

# Parental Incarceration During Middle Childhood and Adolescence

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## Abstract

In 2004, more than 500,000 children between 10 and 14 years, and more than 250,000 youth between 15 and 17 years old, had a parent incarcerated in prison. These figures underestimate the total number of older children and adolescents affected by a parent's incarceration, as they do not account for over 700,000 adults who were held in local jails or the thousands of other adults with minor children who were on probation or parole during that same year. Middle childhood and adolescence are important developmental periods, each characterized by significant changes in cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Compared to infants and younger children, older children and adolescents have greater emotional and cognitive capacities to understand the facts about a parent's incarceration, process the loss of their parent, and express their preferences about their living arrangements and contact with the incarcerated parent. In this chapter, we sum-

marize the empirical research on parental incarceration among older children and adolescents, and consider the implications of a parent's incarceration for children's wellbeing at home, school, and in their communities.

According to the most recently published national data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), 30–34% of parents in state and federal prisons have children between the ages of 5 and 9, an additional 32–35% have children between the ages of 10–14, and another 15–16% have children between the ages of 15–17. Thus, the majority of parents in state and federal prisons have a child in the developmental periods of middle childhood or adolescence. These figures are dated and underestimate the total number of children and adolescents affected by a parent's incarceration, as they do not account for over 700,000 adults who were held in local jails during that same year (Sabol & Minton, 2008). More recent data from the National Survey of Children's Health indicate that, on average, eight percent of US children between 6 and 17 years old have experienced the incarceration of a residential parent at some time during the child's life (Sacks, Murphey, & Moore, 2014).

There is a growing literature on children with incarcerated parents in these age groups. In this chapter, we consider how parental incarceration impacts the development of children's age-appropriate competencies during middle

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childhood (roughly, 6–12 years old) and adolescence (roughly, 12–17 years old) across developmental domains and contexts. After briefly reviewing relevant theoretical frameworks, we review research examining how parental incarceration is related to older children and adolescents' physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, at home, in school, and in their communities. We conclude with suggestions for directions for future research on older children and adolescents with incarcerated parents, and consider practice and policy implications given the current state of knowledge.

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### **Theoretical Frameworks Guiding Research on Children and Adolescents with Incarcerated Parents**

Several theories provide guiding frameworks for considering the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children and adolescents with incarcerated parents. Here, we briefly consider Piaget's stages of cognitive development, Erikson's psychosocial stages of development, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as they relate to children and youth with incarcerated parents.

#### **Piaget and Cognitive Development**

During middle childhood and through the adolescent years, children and youth show considerable gains in their cognitive sophistication. Between the ages of four and seven, children's understanding of mental states, rules, and emotions grows rapidly (Hoffman, 2000), and children become more competent at taking multiple perspectives on a given situation, a phenomenon Piaget referred to as "decentration" (1952). Due to these gains, older children may be less likely than younger children to blame themselves for their parent's incarceration. Adolescence is characterized by an increased capacity for formal operational thinking and the development of

abstract decision making. Adolescents with incarcerated parents may be better equipped than younger children to understand the complexities of a parent's incarceration, in part due to improvements in language and communication skills.

#### **Erikson and Social and Emotional Development**

Erikson's psychosocial stages theory (1950) provides a useful framework for understanding children's development during middle childhood and adolescence. Erikson posited that in middle childhood, one must develop competencies and skills in the tools of society, such as in the academic and peer domains. Parental incarceration can disrupt the development of these competencies by exposing children to risks that may undermine their potential to succeed in school and social contexts. During adolescence, youth are exploring identity formation, which involves balancing psychological and emotional connections to the family, while becoming an autonomous individual. Youth with incarcerated parents may face a number of difficulties navigating the tasks of identity development, such as seeking to maintain identification with a parent, but not with that parent's criminality.

#### **Bronfenbrenner and Contextual Influences on Development**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can also be used to consider how parental incarceration affects the environments in which children develop. These environments include children's proximal contexts of development, termed "microsystems" (e.g., home, school); "exosystems", or contexts that affect children indirectly (e.g., parent's workplace); and the "macrosystem", which is the cultural context (e.g., cultural norms). "Mesosystems" refer to interactions between microsystems, such as parents' involvement with their children's school and teachers.

Children with incarcerated parents may be exposed to more proximal risk factors in microsystem contexts, including harsh, unresponsive parenting practices (e.g., Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004), stigma in school settings (e.g., Dallaire, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008), and risk for association with delinquent peers (e.g., Hanlon et al., 2005). Children of incarcerated parents also face risks outside of their immediate contexts of development. For example, research has demonstrated that parental incarceration reduces families' economic resources (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011; Western & Wildeman, 2009), even after release (Arditti & Few, 2006; Travis & Waul, 2004). Within the mesosystem, children of incarcerated parents face issues related to inadequate visitation environments. An ecological systems framework is particularly valuable for considering influences across systems, such as how social stigma and isolation due to parental incarceration may influence children's academic functioning and behavior problems. An ecological approach is equally valuable for examining successful adaptation in the face of parental incarceration. For example, supportive and stable relationships between children and their caregivers may combat stigma and positively influence interactions with peers, leading to better social and emotional adjustment in youth.

