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# Mental health of adolescents with currently and formerly incarcerated parents



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## ABSTRACT

Reliable information about children of incarcerated people is difficult to obtain, and major gaps exist in our understanding of their well-being. This study aims to determine whether adolescents with incarcerated parents report higher levels of mental health problems than those without an incarcerated parent, and whether the relationship between parental incarceration and adolescent mental health is moderated by parent-child relationships. Using a statewide survey from one US state, we compared adolescents with a currently incarcerated parent to those with a formerly incarcerated parent and those with no history of parental incarceration on self-reported indicators of mental health, and examined whether strong parent-child relationships were protective against mental health concerns. Results indicate that adolescents with incarcerated parents are at elevated risk for mental health problems, and strong parent-child relationships partially buffer children from risk. Findings underscore the need for more investment in effective early interventions for adolescents in highly adverse contexts.

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Between 1980 and 2000, the rate of imprisonment in the United States more than tripled (West & Sabol, 2008). On any given day, there are about 1.9 million children in the United States who have a parent in a state or federal prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) and millions more have a parent incarcerated in a county jail. As the number of individuals under correctional custody who are parents of minor children increases, so does the need to understand the wide-ranging impacts on the families of incarcerated people.

Incarceration of a parent is a stressful event for families and children (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2008; Kampfner, 1995; Nesmith & Ruhlman, 2008). Children of incarcerated parents often experience multiple emotional and social difficulties, including exposure to the parent's criminal activity, witnessing the parent's arrest and court proceedings, separation from parents, loss of family income, housing instability, changes in caregiving, stressful visits with the incarcerated parent, and shame or stigma associated with a parent's involvement in the criminal justice system (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). One potential impact of parental incarceration and the stressors associated with it is compromised emotional well-being of children.

Children and adolescents with incarcerated parents are thought to be at elevated risk for mental health problems, though research has produced mixed results. A recent meta-analysis by Murray et al. (2012) concluded that children of incarcerated parents are no more likely than comparison groups to exhibit poor mental health outcomes. There are several potential explanations for these findings. First, parental incarceration was measured at different times in each of the individual studies, with some studies including parents' arrests occurring before children were born. Children's mental health was also assessed

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at a variety of different developmental stages, rather than during adolescence, when mental health problems are most likely to occur. Finally, most studies included in the meta-analysis examined internalizing symptoms, with limited attention paid to other types of mental health problems (e.g. self-injurious behavior, suicide ideation). Many high-quality studies have produced results that contradict the findings from the meta-analysis. For example, a study in England found that children of incarcerated parents were more than twice as likely as children in the general population to experience significant mental health problems (Murray & Farrington, 2008b). A similar study from the United States (R. Johnson, 2009) compared children who had experienced parental incarceration with a non-incarcerated control group and found that after controlling for confounders such as parent education, parent age, and neighborhood quality, children of incarcerated parents were 4.7 times more likely than children of matched controls to exhibit internalizing problems when they were 11–16 years old. Because there is considerable variability in developmental trajectories for these children, research on risk and protective factors can shed light on the processes of resilience that have the potential to contribute to positive functioning in children of incarcerated parents.

Mental health problems in childhood have important implications for development across the lifespan. Previous research suggests that adults who experience the onset of depression in childhood or adolescence have more impaired social and occupational functioning and poorer quality of life than those whose depression first begins in adulthood (Zisook et al., 2007). Furthermore, childhood mental health concerns might contribute to worse outcomes across a variety of domains (Cox, Mills-Koonce, Propper, & Gariepy, 2010) such as low educational attainment, poor occupational functioning, and early childbearing (Rao, 2006). Deleterious effects of parental incarceration on the mental health of offspring are likely to persist throughout the life course (Colman, Wadsworth, Croudace, & Jones, 2007; Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). For example, Murray and Farrington (2008a) found that men who had experienced parental incarceration during their childhood were significantly more likely to have high levels of anxiety and depression at age 48 than those in a comparison group.

Adolescence is characterized by significant changes in social, emotional, and cognitive capacities, and it is a particularly sensitive period for mental health concerns, with emotional problems often onsetting during these years. The prevalence of emotional and behavioral disorders in children has been estimated at 13% in childhood (Merikangas, He, Brody, et al., 2010) and over 30% by adolescence, including 22.2% with a disorder of severe impairment (Merikangas, He, Burstein, et al., 2010). Mental health problems in adolescence are a particularly salient issue for children of incarcerated parents because mental health problems might contribute to adolescents' problem behavior and intergenerational patterns of low achievement, criminality, and poverty (Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001). Although strong parent-child relationships have been investigated as a protective factor for younger children of incarcerated parents (Mackintosh, Myers, & Kennon, 2006; Poehlmann, 2005), there are no studies in the published literature examining how the quality of parent-child relationships in adolescence might buffer children of incarcerated parents from negative mental health outcomes. This study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the associations between parent-child relationships and mental health indicators in adolescents with currently and formerly incarcerated parents.

## 1. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a risk and resilience framework. Resilience refers to the maintenance or development of positive functioning in the face of exposure to significant stress or adversity (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1991). Masten (2001) argued resilience is common and is the result of normative adaptational systems of humans. Developmental scientists are particularly interested in elucidating processes that contribute to resilience in childhood and adolescence because early deviations from normative developmental trajectories can have cascading effects on later developmental processes (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010).

The study of resilience often focuses on identification of risk and protective factors. Risk and protective factors can be qualities of a child, or qualities of the child's environmental context (Masten & Obradović, 2006). Important risk factors for children that are relevant to this study include parental incarceration, family instability, and poverty.

Many families with an incarcerated parent are known to have significant problems beyond criminal involvement that may include a history of child abuse or neglect, parental substance abuse or mental health problems, lack of education and opportunity, poverty, or the experience of racism (Phillips, Erkanli, Costello, & Angold, 2008). Incarceration can serve to exacerbate these problems and can also result in additional strains for families and children such as loss of family income, disrupted attachment with caregivers, poor parenting skills, social stigma, and inadequate supervision of children. The stress associated with having an incarcerated family member can cause declines in personal well-being and impaired parenting skills in caregivers. These corollaries of parental incarceration represent significant threats to the optimal development of the children of incarcerated parents (Phillips, 2010).

Despite the prevalence of multiple risk factors, families with incarcerated parents can also display considerable resilience. Strong family relationships have been identified as a critical mechanism for facilitating resilience in the face of environmental risks (Miller, 2007). One of the primary mechanisms of resilience for children is positive relationships with parents and other caregivers, which foster protective psychological processes; children who experience chronic adversity fare better when they have a good and stable relationship with a competent adult (Masten et al., 1991). In the current study, parental closeness is hypothesized as a protective factor for children's mental health.

The incarceration of a parent is often a stressful event for families. In addition to concern about the well-being of the incarcerated person, parents remaining at home may face a multitude of challenges such as reduced income, residential

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