

# Teaching & Learning Guide for: Parental incarceration and child outcomes: Those at risk, evidence of impacts, methodological insights, and areas of future work

Meaghan Mingo | Anna R. Haskins 

Department of Sociology, Cornell University

## Correspondence

Anna R. Haskins, Department of Sociology, Cornell University, 354 Uris Hall, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA.  
Email: arh96@cornell.edu

## 1 | AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

With nearly one in every 36 adults under some form of correctional supervision (whether in prison or jail, on probation, or parole), parental incarceration—which just a few decades ago was considered a rare event—is now experienced by a sizeable number of American children. Estimates suggest that at least five million, and possibly upwards of eight million, children nationwide are impacted. As such, understanding and documenting the intergenerational consequences of mass incarceration have become increasingly important to practitioners, policymakers, and academic researchers alike.

In this article, we present an overview of research about parental incarceration and children's outcomes. First, we briefly outline who is the most at risk for experiencing parental incarceration before providing an overview of recent multi- and interdisciplinary research on the impact of parental incarceration on children's behavioral, educational, and health outcomes. We then discuss the strengths, challenges, and unique contributions of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches to studying the consequences of parental incarceration. Finally, we conclude by identifying gaps in current literature and areas ripe for further development, drawing special attention to the potential for the field to identify and test mechanisms, connect microlevel and macrolevel analyses and understand pathways for resilience in children and families.

## 2 | AUTHOR RECOMMENDS

Nesmith, A., & Ruhland, E. (2008). Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1119–1130.

This guide accompanies the following article: Haskins, A. R., Amorim, M., & Mingo, M. (2018). Parental incarceration and child outcomes: Those at risk, evidence of impacts, methodological insights, and areas of future work. *Sociology Compass*, 12, e12562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12562>

This article is one of few that focuses on resilience among children of incarcerated parents. The authors interview 34 children about how having a parent in prison affected their family and peer relationships, school experiences, their reactions to prison visits, and perceptions of prison. They find that while children experience multiple stressors, including social isolation and stigma, they also demonstrate resilience and find healthy outlets for coping.

Siegel, J. A. (2011). *Disrupted childhoods: Children of women in prison*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

This is a powerful book about the lives of children of incarcerated mothers. Based upon interviews with 67 children and 74 mothers, Siegel offers a picture of the lives of children across various stages of their mothers' involvement with the criminal justice system, from the point of arrest and trial to postrelease experiences. When considered in the context of quantitative work that finds null or small effects for maternal incarceration on children, Siegel offers a perspective that contextualizes incarceration as one difficulty in a larger web of challenges faced by children whose parents are struggling with poverty, household instability, substance use, and trauma.

Turney, K. (2017). The unequal consequences of mass incarceration for children. *Demography*, 54(1), 361–389.

Turney uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to estimate the heterogeneous relationship between paternal incarceration and a number of child outcomes in middle childhood, including problem behaviors and cognitive skills. She finds that when taking into account children's risk of experiencing parental incarceration (as measured by the social context in which they are embedded), consequences are greater for children with relatively low risks of exposure to paternal incarceration than for children with relatively high risks of exposure. This article is an important contribution that pushes researchers to consider the heterogeneous effects of parental incarceration.

Wakefield, S., & Wildeman, C. (2011). Mass imprisonment and racial disparities in childhood behavioral problems. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 10(3), 793–817.

Wakefield and Wildeman's article integrates results from three existing studies to provide estimates of the influence of mass imprisonment on racial disparities in childhood well-being. They find that parental incarceration, on average, harms children and is linked to more mental health and behavioral problems and find large racial disparities in these childhood outcomes which are linked to the significant racial disparities in the likelihood parental imprisonment.

Wildeman, C., Haskins, A., & Poehlmann-Tynan, A. (Eds.). (2018). *When parents are incarcerated: Interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

This book offers a multidisciplinary analysis of how parental incarceration affects children and what can be done to help them. Sociologists, demographers, developmental psychologists, family scientists, criminologists, and practitioners offer empirical findings about the scope of parental incarceration, assess interventions, and propose new strategies to lessen the harm caused.

### 3 | ONLINE MATERIALS

Family sentence: The long and costly journey to visit parents in prison. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXn7KCJCNUg>

This short video produced by Nola.com uses infographics, pictures, and narration to describe the challenges and realities of visiting a parent in prison in Louisiana.