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## Developmental Outcomes During Middle Childhood and Adolescence

### Physical Development in the Context of Parental Incarceration

Below, we briefly review research that has examined parental incarceration as a risk factor for physical health outcomes during middle childhood and/or adolescence. We acknowledge, however, considerable research has examined how parental incarceration during these developmental periods may be related to physical health later in life, including obesity (Roettger & Boardman, 2012; Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013), reproductive health (Gottlieb, 2016), and various

chronic conditions, such as asthma, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease, HIV/AIDS, and hepatitis C (Miller & Barnes, 2015; Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013).

In recent analyses using data from a large statewide survey of 119,029 youth in public schools in 8th, 9th, and 11th grades, Hiolski and colleagues (Hiolski, Eisenberg, & Shlafer, 2019) found that parental incarceration was a risk factor for a variety of physical health indicators, including lower levels of physical activity, fruit and vegetable consumption, sleep, and higher levels of fast food and sugar-sweetened beverage consumption, after controlling for key sociodemographic characteristics.

Sexual and reproductive health is particularly relevant during adolescence and has implications for successful navigation of future developmental tasks, such as parenting and romantic relationships. In a sample of 142 youth and young adults (12–24 years old), Nebbitt, Voisin, and Tirmazi (2017) examined associations between parental incarceration and youths' onset of sexual intercourse. In statistical models that included youth gender, maternal and paternal incarceration, and parent substance abuse, youth with incarcerated fathers were found to have initiated sex earlier than their peers with no history of parental incarceration.

### Cognitive and Language Development in the Context of Parental Incarceration

During middle childhood and adolescence, children experience considerable growth in cognitive and language skills, which might help them cope with and adapt to a parent's incarceration. Adolescents typically develop the cognitive capacities to understand right from wrong, abstractions related to rules and laws, and the potential consequences of their actions and the actions of others. Thus, many adolescents are capable of understanding why a parent was incarcerated, whereas younger children are not as likely to understand the consequences of breaking a law. Folk and colleagues (2014) examined children's

understanding of incarceration in a sample of 106 youth (9–14 years old), in which 42% of the youth had experienced parental arrest, and/or incarceration. Older participants provided a more accurate description of the criminal justice system. However, age interacted with parental incarceration, such that older youth with experience with the criminal justice system had a more accurate representation of the criminal justice system than youth with less experience. This suggests that with experience, younger children may be capable of demonstrating an accurate understanding of the criminal justice system.

Unlike younger children, older children and adolescents are capable of verbally expressing their thoughts about their parent's incarceration. They may ask questions, express their feelings about their parents' behaviors, or communicate their preferences about placement and contact during a parent's incarceration. Research has shown that caregivers typically regulate children's contact with incarcerated parents, particularly when children are young (Enos, 2001; Poehlmann, Shlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008). However, little is known about older children and adolescents' preferences for contact, or how they may maintain contact with the imprisoned parent during the incarceration. In one study, Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that caregivers of younger children often acted as "gatekeepers" of children's contact with incarcerated parents. However, it was common for adolescents to have contact with the incarcerated parent that was facilitated by someone other than the adolescent's primary caregiver, bypassing the caregiver's gatekeeping role. Some adolescents reported that they communicated with the incarcerated parent using personal cell phones, writing letters, or arranging visits to the prison without their caregiver's knowledge.

The circumstances surrounding a parent's incarceration can be complex and confusing, even for the adults involved. Having some understanding of these complexities may be overwhelming for older children and adolescents and may itself be a source of stress. In a sample of 32 children (7–17 years old) with a parent in jail, Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010) found that

when children witnessed their parent's criminal activity, arrest, and sentencing, they had lower receptive verbal skills compared to their peers with incarcerated parents who had not witnessed these events. Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson noted that exposure to these events is likely traumatic for children and that trauma may compromise their cognitive and language development. Additional research is needed that explores older children and adolescents' understanding of their parent's incarceration, their preferences for placement and contact, and how these issues affect their developmental outcomes.

