of 447 in 2007, the rate has recently fallen, dropping to 412 in 2014—the most recent year for which data are available (Carson, 2015). Still, the rate in 2014 was 3.5 times greater than it was in 1978.

The surging prison population has, at various times, given rise to a host of concerns. For example, as state prison populations grew sharply during the 1990s, so did interest in the issue of prisoner reentry (Lynch & Sabol, 2001). The federal government has sponsored several major initiatives for the implementation of community-level prisoner reentry projects across the country since the early 2000s (Young, Taxman, & Byrne, 2002). The rapid growth in state prison populations also meant that many institutions were operating above capacity. In one notable example, California was required to reduce its prison population as a result of a federal order (*Brown v. Plata*, 2011). In recent years, there has been discussion about reducing the federal prison population and, more specifically, enacting sentencing reform, mostly for drug and nonviolent offenses (Samuels, La Vigne, & Taxy, 2013; Smarter Sentencing Act, 2015; Subramanian & Delaney, 2014).

As we note in more detail below, one issue that has been largely overlooked in the public debate over mass incarceration is its impact on children and families (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). This issue has likely been overlooked, at least in part, because of a lack of current data on the number of children and families affected. In 2007—the last year for which national data are available—it was estimated that more than 1.75 million children younger than the age of 18 had a parent in a state or federal prison in the United States (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010). More recent estimates using data from the National Survey of Children's Health indicate that more than 5 million U.S. children have experienced the incarceration of a coresident parent although this study cannot discern which parent was incarcerated or whether the parent's incarceration was in jail or prison (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). National estimates suggest 53% of men and 61% of women in the U.S. prison population are parents with minor children (Maruschak et al., 2010). In 2007, this represented nearly 810,000 incarcerated parents, most of whom were men.

Although there are substantially more fathers than mothers incarcerated in the United States, rates of maternal incarceration are increasing at a much faster rate (Maruschak et al., 2010). Between 1991 and 2007, the number of incarcerated fathers increased 77% (Maruschak et al., 2010). In contrast,

during that same time, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122% (Maruschak et al., 2010). It is important to note that a disproportionate number of children from racial minority backgrounds are affected by parental incarceration. Indeed, African American children were almost 8 times more likely than White children and nearly 3 times more likely than Hispanic children to have a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Parental incarceration has consequences for children and families and may confer risk through a number of mechanisms, including the disruption of family relationships, challenges with parenting, economic instability, and residential mobility (Travis et al., 2014). A growing body of qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that maternal and paternal incarceration are associated with children's increased risk for both internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety, withdrawal) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) behavior problems, substance use, cognitive skill deficits, physical health problems, and academic concerns (e.g., poor grades, school failure; Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010; Travis et al., 2014).

Research on the differential effects of maternal versus paternal incarceration has been mixed (Burgess-Proctor, Huebner, & Durso, 2016; Dallaire, 2007; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011). National data indicate that incarcerated mothers were more likely than fathers to be living with their children prior to arrest (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), suggesting that children may experience more disruption in their living and caregiving arrangements when mothers are incarcerated, compared with when fathers are incarcerated (Enos, 2001; Murray & Murray, 2010; Seymour & Hairston, 1998).

Despite staggering national statistics and a growing body of evidence about the negative impact of incarceration on parents and children, this topic has received relatively little attention from scholars, practitioners, and policy makers—until relatively recently. In 2003, (Eddy & Reid, 2003) noted that one of the fundamental challenges with research on this topic is that none of the relevant academic disciplines (i.e., child development, psychology, sociology, social work, criminology, nursing, public health) has identified children of incarcerated parents as a population of particular interest and, as such, this population has remained largely “invisible.”

Ten years later, we have considerably more research (including Eddy & Poehlmann's, 2010, *Handbook* on the topic and the National Research Council's review of the consequences of mass incarceration for children and families [Travis et al., 2014]), with many studies that examine the effects of parental incarceration using longitudinal data (e.g., Gaston, 2016; Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011; Haskins, 2014; Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013; Roettger, Swisher, Kuhl, & Chavez, 2011). In addition, there is growing

interest on this topic at the federal level, as evidenced by major initiatives like the Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents (Youth.gov, 2016).

