

# Understanding the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents

What Educators Should Know



BY KRISTIN TURNEY

**T**he incarceration rate in the United States has increased dramatically in the past half century. In 1970, about 100 out of every 100,000 individuals in the United States were confined in prison. Today, that number is five times as large, with nearly 500 out of every 100,000 individuals confined in prison. This rate increase is especially striking among poorly educated men of color living in disadvantaged neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that confinement in jail or prison has deleterious consequences for currently and formerly incarcerated adults. Incarcerated individuals generally arrive in jail or prison with relatively low educational skills and low educational attainment. And, though there are sometimes ways to engage in educational opportunities while incarcerated (e.g., via training programs or opportunities to receive a GED), individuals experience barriers to engaging in additional educational opportunities upon their release.<sup>2</sup> In an era where incarceration is both common and unequally distributed across the population, concentrated among some of the most vulnerable citizens, incarceration has likely exacerbated race/ethnic and social class inequalities in

educational attainment among American adults.<sup>3</sup>

But incarceration is not only consequential for those who churn through the criminal justice system. It also affects those in their family and personal lives, including parents, romantic partners, and sons and daughters. The majority of incarcerated individuals have at least one child.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the increase in the U.S. incarceration rate means that an increasing number of children—and a substantial number of children—experience the incarceration of a parent at some point in childhood or adolescence. Research shows that parental incarceration negatively affects children's educational outcomes and opportunities.

## Children's Exposure to Parental Incarceration

Currently, an estimated 2.7 million children—or 1 in 28 of those under the age of 18—have a biological mother or father who is incarcerated in a local jail, state prison, or federal prison. And, given that most individuals are eventually released from confinement, back to their families and communities, even more children will experience the incarceration of a parent over the course of their lives. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study—a longitudinal study of nearly 5,000 U.S. children born in urban areas around the turn of the century—show that, by age 9, about one-third of children experience the incarceration of a biological father and about one-tenth of children experience the incarceration of a biological mother.<sup>5</sup>

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Importantly, not all children are equally likely to experience parental incarceration. Parental incarceration is more common among children of color (compared with white children), among children of parents with low educational attainment (compared with children of parents with high educational attainment), and among children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods (compared with children living in advantaged neighborhoods).

Consider differences in exposure to parental incarceration by race and ethnicity. Recent estimates suggest that by age 17, 24 percent of black children, 11 percent of Hispanic children, and 4 percent of white children will experience parental incarceration. Among children of parents without a high school diploma, 62 percent of black children are exposed to parental incarceration, compared with 17 percent of Hispanic children and 15 percent of white children. There is also regional variation in children's risks of exposure to parental incarceration, with children living in the South having the highest risks of having an incarcerated parent and children living in the Northeast having the lowest risks.<sup>6</sup> Geographic variation also depends on race and ethnicity, as black children have the highest cumulative risk in the Midwest, Northeast, and two southern states, and Hispanic children have the highest cumulative risk in the West and Northeast.

Therefore, especially in urban and socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, parental incarceration represents an important obstacle for a large number of children and for the educational institutions they attend. This article discusses what teachers, principals, and counselors, who regularly interact with children of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parents, should know about this particular student population.

### Why Might Parental Incarceration Impede Children's Educational Opportunities and Outcomes?

Parental incarceration is an adverse childhood experience, defined as a potentially stressful or traumatic event that has lasting consequences for children's health and well-being. It often occurs in conjunction with other stressors, such as parental divorce, family economic instability, and household substance abuse. But the stressor of parental incarceration is also unique from other types of family stressors or adverse childhood experiences.

Parental incarceration involves the removal of a mother or father from the child's household or daily routine. This removal is a traumatic incident for many children and may be accompanied by other corresponding traumatic experiences, such as witnessing the arrest of a parent or encountering uncertainty regarding how long the parent will remain away from the household. This removal is often stigmatizing, too, and can produce isolation and shame that impedes social support systems, interactions with peers and teachers, and children's educational opportunities and outcomes.