## **Social and Emotional Development in the Context of Parental Incarceration**

### **Family Relationships**

Attachment to parents and other significant adults is no less important during middle childhood and adolescence than it was during infancy and early childhood (Marvin & Britner, 2008). Maintaining contact during a parent's incarceration can be difficult for many reasons, including location of the prison, cost of travel or telephone calls, and conflicted family relationships (Myers, Smarsh, & Amlund-Hagen, 1999; Poehlmann, 2005a). When contact with the incarcerated parent is infrequent, inconsistent, or of poor quality, youth may perceive their incarcerated parent as emotionally unavailable. Findings from probability samples of prisoners in the USA suggest that few incarcerated parents receive regular visits from their children, and statistics regarding the frequency and type of contact with the incarcerated parent have not been examined according to the child's age (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000).

A few studies provide information about older children and adolescents' experiences of contact with their incarcerated parents. In a sample of families affected by maternal incarceration, Trice and Brewster (2004) found that adolescents who communicated more with their incarcerated mothers were less likely to have been suspended or drop out of school compared to those who communicated less. However, there were no

significant differences in noncompliance at home (e.g., arriving home after curfew) or in youth arrests.

In a sample of children who ranged in age between 9 and 15 years, Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that children who experienced contact with their incarcerated parent reported fewer feelings of alienation and anger toward the parent compared to children who had no contact. However, they found no differences between groups regarding children's feelings of trust, communication, or overall feelings about the incarcerated parent.

In a study of 45 single caregiver-child dyads, Arditti and Savla (2015) examined visitation as a potential mediator of child trauma symptomatology among children (average age 10 years) with and without incarcerated parents. They found that reports of child trauma symptomatology were significantly higher among children with incarcerated parents than the comparison group. In addition, they found that parents' perception of their children's functioning was mediated by the quality of the child's experiences visiting their parent. Specifically, when visits were perceived as problematic or distressing, children's trauma symptomatology was higher. The authors cautioned that visitation may be a "proximal traumatic reminder" (p. 558) for children and recommended that visiting environments and programs be used to improve children and families' experiences in these settings.

Similarly, Dallaire, Zeman and Thrash (2015a) examined type of contact youth had with their incarcerated mother (i.e., mail, phone, and visits) in relation to children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. They found more frequent physical contact was associated with greater internalizing behavior problems, whereas mail and phone contact was associated with fewer internalizing behavior problems. The authors suggested that "children may be able to create their own gentler version of reality about their incarcerated mother that is abruptly dispelled when they encounter an in-person visit" (p. 35).

Caregivers provide a crucial context for children and adolescents' social and emotional development. For older children and adolescents with incarcerated parents, the role of the caregiver before a parent's incarceration, the consistency and dependability of the caregiver during the parent's incarceration, and the caregivers' psychological and tangible resources, are likely to have important implications for youths' developmental outcomes. Caregivers are often single parents with limited financial resources, low educational attainment, and poor mental health (Poehlmann, 2005b). Combined, these risk factors have important implications for older children and adolescents' living environments and the quality of the caregiver-child relationships.

Several studies have examined caregiver characteristics and other family processes as they relate to children and adolescents' social and emotional development when a parent is incarcerated. Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) examined attachment and caregiving in a sample of youth whose parents were incarcerated, and found high rates of internalizing (19%) and externalizing (33%) symptoms. In children aged 7–15 years, they found that when caregivers reported less positive feelings about the child, both teachers and caregivers reported more externalizing behavior problems six months later, after controlling for externalizing problems at intake. These results suggest that the caregiver-child relationship may be important for children's behavioral outcomes in families affected by parental incarceration.

Aaron and Dallaire (2010) analyzed the Children-at-Risk dataset (see Harrell, Cavanagh & Sridharan, 1999) to assess the impact of family dynamics on children with incarcerated parents. Family dynamics constituted parent-child interactions (e.g., parent-child conflict), as well as interactions between and behaviors of other members in the household (e.g., sibling delinquency), and significant experiences of the members of the household (e.g., parental drug use, family victimization). Their dataset included a sample of 874 children aged 10–14 years

recruited from high-risk neighborhoods in four US cities, 18% of whom experienced a history of parental incarceration at some point during their life, and 4% of whom experienced parental incarceration during the course of the 2-year study. After controlling for children's experience of sociodemographic risk factors (e.g., parental unemployment, drug use), history of parental incarceration predicted problematic family processes, including family victimization, and higher levels of sibling delinquency. History of parental incarceration was also associated with higher levels of parent-reported child delinquency. However, after accounting for these problematic family processes, history of parental incarceration no longer predicted child delinquency.

These results suggest that although parental incarceration is associated with negative family processes and children's delinquent behavior, when familial factors are accounted for, parental incarceration may no longer predict child delinquency. Aaron and Dallaire (2010) also found that the experience of recent parental incarceration, (i.e., within the course of the 2-year study) predicted higher levels of parent-child conflict. This finding was robust after controlling for sociodemographic risk experiences and previous exposure to parental incarceration. These results suggest that a recent parental incarceration may negatively impact family processes and interactions following the parent's release from prison, and that the negative impact of parental incarceration on children's wellbeing may be at least partially mediated by problematic parent-child interactions.

