

Children's life chances are hurt when their parents are sent to prison.

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When criminals go to prison, society hopefully benefits. These individuals, for example, ideally are less likely to commit new crimes. What, though, if incarceration harms the children of those who we send to prison? [Daniel P. Mears](#) and [Sonja E. Siennick](#) set out to answer that question and found that the concern is far from hypothetical. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to go on to engage in criminal behavior, have mental health problems, use illegal drugs, and fare worse in their educational achievement, earnings, and intimate relationships.



Studies indicate that over half of prisoners are parents of children who are 17 or younger, and that millions of children have had a parent incarcerated at some point in time. Incarceration can, of course, create benefits for society. For example, it might lower recidivism or crime rates, though such effects remain contested. Regardless, the question arises: What effects does the incarceration of parents have on their children?



This question has become particularly important in an era of mass incarceration. Beginning in the 1980s, rates of incarceration increased dramatically, and by historically unprecedented levels, worldwide. In the United States, alone, the number of people released from prison annually increased from approximately 100,000 or so to over 600,000 per year.

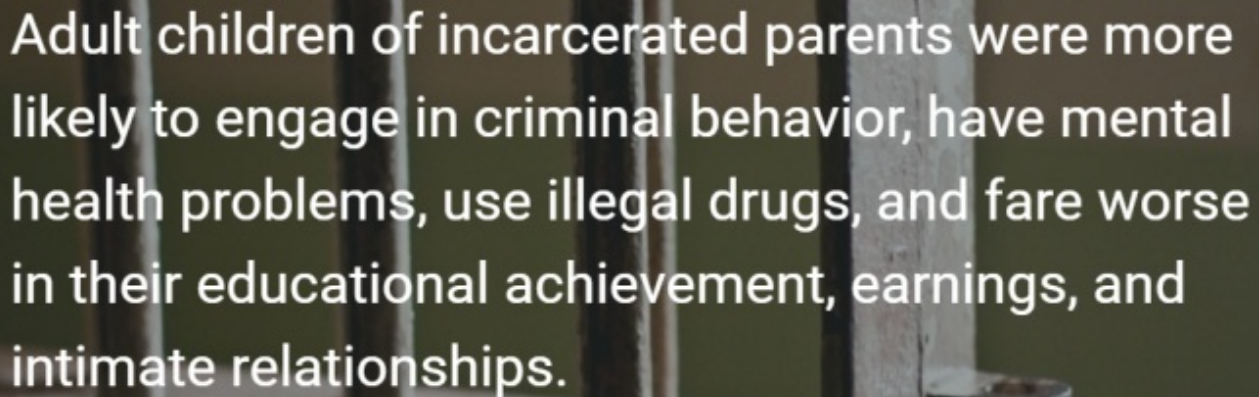
It turns out that reason exists to be concerned. Over the past two decades, scholars increasingly have identified that children may suffer immediate psychological, social, and economic harm when their parents get sent to prison. These harms are troublesome. Society seeks to protect children and yet here we have evidence of a social policy, incarceration, which may hinder rather than promote healthy development. Children of incarcerated parents might be less able to navigate adolescence and successfully transition into adulthood.

This possibility served as the focus of our study. Prior research showed that immediate harms to children may arise due to their parents being incarcerated. We wondered, though, if the harms might continue into young adulthood and beyond. Would grown children whose parents had been incarcerated be more likely, as theory and research would anticipate, to fare worse than other grown children in their adult lives?

To answer this question, we examined data from the [National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health](#) (Add Health), which followed children over time and asked a battery of questions about each one's life experiences. Many of them had parents who were or had been incarcerated. We thus could compare these children with others whose parents had never been incarcerated to see if the two groups differed during adulthood.

One challenge in undertaking this type of study centers on what researchers term "selection effects." Let's assume that children of incarcerated parents commit more crime as adults. Perhaps parental incarceration caused this effect. Alternatively, it may simply be that children who grow up in such households are exposed to the same criminogenic forces to which their parents were exposed. Here, then, parental incarceration itself does not cause greater offending in young adulthood. The cause lies with the social environment in which the children resided.

Following the lead of other researchers, we sought to address this possibility through statistical analyses that controlled for, or took into account, selection effects. Our goal was to estimate as well as possible whether parental incarceration exerts an adverse effect on children as they enter young adulthood and even as they progress into late young adulthood.



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- Daniel P. Mears and Sonja E. Siennick, Florida State University

What did we find? Adult children of incarcerated parents were more likely to engage in criminal behavior, have mental health problems, use illegal drugs, and fare worse in their educational achievement, earnings, and intimate relationships. Just as importantly, we found that these effects persisted or were amplified as children progressed from early young adulthood (defined in the study as ages 18 to 28) to late young adulthood (defined as ages 26 to 31).

Many more studies will be needed to determine if these results are generalizable. The scientific landscape is littered with findings that initially seem provocative but then, as studies accumulate, are found to be the exception rather than the rule.

If, however, the results turn out to reflect a reality of incarceration—and they certainly accord with studies showing adverse short-term effects of parental incarceration on children—then many implications arise.

First, the results suggest that parental incarceration constitutes a life event, or turning point, of significant and long-lasting consequence for children. Why? We speculate that parental incarceration marginalizes children and cuts them off from conventional society. It may reduce school attendance, for example. People sometimes assume that criminals must be bad parents. In fact, however, they can and frequently do care as deeply about their children as law-abiding parents, and may push their children to succeed in school. It is possible, too, that children of incarcerated parents may be more likely to wind up homeless or to assume more of a criminal identity because of how others label them or how they label themselves.

Second, the possibility that parental incarceration adversely affects children in the immediate- and longer-term suggests that society would do well to take action. That does not mean that parents who commit crimes should go unpunished. It does mean that punishments other than incarceration should be considered, where appropriate. It means, too, that society likely should invest in these children to reduce the collateral consequences that they, and ultimately all of us, experience. When children fail to succeed, not only do they suffer, but society does as well through the potential for more crime, homelessness, drug abuse, and mental illness.

Even if parental incarceration does not itself cause harm to children, it may provide a signal that warrants attention. Specifically, it may indicate that these children face a high risk of offending, addiction, mental illness, poor academic performance, and more during adolescence and well into adulthood. Using parental incarceration as a red flag for a potential need for services likely would help to reduce the need for more intervention—such as incarceration, drug treatment, and more—at a later date.

Third, as countries around the world consider the costs and benefits of mass incarceration, they would do well to take a more comprehensive view of the balance sheets. Yes, incarceration may reduce crime rates and help satisfy our need for retribution. It also costs. It costs financially—building and operating prisons obligates substantially more taxpayer dollars than does probation, fine, and other community-based sanctions. And it costs, too, through potential social harms, such as adverse effects on those who are incarcerated and on their children.

Punishment is a tricky business. We ask so much of it, including specific deterrence, general deterrence, retribution, and more. At the end of the day, though, the medical dictum, “Do no harm”—to adults and their children—would seem to provide a useful guide.

*This article is based on the paper “[Young Adult Outcomes and Life-Course Penalties of Parental Incarceration](#)” in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*.*

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