


# A Developmental Perspective on Children With Incarcerated Parents

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**ABSTRACT**—*Parental incarceration is a socially relevant topic with substantial implications for children, yet it is understudied by child development scholars. About 2.6 million U.S. children currently have a parent who is incarcerated, and by age 14, one in 14 U.S. children experiences a resident parent leaving for jail or prison. In this developmentally oriented review, we summarize research on associations between parental incarceration and child well-being, and suggest areas where developmental scientists can contribute. While most analyses of large population-based U.S., datasets have found that experiencing paternal incarceration typically has detrimental implications for child well-being, especially as children grow older, analyses of maternal incarceration have yielded less consistent findings. Longitudinal population-based developmental studies focusing on parental incarceration, especially early in life through adulthood, are urgently needed to answer basic questions, clarify mixed findings, inform policies, and develop interventions for vulnerable children.*

**KEYWORDS**—*incarcerated parents; children; risk*

Incarceration rates in the United States have increased so dramatically over the past half century that parental incarceration is no longer an uncommon adverse childhood event. About 2.6

million U.S. children currently have a parent in jail or prison (Sykes & Pettit, 2014) and most people who are incarcerated have minor children (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). A recently burgeoning literature, primarily in the fields of sociology and criminology, has examined implications of parental incarceration for children's development, including their behavior, mental health, delinquency, and educational outcomes (Eddy & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Wildeman, 2020). Parental incarceration is a socially relevant topic with substantial implications for children, but it is understudied by child development scholars. Yet, developmental scientists are well poised to contribute to research on parental incarceration by focusing on the timing of life course events, processes underlying the experience of incarceration (for parents and children), developmental cascades, and resilience among children. In this review, we summarize research on associations between parental incarceration and children's well-being, and suggest how developmental scientists can contribute.

Compared to their peers, children with incarcerated parents often experience more adversity, such as dissolution of marriages or relationships between parents, parents' substance abuse, extreme poverty, residential instability, and homelessness (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013), making it important to consider factors that differentiate families prior to incarceration. Thus, we focus on research from population-based studies, listed in Table 1 (also see Table S1, for additional detail); in addition, we briefly consider research involving samples that are not based on population but that attend to developmental and family processes, including moderators and mediators of the relation between parental incarceration and children's well-being (Table S2).

Although population-based studies include variables related to selection into incarceration, most do not distinguish between incarceration in jail and incarceration in prison. These types of incarceration differ in ways relevant to child development (Turney & Conner, 2019), including the time individuals spend in corrections, the number and types of programs offered to facilitate education and treatment, proximity to where families live,

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**Table 1***Data Sources With Population-Based Samples Used to Study the Relation Between Parental Incarceration and Children's Well-Being.*

Data source	Sample size	Study design
Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW)	4,898	Sample of children born to mostly unmarried parents in 20 U.S. cities in 1998–1999; families interviewed right after child's birth and an additional five times (at 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years; Turney & Haskins, 2019)
Great Smoky Mountains Study (GSMS)	1,420	Sample of 1,420 youth from 11 rural counties in North Carolina; families interviewed up to eight times from 1993 to 2000; children also interviewed at ages 19, 21, 25, and 30 between 1999 and 2015 (Gifford et al., 2019)
Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS)	1,000–3,000 per state	State-based survey given yearly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state public health departments; includes a stratified random sample of women who have delivered a baby in each of the participating states (Testa & Jackson, 2020)
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)	20,745	Panel study of a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents in grades 7–12 in 1994–1995; respondents interviewed an additional four times (through 2016–2018; Foster & Hagan, 2013)
Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT)	671	Longitudinal randomized controlled school-based prevention trial using population-based sample; began in 1991, with 671 fifth graders followed into adulthood; sample from “at risk” neighborhoods in Eugene-Springfield, Oregon (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a, 2011b)
National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)	Varies across years	Repeated cross-sectional telephone surveys representative of U.S. noninstitutionalized children from birth to age 17 (2003, 2007, 2011–2012, 2016, 2017, 2018; Turney, 2014)
Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)	>18,000	Nationally representative sample of U.S. families starting in 1968, followed annually (through 1997) and then biannually (Johnson, 2009)
Pittsburgh Youth Study (PYS)	3,436	Population-based study of inner-city boys in Pittsburgh; includes three cohorts in grades 1, 4, and 7 in 1987–1988; follow-up assessments conducted semiannually and then annually with a subset of these boys (Murray et al., 2012)