In the wake of parental incarceration, families experience a variety of challenges, including economic insecurity, altered household and relationship dynamics and routines, changes in parenting, and changes in parental health. Families also face economic insecurity. Given that most incarcerated parents, prior to their incarceration, were working, incarceration leads to an immediate decline in family income, an increase in material hardship, and an increased reliance on public assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Parental incarceration generates additional economic costs for families, including those associated with the incarceration, such as making bail, paying for legal representation, or paying fines and fees; costs associated with maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent, such as paying for telephone calls or putting money on his or her "books"; and indirect costs associated with the parent's incarceration, such as taking time off of work to attend court dates or needing to pay for the child care necessary in the parent's absence.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, children with an incarcerated mother or father face new economic challenges that stem directly from the incarceration of their parent, in addition to the economic challenges that may have led up to the arrest.

Research documents that children with incarcerated parents do have difficulties progressing through school.

Parental incarceration can alter household and relationship dynamics quite dramatically. It is common for children's living arrangements to change as a result of parental incarceration, either via children moving to a different household entirely or via children experiencing a change in their household composition. The degree to which these dynamics change may depend on the gender of the incarcerated parent. Children of incarcerated fathers often (but not always) remain living with their mothers. Children of incarcerated mothers sometimes remain living with their fathers but more commonly spend time living with extended family members and are sometimes placed in the foster care system.

Relationship dynamics between children's parents can also change. Maintaining romantic relationships while one partner is behind bars is challenging, given the far distance of prisons to some communities, the often inflexible visiting schedules, and the high cost of making long-distance phone calls from prison. It may be equally difficult to preserve romantic relationships after release. For example, research shows that the incarceration experience may encourage men to engage in violent behavior.<sup>9</sup> These altered relationship dynamics mean that children of incarcerated parents experience household instability.

Parental incarceration may also lead to disengaged, ineffective parenting by mothers and fathers. During incarceration, parents are unable to engage with their children, potentially leading to long-term reductions in parental involvement with children growing accustomed to—and suffering from—this separation. In this regard, incarceration is comparable to other prolonged absences (such as military deployment), as the extended time away from children may inhibit future parental involvement even in the absence of other changes in family life. Also, stressors associated with parental incarceration may cause the nonincarcerated parent to change his or her parenting behaviors.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, parental incarceration may affect children's educational outcomes via its consequences for parental health. Incarceration is linked to reduced physical and mental health among the incarcerated. And the period a current or former romantic partner is incarcerated may be one fraught with anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness for the partner left behind.

### How Teachers and Schools Can Assist Children with Incarcerated Parents

A growing body of research documents that children with incarcerated parents, and particularly children with incarcerated fathers, do have difficulties progressing through school. Negative consequences extend across many types of academic outcomes, including a large number of school absences, inappropriate special education placement, grade retention, suspension, expulsion, low test scores, and measures of educational attainment, such as high school graduation and college attendance.<sup>11</sup> The

consequences also extend to children's behavioral problems. For example, children of incarcerated fathers, compared with their counterparts without incarcerated fathers, have greater internalizing problems (e.g., experiencing feelings of worthlessness or inferiority), externalizing problems (e.g., engaging in fights and bullying), and attention problems (e.g., engaging in impulsive behavior and being unable to sit still).<sup>12</sup> Most existing research focuses on the consequences of paternal incarceration, as opposed to maternal incarceration or the more general parental incarceration, likely because more children are affected by the incarceration of a father than the incarceration of a mother. That said, both paternal and maternal incarceration may have deleterious consequences for children's educational outcomes.

Given the link between parental incarceration and children's well-being, as well as the fact that children spend a substantial amount of time in school, schools provide a unique opportunity to intervene and aid children who have currently or formerly incarcerated parents. The existing research has a number of implications for how educational institutions may best serve children of incarcerated parents.

