



# Paternal incarceration and child-reported behavioral functioning at age 9



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## ABSTRACT

Within the last few decades our understanding of the importance of non-cognitive skills for socioeconomic success has grown along with our knowledge of the deleterious impacts of paternal incarceration for child wellbeing. Given the importance of early skills and that elementary-aged children constitute the majority of children with incarcerated parents, understanding the connection between paternal incarceration and the socio-emotional component of children's non-cognitive development is pressing. Using matching models, data from the newest wave of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and exploring a larger range of behavioral skills than previous literature, this paper provides estimates of the impact of paternal incarceration on children's behavioral functioning at age 9 using children's own self-reports. Comparisons to oft-used parent reports are made and heterogeneity by gender is explored. Findings suggest the incarceration of a father increases the antisocial behaviors children self-report, but has null effects on prosocial skill development.

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## 1. Introduction

There is converging cross-disciplinary evidence of the importance of non-cognitive skills for later education, employment and earnings outcomes—in short, one's socioeconomic success. Somewhat independently, this work has established that a variety of non-cognitive traits such as one's social and emotional skills, self-discipline or behavioral functioning are: consistent predictors of school success (e.g., Bowles and Gintis, 1979; Farkas et al., 1990), equally as important as cognitive skills or schooling for later-life earnings, educational attainment and labor market success (e.g., Duckworth and Seligman, 2005; Dunifon and Duncan, 1998; Heckman and Rubinstein, 2001; Heckman et al., 2006; Jencks, 1979), and dramatically shaped by early life experiences creating lasting implications for subsequent skill development (e.g., Knudsen et al., 2006).

Alongside this, is mounting evidence of the deleterious ripple effects of mass incarceration—those that extend beyond the imprisoned individual to impact families, communities and other social institutions. Given its high cumulative risk (Wildeman, 2009), of particular importance are studies showing the negative impacts of a father's incarceration for child and adolescent mental health and socio-emotional development. Moreover, paternal imprisonment, somewhat more consistently than a mother's incarceration (see for example, Wildeman and Turney, 2014 or National Research Council, 2014 for overviews), has been found to increase aggression, depression, anxiety, attention problems, and delinquency in young children and adolescents (e.g., Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2014; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Murray et al., 2012b; Roettger

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and Swisher, 2011; Wilbur et al., 2007; Wildeman, 2010), suggesting the potential for mass paternal incarceration to present a significant impediment to a child's healthy non-cognitive skill development and thus their future socioeconomic success.

With children of the incarcerated constituting nearly 10% of the total U.S. population under the age of 18 (Travis et al., 2005), this paper builds on these strands of work by bringing new data to bear, from the latest wave of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, on our understanding of the effect that paternal incarceration has on an important dimension of non-cognitive skill development: children's self-reported socio-emotional skills and behavioral functioning at age 9. Special care is given to issues of selection by utilizing matching methods, accounting for a robust set of covariates, and attending to the temporal ordering of all measures included in the analyses. Moreover, examinations of whether effects vary by gender and how similar findings are to parent reports of child socio-emotional behaviors are conducted. In all, this study provides a novel extension by bringing new quantitative data into the conversation on the effects of paternal incarceration for children's development, helping to paint a more nuanced picture of the collateral consequences of mass incarceration for child wellbeing into middle childhood.

### 1.1. Non-cognitive skills and the lasting importance of early skill development

The multi-disciplinary interest in, and broad nature of, non-cognitive skills makes finding a common terminology difficult. Children's non-cognitive skills can encompass dimensions of physical health or motor functioning as well as social and emotional behaviors, personality traits, or abilities linked to self-discipline and effortful control. The specific dimensions of non-cognitive skills that this paper explores are the attention, social and behavioral components of learning, which align with a child's ability to concentrate, stay on task, cooperate, interact appropriately with peers, and exercise emotional self-regulation (for a review, see Farkas, 2003).

Non-cognitive skill development is cumulative, begins during the earliest years of life, and is powerfully shaped—both negatively and positively—by experiences and environments in early childhood (Knudsen et al., 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). During early childhood (approximately birth to age 5) the foundation for one's skill capacities is laid, while in middle childhood (approximately ages 5–10) these skills crystalize, establishing a trajectory for future development (Blair, 2002; Kowaleski-Jones and Duncan, 1999). Thus, negative experiences—whether social, environmental or physical—occurring during the first ten years of a child's life have the potential to influence a range of later outcomes (Duncan et al., 2007; Huston and Ripke, 2006), such as schooling, employment and earnings, all of which are linked to broader stratification processes.

### 1.2. Parental incarceration and child socio-emotional development and behavioral functioning

The incarceration of a parent has the potential to present a number of risks to a child's healthy emotional, behavioral and social development. When children are left to make sense of and deal with the absence of a parent, often without explanation or understanding, parental incarceration can lead to feelings of worry, confusion, loneliness, ambiguous loss, anger, depression, sleep problems, or even developmental regressions (Bocknek et al., 2009; Poehlmann, 2005). The vast majority of work looking at how a parent's incarceration affects their offspring emphasizes impacts along the socio-emotional, delinquency and mental health dimensions of development (for a recent review, see Murray et al., 2012a). For example, among adolescents with incarcerated mothers, findings emphasize juvenile justice involvement (Cho, 2010; Shlafer et al., 2012), aggression and bullying (Myers et al., 2013) and increased depressive symptoms (Foster and Hagan, 2013; Lee et al., 2013). Likewise, paternal incarceration for adolescents carries increased probabilities of delinquency (e.g. Roettger and Swisher, 2011), alongside stress, anxiety and other antisocial behaviors (e.g. Foster and Hagan, 2013; Murray and Farrington, 2008). However, of arguably more importance are studies exploring effects of parental incarceration on younger children's socio-emotional and behavioral functioning, given the importance of childhood for setting the foundation for healthy skill development.

Studies on consequences of parental incarceration for children during early childhood show negative impacts across a range of non-cognitive skills, including physical aggression, behavior problems, and attentional capacities (Craigie, 2011; Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2014; Johnson, 2009; Wildeman, 2010). Effects across this pre-school age range are most robust for externalizing behaviors (aggression, acting out) and are mainly reported to be concentrated among boys. Slightly less consistent findings are reported for children who experience a parent's incarceration during the elementary school years (i.e. middle childhood, ages 5–10). For example, work by Wilbur et al. (2007) and Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) provide evidence for increases in child externalizing behaviors and depressive symptoms after parental incarceration, while Johnson (2009) finds only marginal effects for internalizing and null effects for externalizing behaviors for children in middle childhood.

Focusing mainly on antisocial behaviors, fewer studies of impacts of parental incarceration on children in middle childhood have looked at measures of prosocial non-cognitive skills, such as task completion or self-discipline, which are quite important to future socioeconomic success (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005; Heckman et al., 2006). In one recent exception, Dallaire and Zeman (2013), explore the relationship between elementary aged children's empathic behavior, peer-reported aggression and exposure to parental incarceration. Looking at differences in reports of child empathy and aggressive behaviors across multiple groups of children experiencing a variety of forms of parental separation, they find that children experiencing current parental incarceration are, on average, rated as less empathic and more aggressive than peers in the other comparison groups.

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