and types and frequency of visits (Shlafer, Loper, & Schillmoeller, 2015). Most U.S. incarceration occurs in *jails* (run by local governments or sheriffs' offices and housing individuals serving misdemeanor sentences or detained and awaiting charges, conviction, or sentencing) rather than *prisons* (run by state or federal governments and housing people with felony convictions, typically with sentences longer than 1 year; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). More than 10 million annual admissions to jails occur across the United States (Zeng, 2020), making it a relatively common experience for families. But the literature on children with incarcerated parents rarely focuses on types of criminal justice involvement, such as parental arrest (without incarceration) or children's and families' experiences of probation and parole (Wakefield & Montagnet, 2019), with a few exceptions (e.g., Miller & Bank, 2013).

In this article, we review research conducted with U.S. children since both the prevalence and the context of incarceration in the United States are distinct from other countries. Where possible, we pay attention to both paternal and maternal incarceration, although the number of incarcerated fathers far exceeds the number of incarcerated mothers. Maternal and paternal incarceration differ in ways that may relate differentially to children's well-being (Dallaire, 2007). Compared with fathers, mothers are more likely to live with their children before

incarceration and report more adverse experiences, mental health issues, and substance abuse, which can affect parenting. Additionally, children with incarcerated mothers are exposed to more risk, on average, than children with incarcerated fathers, including placement in foster care (Dallaire, 2007).

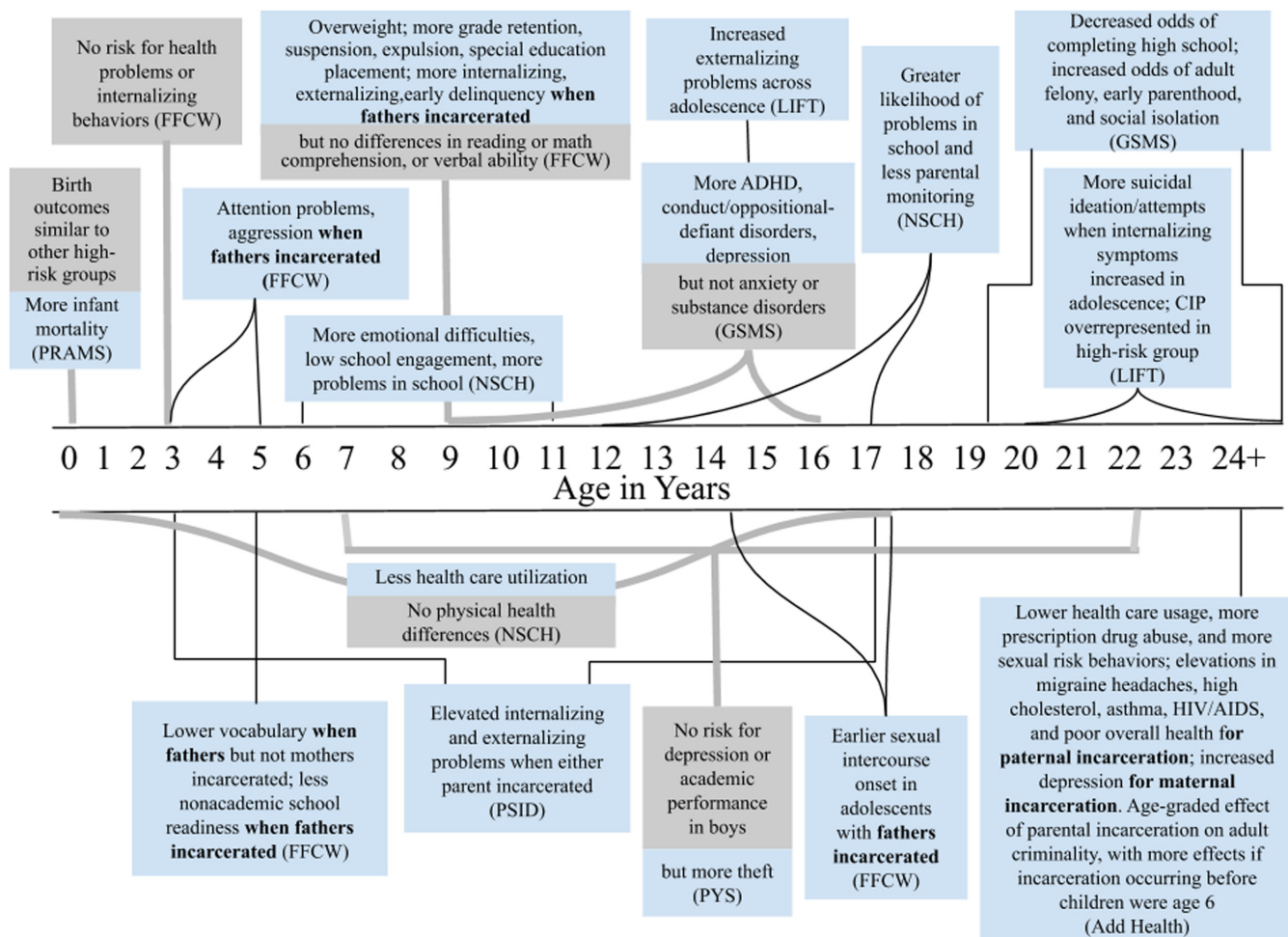
### THE INCARCERATION OF A PARENT AND CHILD WELL-BEING IN POPULATION-BASED STUDIES

