

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/impact-of-having-an-incarcerated-parent-lasts-a-lifetime-and-may-shorten-it-study-says>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[A recent study of the impact of parental incarceration on children](#) in the Netherlands found that children of incarcerated parents were more likely to die prematurely in adulthood than people whose parents have not been incarcerated.

While previous studies have examined the impact of parental incarceration on younger children, little literature exists on how this experience can specifically affect longer-term health outcomes and mortality.

Increasingly, public health agencies are aware that health outcomes are informed by a number of social factors, including the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. Examining these factors, known as [Social Determinants of Health \(SDH\)](#), is critical to understanding individual level health outcomes as well as the health of communities at large.

Here in the United States, mass incarceration has been one of the major contributors of poor health in communities, as rates of incarceration have boomed over the last 40 years. The Dutch study notably found that the experience of having an incarcerated parent itself contributed to negative health outcomes and that children with criminal parents who were not incarcerated had more similar outcomes to children of non-criminal parents. (Criminal and non-criminal are terms taken directly from the study).

This finding coincides with what we already know about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), which are a range of circumstances that cause trauma and stress in young people. This includes young people who live in households where family members or friends are incarcerated or who have consistent contact with law enforcement and the criminal justice system themselves. Such experiences can cause disruptions and instability at home, and can lead children into situations of neglect, risky behavior, and inadequate access to health care. The impact can be so severe that these experiences increase the risk of affected children developing health-harming behaviors and chronic mental and physical health problems like substance use, anxiety, depression, circulatory, respiratory, and digestive diseases, and cancer long after the ACEs cease. Children of color are further disproportionately affected, due to racial and ethnic disparities in health care access more generally.

Recognizing [incarceration as a critical social determinant of health](#) is imperative to informing prevention efforts, and minimizing the negative impact of incarceration on long-term public health. With the United States status as the lead incarcerator in the world, the long-term health implications of incarceration on families and children are even more important to understand.

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