

Recommended Citation

Stergas, Julia (2020) "Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children's Mental Health and Educational Success by Race and Gender," *Perspectives*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol12/iss1/5>

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Perspectives

Volume 12
Issue 1 2020

Article 5

6-15-2020

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ABSTRACT

This literature review will evaluate the extent to which parental incarceration impacts children's mental health and educational success and how these effects differ by race and gender. An introductory section will be followed by definitions of mental health, educational success, race, and gender as they appear in the literature. My discussion on mental health will focus on how parental incarceration places children at greater risk for poor mental health outcomes and how young boys and girls exhibit different mental health problems after experiencing parental incarceration. My discussion on educational success will focus on how parental incarceration is associated with children's poor educational success and how these effects are felt disproportionately by black children and boys. Following the conclusion of my review of the literature, I will assess the limitations of the literature and discuss the potential for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The substantial growth of the United States prison population since the 1980s has prompted much research on the diverse effects of incarceration on prisoners. However, only recently have scholars begun to examine the effects of mass incarceration on an often-neglected group – the children of incarcerated parents (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). More than half of state and federal inmates report having a child under the age of 18, leaving roughly 1.5 million children with parents currently incarcerated (Haskins 2014; Miller and Barnes 2015). When

adults on parole and probation are included in this figure, the number of children estimated to have a parent under correctional supervision is 3.2 million (Haskins 2014). Furthermore, this figure likely underestimates the number of children impacted by mass incarceration, as it does not include children with previously incarcerated parents.

Children of currently or previously incarcerated parents are typically disadvantaged in several ways other than parental incarceration status (Haskins 2014; Johnson and Easterling 2012; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramaer, and Robbins 2002; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Social conflict perspective provides a theoretical lens through which we can examine the effects of parental incarceration by focusing on which groups or individuals benefit from the current social arrangement. In this area of sociology, disadvantage and inequality are at the heart of social research. Parental incarceration status is a marker of disadvantage for children regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender and has recently been the focus of sociological research investigating the social consequences of mass incarceration (Turney and Haskins 2014). This disadvantage is not felt equally by children of all races and is experienced differently by gender. By the age of 14, one in four black children born in 1990 had a parent who was incarcerated, whereas only one in 25 white children had a parent who was incarcerated (Wildeman 2009). In addition, boys of disadvantaged backgrounds have substantially lower educational achievement trajectories than females and are more prone to externalizing behaviors (Haskins 2014). Overall, parental incarceration is associated with poor mental health and poor educational success for children and is a risk factor that predicts these outcomes. How children experience parental incarceration varies by gender, but its main effects do not vary by race. Importantly, while the main effects of parental incarceration do not vary by race, African American children disproportionately experience parental incarceration.

In investigating the extent to which parental incarceration impacts children's mental health and educational success, and how these differ by the child's gender and race, it is important to understand their definitions. In the context of this review, my discussion of the literature on mental health will be broken into three sections: reported overall mental health, internalizing behavior, and externalizing behavior. Internalizing behavior refers to a child's depression or anxiety (Haskins 2014; Murray, Loeber, and Pardini 2012; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Externalizing behavior refers to a child's aggression and conduct disorder (Haskins 2014; Phillips et al. 2002; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Overall mental health encompasses studies where a child's internalizing and externalizing behavior is aggregated to score the overall effects of parental incarceration on mental health (Tasca, Turanovic, White, and Rodriguez 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). When using the term mental health, I will be referring to the effects of parental incarceration on overall mental health unless otherwise specified. In my discussion of the effects of parental incarceration on educational success, I will focus on educational success for elementary-aged children, adolescents, and emerging adults (18 years or older). Educational success in this review refers to school preparedness, literary and math skills, and educational attainment and satisfaction (Foster and Hagan 2009; Haskins 2014; Miller and Barnes 2015; Murray, Loeber, and Pardini 2012). Further definitions will be provided as terms arise.