Because it is important to take a developmental approach to understanding children's well-being in the context of parental incarceration (Eddy & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019), we organize the findings around children's age and by psychosocial problems and educational outcomes. We also elaborate on the mediators and moderators of the relation between parental incarceration and children's well-being when possible. Figure 1 displays the findings of longitudinal population-based studies along a developmental timeline to illustrate what scholars have learned.

#### Early and Middle Childhood

##### *Behavior Problems, Mental Health, and Delinquency*

Behavior problems, mental health, and delinquency are some of the outcomes most commonly considered in research on children



**Figure 1.** Developmental timeline of findings from longitudinal population-based studies focusing on children with incarcerated parents. *Note.* Blue boxes with black lines = parental incarceration related to outcome even when covariates are included in model. Gray boxes with black lines = null finding for parental incarceration. CIP = children with incarcerated parents; FFCW = the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study; GSMS = Great Smoky Mountains Study; Add Health = National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health; NSCH = National Survey of Children’s Health; PSID = Panel Study of Income Dynamics; LIFT = Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers randomized controlled trial; PYS = the Pittsburgh Youth Study; PRAMS = Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

with incarcerated fathers and mothers. Studies on early childhood (from birth through age 5) have generally shown positive associations between paternal incarceration and children’s externalizing, but not internalizing, problems. For example, paternal incarceration when children were 3- to 5-years old related to more attention problems and aggression when they reached age 5 (Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, & Mincy, 2012; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Wildeman, 2010; see also Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009). However, by the time children reached middle childhood, paternal incarceration related to more caregiver- and teacher-reported externalizing and internalizing problems (Antle, Gibson, & Krohn, 2019; Turney, 2017), as well as child-reported antisocial behaviors and delinquency (Haskins, 2015; Turney, 2017). In contrast, generally speaking, maternal incarceration has not been associated

with parent- or teacher-reported behavioral problems in early or middle childhood, controlling for factors associated with selection into experiencing maternal incarceration (Wildeman & Turney, 2014; see also Geller et al., 2009).

Other research has considered parental incarceration in general, as opposed to examining paternal and maternal incarceration separately, and has looked at child development across a large age range. In one study, 3- to 17-year olds were more likely to exhibit elevated parent-reported internalizing and externalizing behavior problems when either their mother or father had been incarcerated, controlling for selection factors (Johnson, 2009). In another study, 6- to 11-year olds with incarcerated parents who had lived with them previously showed more emotional difficulties than children who did not have an incarcerated parent (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Relatedly, in

7- to 22-year-old males, parental incarceration during childhood was associated with more theft, controlling for pre-incarceration variables (Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012). Because paternal incarceration is much more common than maternal incarceration, we suspect that some of these findings in early and middle childhood may be driven by the strong effects of paternal incarceration. Moreover, because associations between parental incarceration and less optimal child development appear to increase with children's age, studying children from such a wide age range may mask some of the developmental nuances in the findings.

#### *Moderators and Mediators*

Children not only experience parental incarceration differently, with children of color and low-income children exposed disproportionately (Haskins & Turney, 2018), but some *effects* of paternal incarceration are also experienced disproportionately. For instance, boys are more likely than girls to have early childhood behavior problems following paternal incarceration (Geller et al., 2009; Haskins, 2014; Wildeman, 2010). Moreover, paternal incarceration has a stronger impact on young children who lived with their father before his incarceration than on children who did not live with their father (Geller et al., 2012; Jacobsen, 2019). In other research, intergenerational consequences are greatest for young children whose fathers were not violent in the family context before incarceration (Wildeman, 2010).

