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A Quantitative Look at Incarcerated Parents and their Parenting Responsibilities in an Urban County Jail

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A Quantitative Look at Incarcerated Parents and their Parenting Responsibilities in an Urban County Jail

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Introduction

The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, with a rate of 698 per 100,000 people incarcerated in 2015.¹ As the incarcerated population has grown in the US, so has the number of families and children affected by incarceration. The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimates that more than 5 million US children have had a parent in prison or jail at some point in their lives.² Children with incarcerated parents are a vulnerable population often overlooked.

The burden of incarceration has disproportionately fallen on communities of color, particularly Black and Hispanic populations.^{3,4} According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2010, more than 4 in every 10 incarcerated fathers were Black and incarcerated at 5 times the rate of Whites.^{3,4} A more recent report from 2018 suggests that Black incarceration rates have decreased since 2008 but remain persistently higher compared to White populations.³

Research studies have also suggested differences related to parental incarceration based on the gender of the parent. In 2007, approximately 744,200 fathers and 65,600 mothers were incarcerated in US prisons.⁴ Compared to men, women tend to be the primary caregivers of children prior to their incarceration. Nationally, in 2010, more than half of the mothers (64.2%) reported living with their child prior to incarceration compared to 46.5% of fathers.⁴ Incarcerated mothers were also 2.5-3 times more likely than fathers to be living in a single-parent household in the month prior to their arrest.⁴

Parental incarceration is considered an adverse childhood event that can have a negative impact on the health and well-being of children that lasts well into adulthood.⁵ A growing body of research has shown that parental incarceration can negatively impact the emotional, social, and developmental health of their children. It can put the child at risk for hardship, including but not limited to acute and chronic psychological stress, parental separation, changes in living arrangements, exposure to domestic violence, behavioral problems, financial difficulties, and social stigma.^{6,7} Data also suggests a relationship between parental incarceration and the future contact of the child with criminal justice.⁸

Our study was part of a larger collaborative effort to better understand the scope and impact of parental incarceration in the Harris County Jail, the third largest jail in the United States. Harris County is located in Southeast Texas and is the fourth most populated county in the country with 4.8 million residents. It is a diverse county with 43.7% Hispanic, 28.7% non-Hispanic White, 20.0% Black, and 7.3% Asian.⁹ We conducted a needs assessment on children with incarcerated parents in the Harris County Jail to better understand the experience of families, identify opportunities to support the children and families, and further inform how to improve short- and long-term outcomes. As part of the needs assessment and the focus of this paper, we surveyed inmates at the Harris County Jail to estimate the prevalence of parental incarceration, and to describe and identify differences in parental incarceration and parenting responsibilities by race and gender.

Located in downtown Houston, Texas, the Harris County Jail has a capacity of 9434 beds. Approximately 75% of the inmates at the jail have not been sentenced and are awaiting trial.¹⁰ This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston and Baylor College of Medicine.

Methods

Nine questions were added to the Harris County Jail intake form inquiring about the inmates' children, parenting responsibilities, and history of incarceration. Questions included: if the inmate has children or is responsible for children under the age of 18, number and ages of children, relationship to the children, schools the children attended, if the parent lived with the child prior to incarceration, if the parent provided financial support to the child prior to incarceration, if they had been to jail or prison before, and their relationship to the child they cared for. The questions were asked verbally by Harris County Sheriff's Office deputies during classification, along with other standard questions asked during the classification process, which typically occurs 48 to 72 hours after a person is booked into jail. Data were collected from August – November 2018. In addition to the intake questions, the Harris County Sheriff's Office provided demographic and criminal charge information on all respondents. Data on the inmates' ethnicity were not available for analysis.

Descriptive statistics, chi square, and t-tests were used to describe and compare the population. $P < .05$ was considered statistically significant. Analyses were conducted using Stata 15.

Results

A total of 1404 respondents completed the added intake questions. We estimate that 13,319 individuals were eligible to complete the questionnaire (10.5% response rate). A summary of demographic characteristics can be found in Table 1. There were differences between parents/caregivers with children under the age of 18 years and those without children under 18 who responded to the intake questions. Respondents who were parents/caregivers were more likely to be Black than those who did not report to be parents/caregivers of at least one child under 18 years of age. Age and gender did not significantly differ between inmates who reported being parents/caregivers and those who did not.

