

# Children's contact with incarcerated parents

Julie Poehlmann-Tynan

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Julie Poehlmann-Tynan is Dorothy A. O'Brien Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an IRP affiliate.

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The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world, and over half of the 2.3 million inmates are parents of children under age 18.<sup>1</sup> One in 28 children in the United States has a parent behind bars, and even more will have an incarcerated parent at some time during their childhood.<sup>2</sup> Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit trauma symptoms than other children, and they are at an increased risk of developing problematic outcomes including behavior problems, substance abuse, academic difficulties, criminal activity, and physical and mental health conditions. Having contact with incarcerated parents through visits, phone calls, and letters has long been considered important for family well-being during and following incarceration, yet few researchers, practitioners, or policymakers have considered this issue from the child's perspective. Recent research has shown that the link between parental incarceration and trauma symptoms can be mediated through the quality of parental-visitation experiences.<sup>3</sup>

## Parent-child contact in the context of parental incarceration

Corrections facilities operate from a "safety and security" position, often with little attention paid to visitors and their needs. How to accommodate the presence of family members, and children in particular, is not usually considered. There are differences in visits between jails (designed for short-term incarceration of individuals awaiting trial or sentencing or serving short sentences) and prisons (designed for longer-term incarceration of individuals convicted of crimes). Prisons are more likely than jails to offer face-to-face visits, although they increasingly rely on video visits. Jails are more likely than prisons to offer visits behind a Plexiglas barrier or via video. Corrections facilities offer phone calls that are more affordable to inmates and their families now than in the past, when per-minute rates ran as high as \$14, driven by the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) actions in October 2015; the FCC reduced rate caps for local and long distance calls from incarcerated individuals, closed loopholes, and barred most add-on fees imposed by inmate calling service providers.<sup>4</sup> Mailing letters is an option as well. However, few correction facilities offer visits that are specifically designed to be child-friendly, which includes providing safe and friendly environments for visits; fostering open communication about contact among caregivers,

children, incarcerated parents, and professionals; adequately preparing both children and adults for visits, including providing support to incarcerated parents; and facilitating parent-child communication between visits.<sup>5</sup>

## Recent research

A new monograph presents novel work done by myself and colleagues, including Danielle Dallaire and Heather McClure, on the issue of children's contact with incarcerated parents, and includes policy and research recommendations.<sup>6</sup> Although contact between parents and children during incarceration may be important for the well-being of both children and parents in a majority of cases, findings concerning this important issue have not been entirely consistent across studies. In addition, most studies of parent-child contact in the context of parental incarceration have been conducted using data from one point in time, and have relied on reports of frequency or type rather than quality of contact. Although personal visits have been occasionally studied separately from letter writing and telephone calls, many studies have combined these types of contact. Prison and jail samples are often combined, and family, relational, and physiological dynamics that may connect the experience of parental incarceration with children's and incarcerated parents' outcomes have rarely been examined.

The three studies presented in this monograph address some, but not all, of these limitations. Two of the studies focused on jail samples and one focused on a prison sample. Children's age ranges were specified and narrower than in some previous studies and measures of child functioning were developmentally appropriate. The studies employed innovative approaches, including reliance on multiple reporters of children's behaviors, observational methods, and analysis of physiological stress processes. The first, by Danielle Dallaire, Janice Zeman, and Todd Thrash, analyzed letter writing and telephone calls separately from personal visits.<sup>7</sup> A second study, done by myself and colleagues, used observational methods in the jail setting to examine the processes that occur during barrier visits and other non-contact visitation procedures.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Heather McClure and colleagues used longitudinal data, following families into the reunification period.<sup>9</sup>

## Effects of different types of parent-child contact

Dallaire and colleagues found that the relationship between parent-child contact and child behavior problems varied as a function of type of contact, which is not surprising since children's experiences of in-person barrier visits vastly differ from their experiences talking with a parent on the telephone

or reading and writing letters. The researchers found that for children who had more frequent barrier visits with their jailed mothers, problems such as anxiety, withdrawal, or depression were reported more often. In contrast, frequent letter writing and telephone contact were associated with fewer behavior problems. These results suggest that in-person visits with their mother behind a Plexiglas barrier may make it harder for children to maintain their own, gentler version of reality about their incarcerated parent. Such visits may generate strong negative emotions that are less likely to arise, and easier to assuage, when communication with their mother takes place in the comfort of their own home.