For both mental health and educational success, I will be investigating to what extent children of different genders and races experience parental incarceration differently. For the purposes of this study, gender refers to a child or adolescent identifying as either male or female. Though other genders exist, all studies in my review identify only male and female participants, so my reference to gender remains binomial. In considering race, differences will focus mainly

on the experiences of African American and white children, though the experiences of Latino children will be examined briefly.

MENTAL HEALTH

Research on the effects of parental incarceration on child mental health typically consists of measures examining depression, anxiety, and aggression (Miller and Barnes 2015; Tasca et al. 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Studies tend to score internalizing behavior and externalizing behavior together to create an indicator of a child's overall mental health (Miller and Barnes 2015; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Research suggests that both internalizing and externalizing behaviors are associated with parental incarceration, but most commonly it suggests that overall poor mental health is associated with parental incarceration (Miller and Barnes 2015; Tasca et al. 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Miller and Barnes (2015) examine paternal incarceration during childhood and the outcomes it produces in adulthood using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. After controlling for relevant variables (gender, race, and ethnicity), Miller and Barnes (2015) determine that paternal incarceration places children at risk for poor mental health. Similarly, Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) use longitudinal data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods to measure internalizing and externalizing behaviors of children with incarcerated parents. Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) determine that pre-existing behavioral problems are exacerbated when children experience parental incarceration. Importantly, parental incarceration can independently increase mental and behavioral problems by four to six percent (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Although four to six percent is a small increase, for children of disadvantaged backgrounds this increase could lead them to require clinical help to manage their symptoms (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011).

Little research has been conducted on differences in mental health by gender or race of children with incarcerated parents. Existing research, though few in number, has suggested that a child's race and gender are negatively associated with their mental health when experiencing parental incarceration. In a preliminary study, Latino and Latina children with an incarcerated parent had a higher risk for mental health problems than non-Latino/a children (Tasca et al. 2014). In this study, incarcerated parents reported whether their children were diagnosed with a mental illness in a yes/no questionnaire (Tasca et al. 2014). The results of this survey also suggest that being a girl, as opposed to a boy, was negatively associated with mental health problems (Tasca et al. 2014). Though not generalizable due to a nonrepresentative sample, this data is one of the first studies that looks at the different experiences of parental incarceration by both boys and girls of different races and ethnicities.

Despite a lack of research on overall mental health differences between boys and girls with incarcerated parents, when separating externalizing and internalizing behaviors, research shows that boys and girls experience the effects of parental incarceration differently. Young boys are more prone to externalizing behaviors such as aggression after the incarceration of a father while girls are more likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). However, paternal incarceration can lead to significant increases in both aggression and depression for both genders (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011).

While research seems to suggest that overall mental health is negatively associated with parental incarceration, many studies contain methodological flaws. Due to the obvious ethical limitations of inducing parental incarceration with random selection, most studies on parental incarceration do not contain data from before and after incarceration. In an extensive meta-analysis of 40 studies, only three studies accounted for a child's mental health before and after

parental incarceration (Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012). In these studies, it was determined that there was no change in behavior from before parental incarceration to after (Murray et al. 2012). The most rigorous studies showed that parental incarceration was not associated with a higher risk for mental health problems or an increase in depression (Murray et al. 2012). This information suggests that more meticulous studies need to be conducted to determine the causal relationship between parental incarceration and poor mental health. Despite this, it does not negate the conclusions of Miller and Barnes (2015); Tasca et al. (2014); and Wakefield and Wildeman (2011), for these studies suggest that parental incarceration is only a *risk factor*, not a causal factor, of poor child mental health. To clarify, a *risk factor* refers to a variable that may contribute to the outcome in some significant way, whereas a *causal factor* refers to a variable that directly precipitates the outcome.

EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Further discussion will focus on the effects of parental incarceration on a child's educational success and how this differs by race and gender. Because research on educational success is often specific to an age group, my discussion will examine the effects of parental incarceration on elementary-age children, adolescents, and emerging adults (18 years and older).