Using prospective longitudinal data as part of a randomized control trial, Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011) examined parent health and parenting strategies among families that had experienced parental incarceration with those who had not. Results indicated that parents in families with a history of parental incarceration experienced more depression and worse physical health than parents in families who had not experienced incarceration. In addition, parents in families with a history of parental incarceration were significantly more likely to report using inconsistent

and inappropriate discipline strategies than parents with no history of parental incarceration. Their findings indicate that children and youth in homes affected by parental incarceration are exposed to numerous risks in their proximal environments. Risks like harsh and inconsistent discipline have been shown to be associated with affiliation with delinquent peers and adjustment problems in adolescence.

### **Peer Relationships**

In contrast to younger children, the influence of peers and friends becomes increasingly important during middle childhood and especially adolescence. Adolescence is characterized by increasing concerns about peers' impressions and the need for approval from friends. Parental incarceration can be a socially stigmatizing and isolating experience, particularly during a period of development in which peer relationships and intimacy in friendships become increasingly important. Despite the numerous theoretical and anecdotal writings on this topic (e.g., Adalist-Estrin, 2005), few empirical studies have examined the effects of social stigma, secrecy, and isolation regarding parental incarceration among older children and adolescents.

Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) conducted interviews with children and teens who were affected by a parent's incarceration. They found that adolescents frequently reported challenges in their social lives, including circumstances that inhibited or interfered with their abilities to connect to individuals outside their families, difficulties developing a sense of belonging to their neighborhoods and communities, and trouble-making friends and relating to their peers.

Johnson and Easterling (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with 10 adolescents. Their qualitative analyses revealed three strategies that youth commonly used to cope with their experiences of parental incarceration: de-identification from the incarcerated parent, desensitization to incarceration, and strength through control. De-identification may be considered an avoidant strategy, as youth appeared to distance themselves from the stress and stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent during interactions

with friends and peers. Desensitization was described as a young person's normalization or minimization of their experience with parental incarceration. Finally, strength through control was described as ways that young people "found strength by maintaining some control over their lives" as it related to their parent's incarceration (p. 257).

### **Relationships with Teachers and School Outcomes**

During middle childhood and adolescence, children spend most of their waking hours in school. As such, school is an important context to consider for youth with incarcerated parents. A growing body of research has examined the impact of parental incarceration on children's interactions with their teachers and in school contexts. In Nesmith and Ruhland's (2008) qualitative study of 34 children (aged 8–17 years), all "seemed keenly aware of negative assumptions that might be made about them because they had a parent in prison" (p. 1123). A major issue that emerged from their work was the social challenges these children experienced in regard to fears of stigmatization by teachers and peers. The researchers identified an intense internal tension between children wanting to talk about their parent's incarceration and fear of the negative consequences of discussing it. They noted that "the children who suffered from social stigma and isolation were at times able to locate some supportive resources; but on the whole, they were without role models, unable to connect to others like themselves, or to find trustworthy people who would help them feel less marginalized in general" (p. 1123). Such feelings of isolation from peers and other adults, including teachers, can hamper children's development of supportive, intimate peer relations, thus undermining emerging social and academic competence.

Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010) interviewed 30 teachers about their experiences with children and families affected by incarceration. The teachers identified a variety of risk factors experienced by children affected by parental incarceration, including the instability of their home situations. They noted that home instability was associated with behaviors that made success

at school difficult, such as misplacing book bags or leaving educational materials at various locations. They also identified several emotional reactions, such as "falling apart," which manifest themselves in the classroom and make concentrating difficult. Developmentally, these teachers felt that parental incarceration was more detrimental to elementary and middle school-age children than to adolescents. Though the majority of teachers noted that it would be helpful for them to know about a child dealing with parental incarceration, they also noted that they have witnessed their colleagues be "unsupportive," "unprofessional," and have lowered expectations for children with incarcerated parents.

In a follow-up experiment with elementary school teachers, Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010) found further evidence for teacher stigmatization. In this study, 73 elementary school teachers rated their expectations of competency for a fictitious child new to their classroom. Teachers who were randomly assigned to a scenario describing a new student who recently moved in with their grandmother because their mother was "away at prison" rated the child as less competent than teachers randomly assigned to scenarios in which the child's mother was described as being either "away," "away at rehab," or "away at school."

Wildeman and his colleagues (2017) also found evidence of teacher stigmatization of youth with incarcerated fathers. The researchers used vignettes about fictional children to compare teachers' expectations of children's behavior problems in children whose fathers were said to be incarcerated, versus youth whose fathers were not involved in their lives for an unspecified reason. They found having an incarcerated father was associated with a 10–40 percent increase in teachers' expectations for children's behavior problems, and that this effect was stronger for boys than for girls.

