

ABSTRACT: The experiences of and care for children who have one or both parents in jail or prison raise important questions about the well-being of these children. In 2012, an estimated 26,000 Ohio adult prisoners were held in these local detention centers, separated from their children in Figure 1. Spousal, parental, and parental incarceration rates are shown in Figure 2. Reflecting long-standing racial disparities, racial disparities exist for children with incarcerated parents (see Figure 2). Black children are 7.5 times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison, and Hispanic children are 2.5 times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than white children.<sup>1</sup> For both men and women, drug and public-order offenders were more likely to report having children than violent offenders.<sup>1</sup>

an estimated 26,000 Ohio adult prisoners

[continued next page >](#)

of state inmates and 63% of federal inmates are parents of minor children.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, Ohio state prisons held 47,008 men and 3,868 women. If Ohio follows national trends of 62% of women and 51% of men in state prisons reporting having at least one child under 18, then

### UNDERSTANDING THE TRAUMA FACED BY CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Parental incarceration often occurs within the context of many other potential life stressors and trauma factors,<sup>2-11</sup> such as parental substance abuse, mental health problems, economic instability and inadequate education. For example, 57% of parents in state prison have a mental health problem, and 67% report current substance abuse or dependence.<sup>1</sup> The experience of parental arrest and incarceration may compound this trauma (see Table 1). Children may also experience difficulties associated with the loss of financial support provided by the incarcerated parent<sup>3</sup> and parental separation or divorce due to incarceration.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Parental incarceration has been conceptualized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that occurs within the context of multiple traumas.<sup>3</sup> Incarceration can disrupt a child's attachment to a

primary caregiver, which can have long-reaching impacts beyond the period of incarceration.<sup>3, 7, 16</sup> Bronfenbrenner's ecological model,<sup>18</sup> adapted to children with incarcerated parents in Figure 3, provides an illustration of the many factors at multiple levels that may impact a child with an incarcerated parent. These may include the development of secure attachments to both the incarcerated parent and caregivers during incarceration, connections between parents and caregivers, parent and caregiver poverty and disadvantage, and societal attitudes towards formerly incarcerated people.<sup>19</sup> The effects of incarceration may also be related to children's exposure to the parent's arrest and previous criminal activity.<sup>3, 4, 14, 15</sup> The negative effects of parental incarceration may be mediated by other factors.

have a significant impact on the stability and consistency of care while a parent is incarcerated. For example, previous research has found that placement with a father during a mother's incarceration was more stable than placement with grandparents or other family members.<sup>17</sup>

As demonstrated by differences in caregivers reported above, the gender of the incarcerated parent can play an important role in children's experience of incarceration. Paternal incarceration is more frequent than maternal incarceration.<sup>1</sup> Maternal incarceration may be especially disruptive to a child's daily routines. Mothers are more likely than fathers to report living with at least one child prior to incarceration and providing most of the daily care for their children.<sup>1, 5, 7, 10, 22, 23</sup> Children of incarcerated mothers are also more likely to have been exposed to their mother's arrest and criminal activities than children of incarcerated fathers.<sup>14</sup> Maternal incarceration is generally linked to greater risk of adverse outcomes, both because of a higher frequency of separation from

a primary caregiver and a greater risk of having both parents incarcerated when a mother is incarcerated.<sup>3-5, 9</sup> For example, adult children of incarcerated mothers are 2.5 times more likely to experience incarceration than adult children of incarcerated fathers.<sup>4</sup>

#### Long-Term Effects of Parental Incarceration

The effects of parental incarceration may be long reaching, especially in the context of other stressors such as poverty and mental illness. In a study of incarcerated parents, only 42% with a current substance problem and 30% with mental health problems had received treatment since incarceration,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that these families may continue to face challenges following release. Formerly-incarcerated mothers have high rates of depression, substance abuse, and history of domestic violence.<sup>12</sup> In other research, parental incarceration in the past 2 years was associated with family conflict, family victimization and children's delinquency, even when taking into account additional risk factors.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a history of parental incarceration is associated with

family victimization and delinquency even after a parent returns to home,<sup>2</sup> and with poor family functioning and increased problem behaviors through childhood and adolescence.<sup>24</sup>

Another long-reaching effect of parental incarceration may be an increased risk of future incarceration for the child. Over half of incarcerated parents report having a family member ever incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> Communities in which there is a high rate of parental incarceration may make the experience seem "normal", thus in part contributing to a multigenerational cycle of incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Previous research has found that maternal incarceration during childhood is associated with increased risk of adult incarceration.<sup>25</sup> After release, disenfranchisement of previously incarcerated individuals may contribute to family economic insecurity,<sup>26</sup> and formerly incarcerated parents may not be able to access social safety net services. Therefore, providing adequate social support and connections to community resources following incarceration are key to the best possible child outcomes.<sup>12, 18</sup>

Throughout the experience of parental arrest and incarceration, children may experience compounded trauma as a result.

TABLE 1: POTENTIAL CHILD TRAUMAS RELATED TO PARENTAL INCARCERATION





The Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB) program is a more than 20 year old model within Girl Scouts of America for daughters

**References:**

1. Glaze LE, Maruschak LM. Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. 2008. Available at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>.
2. Aaron L, Dallaire DH. Parental Incarceration and Multiple Risk Experiences: Effects on Family Dynamics and Children's Delinquency. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 2010;39(12):1471 - 1484.
- 3.