However, we still lack essential information about the scope of this problem at a state level, ultimately limiting states' abilities to use local data to inform practice and policy-based solutions. Like many corrections departments in the United States (Maruschak et al., 2010), the Minnesota Department of Corrections (MN DOC)—where data from the current study were drawn—does not systematically collect information about parenting status in a way that yields reliable estimates about the number of adults in prison who are parents with minor children. Thus, little is known about the actual prevalence of parental incarceration or the number of children affected in the state, inhibiting the state's ability to make data-driven decisions about incarcerated parents and their minor children. This challenge is not unique to Minnesota. A study by the National Conference of State Legislatures concluded policy making is "hindered by lack of reliable data on the characteristics of these children" (Christian, 2009). In addition, a Pennsylvania advisory committee recognized the importance of having data to guide practice and policy, and in 2011 recommended the state legislature "require the Department of Corrections and any other pertinent agency to collect the necessary data to acquire an accurate count of the number of children in the Commonwealth who have an incarcerated parent" (Joint State Government Commission, 2011).

When a parent is incarcerated, children and families are directly and indirectly affected. Many children engage directly with the criminal justice system when they have contact with their incarcerated parent through visits, phone calls, or letters. Indirectly, children and families are affected when a parent is moved to another prison or when the parent begins planning for release. Yet, at this point in time, few considerations are given to the way prisons' practices and policies affect children and families. This may be due, at least in part, to corrections administrators', policy makers', and their constituents' limited awareness and understanding of the sheer number of parents who are incarcerated and the collateral consequences of incarceration for children and families.

Given the numerous ways that children are directly and indirectly interacting with the corrections system, as well as the potential long-term consequences of parental incarceration for the health and well-being of children and families, having reliable estimates about the scope of the problem is essential. Understanding the prevalence of parental incarceration and the number of children affected will guide the development of targeted, state-specific, evidence-informed prevention and intervention efforts for this population, which are sorely needed.

Prior Research on Estimating Parental Imprisonment Rates

National Estimates

The BJS periodically conducts the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF). The SISFCF is the only nationally representative survey of the characteristics and well-being of people in prison, and includes questions about demographic information, experience with sexual and physical abuse, incarceration-related history, substance use and treatment, and medical and mental health treatment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Of relevance to the current study, specific questions on the SISFCF addressed parental status and minor children younger than the age of 18 years (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

In 2004, the BJS conducted the most recent SISFCF (BJS, 2004; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). A total of 287 state prisons participated in the survey (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Within the 287 facilities, 16,152 individuals (81.1% male) were invited to participate (BJS, 2004; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Participants were informed that answers were confidential (BJS, 2004). In total, 14,499 people (79.8% male) participated, with a nonresponse rate of 10.2% (BJS, 2004).

On the SISFCF, about half (51.9%) of participants reported having a least one minor child. More incarcerated women (61.7%) compared with men (51.2%) reported being parents. On average, incarcerated parents reported two minor children ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.47$), with a mean age of 9.00 ($SD = 4.53$) years. Women were more likely than men to report having more than one minor child (41% vs. 29%, respectively). Over one third (37.1%) of parents lived with their children in the month before arrest; mothers were more likely than fathers to report living with their children in the month prior to arrest (55.3% vs. 35.5%, respectively).

The national estimates derived from the SISFCF are valuable, but using these data to guide practice and policy presents important challenges. First, these data are now more than 10 years old. Given the important shifts in the prison population over the last decade, updated estimates are sorely needed. Second, the SISFCF does not focus on parental incarceration; it consists of many questions, some about sensitive topics (e.g., history of abuse). The survey is not anonymous, as a representative from the U.S. Census Bureau reads the survey to participants. As such, parents may be less likely to reveal information about parenting out of concern for how their responses will be used. Finally, a considerable body of evidence demonstrates the importance of access to *local* data for informing practice and policy (Tseng, 2012). While

national estimates provide one measure of the scope of the problem, state and local legislators and decision makers need state-specific data to inform practice and policy change.