Facing stigmatization and having feelings of isolation because of parental incarceration in the school context could negatively affect children and adolescents' interactions with teachers, peers, and other adults, as well as their feelings of acceptance and belonging in an academic environment and their academic outcomes. Little

is known about the processes that influence children's and adolescents' school success or failure when their parents are incarcerated. It is possible that the cumulative effect of stigmatization and negative interactions at school, combined with family risks, contributes to a disinclination to persist in academic endeavors. It is unknown whether (and to what extent) older children and adolescents with incarcerated fathers or mothers experience cognitive delays or prenatal risks that impact their short- and long-term school outcomes. However, a growing body of evidence has documented a range of school-related problems associated with parental incarceration, including truancy, delinquency, suspension, failure, absence from school, drop-out, and disengagement (Hanlon et al., 2005; Trice and Brewster, 2004; Murray and Farrington, 2008a).

Cho (2010) used administrative data from criminal justice, education, employment, and other social and child welfare systems to examine the timing, length, and frequency of maternal incarceration and adolescents' risk for high school dropout. Results indicated that adolescent boys, but not girls, were sensitive to the timing of their mother's incarceration. Boys exposed to maternal incarceration during early adolescence (ages 11–14) had the highest risk of high school dropout, when compared to boys who experienced their mother's incarceration in middle childhood (ages 5–10) or late adolescence (ages 15–17). Cho also found that adolescents' risk for school dropout decreased as the number of maternal incarcerations increased. She posited that frequent and long-term maternal incarcerations may lead to more stable living environments that may promote youths' academic outcomes.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), Hagan and Foster (2012) found that parental incarceration was negatively associated with youth's high school grade point average, both for individual students and for students in schools with high rates of maternal incarceration. This examination of school-level spillover effects is an

innovative contribution to the literature examining individual-level effects.

Nichols, Loper, and Meyer (2016) analyzed data from AddHealth to consider the impact of parental incarceration on educational outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood. After controlling for demographic risk factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, parent education), they found that parental incarceration was significantly associated with truancy, cumulative academic achievement, and highest level of education, but with small average effects. They also considered other individual- and school-level risk and protective factors, including school connectedness, parent/family connectedness, school size, and school-based mental health services. They found, for example, that family and school connectedness were compensatory factors for truancy and academic achievement, regardless of youths' experience with parental incarceration.

In her analysis of data from the Fragile Families Study, Haskins (2016) examined paternal incarceration as a risk factor for children's cognitive skills (i.e., verbal ability, reading comprehension, math problem-solving skills, and working memory/attentional capacities) during middle childhood. Results demonstrated that experiencing paternal incarceration before age 9 was associated with lower cognitive skills for both boys and girls, even after controlling for children's cognitive ability before their fathers' incarcerations.

Shlafer, Reedy, and Davis (2017) used a large, statewide survey of adolescents in public schools, alternative learning centers, and juvenile correctional facilities to examine associations between parental incarceration and youths' self-reported school-based outcomes, including grades, discipline, school connectedness, and student engagement. They found consistent and strong negative associations between exposure to parental incarceration and school outcomes among youth in public schools. However, their findings were mixed for youth in alternative learning centers, and there were no significant effects of parental incarceration on school-based



outcomes among youth in juvenile correctional facilities.

Taken together, these results indicate that parental incarceration may be a risk for negative school performance and behaviors during middle childhood and adolescence; however, more research is needed on the potential moderators (i.e., for whom does parental incarceration impact the most) and the mechanisms (i.e., how does parental incarceration impact youths' adjustment in school). Additional research should also explore how parental incarceration during these key developmental periods is related to educational and employment outcomes later in life.

## Behavioral and Psychosocial Outcomes

### Internalizing and externalizing symptoms

A growing body of evidence has examined parental incarceration as a risk factor for youths' internalizing symptoms, including depression, anxiety, withdrawal, self-injury, and suicide, as well as youths' risk for externalizing symptoms and antisocial behavior. Evidence comes from several studies in the USA and abroad that are summarized in Chaps. 5 and 6 of this volume. For example, in their analysis of prospective data from the Cambridge Study on Delinquent Development, Murray and Farrington (2008a, b) found that boys who were separated from a parent before age ten because parental incarceration were more likely to exhibit antisocial behaviors and internalizing symptoms in adolescence and adulthood compared to boys who experienced other types of childhood separations from parents. For example, 61% of the boys who experienced parental incarceration before age ten showed antisocial personality characteristics at age 14 years, whereas only 16–33% of boys in the comparison groups showed such characteristics (Murray & Farrington, 2008b). Further, boys who were separated within the first ten years of life because of a parent's imprisonment had the highest rates of co-occurring internalizing and antisocial problems in adolescence. These findings remained significant even after controlling for parental criminality and other

family risks. While these findings are intriguing, similar analyses using data from a Swedish longitudinal study did not replicate these findings (Murray, Janson & Farrington, 2007).

