

Kids' health suffers when parents go to jail

3 September 2014, by Laura Rico

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with more than 2 million people currently behind bars. How this affects their families is the subject of a new UC Irvine study, which found significant health and behavioral problems in children of incarcerated parents. The most striking finding is that in some cases parental incarceration can be more detrimental to a child's well-being than divorce or the death of a parent.

"We know that poor people and [racial minorities](#) are incarcerated at higher rates than the rest of the population, and incarceration further hinders the [health](#) and development of [children](#) who are already experiencing significant challenges," said study author Kristin Turney, assistant professor of sociology at UC Irvine.

When comparing children with similar demographic, socioeconomic and familial characteristics, the study found that having a parent in jail was linked to a greater incidence of asthma, obesity, attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression and anxiety.

"Our results suggest that children's health disadvantages are an overlooked and unintended consequence of mass incarceration," Turney said. "Incarceration, given its unequal distribution across the population, may have implications for racial and social class inequalities in children's health."

The study appears in the September edition of the *Journal of Health & Social Behavior*, a publication of the American Sociological Association.

About 2.6 million U.S. children have a parent in jail or prison at any given time, Turney said. "Sesame Street" recently introduced a Muppet named Alex, whose dad is in jail, as a way to address the stigma. The chance of having an incarcerated parent is especially high in certain groups.

"Among black children with fathers without a high school diploma, about 50 percent will experience

parental incarceration by age 14, compared with 7 percent of white children with similarly educated fathers," Turney said.

Parental incarceration is significantly related to learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, behavioral or conduct problems, developmental delays, and speech or language problems, she said. Compared to divorce, parental incarceration is more strongly associated with both ADD/ADHD and [behavioral problems](#); compared to the death of a parent, it's more strongly associated with ADD/ADHD.

Turney used data from the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health, a population-based and representative sample of 0- to 17-year-olds.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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