Cognitive and non-cognitive functioning are important factors in the determination of school readiness, a child's age-appropriate development that is linked to later educational achievement (Haskins 2014). This association with later educational achievement makes school readiness an important educational underpinning. The results of an analysis from the Fragile Families Study suggest that by age five, children experiencing paternal incarceration have lower cognitive scores (e.g., language, literacy, and reasoning skills) and non-cognitive scores (e.g., attention, social, and externalizing/internalizing behaviors) compared to those with non-

incarcerated parents (Haskins 2014). A similar examination of young children suggests that children of incarcerated fathers are 1.47 times more likely to experience early grade retention (i.e. being “held back”) than their counterparts, potentially due to a child’s behavioral problems – a non-cognitive measure whose delay is also associated with parental incarceration (Haskins 2014; Turney and Haskins 2014).

The main effects of parental incarceration on young children’s education do not vary by race, however black children experience the effects of parental incarceration disproportionately (Haskins 2014; Turney and Haskins 2014). Black children’s higher exposure to incarceration could partially explain why black children are less school ready and experience grade retention more often than whites (Haskins 2014; Turney and Haskins 2014). This disproportionate exposure seems to play a role in the persistently low achievement of black boys in school (Haskins 2014). Haskins (2014) and Turney and Haskins (2014) also suggest that gender plays a role in poor educational success. Boys tend to be less behaviorally ready than girls, suggesting that parental incarceration does not promote age-appropriate behavior among young boys (Haskins 2014). Overall, the results suggest that parental incarceration negatively impacts young children’s educational success, and these effects are disproportionately felt by black children and boys.

While research on the educational success of adolescents appears to suggest that adolescents are negatively impacted by parental incarceration, several studies state otherwise, suggesting that results are mixed. Among adolescents receiving routine mental health care, those experiencing parental incarceration also experienced a significantly higher number of school expulsions and suspension than children not experiencing parental incarceration (Phillips et al. 2002). However, it was determined that these children were significantly more likely to have

mothers and/or fathers who abused drugs and/or alcohol, to have lived in extreme poverty, or to have a history of abuse or neglect, all factors that could have influenced suspensions and expulsions (Phillips et al. 2002). Consequently, it is unclear whether parental incarceration had an independent negative effect on educational success in Phillips and colleagues' (2012) study. In a meta-analysis of 40 studies, Murray et al. (2012) determined that parental incarceration was not associated with a higher risk for poor educational performance when controlling for covariates such as child's social class, antisocial behavior, and race. Similarly, Murray, Loeber, and Pardini (2012) analyze data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study (a longitudinal survey of over 1,000 adolescent boys) and suggest that parental incarceration does not independently predict increases in poor academic performance when risks predating parental incarceration are considered. These risks include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic status, low parental supervision, and gender. Generally, studies focusing on adolescent educational success suggest that parental incarceration does not predict poor educational outcomes. Little research investigates whether adolescents' experiences of parental incarceration vary by gender or race.

Further examination of the effects of parental incarceration occurring in childhood on early adulthood educational outcomes may provide insight into the long-term educational trajectory of these disadvantaged individuals. Children who experience the incarceration of a parent do not complete as high a level of education as children who do not experience parental incarceration (Foster and Hagan 2009; Miller and Barnes 2015). Children who experience paternal incarceration are significantly less likely to graduate college and less likely to be satisfied with their level of educational attainment (Miller and Barnes 2015). Parental incarceration also independently decreases the educational attainment of children in emerging adulthood and places children at risk for educational under-attainment (Foster and Hagan 2009;

Miller and Barnes 2015). Parental incarceration decreases the educational attainment across all races and ethnicities, but similar to educational successes in elementary-age children, parental incarceration disproportionately affects minorities (Foster and Hagan 2009).