State Estimates

To date, at least three other states have attempted to estimate the number of parents in prison with the goal of informing local practice and policy, each with varying levels of success. We review each of these states' different approaches and their estimates next.

New York (NY). In December 2010, the NY State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision administered a survey to people incarcerated in seven state facilities (four facilities that housed men and three facilities that housed women), ranging from minimum to maximum security (New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services [NYS], 2013). The survey was administered to a purposive sample in group settings (e.g., substance abuse treatment, anger management); women were oversampled (NYS, 2013). Survey administrators explained the purpose of the survey and asked these individuals to voluntarily complete the survey (NYS, 2013). Survey administrators, group staff, and other participants provided support to those who needed assistance completing the survey (NYS, 2013).

In total, 895 incarcerated (69% male) participated in the survey (NYS, 2013). No information was available about the number of those currently incarcerated who were offered the survey, but declined to participate. Nearly half (54%) were parents with children younger than 21 years and most (73%) reported having one to two minor children (NYS, 2013). More than half (56%) reported living with their minor child(ren) prior to incarceration (NYS, 2013). No information was available about parenting status by parent gender. However, compared with mothers, fathers were less likely to report that they took care of or watched their minor children prior to their incarceration (67% vs. 49%, respectively; NYS, 2013).

Ohio (OH). Between July 17 and August 31, 2014, the OH Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Director of Court and Community, and Bureau of Research and Evaluation administered the Survey of Incarcerated Parents (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). The survey inquired about the demographic characteristics, partners, children, household members, incarceration-related history, and past institutional experiences of people in prison (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). The survey specifically asked about dependent children, or children for whom the incarcerated person had legal, financial, or parental

responsibilities, which could include biological children, stepchildren, partners' children, grandchildren, adopted/foster children, nieces, and/or nephews (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014).

All prisons in OH (with the exception of the male reception centers [Correctional Reception Center and Lorain Correctional Institution] and the Franklin Medical Center for females) were selected for participation (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). The target sample at each facility was proportional to each facility's total population (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). To be included in the sample, participants needed to be incarcerated for at least 9 months and have at least 2 months left in their sentence as of June 30, 2014 (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). A random sample of 1,509 individuals (76% male) was selected across the 25 prisons (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). Four female participants were excluded, as they had previously completed the survey during a pilot phase of the study (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014), resulting in 1,505 surveys. Of the 1,505, 398 (26.4%) declined to participate and 46 (3.06%) had missing surveys (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). Individuals who refused to complete the survey were more likely to be older, male, and members of racial/ethnic minority groups (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). In total, 1,061 surveys were utilized (74% male; Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). To ensure confidentiality, each was assigned a random survey identification number that was different from his or her inmate identification number.

Over half (54.1%) of those surveyed had a biological child who was less than 17 years of age (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). More incarcerated women reported having a minor child, compared with fathers (56.5% vs. 53.2%, respectively; Lamb & Dorsey, 2014). Among incarcerated parents, 51.1% indicated living with a minor child prior to their arrest (Lamb & Dorsey, 2014).

Tennessee (TN). In December 2007, the TN Department of Corrections administered a large-scale survey in TN prisons (Nutt, Deaton, & Hutchinson, 2008). All 16 TN prisons were sampled and individuals from all security classifications were included (Nutt et al., 2008). Participants within each facility were randomly selected from the TN Offender Management Information System; women were oversampled (Nutt et al., 2008). Two lists were created at each facility (Nutt et al., 2008). Individuals were chosen from the primary list; as individuals declined participation, others were selected from the second list (Nutt et al., 2008).

Approximately, 6,000 from the primary list were invited to fill out the survey; less than half agreed (Nutt et al., 2008). Of the 3,329 surveys targeted for completion, 2,857 (85%) individuals completed surveys, representing 12.8% of men and 34.4% of women incarcerated in TN state prisons (Nutt et al., 2008).