### **Children's reactions to Plexiglas and video visits**

My study with colleagues highlighted the importance of child-caregiver relationships and supports for young children during the visit process, as well as the tendency for children to exhibit more behavior problems during non-contact visits compared to their typical behavior in their home environments. We observed both positive and negative aspects of young children's experience with video and barrier jail visits. Because video visits were conducted in a nonsecure part of the corrections facility, fewer security procedures were required for video visits, and families had shorter waits compared to barrier visits. However, the length of video visits was shorter, and these visits often ended abruptly, with the screen turning off without any warning to children. Barrier visits resulted in more time in the corrections facility, a combination of longer visit time, longer wait time, and more intense security procedures. We noted that the longer children were in the facility, the more clingy and distressed they became, possibly reflecting increased stress levels. Use of observational methods in corrections settings is unique and can help us understand how children react to aspects of visitation, including security and screening procedures, waiting in the corrections setting, and visiting with parents. Although some authors have suggested that certain experiences that occur during visits with parents in corrections facilities may be difficult or even traumatizing for children, little data have been available to verify or refute these speculations. Yet because the study relied on a small sample and used innovative, newly developed methods, replication is needed, especially for a wider range of age groups.<sup>10</sup>

### **Mother-child contact, parenting stress, and long-term adjustment**

McClure and colleagues used longitudinal data on contact and maternal adjustment at three time points, including after the mother's release from prison. Following families during the reunification period is a rarity in the literature focusing on parental incarceration, and an important step in documenting the longer-term implications of parent-child contact for maternal and family functioning. The researchers found positive outcomes for mothers who had more contact with their children, including lower recidivism rates six months after release from prison. However, more contact through visits, phone calls, or both, was also associated with higher

rates of symptoms reflecting anxiety and depression among children. Longer periods of incarceration, and thus more limited contact between mother and child, were associated with children's difficulty regulating their emotions, poorer social skills, and behavior problems. These negative effects for children suggest the need for careful consideration by both families and corrections systems of whether and how children should have contact with their incarcerated parents.

## **Recommendations**

Implementation of the recommendations detailed below may result in improvements in the experience of parent-child contact during parental incarceration, or even improvements in child and parent well-being in the context of parental incarceration. These include suggestions related to: (1) parenting interventions; (2) policies and procedures focusing on parent-child contact in corrections facilities; (3) systematic collection of data by corrections systems and more rigorous research in general; (4) and consideration of alternatives to incarceration. Note that when implementing recommendations about children's contact with incarcerated parents, it is critical to consider the type of corrections facility, type of contact available, children's ages, and the quality and availability of preparation and supports for children, incarcerated individuals, and caregivers around contact issues.

### **Parenting interventions**

Several parenting interventions are available that have shown positive effects on parent-child contact, recidivism, and other indices of well-being.<sup>11</sup> Some interventions may be adopted by entire state corrections systems, such as parenting classes offered to inmates or information about visits provided to families, while other interventions may be tailored to be implemented locally depending on resources available and perceived needs. An advantage of systemwide interventions is that inmates and families will better know what to expect if an inmate moves to a different facility; however, it may be more challenging to provide interventions that are uniquely focused on the culture of or resources available in local communities where families live. Because jails are locally operated and located, they may be more accessible for community-intervention efforts than prisons, although administrators' openness and ability to change may vary widely and depend on multiple factors across settings.

The findings by McClure and colleagues on mother-child contact during and after incarceration are in line with past findings, and support the idea that corrections facilities should identify ways to facilitate positive parent-child contact.<sup>12</sup> There is an accruing literature on how this might be done but the field is still in its infancy.<sup>13</sup> To date, what appears to be most promising for incarcerated parents is helping them develop specific cognitive and behavioral skills relevant to emotional regulation and positive parent-child interactions, both inside and outside of the corrections setting. In addition, the findings presented by McClure and

colleagues suggest that more generalized stress management programs for incarcerated parents could have positive effects on inmate health and functioning, and result in more successful adjustment to life after incarceration. This may be particularly true for parents with longer sentences, although this requires further study for incarcerated fathers.