In summary, the literature suggests that parental incarceration negatively affects the educational success of children (Foster and Hagan 2009; Haskins 2014; Miller and Barnes 2015; Phillips et al. 2002; Turney and Haskins 2014). The extent to which it affects educational success, however, appears to be only as a risk factor for various measures of poor educational success. Even the label of risk factor is contentious, as Murray et al. (2012), in a meta-analysis of over three dozen studies, determine that the most informative studies suggest that parental incarceration *is not* a risk factor for poor educational performance. Although most literature points toward its negative effects, more studies need to be conducted to conclusively determine whether or not parental incarceration is an independent risk factor for poor educational success.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed substantial evidence that provides a conclusive summary of the extent to which parental incarceration affects children's mental health and educational success. With the literature available, I have also discussed how a child's experience of parental incarceration is influenced by their race and gender. The literature suggests that parental incarceration is associated with poor mental health and poor educational success for children. Specifically, children of elementary age appear to be at risk for delayed non-cognitive development and early grade retention while adolescents and young adults appear to attain fewer years of education compared to their peers who did not experience parental incarceration (Foster and Hagan 2009; Haskins 2014; Miller and Barnes 2015; Turney and Haskins 2014). When considering the effects of parental incarceration on mental health, externalizing and internalizing

behaviors as well as overall poor mental health seem to be associated with parental incarceration (Tasca et al. 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2009). Of the few articles that examine differences by race, the main experiences of parental incarceration's association with poor mental health and poor educational success do not appear to significantly differ (Haskins 2014; Turney and Haskins 2014). However, several studies indicate that African American children disproportionately experience parental incarceration and therefore the negative effects of parental incarceration (Haskins 2014; Turney and Haskins 2014). Limited research on gender differences propose that girls and boys exhibit different mental health consequences due to parental incarceration, but more research is needed to determine the significance of the experiences of parental incarceration by both gender and race (Wakefield and Wildeman 2009).

Several limitations of the methodologies of the studies above restrict the generalizability of their findings. Incarceration in nature is not random and the children whose parents are incarcerated often differ from children whose parents are not on several dimensions other than simply parental incarceration history (Haskins 2014; Johnson and Easterling 2012; Phillips et al. 2002; Wakefield and Wildeman 2009). The concentration of other disadvantageous risk factors among children of incarcerated parents makes it difficult to infer whether the effects of parental incarceration are due to parental incarceration or other hardships faced by a child. These risk factors are often difficult to control for in studies. A child's race, socioeconomic status, and history of abuse are just a few examples of confounding variables that could independently influence both parental incarceration and a child's mental health or educational success. Secondly, few studies track a child's behaviors (mental health or educational success) prior to parental incarceration and their behaviors following parental incarceration. This small but

important methodological specification is the key to determining if a child's behavior is caused by parental incarceration or by other factors from their disadvantaged backgrounds.

Given these limitations, there are several ways in which to improve the current literature on the effects of parental incarceration. Examining a child's mental health or educational success before and after incarceration, though difficult to do, is essential in determining parental incarceration's effect on either issue. More research focusing on children's experiences before and after parental incarceration is needed in order to determine if parental incarceration *precipitates* poor mental health and educational success or whether it is only a *risk factor*. If it is determined that parental incarceration is only a risk factor for poor mental health and educational success, it would be important to examine socioeconomic status (SES) differences among children who experience parental incarceration. Examining SES in relation to parental incarceration and poor educational success/mental health would help determine whether parental incarceration is an *independent* risk factor for poor educational success and poor mental health in children. Given that children of incarcerated parents are typically disadvantaged in several other ways other than parental incarceration status, it is possible that another variable that often coincides with parental incarceration status such as low SES is the main factor that predicts poor mental health and educational success among children with incarcerated parents. Research examining whether parental incarceration is an independent risk factor for poor educational success and poor mental health in children would be important scholarship to add to this subject.

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