

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/guest-blogger-christopher-wildeman-on-the-consequences-of-incarcerating-parents>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Editors note: Guest blogger [Christopher Wildeman](#) is an assistant professor of sociology at Yale University whose work focuses primarily on parental incarceration.

In [a new report](#), Vera describes an agenda for family-focused justice reform. One core component of the report is the corrosive effects on children of contact with the criminal justice system. In this response, I focus on the consequences of mass imprisonment for children in the hopes of building on the report and highlighting some of its key strengths.

One reason to be concerned about paternal incarceration is the number of children experiencing this event. However, the authors do not highlight the number of children who ever have a parent imprisoned. [Research shows](#) that 25 percent of African American children will at some time have a father imprisoned; just more than 3 percent of white children will ever experience this event. By highlighting these racial disparities, the consequences of paternal incarceration become more transparent.

Knowing how many children will ever have a parent imprisoned, the next thing we need to think about is how this event influences children. Of course, the data we have to address this issue tends to be limited, making it difficult to differentiate the effects of jail stints from prison stays and the effects of incarceration from arrest to conviction and release. Despite that limitation, research in this area tends to support the idea that paternal incarceration makes children worse off even though Ann Adalist-Estrin [of the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated] notes that we may emphasize this too much.

Nonetheless, research highlights the consequences of paternal incarceration for children's behavioral problems and their risk of experiencing severe forms of disadvantage like foster care placement. Yet this research also shows that the effects of paternal incarceration on children are smallest when their father had engaged in domestic violence or was incarcerated for a violent crime. This is not to suggest that such men have nothing contribute to their families; indeed, they may have much to offer but merely to show that family-focused justice must also be attentive to the safety of the children incarcerated fathers leave behind. The removal of these men will often compromise [children's well-being](#), yet in some instances, the removal of an abusive man may enhance their safety.

Let me close with a warning. All preliminary indications point toward paternal imprisonment having large, negative effects on children. Because paternal imprisonment disproportionately touches the lives of African American children, mass paternal imprisonment might significantly increase future racial inequities. Absent more research, we will not be able to know whether it is paternal imprisonment or something else that is responsible for any such effects. Thus, as my colleague Rosa Cho [of Brown University] notes in the report, the need for more related research is indeed a pressing issue.

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