Surveys were administered in group settings or privately in the participants' cells (Nutt et al., 2008). Both methods of survey administration were used equally across facilities (Nutt et al., 2008). Each received an envelope with a letter explaining the study, the survey, and a pencil (Nutt et al., 2008). The survey inquired about participants' demographic information, relationships, family, children, and incarceration-related information (Nutt et al., 2008). To maintain confidentiality, surveys were returned to prison staff in the envelopes (Nutt et al., 2008). Research staff remained on site to provide assistance to prison staff and collect completed survey packets (Nutt et al., 2008).

Among the 2,857 surveyed, approximately two thirds (69.8%) indicated that they were parents to adult and/or minor children; 6% of the sample did not respond to this question (Nutt et al., 2008). More incarcerated women than men indicated that they were parents (85.5% vs. 72.2%, respectively; Nutt et al., 2008). Most (73%) parents reported having two or more children ($M = 2.11$), and mothers reported more children than fathers ($M = 2.16$ vs. 2.06, respectively; Nutt et al., 2008). Over half of incarcerated parents (58.3%) indicated that they lived with at least one of their children prior to arrest; mothers were more likely than fathers to report living with one of their children before their incarceration (64.7% vs. 57%, respectively; Nutt et al., 2008). Information was not provided about the number of incarcerated mothers and fathers with minor children, specifically. However, Nutt and colleagues (2008) did report that approximately 65.7% of the children with incarcerated parents were 17 years old or younger.

Current Study

The BJS and each of these three states (NY, OH, and TN) utilized different methodological approaches to estimating the proportion of people incarcerated in state prisons with minor children. Whereas BJS utilized probability samples, others utilized random (e.g., TN) or convenience (e.g., NY, OH) samples, with notable differences in response rates. In addition, each study varied in the definition of "child"; BJS and OH included minor children (17 years or younger), NY included children 21 years or younger, and TN included both adult and minor children. As such, these four surveys yield different results, with rates of parental incarceration ranging from 51.9% (BJS) to 69.8% (TN). Importantly, each of these studies assessed the prevalence of parental incarceration with a point-in-time estimate of people in state prisons who—at the time the parenting status was assessed—had been incarcerated for varying periods of time. In contrast, the current study sought to estimate the prevalence of parental incarceration among individuals newly admitted to state prisons in MN over a 6-month period of time through a completely

anonymous survey. The methods were carefully designed to yield the best estimate of parental incarceration in MN, by utilizing anonymity and brevity of the survey.

Method

Data were collected from all new admissions over the course of 6 months (July 1, 2014 to December 31, 2014) at the male (MN Correctional Facility [MCF]–St. Cloud) and female (MCF-Shakopee) intake facilities. A 6-month data collection period was selected with important methodological considerations in mind. First, this time frame yielded a sample size sufficient for all of the proposed analyses, including accurate estimations of the prevalence of parental incarceration in the state. Second, restricting the data collection period to 6 months ensured that those who were surveyed when they entered an intake facility were not resurveyed if they were released from prison and returned after committing a new crime or violating the conditions of their release during the data collection period. Finally, the data collection period was feasible, while not being burdensome, for MN DOC orientation staff responsible for administering surveys at both facilities. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board and the MN DOC Human Subjects Review Board.

Participants

During the 6-month data collection period, 2,521 people (86.1% male) entered the two MN intake facilities. More than 95% of these individuals ($n = 2,416$) attended orientation sessions; orientation sessions may have been missed for a variety of reasons (e.g., illness, lockdown). Of the 2,416 who attended orientation sessions and were offered the opportunity to complete the survey, 2,242 (92.7%) completed the survey.

Survey

During orientation sessions, trained prison staff provided a brief introduction about the purpose of the survey. The survey was completely anonymous; it did not contain any identifying information (e.g., offender identification number, children's dates of birth) that could be used to link responses back to an individual.

The survey was intentionally brief as only a limited amount of time was available during orientation sessions and corrections staff expressed valid concerns that additional questions would reduce staff buy-in and participation.

