



# Maternal criminal justice involvement and co-occurring mental health and substance abuse problems: Examining moderation of sex and race on children's mental health

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## ABSTRACT

Increased attention and concern has been given to the scope and consequences of children's experiences with maternal criminal justice involvement (CJI), yet the empirical literature on the population remains limited. This study examined whether the influences of maternal risks (mental health and substance abuse problems) on children's mental health (internalizing and externalizing behaviors) were moderated by sex and race. The sample included 409 children of CJI mothers aged 5–15 who participated in the National Survey on Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). Results indicated that maternal risks were significantly associated with internalizing behaviors and that race was significantly associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Sex and race moderated the associations between maternal risks and internalizing behaviors. Females exposed to maternal mental health and substance abuse problems exhibited elevated internalizing behaviors compared to males. Black children exposed to maternal substance abuse had decreased internalizing behaviors as compared to non-Black children. Implications for criminal justice and child welfare practices and future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The number of women with criminal justice involvement (CJI) has increased dramatically and as a result, their children are one of the fastest growing at-risk populations in the U.S. (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010). In recent decades greater attention and concern has been given to the scope and consequences of children's experiences with maternal CJI. Research has concluded that the population is susceptible to co-occurring maternal mental health and substance abuse problems (Amlund-Hagen & Myers, 2003; Miller, Orellana, Johnson, Kruse, & Anderson-Nathe, 2013; Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006). In addition, children of mothers with CJI, mental health concerns, and substance abuse issues are vulnerable to child welfare investigations (Burns et al., 2010; Egami, Ford, Greenfield, & Crum, 1996; Hairston, 2008; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Kelleher, Chaffin, Holleberg, & Fischer, 1994; Miller, Smyth, & Mudar, 1999; Mumola, 2000; Semidei, Radel, & Nolan, 2001). Elevated internalizing and externalizing behaviors are linked to children who are exposed to each of the aforementioned vulnerabilities (Baker, McHale, Strozier, & Cecil, 2010; Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009; Miller et al., 2013; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004; Poehlmann, 2005; Schneiderman & Villagrana, 2010).

Although the literature provides important context for understanding the significance of the problems the population encounters, the empirical evidence remains limited. Specifically, few studies have

examined the extent that maternal mental health and substance abuse problems affect internalizing and externalizing behaviors among children who are dually exposed to child welfare and criminal justice systems. Moreover, there are few studies that examine whether child characteristics such as sex and race moderate these associations. Results of the current study are important to understanding how children's mental health is affected by exposure to maternal risks and essential to articulating deliberate practice strategies and policy recommendations that address the population's needs.

### 1.1. Maternal criminal justice involvement and co-occurring risks

The lives of women with an arrest and/or incarceration history are often complicated by numerous personal challenges beyond their involvement with the criminal justice system (Miller et al., 2013). Mental health and substance abuse problems are of particular concern as CJI women are disproportionately affected by these issues compared to women in the general population (Cox, Morschauer, Banks, & Stone, 2001; Fazel, Bains, & Doll, 2006; Fazel & Danesh, 2002; Hammett, Roberts, & Kennedy, 2001). Research suggests that among the incarcerated population, mental illness and drug use are more prevalent among incarcerated women than incarcerated men (James & Glaze, 2006; McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997). Mumola (2000) found that among incarcerated mothers, 14.1% of state and 3.8% of federal reported prior admittance to a mental health hospital or treatment program, 15.7% of state and 7.9% of federal identified an emotional or mental health condition, and 22.5% of state and 10.3% of federal reported a

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mental illness. In the same study, 65.3% of state and 37.4% of federal incarcerated mothers reported drug use within the month prior to their offense. Of those who reported an alcohol dependence problem 23.5% were in a state and 12.7% were in a federal prison. A more recent survey of incarcerated mothers, showed that 72.8% had mental health concerns and 63.6% had substance abuse problems (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). These patterns have the potential to negatively affect children as many women continue to experience such issues after they are released.

Mental health and substance abuse issues can impede a mother's ability to provide adequate care for her children, placing them at greater risk for exposure to neglectful or harmful parenting that can lead to child welfare involvement (Dannerbeck, 2005; Mackintosh, Myers, & Kennon, 2006; Rinehart et al., 2005; Semidei et al., 2001). In addition, mental health and substance abuse problems can affect one's capacity to be physically and emotionally available to her children, creating circumstances in which children may sacrifice their own needs to become the family's emotional and/or instrumental caregiver (Bellow, Boris, Larrieu, Lewis, & Elliot, 2005; Hooper, 2007). Exposure to these risks creates stress for children and has significant implications that can negatively affect their psycho-emotional and behavioral well-being (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998; Jones & Wells, 1996).