These recommendations are consistent with the growing body of literature on programs for incarcerated adults. Parenting interventions such as behavioral and cognitive skills training have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism.<sup>14</sup> These interventions are most effective when programs are matched to prisoner risks and needs, well-managed, and supported through post-release supervision. Despite modest reductions in rates of recidivism among participants, these small declines can have significant aggregate effects on criminal behavior in communities with high concentrations of returning prisoners.<sup>15</sup> Children clearly benefit when formerly incarcerated parents avoid returning to prison or jail and remain positively engaged in children's lives.

### **Child-friendly visitation**

Child-friendly visitation can be defined as providing positive, safe, friendly environments for visits; fostering open communication among caregivers, children, incarcerated parents, and supportive professionals; adequately preparing children for visits; facilitating parent-child contact between visits; and supporting incarcerated parents during the process.<sup>16</sup> Some parenting interventions in corrections settings offer child-friendly visitation experiences as a component of the intervention (for example, Parenting Inside Out, a skills-training program for incarcerated parents).<sup>17</sup> Some prisons offer child-friendly visits as part of their rehabilitation or parenting programs. For example, the Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has a family activity center in the jail lobby designed to reduce child stress and provide information to caregivers. It includes a craft area for children, videos, books, and miniature mock visiting booths to help prepare children for non-contact visits with jailed parents.<sup>18</sup> The jail also has a family-support center, and inmates with children may have the opportunity to work with professionals on parenting issues. Given the large number of children in the United States with incarcerated parents, it will be important to increase the number of child-friendly visit opportunities available over time in both prisons and jails.

Preparation for visits and providing ample support for children, inmates, and family members during and after visits may also be important. It would be helpful if child-friendly materials were available, even something as simple as having a corrections officer give a sticker to a child who has just passed through a metal detector, to make the experience less scary and establish positive associations with the visit. Corrections staff could be trained more thoroughly to interact positively with families, including interacting with visiting children in a developmentally appropriate

manner. Information about visitation could be written or visually depicted in a simple, child-friendly way and posted at the entry to the jail as well as on the jail's or prison's website. Visual descriptions could include drawings showing the visiting area and how the handheld listening device works. Five-minute warnings could be given to remind families when the end of the visit is near so children would not be as surprised or distressed by a video monitor suddenly turning off, or by the end of a Plexiglas or face-to-face visit. For non-contact visits, barriers between video or Plexiglas booths could be erected to provide privacy.

Additional interventions could focus on better preparing caregivers, children, and incarcerated parents for the visit experience, suggesting additional ways for families to stay in touch with an incarcerated parent, and attempting to reduce social stigma associated with parental incarceration, which has recently been identified as a key mechanism for lasting negative effects of parental incarceration on children.<sup>19</sup> For example, Sesame Street recently developed materials for young children and their families including an animated depiction of a child's visit to a corrections facility, a story book, videos, and a caregiver guide.<sup>20</sup> A new Muppet character named Alex was designed for the project. In one of the available videos, Alex, who has an incarcerated father, discusses his feelings and experiences in relation to his father's incarceration from a child's point of view, and receives support from an adult and other Muppet characters. The caregiver guide offers suggestions on how families can stay connected with children's incarcerated parents in positive ways, such as writing letters or cards or talking on the phone between visits. The guide also covers topics such as how to talk to very young children about parental incarceration and how to handle some of the common emotional reactions that children may have when their parents go to jail or prison. Sesame Workshop is in the process of evaluating these materials for their efficacy with families affected by parental incarceration, a critical step in the intervention process. Because hard copies of these materials are free and digital copies are widely available on the website and as a free app for smart phones and tablets, corrections facilities could easily access them to promote healthy child development in the context of parental incarceration.