A description of parental responsibilities is outlined in Table 2. Most notably, half of respondents reported being the parent of at least one child under 18 years of age (49.8%) and on average had 2.48 children. For incarcerated male parents/caregivers, the other parent (mother) was most likely (85.6%) the person taking care of the child(ren) while the father was incarcerated. However, the children of incarcerated women were cared for by a mix of other caregivers including: the other parent (father) (38.7%), grandparent (30.6%), and other family members (14.5%). The majority of both male (59.1%) and female (70.2%) respondents said they provided all or most of the financial support to care for their child(ren). Similarly, most mothers (79.0%) and fathers (58.6%) were living with their child(ren) prior to this encounter at the Harris County Jail. Age of children and the school the children attended were not reported in these analyses as the variables were not answered uniformly and both had considerable missingness.

Table 3 includes the characteristics of the incarceration for those respondents with children under 18 years of age. There were significant differences between male and female caregivers and their experience with jail or prison prior to this arrest, with more males reporting having gone to prison before and more female reporting prior jail experience. Regardless of the setting, the vast majority (91.7%) of the incarcerated parents in our sample reported having been to jail or prison before. More than half of all caregivers responding had been charged with a felony. However, charge type did significantly vary by caregiver gender ($p=.02$).

Table 4 describes parental responsibilities for White and Black caregivers. Overall, there were no statistically significant differences in parenting responsibilities between the two races; Black and White caregivers had similar relationships to their children, provided similar levels of financial support, and had similar childcare arrangements while

incarcerated. As demonstrated in Table 5, despite these similar parenting responsibilities, Black caregivers were more likely to report having prior prison experience compared to White caregivers.

Discussion

This study aims to describe a sample of incarcerated parents at the Harris County Jail and to fill a gap in knowledge regarding the characteristics of incarcerated parents and their parenting responsibilities. Based on our findings, we estimate that 92,000 children have a parent in the Harris County Jail each year, which accounts for 7% of all children in Harris County. This estimate does not account for children with parents confined in other locations such as prisons. Additionally, 92% of our sample reported having been to jail or prison before, indicating these same children may experience repeated trauma and disruption due to their parents'/caregivers' recidivism.

Research studies have demonstrated that children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk of poor outcomes compared to children without incarcerated parents.^{5–8} While we did not measure child outcomes in this study, important information on the potential impact was obtained. In our sample, 62% of parents reported living with their children prior to arrest, suggesting that a large number of children in Harris County experience disruption in their home and potentially school life due to the incarceration of their caregiver. In addition, significant financial costs associated with incarceration have a lasting impact on families. More than 60% of our sample reported providing most or all of the financial support for their children prior to their incarceration. When a parent is incarcerated, families may lose income and often struggle to meet basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, transportation, and clothing.^{11, 12} Families are also responsible for expensive phone calls to jails and background check fees, potentially further limiting contact between the child and incarcerated parent.¹² Further exacerbating the initial financial burden felt during the incarcerated period are the long-term consequences of having an arrest or criminal record. Due in part to federal, state, and organizational policies, it can be very challenging for persons with a criminal record to obtain a job, secure housing, and participate in governmental assistance programs and other supports that are helpful to achieving financial stability in society.^{13,14}

Limitations

While our study provides insight to the scope of parental incarceration in a large urban county jail, there are several notable limitations, including a 10.5% response rate. It is unknown if the 10.5% response rate is a result of Harris County Sheriff's Office deputies not asking all the eligible inmates the questions or if the inmates did not answer the questions when asked. We do not know if there were differences in the populations who were asked and responded about their children and those who were not asked or chose not to respond about their children. All responses were self-reported, and our study questions did not account for the complex nature of families, in which parents may have responded differently when asked about individual children. In addition, ethnicity data were not available for this analysis, and with 43.0% of the Harris County population being Hispanic, our understanding and interpretation of racial and ethnic findings were limited.

Our findings in the Harris County Jail may or may not be similar to other county jails across the state, given that jails are under local jurisdiction. However, with approximately 92,000 children impacted in this single urban county each year, there is a great need for communities in general to better understand the prevalence and impact of parental incarceration in jails on children and families.

Policy Implications

Our study demonstrated that parental incarceration in the local jail impacts an estimated 92,000 (7%) children in Harris County each year, and many of these children face substantial disruptions through changes in caregivers and loss of family income. Local law enforcement agencies and policymakers should consider implementing programs and policies that support children impacted by parental incarceration. While research is still emerging on how communities can best support children with incarcerated parents, in 2019 the National Institute of Corrections and the Bureau of Justice Assistance released guidelines on model practices for prisons and jails to support families impacted by parental incarceration that were based on the available evidence and expert recommendations.

