

Research examines the price of prison for children

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It comes as no surprise that many children suffer when a parent is behind bars. But as rates of incarceration grew over the past 30 years, researchers were slow to focus on the collateral damage to children.

The best estimate says that at any one time, 1.7 million (about 2.3 percent) of all American [children](#) have a parent in prison, says Julie Poehlmann, a professor in the School of [Human Ecology](#) and investigator at the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"By age 14, more than half of black children with a low-education parent, will have an imprisoned parent," she says.

About 10 years ago, the problem finally began to spark interest from social scientists, Poehlmann says.

"School personnel and child welfare personnel are now seeing more and more children who have a current or past incarcerated parent. There is a greater awareness of the volume, and greater need to understand what's going on. What are the risks, what are the outcomes, and how can we better help these children?" Poehlmann says.

Although a definitive cause-and-effect relationship has not been established, children of incarcerated parents tend to have more arrests, and more problems with behavior, relationships, school, and substance abuse. "It's all the things you would expect," says Poehlmann.

Problems are particularly acute when the mother is in jail or prison. "It's more likely that the child will move out of house, and be placed with grandparents," she says. "They are more likely to change schools and have a higher risk of substance abuse, and the father is also likely to be incarcerated."

Poehlmann, who has studied mothers, substitute caregivers and children in Milwaukee, Racine, Green Bay, Beloit and other parts of Wisconsin, finds that a strong, close attachment with the alternative caregiver can mitigate the harm of incarceration.

"I don't find it surprising how important the caregiver is. In the past, interventions tended to focus on the parent, with little or no focus on the caregiver, the quality of the home environment, or the nature of the attachment between child and caregiver, yet these are all critical to how the child is doing," she says.

Despite the risks, 25 to 30 percent of children escape the worst harm, Poehlmann says. "When I look at the factors that facilitate resilience, secure attachment appears to be protective," she says.

In one of her studies, kids aged 9 to 14 who had a positive relationship with a caregiver had fewer behavior problems six months later.

Although it's assumed that contact with an imprisoned parent will help the child, Poehlmann finds that this is not always true.

"Visits when the parent is behind Plexiglas are not always positive. Alternative means of contact, like letters, may be more positive" for kids who are traumatized by [prison](#) visits, she says.

School districts are belatedly trying to address the extra needs of these children, says Poehlmann. Incarcerated parents are "one reason why

districts like Milwaukee are having so many problems with truancy and graduation rates. There is probably a huge proportion of kids having these problems--the parents are incarcerated--and yet the school district may never learn of that fact."

The long-term picture is bleak, Poehlmann adds. "Children of incarcerated parent are at least two and a half times more likely to be incarcerated themselves. Just imagine the scale of the crisis in another 10 or 15 years. It's overwhelming," she says.

Poehlmann has been getting some attention for her work on the children of incarcerated parents, including serving as editor of a special issue on the subject in the journal *Attachment and Human Development* and a forthcoming book. But she says, "I wish this area hadn't exploded. I wish this problem didn't exist."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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