### **Policies and procedures in corrections facilities**

Dallaire and colleagues' work corroborated earlier findings that, in certain contexts, non-contact visits can be stressful for children.<sup>21</sup> These visits may activate a child's attachment system and trigger anxiety that cannot be easily assuaged since the parent-child separation continues following the visit. In our study, we find that caregivers play a powerful role during children's non-contact visits with incarcerated parents.<sup>22</sup> More can be done to maximize the positive effects of the caregiver-child relationship within the corrections setting. Policies and procedures that can help reduce children's anxiety, such as preparing them for visits, maintaining contact between visits, and providing ample support from caregivers and other loved ones before,

during, and after visits are also important for facilitating children's well-being. The research should not be interpreted to suggest, however, that in-person visitation in noncontact cases should not be allowed for children. Overall, visitation is important for parents and children, and it can be encouraged if supplemented by the supports recommended.

In our study, out of 20 children observed, only one child showed overt signs of fear during security procedures at the jail, although many children exhibited periods of serious or somber observation of what was happening around them at the jail. To ameliorate any stress that might be experienced by children during a visit, caregivers can be encouraged to hold children's hands and talk with their children about what they are seeing and hearing in the corrections settings. Corrections systems can provide more information on their websites about policies and procedures relating to security procedures used with children without compromising the safety of the facility, so that caregivers know what to expect when they arrive, and can prepare children for what they will encounter.

### **Systematic collection of data by corrections systems and rigorous intervention research**

In addition to the importance of supporting children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents, our research suggests a need for systematic tracking of the number of children affected by parental incarceration and change over time, which could be completed in jail and prison settings as part of the inmate-intake or risk assessment process. At intake, inmates could be asked to indicate if they have children and if so, the age of each child. Although some inmates may be reluctant to provide such information because they may fear repercussions from child protective services, child support enforcement, or intrusion in their private lives by "the system," or because they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of arrest and intake, many inmates indicate that they are willing to provide such information. Many incarcerated parents are eager to receive parenting support as part of their incarceration and many of them enjoy talking about and finding ways to connect with their children. Such tracking would allow society to more accurately gauge the effects of incarceration on families in communities, and help identify affected families' needs and an appropriate allocation of resources to meet those needs.

Rigorous, focused, practical research is also needed on children of incarcerated parents and their families. A key question is how to accomplish such research when funding is tight and such a research agenda does not fit neatly into any one federal agency's domain. In recognition of this fact, the federal government has assembled an interagency working subgroup on children with incarcerated parents, which comprises diverse departments including the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Health and Human Services, and disseminates information on the topic.<sup>23</sup> However, even when there is a match between a research

agenda and interested agencies, much of the available funding goes to programs rather than research, with programs often requiring only a minimal evaluation component. One solution is to form partnerships with state corrections systems to start collecting high-quality data on variables of interest to the corrections system. This could start with inmate risk status, mental health, and contact between inmates and family members, including children, and then expand to conducting low-cost randomized controlled trials. It would be even more promising if several states could agree to collect similar data, and test family contact interventions on a systematic basis. Jails could collaborate and follow this model as well.

### **Consideration of alternatives to incarceration**

The implications of mass incarceration for children and families are well-documented.<sup>24</sup> Through short-sighted overreliance on crime policies to address challenging social problems, the United States has created a significant and growing public health crisis for its children and has increased racial disparities in health and well-being of children.<sup>25</sup> Many children who experience the incarceration of a parent are vulnerable and need substantial help now and in the future. These children are at risk for a host of negative outcomes, including the development of antisocial behavior and long-term health and mental health problems.<sup>26</sup> Consideration of alternatives to incarceration may help ease the social and economic burden of corrections on families and society and free up resources that could be used for implementation of preventive interventions to help children with corrections-involved parents become more resilient. ■

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<sup>1</sup>The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility," Washington, DC: 2010. Accessed at [http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes\\_assets/2010/collateralcosts1pdf.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1pdf.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs."

<sup>3</sup>J. A. Arditti and J. Savla, "Parental Incarceration and Child Trauma Symptoms in Single Caregiver Homes," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 24, No. 3 (2015): 551–561.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/inmate-telephone-service>

<sup>5</sup>D. H. Dallaire, J. Poehlmann, and A. Loper, *Issues and Recommendations Related to Children's Visitation and Contact with Incarcerated Parents*, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, Submission to the Day of General Discussion 2011, Children of Incarcerated Parents.

<sup>6</sup>J. Poehlmann-Tynan, ed., *Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents: Implications for Policy and Intervention* (Switzerland: Springer, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>D. Dallaire, J. Zeman, and T. Thrash, "Differential Effects of Type of Children's Contact with Their Jailed Mothers and Children's Behavior Problems," in *Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents*.