The intersection of love and loss: Children of incarcerated parents. <http://time.com/4327836/love-and-loss-children-of-incarcerated-parents/>

Photographer Isadora Kosofsky documents bonding meetings between children and their mothers and fathers at five prisons in the state of Florida.

**How parental incarceration harms children and what to do about it.** [https://www.ncfr.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/How%20Parental%20Incarceration%20Harms%20Children%20NCFR%20Policy\\_Full%20Brief\\_Jan.%202018\\_0.pdf](https://www.ncfr.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/How%20Parental%20Incarceration%20Harms%20Children%20NCFR%20Policy_Full%20Brief_Jan.%202018_0.pdf)

This accessible six-page policy brief from the National Council on Family Relations describes the consequences of parental incarceration on children, focusing especially on the consequences of paternal incarceration. Sociologists Wakefield and Wildeman also make recommendations for policymakers, focusing both on those that would diminish rates of incarceration and help children who have already been affected.

**Who pays? The true cost of incarceration on families.** <http://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/who-pays.pdf>

This community-driven report involving 20 community-based organizations around the country outlines and documents both the immediate and long-term, hidden, and obvious costs of mass incarceration on families and communities.

**A shared sentence: The devastating toll of parental incarceration on kids, families and communities.** <http://www.aecf.org/resources/a-shared-sentence/>

This policy report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation outlines the unique stressors and challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents and the impacts on families, describes the “spillover” effects of incarceration on communities, and offers policy recommendations for creating stronger support systems for children.

**Change maker: Learning from youth who have an incarcerated parent.** <https://engage.youth.gov/youth-voices/youth-with-incarcerated-parents>

This website contains four products developed based on the ideas, insights, and experiences of youth who have incarcerated parents. For example, there is a short video that shares the voices of four young women about dealing with having a parent who is incarcerated. In this video and the other three resources, youth describe challenges and experiences and offer tips for dealing with parental incarceration.

**Bill of Rights for children of incarcerated parents.** <http://www.sfcipp.org/>

The San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP), a coalition of social service providers, representatives of government bodies, advocates, and others who work with children of incarcerated parents and their families, developed a Bill of Rights for children whose parents are arrested and/or incarcerated. Their website contains the bill of rights, resources for providers and community members who work with children of incarcerated parents, and basic background on incarceration, children, and how frameworks/models for criminal justice should consider their needs.

**Sesame workshop—Little children, big challenges: Incarceration.** <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/incarceration/>  
<https://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits/incarceration>

Online resource and toolkit specifically developed for families dealing with the challenges of incarceration. These websites include videos and a storybook to help support and comfort children, guides to help parents talk with their children about incarceration, and a resource for the incarcerated parent that highlights the importance of communication.

## 4 | SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Readings from this syllabus could be used in a standalone course on mass incarceration and the family, as well as included in numerous other courses, including those on the criminal justice system, prisons and jails, inequality, or social problems. Readings included in this sample syllabus provide a broad overview of the consequences of imprisonment, and how it shapes opportunities and disadvantage for communities, families, and especially children.

### Weeks 1 and 2: Overview of incarceration and its consequences in the United States

Garland, D. (2001). *Mass imprisonment: Social causes and consequences*. London: Sage Publications.

Haskins, A. R., Amorim, M., & Mingo, M. (2018). Parental incarceration and child outcomes: Those at risk, evidence of impacts, methodological insights, and areas of future work. *Sociology Compass*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12562>

Travis, J., Redburn, F. S., & Western, B. (Eds.) (2014). *The growth of incarceration in the United States: Exploring causes and consequences*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press.

Wakefield, S., & Uggen, C. (2010). Incarceration and stratification. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 387–406.

Western, B., & Wildeman, C. (2009). The black family and mass incarceration. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 621, 221–242.

### **Week 3: Spatial concentration of incarceration and consequences for communities**

Clear, T. R. (2007). *Imprisoning communities: How mass incarceration makes disadvantaged neighborhoods worse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lynch, J. P., & Sabol, W. J. (2004). Assessing the effects of mass incarceration on informal social control in communities. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 3(2), 267–294.

