Parental Incarceration

A summary of the scientific literature on the impact of parental incarceration on child development.



How This Impacts Children's Development

Parental incarceration has been linked to an array of consequences for children's development and well-being, spanning most developmental domains and all developmental stages. Families of color are

disproportionately affected by incarceration and associated policies.

READ THE BRIEF: The role of Policy in shaping and addressing the consequences of parental incarceration for child development in the United States, 2022

Talking Points from the SRCD Brief

- At present, the United States (U.S) incarcerates a greater share of its population than any other country in the world, with approximately 700 people incarcerated per every 100,000 in the population at any given time.
    - By their early thirties, Black men in the U.S. are approximately seven times as likely to have spent time in prison compared with their white peers, resulting in a greater impact on children of color.
    - Federal prisons account for roughly 10% of the incarcerated population, state prisons account for roughly 60%, and county/municipal jails account for the remaining 30%.
- Across all developmental stages, children experiencing parental incarceration encounter greater levels of other types of family adversity that can impact well-being and development including parental divorce/separation, poverty, familial substance misuse, housing-related instability, and child welfare system involvement.
- Young children whose fathers are incarcerated have been found to exhibit more challenges related to attention, aggression, and externalizing behaviors.
    - Educational consequences may also emerge, including lower vocabulary and poorer school readiness among children whose fathers are incarcerated.
- Adolescents with incarcerated parents are also more likely to engage in more frequent and more serious risk-taking behavior, including those related to substance use, delinquency, early sexual behaviors, and suicidal ideation or attempts, compared to adolescents without incarcerated parents.
- In circumstances in which the incarceration of a parent is necessary, there are federal, state, and local policy options that can lessen the collateral impacts on children and families before, during, and after incarceration.

Policy Considerations in the Brief

- Consider policies that move further upstream and identify ways to truly support children, families, and communities and eliminate our country's reliance on the criminal legal system to fix complex social problems.
- Any policy solution requires strong cross-agency collaboration, from health, human services, education, and corrections agencies.
- Individuals with lived experience are uniquely situated to contribute to the development and evaluation of efforts to improve the experiences and well-being of families affected.
- Effective policy solutions must address historical, racial, and economic disparities in all aspects of criminal legal system involvement.

READ THE BRIEF: The role of Policy in shaping and addressing the consequences of parental incarceration for child development in the United States, 2022