First, it may be useful to increase awareness among teachers and administrators about the prevalence of parental incarceration. They should also know that many children who experience parental incarceration also experience additional adversities in childhood, such as family instability, parental substance abuse, and violence. Knowing that parental incarceration is relatively common, especially among vulnerable children who often experience other challenges that can impair their well-being, may help alleviate some of the stigma that children of incarcerated parents encounter.

Knowing that parental incarceration is relatively common may help alleviate some of the stigma.

## Teaching Students with Incarcerated Parents

BY TRACEY SHOLLENBERGER LLOYD

A few weeks shy of my 22nd birthday, I stepped into my own classroom for the first time in Baltimore. Like many teachers, my background was different from that of my students. I am white and had grown up in small, solidly working-class Pennsylvania towns, whereas my students, both black and white, were living in some of the most highly distressed urban neighborhoods in the country. Despite our differences, I shared with many of my students a personal history of early self-sufficiency—and a sense of humor—that opened up opportunities for connection. Not all of my

students were a fan of my Spanish class, of course, but I prided myself on showing them that I cared and on building relationships whenever I could.

In my high school classroom, I experienced many common obstacles to developing strong relationships with students. I had large class sizes, more IEPs (individualized education plans) than seemed reasonable, and a steep learning curve with classroom management. I hadn't yet internalized the extent to which great teaching is *leadership*, and I sometimes struggled to strike a balance between caring and captaining the ship. Between lesson planning, grading, advising students in extracurricular activities, calling parents and caregivers, cleaning desks, and washing chalkboards, there was not enough time in a week, or even in a school year, to get to know all of my students' stories and build the open, supportive relationship with each student I would have wanted.

Nonetheless, I developed enough rapport with many students and their families to learn about their lives beneath the surface level. Often, they shared positive things like career goals, hidden talents, poetry or song lyrics, and dreams for the future. I also heard about difficult relationships, financial struggles, housing instability, and health concerns. At times, my students discussed their experiences with police and upcoming court dates. Sometimes I learned about parents' situations. One student told me, after missing weeks of class, that his father's health had deteriorated, and he had assumed responsibility for his father's transportation and care. Other students shared with me worries about their parents' mental health or substance use. Once a student I was certain disliked me, or at least loathed my class, arrived with a giant smile: she told me that she had just received a letter from her father in prison and learned that she would see him soon.

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Second, it may be useful to increase awareness about the specific needs and challenges of children of incarcerated parents. As noted above, these children often experience a (conscious or unconscious) social stigma from their teachers and classmates that stems directly from their parents' incarceration. Educational institutions can help in reducing this stigma.

In particular, educators can play a critical role. They can avoid singling out or drawing attention to children with incarcerated parents, and they can refrain from judging, blaming, or labeling such children. This approach may directly benefit children by reinforcing the idea that parental incarceration is not their fault. It also signals to these children's classmates that they too should refrain from judging, blaming, or labeling children of incarcerated parents. In general, educators can also avoid saying negative things about those involved in the criminal justice system, as such statements could reinforce stereotypes and stigma surrounding parental incarceration.

Children of incarcerated parents may also have other specific needs that schools can address.\* Schools may consider providing resources to children of incarcerated parents, such as developmentally appropriate books and pamphlets about parental incarceration. Teachers and librarians can encourage all students to read these books (as opposed to only children who have an incarcerated parent), which would help children of incarcerated parents but also foster awareness of this experience among their classmates (without singling out individual children).

Other resources include the Sesame Street in Communities program ([www.sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration](http://www.sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration)). This website provides videos, activities, and

\*Community schools in particular are well positioned to support children of incarcerated parents as well as other disadvantaged youth. For more on these schools, which partner with food banks, social service agencies, higher education institutions, health clinics, businesses, and youth organizations, see "Where It All Comes Together" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank\\_villarreal](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank_villarreal).