Sampson, R. J., & Loeffler, C. (2010). Punishment's place: The local concentration of mass incarceration. *Daedalus*, 139(3), 20–31.

### **Week 4: Material hardship of children and families**

Geller, A., & Franklin, A. W. (2014). Paternal incarceration and the housing security of urban mothers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76(2), 411–427.

Katzenstein, M. F., & Waller, M. R. (2015). Taxing the poor: Incarceration, poverty governance, and the seizure of family resources. *Perspectives on Politics*, 13(3), 638–656.

Schwartz-Soicher, O., Geller, A., & Garfinkel, I. (2011). The effect of paternal incarceration on material hardship. *The Social Service Review*, 85(3), 447–473.

Sykes, B. L., & Pettit, B. (2014). Mass incarceration, family complexity, and the reproduction of childhood disadvantage. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654(1), 127–149.

Wildeman, C. (2014). Parental incarceration, child homelessness, and the invisible consequences of mass imprisonment. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651(1), 74–96.

### **Week 5: Social isolation of children and families**

Hagen, K. A., & Myers, B. J. (2003). The effect of secrecy and social support on behavioral problems in children of incarcerated women. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 12, 229–242.

Haskins, A. R., & Jacobsen, W. C. (2017). Schools as surveilling institutions? Paternal incarceration, system avoidance, and parental involvement in schooling. *American Sociological Review*, 82(4), 657–684.

Nesmith, A., & Ruhland, E. (2008). Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1119–1130.

### **Weeks 6 and 7: Parenting and relationships**

Arditti, J. A. (2003). Locked doors and glass walls: Family visiting at a local jail. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 8(2), 115–138.

Arditti, J. A., Lambert-Shute, J., & Joest, K. (2003). Saturday morning at the jail: Implications of incarceration for families and children. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 195–204.

Comfort, M. (2008). *Doing time together*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nurse, A. (2002). *Fatherhood arrested: Parenting from within the juvenile justice system*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Roy, K. M., & Dyson, O. L. (2005). Gatekeeping in context: Babymama drama and the involvement of incarcerated fathers. *Fathering*, 3(3), 289.

Turanovic, J. J., Rodriguez, N., & Pratt, T. C. (2012). The collateral consequences of incarceration revisited: A qualitative analysis of the effects on caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. *Criminology*, 50(4), 913–959.

Turney, K., & Wildeman, C. (2013). Redefining relationships: Explaining the countervailing consequences of paternal incarceration for parenting. *American Sociological Review*, 78(6), 949–979.

### **Week 8: Educational effects on children**

Dallaire, D. H., Ciccone, A., & Wilson, L. C. (2010). Teachers' experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31(4), 281–290.

Haskins, A. R. (2014). Unintended consequences: Effects of paternal incarceration on child school readiness and later special education placement. *Sociological Science*, 1, 141–158.

Haskins, A. R. (2016). Beyond boys' bad behavior: Paternal incarceration and cognitive development in middle childhood. *Social Forces*, 95(2), 861–892.

Turney, K., & Haskins, A. R. (2014). Falling behind? Children's early grade retention after paternal incarceration. *Sociology of Education*, 87(4), 241–258.

### **Week 9: Behavioral effects on children**

Haskins, A. R. (2015). Paternal incarceration and child-reported behavioral functioning at age 9. *Social Science Research*, 52, 18–33.

Wakefield, S., & Wildeman, C. (2011). Mass imprisonment and racial disparities in childhood behavioral problems. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 10(3), 793–817.

Wildeman, C., & Turney, K. (2014). Positive, negative, or null? The effects of maternal incarceration on children's behavioral problems. *Demography*, 51(3), 1041.

### **Week 10: Health effects on children**

Lee, R. D., Fang, X., & Luo, F. (2013). The impact of parental incarceration on the physical and mental health of young adults. *Pediatrics*, 131(4), e1188–e1195.

Miller, H. V., & Barnes, J. C. (2015). The association between parental incarceration and health, education, and economic outcomes in young adulthood. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(4), 765–784.

Turney, K. (2014). Stress proliferation across generations? Examining the relationship between parental incarceration and childhood health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 55(3), 302–319.

Turney, K. (2017a). Unmet health care needs among children exposed to parental incarceration. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 21(5), 1194–1202.