In several studies, associations between parental incarceration and children's antisocial behaviors were mediated by parenting and indicators of socioeconomic status. For instance, parenting stress and symptoms of depression in mothers who did not work outside the home accounted for the relation between paternal incarceration and children's externalizing problems (Antle et al., 2019). In another study, paternal incarceration when children were 3- to 9-years old led to diminished engagement by fathers and increased material hardship when children were 9 years of age; these mediators, in turn, reduced the direct effect of paternal incarceration to statistical nonsignificance and led to more behavior problems at age 9 (Dwyer Emory, 2018). Thus, these studies show that characteristics of the family environment account for some of the relations between parental incarceration and children's well-being.

Taken together, these findings suggest that parental incarceration, especially paternal incarceration, is most commonly associated with externalizing problems (e.g., attention problems, aggression), as opposed to internalizing problems, in boys in early and middle childhood. These findings also provide some evidence that parental incarceration does not affect all children in the same way and that family processes may account for some of children's behavior problems.

#### *Educational Outcomes*

Several investigators have found that children whose fathers (but not mothers) are incarcerated are more likely to score lower on

vocabulary tests at age 5 as well as to be retained in their grade, be suspended or expelled, and be placed in special education at age 9 (Haskins, 2014; Jacobsen, 2019; Turney & Haskins, 2014; Turney & Wildeman, 2015). In addition, 6- to 11-year olds with incarcerated parents who lived with them previously were less engaged in school and had more problems in school than other children (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

However, in another study, parental incarceration was not related to boys' academic performance, measured via reports by caregivers, teachers, and youth (Murray et al., 2012). This study focused only on boys and combined maternal and paternal incarceration in the analyses, which may help explain the different findings.

Other research has investigated mechanisms or processes that may connect parental incarceration and education-related outcomes and cognitive development in children. Findings indicate that children's behavioral problems explain much variation in educational outcomes stemming from paternal incarceration, including suspension and expulsion of children during elementary school (Jacobsen, 2019; McLeod, Johnson, Cryer-Coupet, & Mincy, 2019).

#### **Adolescence**

##### *Mental Health and Delinquency*

Controlling for adolescent race and sex, parental incarceration is associated with an increased likelihood of psychiatric diagnoses including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, and depression, but not anxiety or substance disorders (Gifford et al., 2019). Other research has identified four different trajectories of youth (varying based on their earlier risk factors) that are associated with measures of adolescent delinquency, substance use, and suicidal ideation and attempts; youth whose parents were incarcerated were more likely to be in the high-risk groups (Kjellstrand, Yu, Eddy, & Clark, 2020).

In another study, the association between parental incarceration and delinquency was moderated by race: White youth with incarcerated parents committed more theft in adolescence and early adulthood than Black youth from similar backgrounds (Murray et al., 2012). In a study focusing on moderators of the relation between paternal incarceration and adolescent mental health, child maltreatment functioned as a moderator: When sexual abuse had not occurred, paternal incarceration related to elevated symptoms of depression for girls, but when sexual abuse had occurred, paternal incarceration was not related to girls' depression (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015). In yet another study examining mediators between paternal incarceration and adolescent behavior, the association between parental incarceration and youth's antisocial behaviors in fifth and eighth grades was mediated by parental health, social advantage, and effective parenting (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a).

### Educational Outcomes

Across various studies, adolescents with an incarcerated parent were more likely than others to experience problems in school (Murphey & Cooper, 2015) and, for those with incarcerated fathers, have significantly lower high school grade point averages and educational attainment than adolescents whose parents have never been incarcerated (Foster & Hagan, 2009; Hagan & Foster, 2012). Similarly, parental incarceration was related to decreased odds of completing high school, even after adjusting for childhood psychiatric diagnoses and adversity (Gifford et al., 2019).

### Early Adulthood

In studies on the transition to adulthood and early adult outcomes, youth with incarcerated fathers were less likely to complete college than youth whose fathers were never incarcerated (Hagan & Foster, 2012). Moreover, young adults whose parents were incarcerated had more mental and physical health problems than young adults whose parents were never incarcerated (Miller & Barnes, 2015). Using linked administrative data, controlling for adversity and childhood psychiatric diagnoses, parental incarceration predicted being charged with a felony, early parenthood, and social isolation in adulthood (Gifford et al., 2019). In addition, paternal and maternal incarceration before age 17 related to more transitions in adulthood (e.g., feeling older, getting a job, living independently, partnering, and child-bearing) between ages 18 and 23, suggesting “growing up early” as a potential mechanism for further study (Turney & Lauza, 2017). Taken together, these studies indicate that parental incarceration can have lasting deleterious consequences, especially as children grow older, because effects appear to be stronger for adolescents and young adults than for young children.