The five-item survey was designed to parallel items from the SISFCF and contained nonsensitive questions about parenting status, basic information about children's ages, whether the respondent lived with his or her children in the month preceding his or her arrest, and whether he or she was interested in participating in parenting-related programs or services during his or her incarceration (Table 1).

Analysis

For each variable, we first present descriptive statistics and then test for significant differences by parent gender, using chi-squares for dichotomous variables and *t* tests for continuous variables. Then, using bivariate and multivariate analyses, we examine how key variables (parent gender, living with child before arrest, number of children, and average child age) are associated with parents' expressed interest in participating in a parenting class.

Results

More than two thirds (67.5%) of respondents in MN state prisons had minor children. More women (76.4%) compared with men (66.0%) reported being a parent to minor children ($\chi^2 = 21.74, p < .001$). Over half (57.2%) lived with their children in the month before arrest. More mothers (66.1%) lived with children in the month prior to arrest compared with 55.5% of fathers ($\chi^2 = 11.91, p = .001$). On average, parents had 2.42 ($SD = 1.58$) minor children. There was no significant difference in the number of children among mothers ($M = 2.09, SD = 1.48$) and fathers ($M = 2.15, SD = 1.71$), $t(1700) = 0.57, p = .570$. Children's average age was 7.46 ($SD = 4.32$) years. On average, fathers ($M = 7.20, SD = 4.29$) had significantly younger children than mothers ($M = 8.74, SD = 4.22$), $t(1494) = -5.19, p < .001$. See Tables 1 to 3 for a summary of descriptive statistics and national estimates from the BJS.

Among those who indicated they were parents of minor children, 75.3% noted that they would be interested in taking a parenting class while incarcerated. Mothers (84.7%) were more likely than fathers (73.3%) to express interest in a parenting class ($\chi^2 = 9.41, p = .002$). There was more interest in a parenting class from parents who lived with their minor child before arrest than those who did not live with minor children before arrest, 80.4% vs. 69.1%, respectively; ($\chi^2 = 69.36, p < .001$). Furthermore, parents were more interested in a parenting class if their children were younger, $t(1467) = 7.10, p < .001$, and if they reported having more children, $t(1662) = -8.23, p < .001$.

As shown in Table 4, we estimated a logistic regression model to develop more precise estimates of the effects that parent gender, average child age,

Table 1. Parents in Minnesota Prisons Survey Questions and Descriptive Statistics.

	Total sample (N = 2,416)				Females (n = 350)				Males (n = 2,066)			
	%	N	M	SD	%	N	M	SD	%	n	M	SD
Are you a mother [or father]?												
Yes	76.4	2,242			86.5	326			74.6	1,916		
[Females only] Are you currently pregnant?												
Yes					5.6	301						
[Parents only]												
How many children (younger than 18 years old) do you have?		1,702	2.14	1.68		282	2.09	1.48		1,420	2.15	1.71
How old are each of your children? Please list their ages.		1,496	7.45	4.32		248	8.74	4.22		1,248	7.20	4.29
In the month before your arrest, how many of your children did you live with?		1,666	1.04	1.29		277	1.22	1.28		1,389	1.00	1.29
If parenting classes were available to you during your incarceration, would you be interested in participating?	69.5	1,668			77.2	281			68.0	1,387		

Table 2. Parents in U.S. State and Minnesota Prisons Who Reported Living With Their Minor Children in the Month Before Arrest.

	State prisoners ^a			Minnesota		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Parents of minor children	51.9%	51.2%	61.7%	67.5%	66.0%	76.4%
Lived with their minor children in month before arrest	37.1	35.5	55.3	57.2	55.4	66.1

^aGlaze and Maruschak (2010).

Table 3. Ages of Minor Children of Parents in National and Minnesota Prisons at the Time of the Survey.