Other researchers have examined associations between parental incarceration and adolescents' externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Kinner, Alati, Najman, and Williams (2007) found that a history of incarceration for the mother's current partner was associated with more internalizing and externalizing symptoms in adolescents, compared to adolescents whose mothers' partner did not have a history of incarceration. Further, a history of incarceration for the mother's current partner was associated with self-reported internalizing symptoms among girls, although it was not related to externalizing symptoms. In addition, the incarceration of the mother's partner was not significantly related to self-reported behavior problems among boys. However, after controlling for other risk factors (e.g., maternal age and education, family income, maternal mental health and substance use, dyadic adjustment, domestic violence, and parenting style), the associations between arrest and incarceration and children's outcomes became non-significant, suggesting that a history of incarceration in the mother's partner may not have been a unique risk factor for less optimal outcomes when examined in the context of other sociodemographic and family risk factors.

Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010) found that children's exposure to incarceration-related events (i.e., parent's criminal activity, arrest, and sentencing) was positively associated with caregiver-reported symptoms of children's anxiety and depression, and negatively correlated with children's self-reports of emotion regulation. In follow-up work with a larger sample of youth with an incarcerated mother ( $N = 151$ , ages 9–12), Dallaire, Zeman, and Thrash (2015b) found that children's exposure to incarceration-related experiences predicted youth's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems over and above the contribution of other risks in the environment (e.g., socioeconomic status, maternal psychopathology). These results suggest that specific, traumatic experiences associated with a

mother's incarceration, like witnessing her arrest, and being separated from siblings during her incarceration, contribute to youth's adaptation during the time of incarceration independently of other risks. However, using this same sample, Zeman, Dallaire, Folk, and Thrash (2017) found that the relationship between youth's experience of incarceration-specific risks and externalizing behaviors was mediated by youths' ability to positively regulate their anger.

Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011) compared parent- and teacher-reported externalizing behavior (assessed at 5th, 8th, and 10th grades) and youth-reported serious delinquency (assessed at 10th grade) among adolescents who had an incarcerated parent before age 10 with their peers who had not experienced parental incarceration. Across all measures, youth with a history of parental incarceration had more externalizing behavior problems and serious delinquency than their peers with no such history.

Shlafer, Poehlmann, and Donelan-McCall (2012) used longitudinal data from the Nurse-Family Partnership intervention program to examine the effects of maternal conviction, arrest, and jail time on adolescents' antisocial and health risk behaviors (e.g., being stopped by police, arrest, substance use) at age 15. After accounting for treatment status, maternal prenatal risk factors (e.g., smoking, prenatal care), child gender, and maternal arrest and conviction, maternal jail time was not a significant predictor of any of the adolescent outcomes they examined. Their findings highlight the importance of examining maternal risk factors and criminal behavior, in addition to confinement, when considering effects on youths' outcomes.

Davis and Shlafer (2017) examined mental health outcomes among adolescents with currently and formerly incarcerated parents. Using data from a statewide survey with 122,180 youth ages 12–19 in public schools, they found that youth with currently and formerly incarcerated parents were significantly more likely than their peers with no history of parental incarceration to self-report internalizing symptoms, purposeful self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempt. These strong associations remained significant even after

controlling for key sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., race, poverty, family structure). They also examined whether parental closeness moderated the associations between parental incarceration and youths' mental health outcomes. In all of their models, parental closeness was a significant moderator. Notably, though, parental closeness seemed to be most protective for youth without a history of parental incarceration.

### **Substance Use and Abuse**

Unlike Substance use younger children, some degree of risk-taking behaviors is considered normative during adolescence. Substance use is particularly relevant during this period and a growing body of research has examined parental incarceration as a risk for adolescents' substance use and abuse. For example, research by Kinner and colleagues (2007) found that girls whose mothers' partners had ever been imprisoned were more likely to use alcohol and tobacco at age 14, compared to girls whose mothers' partners had never been incarcerated. They also found that the partners' histories of arrest (but not imprisonment) were associated with boys' use of alcohol and tobacco at age 14.

Davis and Shlafer (2017) examined substance use and abuse among a statewide sample of 122,180 youth in 8th, 9th, and 11th grades. They found that youth with currently and formerly incarcerated parents were significantly more likely than their peers with no history of parental incarceration to report early alcohol initiation, recent alcohol use, binge drinking, tobacco use, marijuana use, and prescription drug use. Youth with currently and formerly incarcerated parents were also more likely to self-report substance use dependence and a history of treatment for drug or alcohol abuse than their peers with no history of parental incarceration.

