

Non-technical summary of
"The Effects of Parental and Sibling Incarceration: Evidence from Ohio"
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Introduction:

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the developed world, with millions incarcerated annually. Incarceration also affects the family members of those incarcerated, but the way this happens will differ from family to family. For example in some families, the incarceration of a parent can be traumatic for the children as it may lead to the loss of social, economic, and emotional support for the child. For other children, the incarceration of a parent could lead to a more stable home environment, especially if the now-incarcerated parent had been involved in criminal activity that had negative effects on their children. Given that there are many ways children could be affected, research studies going back at least 50 years have tried to empirically understand how incarceration affects family members.

Approach:

This paper uses data from the three largest counties in Ohio (around Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati) to study the effects of having a parent or a sibling incarcerated. We try to measure a *causal* effect of incarceration on children. In other words, how would the life of a child with an incarcerated parent have been different if their parent had not been incarcerated? To do this, the paper follows a statistical approach, common in social science research, that uses the random assignment of criminal cases to judges in these three counties. As a result of random assignment, judges will on average see similar types of defendants—for example, each judge would preside over a similar number of drug-related or violent crime cases in a year. Despite the fact the overall pool of defendants before each judge is similar, judges differ significantly in their likelihood of incarcerating defendants—a very harsh judge might incarcerate 50% of defendants, while a lenient one might incarcerate only 25% of defendants.

Because defendants are randomly assigned to judges, children whose parents or siblings are assigned to harsh judges will initially be quite similar to those assigned to lenient judges. However, the judge assignment creates a difference between these groups in one key aspect: the likelihood they will have an incarcerated parent. While the technical details are complicated, our approach essentially compares later life outcomes among the similar children whose parents were assigned to more or less strict judges. We can then observe, for example, whether children whose parents are assigned to harsher judges, and therefore who are more likely to have incarcerated parents, perform better or worse in school.

Results:

The paper uses this approach to measure impacts on children in the short- and long-run. In the short-run, test scores do not appear to be any better or worse for children whose parents are assigned to more or less severe judges. We also do not find any effect on the likelihood of teen parenthood. However, in looking at both of these impacts, it is possible that there may be some positive or negative effects that are too small for us to detect with our data. However, we do find that parental incarceration reduces contact with the criminal justice system, lowering the likelihood of the child being convicted of a crime as an adult from 24.7% to 19.2%. It also increases the likelihood of the child living in a wealthier neighborhood as an adult. Sibling incarceration leads to similar declines in contact with the criminal justice system.

It is important to be clear what this methodology measures. Our estimates reflect the average effect of parental incarceration only among the children of criminal defendants, rather than the broader population. Our method also only measures the effect of parental incarceration for parents accused of mid-level crimes—mostly those that would result in a sentence of about a year—where the severity of the judge makes a difference for incarceration

What do these results not say?

First, this study only addresses outcomes that are actually recorded in our data. There are other important considerations, such as emotional trauma from the removal of a parent or the morality of incarceration. These considerations must be incorporated into policy decisions, but empirical studies like this provide no guidance on these issues. Second, this study says nothing about the effects of mass incarceration on broader communities, only on individual family members. Third, the results do not say that all children will have less criminal justice involvement as a result of parental incarceration. Instead, it gives an average across children.

What do these results mean for policy?

These results should not be read as supporting incarceration—in fact, we find that the costs of incarceration outweigh the quantifiable benefits to children. Instead, we see a few other policy takeaways. First, our results indicate that as the US reduces rates of incarceration, reformers need to also make plans for how to provide greater resources for the children who will be affected by that shift. Second, policymakers may be able to implement other policies that provide similar impacts for children without the many costs of incarceration.

How does this paper relate to other research on parental incarceration?

The effects of parental incarceration have been widely studied, but nearly all papers rely on comparisons between children whose parents have been incarcerated with children who share some similar characteristics but whose parents have not been incarcerated. [This recent literature review](#) nicely summarizes some of them, which find, among other things, that children with incarcerated parents experience more behavioral and health problems and are less likely to graduate high school. However, it is unclear if this difference is *caused* by parental incarceration, or due to disadvantages that these children faced prior to their parent's incarceration: as a result, the literature review notes that one "can't draw causal conclusions" from these studies.

Papers using data from [North Carolina](#) and [Chicago](#) take a different approach, looking at how children's test scores change during periods when their parents were incarcerated. These papers find measurable improvements in child outcomes, such as being less likely to be held back and having some better academic outcomes during the period of incarceration. Some other papers also use random assignment of cases to judges, but in Sweden, Norway, and Colombia. In [Sweden](#), they find parental incarceration has strong harmful effects on many later child outcomes, while in [Colombia](#), they find parental incarceration increases child educational attainment. In [Norway](#), they find incarceration of a sibling leads to even larger reductions in criminal activity than in this paper. These results emphasize the nuanced effects of incarceration of family members and point to the need for more research to better understand how to aid affected children.