

Notes from *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents*

Summary

While widely quoted, the fact that children of incarcerated parents are 5-7 times more likely to be imprisoned as adults is not supported by any reliable research. This statistic has been based upon two studies, one from England and one from Sweden. However, these studies are not able to support this information, as other effecting factors were unaccounted for. These studies are also not necessarily applicable to the United States. While there are risk factors for these children, such as higher self reported depressive symptoms, school suspension, behavioral problems and lower self esteem, they are not necessarily more likely to end up in prison themselves.

Quotes

- “The notion that children whose parents are imprisoned are several times more likely than other children to be incarcerated when they become adults is widely accepted as fact in scholarly, political and bureaucratic circles. There is no solid evidence, however, to support this assertion and its continued use in policy arenas is highly questionable. Children whose parents are in prison are exposed, however, to many factors such as parental substance use and poverty that place their well-being at risk.” (3)
- “...a clear, causal relationship between parental incarceration and children’s problems has not been established. Problems could be related to the incarceration of their parent, to pre-incarceration parenting or to other domestic factors. Existing research rarely attempts to isolate these different factors.” (21)
- “Another study collected data directly from teenagers whose parents were incarcerated. Although the study found high levels of school suspensions, there were low levels of delinquency and participation in antisocial behavior.” (23)
- “The differences [in behavior between children whose fathers were incarcerated and those whose fathers were not] disappeared, however, when the researchers factored in socioeconomic status, parenting style and maternal health for both groups.” (23)
- “...a recent analysis of data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being, a landmark study of children who are subjects of reports of maltreatments indicates that among children in in-home care, arrest was no more common among children of arrested parents than among children of never arrested parents.” (23)
- “Neither of these [two main] studies supports the assumptions about intergenerational incarceration prevalent in the United States, where, despite the lack of research on the subject, official government documents, scientific journals and program marketing materials often report that children of prisoners are approximately six times more likely than their peers to be imprisoned as adults.” (24)
- “There may be an association between parental incarceration and later-life incarceration for prisoners’ children in this country, but it is important to

recognize that there are currently no empirical data validating this assumption.”
(24)

- “Despite widespread beliefs that children of incarcerated parents are many times more likely than other children to be incarcerated as adults, there is no research evidence to support this assertion. These unsupported statements should not be accepted as fact and printed in official documents and research papers. They perpetuate the spread of inaccurate information in a field sorely in need of substantiated knowledge to guide its development. These incorrect statements may also act to increase the stigma that children with incarcerated parents experience, as they become misidentified as potential criminals and treated as threats to society.” (33)

Information from: **Creasia Finney Hairston, Ph.D.** *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents: An Overview of the Research Literature.* Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2007.

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www.aecf.org/childrenofincarcerated.aspx