Combined, these studies suggest strong associations between parents' and adolescents' antisocial behaviors. Such behaviors include, but are not limited to, violating the rights of others, breaking the law, and disregard for social standards or the legal system. Although one cannot equate incarceration with the full range of antisocial behaviors, incarcerated individuals have

most likely engaged in some type of antisocial behavior (e.g., stealing, assault, drug use). Scholars have offered numerous and wide-ranging explanations for intergenerational associations in antisocial behavior, including parental modeling of negative behaviors, family socialization regarding the acceptance of deviant behaviors, and lack of supervision (e.g., Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), the heritability of potential genetic markers relevant to antisocial behaviors (e.g., Carey & Goldman, 1997), and the accumulation of risks relevant to children's antisocial behaviors.

It is often assumed that many young people with parents involved in the criminal justice system will grow up to be criminals themselves. Although research has documented an increased risk for offending among youth whose parents were involved in the criminal justice system (Farrington, Barnes, & Lambert, 1996; Murray, Janson, and Farrington, 2007), there is also considerable discontinuity between generations (Bijleveld & Wijkman, 2009). Having an incarcerated parent by no means determines whether or not an adolescent will take the same developmental trajectory. Research on this topic must consider the processes through which antisocial and criminal behaviors are and *are not* transmitted across generations. The specific processes that explain the intergenerational transmission of antisocial behavior remain unclear. There is a need for additional research that examines parents' functioning prior to incarceration (e.g., criminal behavior witnessed by the adolescent, harsh or neglectful parenting, mental health and substance use) and young people's subsequent outcomes.

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## **Future Directions for Research, Practice, and Policy**

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The research reviewed in this chapter generally falls into one of two categories. In the first category, analyses were conducted on an archival dataset which allowed questions about parental incarceration to be tested, as well as more

complex relations and interactions, though the measures in the dataset were not intended to examine such questions. In the second category, data were collected as part of a relatively small research study (e.g., with sample sizes rarely larger than 50) designed to examine very specific questions pertaining to parental incarceration. Studies in the latter group often contained rich qualitative data and interesting results, but with insufficient power to detect more complex quantitative associations and interactions.

These methodological limitations could be remedied with purposefully planned, well-funded, large scale, mixed methods research projects focused on how parental incarceration affects children and families across developmental periods. Such studies could better address important questions related to factors which may moderate children and adolescents' reactions to parental incarceration, including the influence of family dynamics and gender, for example. Few of the studies cited in this chapter specifically addressed important issues related to either parent or child gender, for example, or the possible interaction between parent and child gender.

A further step would entail examining longitudinal relations for a cohort of children who are followed across important periods of development. For example, questions might include "how does separation from mothers during infancy due to incarceration impact children's peer relations at school age?" or "how does witnessing parental arrest during middle childhood affect children's association with deviant peers during adolescence?" A longitudinal study would also allow researchers to address important questions related to how parental incarceration impacts a family's dynamics and the extent to which family dynamics impact child development during and after a parent's incarceration.

There is also a real need for resilience-focused research—empirical work that recognizes and examines factors associated with children and adolescents' successful adaptation despite the considerable adversities they experience in the context of parental incarceration. The research that has emerged within the past decade has provided

important information about the development of children and adolescents with incarcerated parents. However, this research has been overwhelmingly problem-focused (Eddy & Reid, 2003). Scholars should examine the outcomes of children and adolescents with incarcerated parents using a resilience framework (e.g., Masten, 2001). Research with children and adolescents with incarcerated parents should consider protective factors that are suggested by theory and previous developmental research, including positive family relationships, supportive relationships with non-family members (e.g., a teacher, mentor, or coach), youths' self-efficacy, supervision provided in the home, and positive peer relationships (Grossman et al., 1992; Werner & Smith, 1992). As researchers and practitioners, it is vital that we begin to understand how and why some children and adolescents exhibit successful adaptation, despite the considerable risks associated with parental incarceration. Furthermore, it is important for researchers to begin to understand the factors that promote resilience processes so that we can guide practitioners in a way that capitalizes on protective factors.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Several resources exist for practitioners working with older children and adolescents affected by incarceration. We recommend that practitioners become acquainted with these, disseminate information from them to their community-partners and professional networks, and modify recommendations, as appropriate, to meet the developmental needs of the older children and adolescents in their care. For example, as discussed in Chap. 7 of this volume, Sesame Street recently developed materials for young children affected by parental incarceration (Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration, 2013; <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/incarceration/>).