Since leaving the classroom in 2005, I have worked as a researcher studying issues affecting children and families, with a focus on criminal justice. I arrived at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., in the midst of pioneering work on prisoner reentry, motivated by the dual insights that the United States has a spectacularly high incarceration rate and that almost everyone who is sent to prison is eventually released. Back then, the effects of incarceration on individuals, families, and communities outlined in the article on page 22 were only beginning to be documented. People questioned, but had not yet assembled empirical evidence on, the extent to which incarcerating unprecedented numbers of people affected the families and communities they left behind.

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As a researcher, my challenge was to determine whether incarceration caused children's and families' trajectories to

worsen, or simply occurred alongside a range of other issues. Reflecting on my classroom experience, I wasn't sure. Although the goal of research is often to isolate the size of the effect of one condition on another, reality is messier. Plenty of students whose parents are not incarcerated are also growing up in challenging circumstances, including situations where their parents are absent due to addiction issues, military service, or long-distance jobs. I could not have correctly guessed which of my students had a parent or caregiver in prison and which did not. I didn't always know, and it would have been inappropriate to ask. But when a student, caregiver, or staff member told me that a child I was teaching had an incarcerated parent, I also don't remember feeling surprised.

What I didn't realize at the time was that, in the context I was teaching in, incarceration was devastatingly common. Not only does the United States incarcerate

people at an unusually high rate, but the experience of being incarcerated is unequally distributed. The predominantly white towns I grew up in had people in jails and prisons, of course, but that experience was far from common. By contrast, a *majority* of black men without a high school degree experience incarceration by their early 30s.<sup>1</sup> Few people in my students' neighborhoods would have been untouched by this reality.

Research on children with incarcerated parents has yielded several insights that educators may find useful. In this article, I highlight three such insights. First, although having an incarcerated father is the more common experience, having an incarcerated mother is especially likely to disrupt children's everyday lives. Among people in prison who have minor children, mothers are more likely than fathers to have been living with their children and to have been their children's primary caregiver at the time of their arrest.<sup>2</sup>

articles specifically designed for children of incarcerated parents, all of which may provide teachers guidance on how to talk to children about incarceration. Teachers can also help children maintain contact with incarcerated parents, perhaps by providing them time and encouragement to create artwork or write letters, as maintaining these relationships may benefit children's well-being.

Children of incarcerated parents may also need emotional support and counseling in school. In addition to collaborating with mental health professionals, such as psychologists and guidance counselors, classroom teachers can help children work through their feelings about parental incarceration and/or connect these students to additional supports.

Schools may also be able to help address the needs of families more generally by making sure that all parents can participate in

school activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and visiting the classroom. Of course, incarcerated parents experience real barriers to their involvement in children's schools and home lives, but teachers can encourage children to talk with their incarcerated parent (via the telephone or in-person visits) about their homework and schooling activities.

The caregivers of these children may also experience difficulties that impede their involvement in children's schools, such as increased family and economic responsibilities. For example, they may have had to increase the number of hours they work to make ends meet, or they may have difficulty finding child care that would allow them to attend school activities, such as open houses or parent-teacher conferences. Teachers can take steps to facilitate parental involvement among all families by keeping all parents informed about opportunities to get involved in their children's



And whereas most children with incarcerated fathers live with their mothers, children with incarcerated mothers have much more varied living arrangements. Grandparents provide care most often, but many arrangements

stress when they return home.

Second, maintaining contact with an incarcerated parent is associated with positive outcomes for children as well as parents, but doing so can be challenging. As

Nonetheless, many incarcerated parents are eager to stay in touch with their children and seize opportunities to do so when they are available. They may also jump back into doing so when they are released.

Third, parental incarceration is just one piece of a larger concern: students are growing up in an era of an expanded criminal justice system that shapes not only their day-to-day lives, but also their perceptions of what is possible for their futures. For middle and high school boys in particular, frequent interactions with police and firsthand knowledge of men in their families and communities who have faced legal troubles or been to prison can cast a shadow over them as they enter adolescence. Research has focused on parental incarceration—for good reason—but even children whose parents are not incarcerated may have brothers, cousins, uncles, or other relatives who are. They may also know people in the community who are not in jail or prison but are on probation or parole or facing new charges.