<sup>8</sup>J. Poehlmann-Tynan, H. Runion, C. Burnson, S. Maleck, L. Weymouth, K. Pettit, and M. Huser, "Young Children's Behavioral and Emotional Reactions to Plexiglas and Video Visits with Jailed Parents," in *Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents*.

<sup>9</sup>H. H. McClure, J. W. Shortt, J. M. Eddy, A. Holmes, S. van Uum, E. Russell, G. Koren, L. Sheeber, B. Davis, J. J. Snodgrass, and C. R. Martinez Jr., "Associations Among Mother–Child Contact, Parenting Stress, and

Mother and Child Adjustment Related to Incarceration,” in *Children’s Contact with Incarcerated Parents*.

<sup>10</sup>Rebecca Shlafer has just finished collecting data on older children using similar methods; see <http://www.rebeccashlafer.com/research/observational-jail-studies>

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, J. M. Eddy, C. R. Martinez, and B. Burraston, “A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Parent Management Training Program for Incarcerated Parents: Proximal Impacts,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 78, No. 3 (2013): 75–93; and J. W. Shortt, J. M. Eddy, L. Sheeber, and B. Davis, “Project Home: A Pilot Evaluation of an Emotion-Focused Intervention for Mothers Reuniting with Children After Prison,” *Psychological Services* 11, No. 1 (2014): 1–9.

<sup>12</sup>For an example of past findings, see J. Poehlmann, D. H. Dallaire, A. B. Loper, and L. D. Shear, “Children’s Contact with Their Incarcerated Parents: Research Findings and Recommendations,” *American Psychologist* 65, No. 6 (2010): 575–598.

<sup>13</sup>For research on how to facilitate positive contact between children and their incarcerated parents, see: Eddy et al., “Parent Management Training Program for Incarcerated Parents;” A. B. Loper and C. Novero “Parenting Programs for Prisoners,” In *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Handbook for Researchers and Practitioners*, eds. J. M. Eddy and J. Poehlmann (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2010); and Shortt et al., “Project Home.”

<sup>14</sup>J. Travis and M. Waul, eds., *Prisoners Once Removed: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup>Travis and Waul, *Prisoners Once Removed*.

<sup>16</sup>D. Dallaire et al., *Issues and Recommendations Related to Children’s Visitation and Contact with Incarcerated Parents*.

<sup>17</sup>For more information on Parenting Inside Out, see <http://www.parentinginsideout.org/>

<sup>18</sup>Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, “Ceremony Celebrates Opening of “Family Activity Center” at Allegheny County Jail,” April 21, 2007 news release, accessed at <http://foundationcenter.org/grantmaker/childguidance/news-releases-4-21-07.html> on May 10, 2014.

<sup>19</sup>J. Murray, C. C. J. H. Bijleveld, D. P. Farrington, and R. Loeber, *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children: Cross-National Comparative Studies* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2014).

<sup>20</sup>Sesame Workshop, *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration*, 2013, <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration>

<sup>21</sup>J. Poehlmann et al., “Children’s Contact with Their Incarcerated Parents.”

<sup>22</sup>Poehlmann-Tynan et al., “Young Children’s Behavioral and Emotional Reactions to Plexiglas and Video Visits with Jailed Parents.”

<sup>23</sup><http://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents>

<sup>24</sup>For example, see Murray et al., *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children*.

<sup>25</sup>S. Wakefield and C. Wildeman, “Mass Imprisonment and Racial Disparities in Childhood Behavioral Problems,” *Criminology & Public Policy* 10 (2011): 791–792.

<sup>26</sup>J. Murray, D. P. Farrington, and I. Sekol, “Children’s Antisocial Behavior, Mental Health, Drug Use, and Educational Performance after Parental Incarceration: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 138, No. 2 (2012): 175–210. doi: 10.1037/a0026407; and E. S. Ford, R. F. Anda, V. J. Edwards, G. S. Perry, G. Zhao, C. Li, and J. B. Croft, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Smoking Status in Five States,” *Preventive Medicine* 53, No. 3 (2011): 188–193.