### 1.2. Risk exposure and child mental health

The extant literature reports that children of parents who experience depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders are at greater risk for psycho-emotional and behavioral disorders than children of parents without these problems (Beardslee, Versage, & Gladstone, 1998; Black & Krishnakumar, 1998; Burns et al., 2004; Hammen, Shih, & Brennan, 2004; Lewinsohn, Olino, & Klein, 2005; Lindsey et al., 2008; Marcenko, Lyons, & Courtney, 2011; VanDeMark et al., 2005). Similar outcomes are found among children of parents with substance abuse disorders (Dore, Doris, & Wright, 1995; Ellis & Zucker, 1997). Research has consistently concluded that children who experience maltreatment are more likely to exhibit internalizing and externalizing problems that manifest as anger, depression, anxiety, and disassociation than children in the general population (English et al., 2005; Ford, Wasser, & Conner, 2011; Johnson et al., 2002; Leslie et al., 2005; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; McCrae, Chapman, & Christ, 2006; Schneiderman & Villagrana, 2010).

Children dually exposed to criminal justice and child welfare systems are more likely to experience maternal risks—which may increase the risks for psycho-emotional and behavioral difficulties. Phillips and Erkanli's (2009) nationally representative child welfare study concluded that mental health and substance abuse problems were more prevalent among mothers with arrest histories than mothers without such histories. Moreover, children aged 2–10 whose mothers had arrest histories had higher levels of emotional or behavior problems than children of mothers without arrest histories but no significant differences were found among children 11 and older. In another study, Miller et al. (2013) found that among a sample of children assessed by child welfare agencies, children of CJJ mothers were more likely to experience maternal substance abuse but not maternal mental health problems. Maternal CJJ was associated with increased externalizing problems and comparable internalizing problems to their otherwise situated counterparts. Similarly, Phillips and Dettlaff (2009) found no significant differences in behavioral problems between children of arrested and non-arrested caregivers (included mothers, fathers, and extended family). Children in the sample exhibited clinically significant emotional and behavioral problems that were two to four times greater than children in the general population.

### 1.3. Moderating effects of sex and race

The relationship between sex differences and behavioral outcomes are studied extensively in the literature, concluding that internalizing

behaviors occur with greater frequency among females while externalizing behaviors are more likely to occur among males (Achenbach, 1991; Besser & Blatt, 2007; Rutter, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005). It is unclear, however, whether there is a marked preponderance of male and female specific biological predictors of behavioral outcomes or whether sex is a cue for gender socialization that predicts behaviors (Kirby & Fraser, 2002; Rutter et al., 2003). Scholars suggest that for children of incarcerated or otherwise justice involved mothers, males and females are affected similarly but that their modes of expressions may differ (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). There is no conclusive evidence on whether sex is a predictor of behavioral expression or whether there is greater frequency of specific expressions among males or females (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Gabel & Shindlerdecker, 1993; Amlund-Hagen & Myers, 2003; Phillips et al., 2004). Findings on the relationships between sex and mental health outcomes among study samples of children with criminal justice involved parents are mixed. For example, Mackintosh et al. (2006) found that among a sample of children of incarcerated mothers, females exhibited elevated internalizing behaviors while males exhibited elevated externalizing behaviors. In another study, Amlund-Hagen and Myers (2003) found no differences between males and females with regard to internalizing behaviors but males had increased levels of externalizing problems as compared to females. Miller and Bank (2013) concluded that the influence of sex on internalizing but not externalizing behaviors appeared relevant when the child's race and exposure to multiple maternal criminal justice involvement interacted such that males exhibited an increased risk for internalizing problems. The influence of sex on internalizing problems remained small and suggested that males and females were affected similarly by such exposure. Research on this population, however, has not examined the potentially moderating effects of sex on the relationship between co-occurring maternal risks and children's mental health.

Children of color, specifically Black children are represented disproportionately among parents with corrections/criminal justice histories (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2008, 2011; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000) and parents with prior or concurrent child welfare system involvement (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Sedlak & Schultz, 2005; Sedlak et al., 2010; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2007). Most studies on the population limit the scope of inquiry of race descriptively and fail to examine the extent to which race potentially predicts distinct experiences and variability in outcomes among children with CJJ mothers. Miller and Bank (2013) is the only known study that has examined the moderating effects of race on the population's outcomes. The researchers found that race served as a moderator such that non-Black children exposed to multiple involvement with the criminal justice system and community adversity exhibited significant increases in problem behaviors as compared to Black children who were similarly exposed but showed no increases in problem behaviors. Despite these findings, there is still much that is unknown about the potentially moderating effects of race on the associations between maternal risks and the mental health outcomes among children with CJJ mothers. Understanding whether sex and race differently influence children's outcomes may provide important information for practitioners that inform practice strategies to effectively address and uniquely respond to the needs of children affected by maternal CJJ and associated risks.

### 1.4. Purpose of the study

This study analyzed data from a nationally representative child welfare sample that included children of CJJ mothers to examine the predictive validity of child characteristics (i.e., sex and race) and maternal risks (i.e., mental health and substance abuse problems) on children's mental health (i.e., internalizing and externalizing behaviors). In addition, the study investigated whether sex and race moderated the effects of maternal risks on children's mental health outcomes. It was hypothesized

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