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In perhaps the most powerful exchange I had with a student while teaching, a young

## It's important to educate all students on the prevalence of incarceration and what it means for families and communities.

exist, including living with other relatives or friends or in foster care.

Because of this, children may find even a mother's return home stressful, as caregiving arrangements are renegotiated. Incarcerated women are also especially likely to cycle in and out of jail quickly and to have histories of mental health challenges and substance abuse. Some children feel responsible for helping to keep their parents safe and may worry and experience

the article on page 22 explains, correctional facilities are often located far from home, and the costs and logistics of travel can make visiting difficult. Phone calls can also be expensive. For children who do visit their parents in prison, correctional facilities' visitation protocols can be intrusive and traumatic. If relationships are strained, children's current caregivers may not want to facilitate communication between their children and an incarcerated parent.

education. And, for parents who do not participate, it is important that teachers not assume that parents do not want to be involved. Instead, these parents may lack the child care or transportation that would make it easier for them to do so. Research increasingly shows that individuals with criminal records avoid community institutions such as schools because of fear that their criminal record will be discovered by the school. School administrators may consider, when appropriate, taking steps to assure parents that they welcome participation among all parents, including those with criminal records.<sup>13</sup>

### Promising Programs

Relatively little is known about existing school-based programs that may help children of incarcerated parents. And even less research exists on if and how these programs improve student outcomes. Although more research would be helpful, two existing programs appear promising.

One such program is POPS (Pain of the Prison System) the Club,\* which may be a model for how to design and deliver services to children affected by parental incarceration. The program began in Venice High School in Los Angeles and has since expanded to seven other high schools in the Los Angeles area, as well as to high schools in an additional four states. POPS gives students the opportunity to come together to share how they have been affected by parental incarceration. The program operates during the school day, usually during lunch, and gives students who may be experiencing the

stigma and shame of having a loved one in jail or prison a space to be open about their struggles and successes. POPS enables students to engage in three types of creative expression:

1. Self-expression, which gives students the opportunity to share their experiences through writing, drawing, photography, and performance;

Teachers can encourage children to talk with their incarcerated parent about their homework and schooling activities.

2. Self-healing, which gives students the opportunity to participate in mindfulness activities; and
3. Community engagement, which allows students to listen to and engage with outside speakers (for example, those who have been touched by the incarceration of a loved one).

In addition to the weekly meetings during the school day, this program also publishes students' literary works on its website. Most students who participate in POPS have experienced the incarceration of a loved one, such as a parent or sibling, and

\*For more about POPS the Club, see [www.popstheclub.com](http://www.popstheclub.com).

man in my class who was quiet and brilliant, and commanded universal respect from his peers, stopped into my classroom after school one day and sat down at a desk. In tears, he shared that his older brother had recently been incarcerated. He told me that he was feeling pressure to take up drug sales to replace his brother's income and keep his family afloat. His sadness was palpable. As he was grieving the loss of his brother—with whom he had shared a room and his daily life—he was facing new challenges brought about by his brother's absence. Fifteen years later, I can't remember exactly what I said to him. I am sure that I conveyed my care and concern for his well-being. Beyond that, what did I say? What *should* I have said or done? What *would* I do now?

Today, I think about returning to the classroom often. If I were to teach again, all that I've learned about parental incarceration—and criminal justice more generally—would inform my teaching practice. In addition to becoming familiar with the statistics on parental incarceration, there are several things I believe teachers and other school staff members can do to better

meet the needs of students with incarcerated parents.

In communities where incarceration is relatively rare, developing knowledge and sensitivity about the issue of incarceration among all students should be prioritized. In these settings, it's important to educate all students on the prevalence of incarceration and what it means for families and communities. Prohibiting jokes about prison and taking care to avoid language and examples that stigmatize are also practices teachers should engage in. And assigning readings that explore the scope of the U.S. criminal justice system can also help students understand the issue. If a student, caregiver, counselor, administrator, or other staff member discloses to you that a student has a parent in jail or prison, take care to ask how much the student knows about the situation (as caregivers sometimes choose to withhold information to protect children) and be certain to protect that student's privacy.

