

Foster care, parental incarceration linked with youth mental health problems

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Published in the international journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*, University of Minnesota researchers found parental incarceration and foster care were separately linked with mental health problems. However, youth

who had experienced both had the highest odds of anxiety, depression, self-injury, suicidal ideation and mental health diagnoses and treatment. Those who were recently in foster care and had a parent currently incarcerated reported the most adverse mental health symptoms.

While trends consistently showed that [youth](#) navigating both systems fared the worst, it also appears that those who have the most proximal and concurrent exposure to parental incarceration and foster care are at the highest likelihood of poor outcomes. It should be noted that those who have past experience with parental incarceration and/or foster care fared worse relative to non-systems exposed youth and likely require consideration for intervention services. As such, ongoing access to support and mental health services may be warranted.

"This study emboldens what we know about youth in foster care and children with incarcerated parents by detailing a concerning state of adolescent health for those navigating both systems," said Luke Muentner, Ph.D., MSW, a post-doctoral research associate at the University of Minnesota Medical School. "These findings point to a dire need for increased access to [mental health services](#) for youth in systems-impacted families while also advocating for [policy change](#) that reduces the number of children made systematically vulnerable to this exposure."

The study used data from the [2019 Minnesota Student Survey](#) of more than 110,000 students in grades 8, 9 and 11. Nearly 2% of students surveyed experienced both parental incarceration and foster care. A disproportionate number of those identified as youth of color, were experiencing poverty, or living in a [rural community](#).

After analyzing these findings, the research team compiled the following recommendations:

- Increased screening and treatment for anxiety and depressive

symptoms.

- Expanded access to culturally-relevant, evidence-based therapeutic programs that reduce risk for self-harm and suicide-related behaviors.
- A coordinated, smooth continuum of care as children navigate their way through the various systems.
- Reduced reliance on family policing and separation. Instead, employ alternate strategies that offer agency, autonomy and rights back to parents and families while still promoting child safety and family well-being.

Researchers suggest further work to continue exploring health-related outcomes for youth impacted by both parental incarceration and [foster care](#), including externalized behaviors, substance use and physical health. The research team also plans to examine ways various protective factors, like family, school or [community support](#), can help to mitigate risk for poor child health.

More information: Luke Muentner et al, Youth at the intersection of parental incarceration and foster care: Examining prevalence, disparities, and mental health, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105910](#)

Provided by University of Minnesota Medical School

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