Recommendations included: training staff in family-centered practices; developing partnerships with social service agencies; educating parents on available resources for their families; administering assessments to identify families impacted by parental incarceration and families that need support; notifying families of the status of the incarcerated parent; offering parent-focused classes; creating welcoming and child-friendly visitor lobbies; offering contact, phone, and video visits for children and

incarcerated parents; providing incarcerated parents with opportunities to communicate with the caregivers and organizations that are caring for their children; making noncontact visits more child-friendly; partnering with community-based organizations to provide support to caregivers; and including caregivers and children in re-entry planning.¹⁵

In addition to creating additional supports to children and families impacted by parental incarceration, local policymakers should consider alternatives to incarceration that do not have the same negative downstream effects on children and families. Opportunities for further exploration include supporting bail reform, designating minor nonviolent offenses as nonarrestable, expanding eligibility and funding for programs that keep incarcerated mothers serving short sentences with their children, and addressing root causes that lead to inequitable rates of incarceration.¹⁶

Finally, correctional facilities should consider adding additional questions to their intake forms that would enable policymakers and communities to better understand the needs and how to support individuals and families impacted by incarceration. For example, in most communities including Harris County, data on whether an incarcerated individual has a child or family members is not routinely collected, which makes it challenging to identify needs and provide support. In addition, ethnicity data is not routinely collected, which limits our understanding of racial and ethnic differences often found in the criminal justice system.

Conclusion

Our study adds to an emerging field on parental incarceration. Previous research has focused on prisons, and our study demonstrates that children with parents incarcerated in a jail also are likely to face substantial hardship, including changes in caregivers, disruption in living arrangements, loss of family income, and high rates of parents cycling in and out of jail or prison. However, with jails, change can occur at the local level. With leadership by public health professionals, local government, teachers, and health professionals, communities must recognize the downstream effects of parental incarceration and ensure that appropriate resources, programs, and policies are in place to meet the needs of children experiencing parental incarceration in their local jail.

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

		Parent/caregiver (n=699)		Not a parent/caregiver of a child under 18 years of age (n=705)		
Gender		n	(%)	n	(%)	
	Male	575	(82.3%)	598	(84.8%)	P=0.195
	Female	124	(17.7%)	107	(15.2%)	
Race						
	Black	370	(52.9%)	319	(45.2%)	P=0.038
	White	314	(44.9%)	368	(52.2%)	
	Asian/Pacific Islander	9	(1.3%)	12	(1.7%)	
	Unknown	6	(0.6%)	6	(0.9%)	
Age						
	Average age (y)	34.8	(s.d. 9.81)	34.6	(s.d. 13.25)	P=0.781
	Range (y)	17-75		17-84		

Table 2: Description of Parenting Responsibilities by Parent/Caregiver Gender

	Parent/caregiver (n=699)	Female parent/caregiver (n=124)	Male parent/caregiver (n=575)	
No. of children				
Average No. of children	2.48	2.67	2.44	P=0.14
Total No. of children	1736	331	1405	
1	219 (31.3%)	34 (27.4%)	185 (32.2%)	
2	214 (30.6%)	38 (30.6%)	176 (30.6%)	
3	119 (17.0%)	20 (16.1%)	99 (17.2%)	
>3	147 (21.0%)	32 (25.8%)	115 (20.0%)	
Relationship to child(ren) that are under their care				
Parent	656 (93.8%)	115 (92.7%)	541 (94.1%)	P<.001
Stepparent	25 (3.6%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (4.3%)	
Family member	14 (2.0%)	8 (6.5%)	6 (1.0%)	
Other	9 (1.3%)	1 (0.8%)	3 (0.5%)	
Caregiver for child(ren) while parent is incarcerated				
Parent	540 (77.3%)	48 (38.7%)	492 (85.6%)	P<.001
Grandparent	59 (8.4%)	38 (30.6%)	21 (3.7%)	
Other family member	37 (5.3%)	18 (14.5%)	19 (3.3%)	
Other	63 (9.0%)	20 (16.1%)	43 (7.5%)	
Financial contribution to support children				
Yes, I provide most or all of the money	427 (61.1%)	87 (70.2%)	340 (59.1%)	P=0.01
Yes, I provide some of the money	169 (24.2%)	20 (16.1%)	152 (26.4%)	
No, I do not provide money	103 (14.7%)	17 (13.7%)	83 (14.4%)	
Living situation prior to arrest				
With children	435 (62.2%)	98 (79.0%)	337 (58.6%)	P<.001
Sometimes with children	32 (4.6%)	3 (2.4%)	29 (5.0%)	
Not living with children	232 (33.2%)	23 (18.5%)	209 (36.3%)	