In communities where incarceration is common, recognize the extent of the problem, be mindful of challenging dynamics when engaging with students' families, and consider spearheading

schoolwide efforts to meet the needs of children with incarcerated loved ones. Recognize that many students already have firsthand knowledge of this topic. Understand that the removal or return of a parent or loved one from prison might not be an isolated event, but one in a series spanning long before and after their time in your classroom. Be mindful of potentially challenging relationship dynamics between incarcerated parents and current caregivers.

At times, these relationships are fraught, and it is important to be respectful of all parties. Incorporate opportunities for connection with incarcerated parents into daily curricula. Suggest that students prepare written assignments and artwork with incarcerated loved ones in mind. Discuss with caregivers the feasibility and appropriateness of mailing these items from school. Consider offering resources or clubs targeted toward students who have been affected by prison, including support groups, counseling, and extracurricular activities providing opportunities to process experiences through poetry, writing, arts, and journal writing. Framing these efforts broadly—i.e., as suitable for anyone who

some have experienced their own contact with the criminal justice system.

Like most other school-based programs designed to serve children of incarcerated parents, POPS has not been rigorously evaluated. However, participants of the program say their engagement has given them a space to highlight their challenges and successes. This program also likely reduces stigma among students affected by the criminal justice system and increases the sense of community among them.

Children who have caring adults in their lives are likely to be resilient in the face of challenges such as parental incarceration.

Another program, called Amachi, is run through Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.\* This mentoring program provides guidance and support to children of incarcerated parents by pairing them with a mentor who spends time with them once a week. Amachi is based on the premise that children who have caring adults in their lives are likely to be resilient in the face of challenges such as parental incarceration. Though no rigorous evaluations of the Amachi program exist, some evaluations of Big Brothers Big Sisters find that pairing children with a mentor can have positive educational and behavioral outcomes for children.

Both POPS and Amachi provide concrete ways that schools can support children of incarcerated parents. Some schools may be uniquely positioned to begin similar school-based clubs that can go a long way toward reducing the social stigma of parental incarceration while also providing necessary emotional support. But if the development of such a program is not feasible, teachers and administrators can still work to alleviate the stigma, trauma, and strain experienced by children of incarcerated parents. □

(Endnotes on page 43)

\*For more about the Amachi program, see [www.bbbs.org/amachi](http://www.bbbs.org/amachi).



has an incarcerated loved one or worries about this possibility—may allow for greater participation and connection among students.

In all school types, recognize that many parents are eager to be involved in their children's lives both while they are incarcerated and once they are released. Do what you can to facilitate these connections and meet parents where they are. Do not assume that absences from parent nights and other functions are voluntary. Besides work conflicts and transportation issues, parental incarceration may be an additional reason some parents in your school are not in attendance. If you are in a leadership position, explore innovative ways to include incarcerated parents in education and consider formal partnerships with departments of corrections. For example, it may be possible to facilitate parent-teacher

conferences with incarcerated parents by video, as is currently being done in the state of Washington.<sup>3</sup> And investigate whether there are programs or service providers in your community serving families affected by incarceration, where you can refer students and caregivers for additional support.

Research on children with incarcerated parents has increasingly made clear that parental incarceration does cause children's outcomes to worsen independent of other challenges that may have existed in their lives beforehand. For students who do experience the incarceration of a parent, having access to teachers who share their experiences and who can relate to them can help.

Ideally, teachers and school staff members would have all the time they need to build strong, open relationships with students to engage in conversations

around these issues. But in the world we live in now—with millions of individuals and families touched by prison, and with teachers in many communities less likely than students to have experienced parental incarceration—there is still a lot we can do to provide the supportive, inclusive school communities children with incarcerated loved ones need.\*

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