Age of minor child	Percent of minor children among parents in state prisons ^a			Percent of minor children among parents in Minnesota state prisons		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Less than 1 year	2.4%	2.5%	1.6%	6.0%	6.6%	2.9%
1-4 years	20.0	20.3	16.7	26.7	28.1	19.6
5-9 years	30.2	30.3	29.1	33.0	32.4	36.2
10-14 years	31.6	31.4	33.8	23.7	22.9	27.6
15-17 years	15.8	15.5	18.8	10.7	10.1	13.7

^aGlaze and Maruschak (2010).

Table 4. Logistic Regression Summary Table for Interest in Taking a Parenting Class.

Predictor	B	SE B	Odds ratio
Female	0.848**	0.20	2.334
Number of children	0.054	0.04	1.056
Child age	-0.099**	0.02	0.905
Live with	0.396*	0.13	1.485
Constant	1.457**	0.18	4.295
Model χ^2		15.33	
Nagelkerke R^2		.84	
Cox and Snell R^2		.06	

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

number of children, and living status prior to prison had on interest in parenting classes. Although the number of children did not have a significant effect, the results show the other three variables were significant predictors of parenting class interest. Compared with males, females were 1.3 times more likely to express interest in a parenting class. Parents who lived with their children prior to prison were 49% more likely to report interest, while interest was also significantly greater for those with younger children. In particular, a 1-year increase in the average age of children was associated with a 9.5% decrease in parenting class interest.

To estimate the number of parents incarcerated in MN, the distribution of parents from the current survey period was applied to the prisoner custody population on July 1, 2014 (Minnesota Department of Corrections [MN DOC], 2015). Assuming 66% of the 9,228 men imprisoned on July 1, 2014 were fathers with minor children ($n = 6,090$), and 76.4% of the 701 women were mothers ($n = 536$), then approximately 6,626 parents were incarcerated in MN prisons (MN DOC, 2015). The total number of children affected was estimated by applying the average number of minor children for incarcerated fathers and mothers (2.43 and 2.37, respectively) to the estimated number of fathers ($n = 6,090$) and mothers ($n = 536$) incarcerated in MN on July 1, 2014. On the basis of the July 1, 2014 census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), this yields approximately 16,069—or 1,246 per 100,000—children with a parent imprisoned in MN.

Discussion

In the current study, we used an anonymous survey to assess the prevalence of parental incarceration among newly admitted individuals to MN state prisons over a 6-month period of time. We found that more than two thirds of men in prison were fathers with minor children and more than three quarters of women in prison were mothers with minor children. Combined, these individuals were parents to an estimated 1.3% of all MN children. More than half of fathers and more than two thirds of mothers were living with at least one of their children in the month before their arrest, and most incarcerated parents expressed interest in participating in a parenting class.

These findings are consistent with estimates from BJS, OH, and TN, showing higher rates of parenting among incarcerated women than men. Indeed, estimates from BJS, OH, and the current study indicate that incarcerated women are 10% to 13% more likely to report having children compared with incarcerated men. Similar to national estimates, data from this investigation also indicate a higher percentage of incarcerated mothers who said they lived with minor children prior to arrest, relative to incarcerated fathers.

Despite these similarities across studies, there are notable differences. Most obvious are estimates from the current study that yield a higher prevalence of parental incarceration than BJS, NY, and OH report. Indeed, estimates of parental incarceration in the current study were nearly 16 percentage points higher than BJS estimates (67.5% vs. 51.9%), with a similar magnitude of difference between MN and BJS estimates for incarcerated fathers (66% vs. 51%) and incarcerated mothers (76% vs. 62%).

There are a number of possible explanations for the differences between national estimates of the prevalence of parental incarceration, state estimates from NY, OH, and TN, and those presented here. First, many scholars have long since acknowledged that the BJS data are likely an underestimate of the number of parents in prison (Maruschak et al., 2010). There may be a host of reasons—including fear of child protection services involvement or increased child support payments—that respondents in prison may be reluctant to acknowledge having minor children in a face-to-face interview.

