

Incarcerated mothers impact children's future criminal involvement

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Credit: Marty from Manitou Springs, USA. Via Wikipedia.

Children of incarcerated mothers are twice as likely to be arrested, convicted and incarcerated as adults, according to a study by Sam Houston State University scholars.

"Impact of Maternal Incarceration on the Criminal Justice Involvement

of Adult Offspring: A Research Note," by Lisa Muftic, Leana Bouffard, and Gaylene S. Armstrong of the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology found a significant link between incarcerated mothers and children who are imprisoned as adults, even after considering common correlates of [criminal behavior](#).

The findings are based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a 20-year study that follows a nationally representative sample of youth who were in 7th to 12th grades in 1994-95. The survey, conducted in four waves, includes data on social, economic, psychological, and physical well-being, as well as information on the family, neighborhood, community, school, friendships, peer groups, and romantic relationships, to see how behavior and environment are linked to health and achievement outcomes.

"The current findings serve to bolster the contentions regarding the unintended consequences of maternal incarceration that include collateral damage to the children these women are forced to leave behind during imprisonment," said Muftic. "Specifically, this study provides updated analyses that focus on a more recent time period when maternal incarceration impacts a larger proportion of youth."

Although women only comprise 7 percent of the overall prison population, growth in the rate of incarceration for females is outpacing that of males, with a 64 percent growth in commitments to prison between 1991 and 2011 for women, compared to 22 percent for men. The rise in incarceration rates for women are the result of determinant sentencing policies, such as sentencing guidelines, mandatory minimum sentencing, enhanced sentences for certain crimes, and the War on Drugs.

Two-thirds of women in prison are mothers and generally have greater responsibility in child-rearing than incarcerated fathers. Children with

incarcerated mothers are more likely to live with relatives away from home, which increases the risk of attachment disruptions, separation anxiety, depression, preoccupation with the loss of a parent, and sadness, according to existing research. Compounding this problem is that fathers may also be in prison, the study found.

Based on the Add Health survey, this study compared adult children whose mothers had been incarcerated to those whose mothers had not been in prison or jail. Among the adult children of incarcerated mothers, participants were three times more likely to report their mother's absence and half as likely to be a college graduate. The sample also measured factors that correlate with criminal behavior, including self-control, delinquency, peer delinquency and parental supervision.

"The absence of mothers significantly increases the likelihood that offspring are actively involved in the [criminal justice](#) system in the future," said Bouffard. "Maternal incarceration, above and beyond maternal absence, demonstrated a unique impact on offspring that may be due to the offspring's extended displacement from the home, increased attachment disruption or other negative psychosocial effects."

The study was published in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*.

More information: L. R. Muftic et al. Impact of Maternal Incarceration on the Criminal Justice Involvement of Adult Offspring: A Research Note, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0022427815593988](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427815593988)

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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