

Fearing surveillance, dads with a record avoid kids' schools

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Children whose parents have spent time behind bars have worse social, economic, cognitive, behavior and health outcomes than kids whose parents haven't.

But researchers know less about why that is.

A Cornell University sociologist and former [elementary school](#) teacher recently identified a mechanism that may explain why these kids have worse educational outcomes—and strong, lasting, [negative consequences](#) that often span generations.

Fathers who have been incarcerated at some point from their child's birth through age 9 are nearly 50 percent less involved in their child's education, compared with fathers of the same race and [income level](#) who have never been incarcerated, according a study co-written by Anna Haskins, assistant professor of sociology at Cornell.

Haskins and her co-author, Wade Jacobsen of the University of Maryland, published their study in the August issue of *American Sociological Review*.

The formerly incarcerated fathers may avoid their child's school because they see it as a "surveilling institution"—an entity, like a bank or a hospital, that has increased security, direct connections to other public agencies and keeps formal records, the research found.

"They may avoid institutions they see as 'surveilling' because of distrust or dislike of the criminal justice system and police or shame and stigma - regardless of whether they've done anything wrong," Haskins said.

"Schools are unique because most people don't think of them as surveilling institutions. But with their increases in security guards and metal detectors, they can seem that way to people wanting to avoid any further contact with the [criminal justice](#) system."

The research has important implications, given the increasing prevalence of incarcerated people in the United States. Parental incarceration peaks by age 9; by middle childhood, nearly one in every 10 children has a parent who has been incarcerated, Haskins said: "That's three kids in every elementary school classroom."

"If you are not engaged in schools, you're severing that opportunity, restricting avenues of social integration and potentially transferring feelings of institutional distrust," she said. "So, you can just imagine the trajectory of disadvantage this sets up for particular groups of kids and families as early as during elementary [school](#)."

More information: Anna R. Haskins et al. Schools as Surveilling Institutions? Paternal Incarceration, System Avoidance, and Parental Involvement in Schooling, *American Sociological Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0003122417709294](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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