### Mediators and Moderators in Studies Without Population-Based Samples

One flaw in the research analyzing population-based data regarding the links between parental incarceration and children’s well-being is the inattention to possible mechanisms of effect, with some recent exceptions (as we reviewed earlier). Although scholars are beginning to examine general family processes and contexts linking parental incarceration and children’s well-being, including economic stress, compromised parenting, and the mental health of children’s caregivers, many processes that stem *directly* from parental incarceration have not been assessed in large longitudinal datasets. Herein lies an opportunity for child development scholars to enrich our understanding of the risk and resilience factors, as well as the processes underlying the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration.

Nonrepresentative samples in smaller studies sometimes have included rich data about incarceration-related experiences using a child development lens, although they have limited generalizability and are typically not longitudinal. Studies with the initial

intent of investigating incarceration-specific family processes have several advantages over studies that include only one or two basic questions about parental incarceration, including details about the incarceration (e.g., length, child’s age at parental admission and release, offense, jail or prison sample). This includes traumatic experiences such as children witnessing a parent’s arrest (Dallaire, Zeman, & Thrash, 2015a), how families communicate about the incarceration (Poehlmann, 2005b), the frequency and quality of parent–child contact in the corrections context (Beckmeyer & Arditto, 2014; Dallaire, Zeman, & Thrash, 2015b), and children’s attachments to parents and at-home caregivers after parents leave for jail or prison (Poehlmann, 2005b; Poehlmann-Tynan, Burnson, Runion, & Weymouth, 2017). In addition, such studies have examined several conditional processes (i.e., moderators and mediators) that may intervene between parental incarceration and child development outcomes (Table S2).

Some scholars have examined moderators that protect children with incarcerated parents. For instance, based on data from the 2013 Minnesota Student Survey, 8th- to 11th-grade youth with incarcerated parents had elevated risk for mental health problems, but strong parent–child relationships partially protected children (Davis & Shlafer, 2017). In a study of children at a camp for incarcerated mothers, emotion regulation was a protective factor for engaging in bullying; that is, children who scored higher in emotion regulation were less likely to bully other children at the camp (Myers et al., 2013).

Variables have also been identified that indicate increased risk for problematic outcomes in children with incarcerated parents. One study analyzed data from incarcerated parents who participated in the U.S. Department of Justice Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities: Imprisoned mothers were more than twice as likely as imprisoned fathers to have adult children who were also incarcerated; when imprisoned mothers had used drugs regularly, their adult children were even more likely to be incarcerated (Dallaire, 2007).

Other studies have examined mediators. In one, adolescent school dropout rates rose during maternal incarceration; mechanisms of effect included the negative effects of removing mothers as children’s legal guardians or placing the children with nonparental relatives (Cho, 2011). In another study, the quality of the home environment partially mediated the relation between maternal imprisonment and children’s early cognitive skills (Poehlmann, 2005a).

### GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Yet, gaps in our knowledge remain and developmental scientists are well positioned to fill these gaps. We know less about cognitive, language, and attention problems in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with incarcerated parents than in children at older ages whose parents are also incarcerated,

including limited understanding of why some outcomes differ by gender. We also do not know why the effects of parental incarceration appear to magnify as children grow older. Mechanisms may help explain such phenomena, such as increasingly risky family and school environments over time. In addition, our understanding of brain development in the context of parental incarceration is lacking, including our ability to document the neurobiology of stress in children with incarcerated parents. Does toxic stress associated with exposures related to parental involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., witnessing a parent's arrest) affect children's neurobiological processes? What protective factors attenuate children's stress responses when parents are incarcerated?

The findings on links between paternal incarceration and children's and adolescents' externalizing problems and delinquency are consistent; however, they are mixed for internalizing problems and for maternal incarceration. Findings could be clarified with more precise timing of measures across development and by routinely separating maternal and paternal incarceration in analyses. We know that incarcerated mothers experience more risks than incarcerated fathers, so identifying the most potent risk factors as well as protective factors is crucial. Examining developmental mechanisms such as self-regulation and coping with stress is also important, as suggested by models of resilience (Masten, 2015).

