

Trauma, severe stress in childhood linked to criminal legal involvement in next generation

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A study led by UCLA researchers found that the children of parents who

experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)— such as abuse, neglect, violence in the home, or loss of a parent—are at increased risk of arrests and convictions by young adulthood.

The authors report that their findings suggest that there is a crucial need for prevention of ACE exposure in the first place, as well as efforts to mitigate the impact of ACEs before they have downstream impacts on the next generation of children who are not yet born. The study appears in *JAMA Network Open*.

Youth arrest and incarceration have damaging effects on health and social success well into adulthood, and the carceral system is highly overused in the United States especially among communities of color and for people with multiple marginalized intersectional identities. To achieve health equity, prevention of ACEs—and of the cradle-to-prison pipeline—is an important focus for policymakers.

"The study is based on a nationally representative dataset, and is the first to show an intergenerational relationship between parental ACE exposure and a young person's involvement in the criminal legal system. This suggests that there may be an intergenerational transmission of risk," said Dr. Elizabeth Barnert, a pediatrician at UCLA Health, a researcher at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, and the paper's first author. Dr. Barnert also serves as Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine liaison to the National Commission on Correctional Health Care.

"Our results suggest that it is not only important to prevent childhood adversity, but also to find ways to effectively mitigate the impact of ACEs when they do happen—because the effects may last even more than one or two generations," said Barnert

Barnert said the findings—the results of a multicenter study led by

UCLA researchers—are important for pediatricians, who often identify and address instances of childhood trauma and other forms of adversity. The findings also are applicable for policymakers, who must set guidelines on how society deals with young people who come to the attention of law enforcement.

Dr. Barnert, senior author Dr. Adam Schickedanz, a pediatrician and health services researcher at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, and colleagues have studied [adverse childhood experiences](#), incarceration, and other issues affecting health and behavioral health. They were surprised in this study that positive childhood experiences—like good relationships and interactions with caregivers, friends, neighbors and teachers—were not observed to provide a balance for the adverse ones.

"We had hypothesized that positive experiences might protect or mitigating against ACEs, but this did not necessarily bear out in the data," Barnert said. "This is likely because the sample size was too small."

The authors launched this study to better understand the issues facing children and families in the United States, and in particular to understand how childhood adversity might transmit through generations.

"It can be frustrating to see that the carceral system often doesn't solve problems for young people, and in some ways, it can traumatize them even further. It alienates parents instead of engaging them," Barnert said. "We wanted to begin to paint a picture of who these young people are because we think there needs to be a switch from a paradigm of blame to one of empathy and public [health](#) problem-solving."

"Now that we've unlocked this dataset, built this intergenerational sample and looked at other variables around legal system involvement,

we want to understand more of the underlying mechanisms and pathway," Barnert said.

The research team analyzed data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the world's longest running panel survey, and its 2014 Childhood Retrospective Circumstances Study (CRCS).

Adults 18 to 97 years old retrospectively reported on their [childhood](#) experiences. Parents and [adult children](#) were linked in the dataset. Data analysis was done from October 2022 to September 2023. Having four or more parental ACEs was associated with a nearly two-fold higher adjusted odds of arrest before age 26 and more than a threefold higher adjusted odds of conviction before that age, compared with children of parents without ACEs.

More information: Elizabeth Barnert et al, Parents' Adverse and Positive Childhood Experiences and Offspring Involvement With the Criminal Legal System, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.39648](#)

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