Although the materials were developed for young children, some of the videos and many of the messages in the caregiver guide are relevant for older children as well. For example, these resources emphasize the importance of providing

children with developmentally appropriate and honest information about the parent's incarceration—recommendations that are equally relevant for older children and adolescents. Additionally, a Tip Sheet for Youth ([http://youth.gov/sites/default/files/COIP\\_TipSheet\\_Youth\\_Final.pdf](http://youth.gov/sites/default/files/COIP_TipSheet_Youth_Final.pdf)) and a Tip Sheet for Providers ([http://youth.gov/sites/default/files/COIP-TipSheet-Providers\\_Final.pdf](http://youth.gov/sites/default/files/COIP-TipSheet-Providers_Final.pdf)) were developed following a listening session hosted by the federal government. These resources address many salient issues for adolescents with incarcerated parents, including having increased responsibilities in the absence of a parent, navigating complex systems, dealing with stigma, coping with complex emotions, and identifying resources and supports in school and in the community. Most of these resources are free and available online. Because many were developed by youth for youth, they are particularly accessible for older children and adolescents.

Additionally, we recommend that practitioners working with older children and youth with incarcerated parents capitalize on the unique developmental capacities and transitions happening during these periods of development in order to support youth. With increased cognitive and language skills, youth may find writing or talking about their experiences particularly valuable. Ensuring that youth have a safe and confidential space to address their concerns is important in every therapeutic setting, but is particularly relevant to these youth, given what is known about the shame and stigma surrounding parental incarceration. Finally, recognizing the variation in youths' experiences when a parent is incarcerated is critical. Parental incarceration is not a singular experience and is often characterized by a series of traumas and transitions. Being prepared to meet youth "where they are at" as they move through these experiences is critical for providing them with support.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

Research findings on parental incarceration during middle childhood and adolescence have

implications for policies formulated and implemented at the local, state, and national levels. During a 2016 White House Listening Session, youth with currently and formerly incarcerated parents identified six areas for changes in practice and policy, including: (a) increased opportunities to visit, (b) more frequent and less expensive opportunities to communicate, (c) better communication between corrections and schools, (d) improved sharing of information about parents, (e) better understanding about the impact of mandatory reporting rules, and (f) friendlier interactions [with corrections staff] when visiting. Policy implications relevant to the development periods of middle childhood and adolescence concern how youth at these stages may handle the arrest of their parent and how parental incarceration may impact youths' experiences in different settings, particularly school.

In contrast to younger age ranges, children in middle childhood and adolescence are fully cognizant of what is happening when their parent is arrested. In these instances, it would be helpful to have officers trained in child development to help children understand the context of parental arrest. However, if a parent is arrested and taken away when a child is at school, then the child would likely return home to an empty home with no knowledge of what has happened to their parent. With children's needs in mind, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recently developed a model policy for safeguarding children during the arrest of a parent. In addition, they have developed and disseminated comprehensive training materials which are widely accessible for law enforcement professionals throughout the USA. We recommend that law enforcement agencies implement the model policy and monitor implementation.

Another policy-relevant area for middle childhood and adolescence concerns youths' interactions in the school context. Following the arrest or imprisonment of a student's parent, teachers and administrators may only be informed of the situation by word of mouth, and many teachers may never know that their students are affected by parental incarceration. Increased communication among staff within

interacting systems, including criminal justice, child welfare, and education, would assist with the early identification of children affected by parental incarceration and allow for interventions that attempt to decrease social isolation and stigma, increase opportunities for positive youth development, and promote older children and adolescents' school attendance and completion of academic work. As studies have shown that parental incarceration confers risk for youths' school outcomes (e.g., Trice & Brewster, 2004; Shlafer, Reedy, & Davis, 2017), it is important that teachers understand how a parent's incarceration may impact academic and behavior in the school setting. Privacy concerns, however, may make informing teachers of such events difficult or unlikely, and these concerns are well-founded, as children who know that their teachers are being informed about their home situation may be even more sensitive to stigmatization from peers (e.g., Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). In spite of these limitations, however, policies which allow administrators and teachers to be aware of how parental incarceration affects their students may be important to help raise awareness about this issue and to help circumvent school-related problems associated with experience of parental incarceration.

Finally, as a society, it will also help affected youth if we attempt to decrease social stigma through more effective efforts at reintegration of formerly incarcerated parents back into society and into roles that promote their positive civic engagement, including issues related to employment, housing, education, and voting. Alternatives to incarceration for individuals with children (see Chap. 16, this volume) should also be considered as a means to decrease family disruption and to minimize the impact on the next generation.

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## Conclusions

Middle childhood and adolescence are characterized by significant changes in cognitive, social, and emotional skills. These developmental changes are essential to consider when seeking to understand how a parent's incarceration

impacts older children and adolescents. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers must all consider the developmental needs of older children and adolescents, when identifying strategies to best support them before, during, and after a parent's incarceration.

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