



INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

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Parental Incarceration Impacts Health of Indiana's Children

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

Children suffer when parents end up behind bars. Separation from a parent, especially before a child turns five, can cause toxic stress that changes the architecture of a child's brain and organ systems, in turn increasing the risk of disease and cognitive impairment well into adulthood.¹ This adverse childhood experience can have a long-term impact on a child's social, emotional, and physical health and well-being.

Indiana's incarceration rates are consistently above the national average. In 2018, only three states had higher state prison rates.² Since 2015, Indiana's jail population rose 32 percent, one of the largest increases of any state in the last two decades. Most people who are incarcerated are parents. Indiana's children experience parental incarceration at a higher rate than the national average; more than 7 percent of children younger than 5 years, and 11 percent of all children under 18 live with a parent who has been incarcerated during their lifetime.³

Despite the potential magnitude of the problem, there is little research that seeks to understand the scope of the problem facing children in Indiana whose parents are incarcerated. Furthermore, while it is well documented that preschool programs are linked to positive health outcomes and future success, there is insufficient exploration of the relationship between prekindergarten and parental incarceration experiences. Can access to quality prekindergarten act as a protective factor for children of incarcerated parents? Does parental incarceration limit access to preschool?

Mass incarceration is devastating the health and well-being of Indiana's children. Childcare providers in the state reported that children with an incarcerated parent displayed symptoms associated with PTSD, inability to learn, regression in developmental skills, increased behavior problems, and signs of family financial strain, such as children who had not eaten over a weekend. Our study showed that even short stays in jail can impact parent-child attachment and future relationships.

WHAT WE FOUND

- The majority (51 percent) of preschool providers surveyed served children of incarcerated parents.
- Families impacted by incarceration face barriers to accessing high-quality preschool.
- Providers reported impacted children exhibited trauma-related symptoms and identified specialized training as critical to work effectively with the children in their care.

WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Policy makers must recognize the harmful effects of incarceration-first policies on a generation of Hoosier children. Going forward, they should instead invest in strategies to reduce incarceration, such as: pre-booking jail diversion programs, so parents with mental illness or addiction can receive treatment to recover and remain home with their families; reforming Indiana's bail law to ensure people are assessed and released back to their families within 24 hours of arrest; and expanding funding for crisis intervention facilities and treatment programs in counties with high levels of incarceration.

Childcare providers were clear: trauma-informed training and coaching that emphasizes cultural competency is crucial to ensure the resilience and future success of impacted Hoosier children. According to providers, trauma-informed training, coaches, and mental health consultants can help to intervene when a child is in distress. One recommendation is to provide onsite early childhood mental health consultation in the classroom to support preschool staff in developing the skills needed to work effectively with children and families who have experienced incarceration. Study findings suggest that the best way to address the needs of children of incarcerated parents is with an integrated, systems-level approach that coordinates early care and education, mental health, and corrections.

The social, emotional, and physical health benefits of quality early education is well documented.⁴ Yet, among families who had a preschool age child in the home at the time of incarceration, less than 20 percent reported enrollment in an early childhood program. Barriers to enrollment included long wait lists, challenging work schedules, transportation, and fear of mistreatment in institutional settings. Policy makers should develop targeted strategies to help overcome these barriers that families encounter. Revising the On-My-Way PreK eligibility criteria to prioritize children impacted by incarceration is one such action they could take.

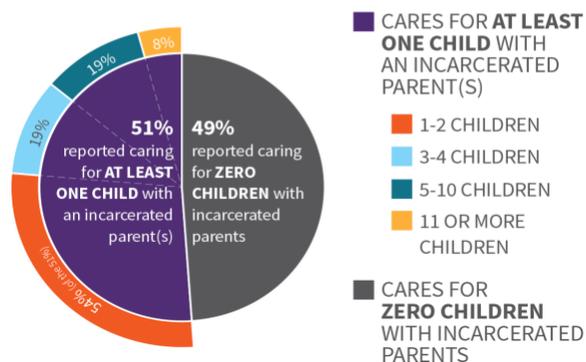
MORE ABOUT THIS STUDY

Over a six-week period in 2018, an electronic survey was sent to approximately 3,200 childcare providers that serve children ages 3 to 6 years of age in Indiana. Providers were asked to respond to a variety of questions related to the scope of children impacted, the range of provider types, and the quality of care (based on Indiana's quality rating improvement system). Twenty preschool directors also participated in focus groups to discuss their experiences with children impacted by parental incarceration.

A total of 667 surveys were returned, representing a 21 percent response rate. Of the 92 total counties in Indiana, 86 were represented among the survey responses. Family childcare providers represented the largest percentage of providers responding to the survey (41 percent), followed by registered ministries (26 percent), licensed childcare centers (20 percent), school-based programs (7 percent), and other providers (5 percent). This reflects the profile of childcare programs in Indiana.

Through community partnerships, we also surveyed 337 community members. Participants were largely female (78 percent), African American (75 percent), and did not identify as Hispanic (85 percent). We then recruited 24 individuals to participate in focus groups to discuss how their children were affected by parental incarceration. Community members shared their perceptions regarding the impact of separation on the child, the benefits of high-quality childcare, and the challenges involved in accessing early childhood education. Focus groups were conducted both in-person and online.

Majority of Preschool Providers Surveyed (51%) Report Child in Their Care Has an Incarcerated Parent



“I want to know when you are sitting on the floor and this is the tenth time that this child has held a meltdown, and you’ve exerted every option, what do you do next?”

— *Preschool Provider, Evansville, IN*

SOURCES

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- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Office of Policy and Strategy. Year. Health Impact in five years. (July, 2018). <https://www.cdc.gov/policy/hst/hi5/earlychildhoodeducation/index.html>

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