Surveys—as were used in each of the individual state studies—may be less intrusive and, therefore, yield more valid estimates. Given the higher estimates of persons in state prison with minor children in NY (54%), OH (54.1%), and the current study (67.2%), relative to the BJS estimates (51.9%), there may be some support for this explanation. Furthermore, in OH and TN, some steps were taken to protect participants' privacy, presumably with the goal of increasing their willingness to disclose sensitive information. In OH, those surveyed were given a research identification number that was different from their inmate identification number. In TN, a research identification number was used, but participants were also instructed to put completed surveys in an envelope to protect confidentiality. Despite this, both OH and TN had high nonresponse rates (26.7% and 52.4%, respectively), suggesting that individuals have still been reluctant to complete the surveys, despite protections in place to protect their confidentiality.

In the current study, prisoners were guaranteed both confidentiality and anonymity as they completed the pencil-and-paper survey themselves, were explicitly instructed to not include any identifying information (including their offender identification number) in their response, and returned surveys in a way that maintained this privacy. This approach yielded a substantially lower nonresponse rate (6.9%) relative to the other studies. In this way, estimates obtained through an anonymous survey may not only be higher, but also more accurate, as participants trust that their answers can never be linked back to them.

It is also possible that the sampling approach used here resulted in higher estimates relative to BJS and each of the other states. Indeed, BJS and each of the other states sampled those who had been incarcerated for some period

of time. Parenting status may be confounded by sentence length, in that a prolonged period of incarceration affects one's ability to conceive children, and those with long sentences may have been parents with minor children at some point during their incarceration—but those children have since become adults. As such, studies with samples in which there is unmeasured or uncontrolled variability in sentence length may reduce estimates of parental incarceration. In contrast, in this study, the survey was administered upon admission to prison, effectively controlling for any impact sentence length may have on parenting status.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. There is no way to explore potential differences between responders and nonresponders as the survey was completely anonymously. As such, there may be unmeasured selection effects, thereby limiting the study's generalizability. In addition, because we were particularly sensitive to protecting participants' identities, we did not include questions about age or race/ethnicity, which could have been used to identify an individual in a small orientation group. As such, we are unable to test for potential differences in parenting status based on key demographic characteristics. Given what is known about the marked disparities in parental incarceration by race (Maruschak et al., 2010), this is a critical area for future inquiry.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study has important implications for criminal justice practice, policy, and research. It provides compelling evidence in support of widely held assumptions that BJS data underestimate the true prevalence of parental incarceration. We found that a substantial majority of people in state prisons are parents with minor children; most of whom lived with their children prior to their arrest.

In addition, we found a majority of incarcerated parents indicated interest in participating in a parenting class. While parenting programs are available in correctional facilities in MN and across the country (Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010), they are underfunded and consequently serve only a fraction of incarcerated parents who might benefit (Loper & Novero, 2010). Indeed, fewer than 12% of incarcerated parents reported participating in a parenting or child-rearing class during their time in state prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

In recent reviews of parenting programs of incarcerated mothers (Dallaire & Shlafer, 2017) and fathers (Eddy & Burraston, 2017), the authors conclude

that few of the existing parenting programs are supported by strong evidence. Many existing programs are not systematically and rigorously evaluated and, among those that are, few programs have consistent positive effects on parents or children. With a growing emphasis on the importance of evidence-based practice in corrections (Latessa, 2004; MacKenzie, 2001; MacKenzie, 2013; MacKenzie, 2014), significantly more research is needed examining targeted interventions for incarcerated parents.

Expanding the availability of evidence-based parenting programming could have implications for both incarcerated parents and their children. Providing people in prisons with parenting classes may help address a criminogenic need, which may increase the odds of achieving better recidivism outcomes (Hoffmann et al., 2010). Moreover, increasing the provision of this programming may also help lessen the short- and long-term consequences of parental incarceration for children's health and development (Dallaire & Schlafer, 2017; Eddy & et al, 2017; Loper & Novero, 2010). The relatively high level of interest in parenting programming evidenced by this study—coupled with the limited availability—underscores the need for effective interventions that support incarcerated parents and their minor children, and policies that emphasize support for people in prison and in their roles as parents.

Authors' Note

The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the funding institutions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Preparation of this article was supported in part by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health (UL1TR000114).

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