Substantial gaps also exist in our understanding of separation and loss related to parental incarceration and the repercussions for future relationships (e.g., peer relations, intimate partner relationships, adult functioning as parents and caregivers). What are the mechanisms linking parental incarceration with relationships and what is protective or risky? Do strong parent-child relationships protect children from some of the effects of parental incarceration, and does this happen only for at-home caregivers or also for incarcerated parents? If the latter, studying the frequency and quality of children's contact with their incarcerated parents, including relationships during re-entry and reunification, would be important. The idea of "growing up early" could be studied further from a developmental perspective.

### Research Recommendations

Scholars can take advantage of several critical research opportunities to extend our knowledge about children with incarcerated parents and address the gaps in knowledge we have delineated. First, because in at least three population-based studies (e.g., Young, Collier, Siennick, & Mears, 2020), parental incarceration earlier in a child's life was related to more subsequent behavior problems, studies should test for age-graded effects. Life course models and theories that are sensitive to children's developmental capacities and contexts over time are particularly well suited for such investigations (e.g., Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Developmental cascades related to both risk and resilience trajectories in children with incarcerated parents could also be examined in this context.

Second, child development researchers should consider using administrative data to examine child and family well-being across generations in the context of jail and prison incarceration. A first step would be to develop systems that would permit this type of research (e.g., by linking data from the criminal justice system to data from the child welfare system). In some countries, such as Sweden, researchers have linked data from multiple systems to investigate the effects of criminal justice policy changes on children (Wildeman & Andersen, 2017). In other countries, like Australia, scholars can connect data across systems to examine a variety of infant and child outcomes in relation to the incarceration of parents (e.g., Bell, Bayliss, Glauert, & Ohan, 2018). Although this occurs to some degree in the United States (e.g., Gifford et al., 2019), leveraging administrative data could allow researchers to understand more fully the effects of criminal justice policy changes on children.

Third, child development must be explored within the context of the wide range of parental criminal justice involvement, not simply parental incarceration. Parental criminal justice involvement can change over time, and children change as well. The field needs nuanced examinations of the effects of parental arrest, incarceration, re-entry, and probation or parole on various developmental capacities that are salient at various ages. Current data limitations preclude precisely addressing key gaps (as outlined earlier) and answering such foundational questions as: Is it more difficult for children when a parent repeatedly cycles through jail compared to remaining in prison for a longer stay? In other countries, the frequency and duration of parental incarceration are important for children (Andersen, 2016). Are there points or transitions within child development trajectories when parental incarceration has more or less detrimental effects on brain development, stress responses, social emotional skills, self-regulation, or cognitive and language development? We need to know more about the differential direct and indirect effects of parental incarceration. These questions could be answered by studies that involve population-based data collection and that include time-varying information about developmental processes, including resilience processes. Most population datasets have focused on negative rather than positive outcomes in children, such as prosocial behavior and strong peer relationships.

Finally, children's neurobiological development in the context of parental incarceration is largely unexplored, although access to new datasets (e.g., the National Institutes of Health's Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study) may help facilitate research in this area. However, to fully explore details about parental criminal justice involvement as well as child development data, new data collection efforts are urgently needed (Wildeman, 2020) and will likely require collaborations among developmental scientists, sociologists, and criminologists. New population-based longitudinal studies that combine collection of detailed parental criminal justice data and incarceration-related risks and protective factors, with rich child development, family,

and school data, are crucial for answering basic questions, clarifying mixed findings, informing policies, and developing interventions for vulnerable children.

### CONCLUSION

In summary, with some exceptions (e.g., when abuse by the incarcerated parent has occurred), parental incarceration is negatively associated with child, adolescent, and adult adjustment, including less optimal behavior and poorer mental health and academic outcomes, even controlling for factors that distinguish families prior to parents' incarceration or contact with the criminal justice system. Children's gender, race, relationships with parents, and exposure to incarceration-related events (e.g., witnessing a parent's arrest) appear to be significant moderators, while family environments and economic hardship appear to be important mediators. However, new longitudinal population-based developmental studies focusing on how a parent's incarceration relates to child development are needed. Moreover, attention to racial/ethnic, economic, and geographic diversity and inequities is crucial to advancing scholarship focusing on parental incarceration as a context for child development.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table S1. Data Sources With Population-Based Samples Used to Study the Relation Between Parental Incarceration and Children's Well-Being

Table S2. Summary of Key Findings From Longitudinal Studies With Population-Based Samples and Example Findings From Studies Without Population-Based Samples, Organized by Developmental Domain and Child Age