Table 3: Summary of Incarceration Characteristics by Parent/Caregiver Gender

	Parent/caregiver (n=699)		Female parent/caregiver (n=124)		Male parent/caregiver (n=575)		
Prior experience in jail or prison							
Jail	365	(52.2%)	80	(64.5%)	285	(49.6%)	P<.001
Prison	111	(15.9%)	7	(5.6%)	104	(18.1%)	
Both	165	(23.6%)	9	(7.3%)	156	(27.1%)	
Neither/unsure	58	(8.3%)	28	(22.6%)	30	(5.2%)	
Any experience jail or prison	641	(91.7%)	96	(77.4%)	545	(94.8%)	
No. of charges (at this arrest)							
1	520	(74.4%)	90	(72.6%)	430	(74.8%)	P=0.87
2	130	(18.6%)	25	(20.2%)	105	(18.3%)	
3-8	49	(7.0%)	9	(7.3%)	40	(7.0%)	
Type of charge(s) (at this arrest)							
Felony(ies)	424	(60.7%)	64	(51.6%)	360	(62.6%)	P=0.02
Misdemeanor(s)	183	(26.2%)	45	(36.3%)	138	(24.0%)	
Both	83	(11.9%)	12	(9.7%)	71	(12.3%)	
Single charge but unclear type	9	(1.3%)	3	(2.4%)	6	(1.0%)	

Table 4. Description of Parenting Responsibilities by Parent/Caregiver Race

	White parent/caregiver (n=314)		Black parent/caregiver (n=370)		
No. of children					
Average No. of children	2.43		2.55		p=0.994
1	100 (31.8%)		113 (30.5%)		
2	96 (30.6%)		113 (30.5%)		
3	60 (19.1%)		57 (15.4%)		
>3	58 (18.5%)		87 (23.5%)		
Relationship to child(ren) that are under their care					
Parent	293 (93.3%)		349 (94.6%)		p=0.186
Stepparent	15 (4.8%)		9 (2.4%)		
Family member	3 (1.0%)		9 (2.4%)		
Other	2 (0.6%)		2 (0.5%)		
Caregiver for child(ren) while parent is incarcerated					
Parent	242 (77.1%)		285 (77.0%)		p=0.565
Grandparent	24 (7.6%)		33 (8.9%)		
Other family member	43 (13.7%)		42 (11.4%)		
Other	5 (1.6%)		10 (2.7%)		
Financial contribution to support children					
Yes, I provide most or all of the money	193 (61.5%)		222 (60.0%)		p=0.868
Yes, I provide some of the money	77 (24.5%)		91 (24.6%)		
No, I do not provide money	44 (14.0%)		57 (15.4%)		
Living situation prior to arrest					
With children	185 (58.9%)		240 (64.9%)		p=0.150
Sometimes with children	13 (4.1%)		19 (5.1%)		
Not living with children	116 (36.9%)		111 (30.0%)		

Table 5: Summary of Incarceration Characteristics by Parent/Caregiver Race

	White parent/caregiver (n=314)		Black parent/caregiver (n=370)		
Prior experience in jail or prison					
Jail	186	(59.2%)	170	(45.9%)	p=0.002
Prison	66	(21.0%)	66	(17.8%)	
Both	58	(18.5%)	105	(28.4%)	
Neither/unsure	26	(8.3%)	29	(7.8%)	
Any experience jail or prison	288	(91.7%)	341	(92.2%)	
No. of charges (at this arrest)					
1	239	(76.1%)	267	(72.2%)	p=0.323
2	52	(16.6%)	78	(21.1%)	
3-8	23	(7.3%)	25	(6.8%)	
Type of charge(s) (at this arrest)					
Felony(ies)	147	(46.8%)	242	(65.4%)	P=0.026
Misdemeanor(s)	98	(31.2%)	79	(21.4%)	
Both	37	(11.8%)	42	(11.4%)	
Single charge but unclear type	5	(1.6%)	7	(1.9%)	