



# Differences between Delinquent Youth with and without a Parental History of Incarceration

by Anne Dannerbeck, Ph.D.  
*Research Assistant Professor*

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Analysis conducted with data from the Office of State Courts Administrator's Juvenile Offender Risk & Needs Assessment and Classification System in collaboration with the Division of Youth Services.

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## **Preliminary Report Findings:**

- ❖ Of the 1112 juveniles included in the study, 31 percent (31%) had a parental history of incarceration (346 juveniles with a parental history of incarceration as compared to 766 without such a history).
- ❖ Those with a parental history of incarceration were found to have had more troubled pasts and more current behavior problems.
- ❖ A higher proportion of those juveniles with a history of parental incarceration have had and/or currently have:
  - A parent with substance abuse problems
  - Experienced more ineffective parenting styles
  - Were placed in out-of-home care (50%)
  - Little positive social support
  - Exhibited behavior problems
  - Long criminal histories (54%)
  - Multiple prior referrals
  - Committed assaults
  - Expressed little motivation to change these behaviors

*Note that parental incarceration has not been found to have caused these conditions though prior research has established a relationship between parental incarceration and each condition in youths.*

Both groups are delinquents confined to a Division of Youth Services facility yet many significant differences exist between those with a parental history of incarceration and those without such a history.

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## Introduction

Children who grow up to be well-functioning adults have experienced security and stability as they develop and have been effectively socialized to take on roles in society. Children who grow up in families where a parent has been incarcerated may have experiences that do not promote development into a well-functioning adult. They may experience the insecurity of economic strain, the instability of disruption in their lives as adults move in and out of their homes and as the home itself changes unpredictably. They may be socialized in ways that do not lead to adaptation of healthy adult roles. The negative influences of parental incarceration can be both direct and indirect. A parent whose behavior leads to his/her incarceration may be observed acting in socially deviant ways and the child may use these behaviors as a model for how to behave. Indirectly parental incarceration may impact a child's development through the disruptions placed on the child by the loss of a parent and by the instability that comes with having a parent in prison. Parental incarceration is not a single causal factor in a child's development, but rather, part of an amalgamation of events and experiences that influence development.

Data Source: The data used in this report come from the Office of State Courts Administrator J-TRAC ( Juvenile Offender Risk & Needs Assessment and Classification System) data base. The scales “are part of a comprehensive classification strategy to manage youthful offenders referred to juvenile and family courts”(OSCA 2001, p.1-1) in Missouri.

Data Analysis: Because the variables are categorical, chi-square analysis was used to determine if significant differences exist on each variable between juveniles with and without a parental incarceration history.

## Characteristics of Juveniles

<i>Gender</i>	<b>No incarceration</b>		<b>Incarceration</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>% of total</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of total</b>
Female	222	20	90	8
Male	544	49	256	23
Total	766	69	346	31
No significant difference				

Previous research indicates that gender differences are prevalent in the pathways to delinquency. (Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt, & Silva 1993) Males not liked by peers are more likely to become involved in antisocial behavior and females who have been abused are more likely to become involved in criminal activity (Day 1998).

The ratio of females (28%) to males (72%) with a history of parental incarceration varies only slightly from national data on juvenile delinquent populations which indicates 30% are female vs. 70% male ([www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/chapter6.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/chapter6.pdf)).

	<b>No incarceration</b>		<b>Incarceration</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Race**</i></b>				
Caucasian	281	37	85	25
African-American	451	59	243	70
Other	8	1	10	2
<b><i>Learning Disorders*</i></b>				
No	618	81	260	75
Yes	148	19	86	25
<b><i>Mental Health Disorder</i></b>				
None	673	88	293	85
Moderate	77	10	45	13
Severe	16	2	8	2
*sig. at p=.01				
** sig. at p=.0001				

**Overall, the majority of youth (62%) included in this data set are African-American and a significantly higher proportion of African-Americans have a parental history of incarceration, an indicator of an intergenerational cycle of criminal behavior.**

Caucasian and African American youth differ substantially in the proportion with a parental incarceration history. Of those with a history of parental incarceration, 25% are Caucasian and 70% are African-American, indicating a major life experience difference between the two races.

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In interpreting these racial differences, the role of discrimination cannot be denied but it only tells part of the story. Substance abuse, unemployment, fractured families, poverty, and community disorganization are part of the background noise for many African-American youth. They are a group who are more likely to be given restrictive sentences because, as one judge explained it, “the white juveniles are likely to approach the bench with two parents and a preacher. The black youth will come alone.” (Judge Mike Wolff, 2002). A lack of obvious social support can lead to more institutional support. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explain these differences.

Of those with learning disorders, a higher proportion had a parental incarceration history. Learning disorders inhibit one’s ability to perform well in school and to accomplish general life course tasks. Learning disorders are generally believed to have an organic basis (Murray 1976). However environmental factors like stability and parental management can impact one’s ability to cope with a learning disorder or even lead to the development of one (Shah & Roth 1974). In addition, insecure attachments have been linked to learning disorders and children with incarcerated parents are at-risk for weakened attachment. In addition, those with learning disorders tend to have more problems with school and those with problems in school are more likely to become involved in criminal activity either because of a general inability to learn from experience (Murray 1976) or because of negative attitudes regarding school and authority (Fink 1990). Because of the link between learning disorders and criminal behavior, it may be that the parents also had learning disorders and thus, the same dysfunctional behaviors are reinforced in the second generation.

Most of the youth in this study have no reported mental disorder and no significant differences exist between the groups despite the more serious history of trauma (abuse and out of home placement, parental incarceration) experienced by the study group.

Phillips et al (2002) actually found a significantly lower rate of mental illness among a group with a history of parental incarceration and these were all youth who had been seen at a mental health center. Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle (2002) report that in a randomly selected sample of 1829 youth detained in Cook County, Illinois, 60 percent of males and more than two thirds of the females met the diagnostic criteria for one or more psychiatric disturbances. The rates in the JTRAC sample are much lower, suggesting either an entirely different population or more likely, a difference in how diagnoses for mental disorders were made.



## Developmental Experiences

Abrupt changes and multiple transitions can disrupt the socialization process during child development (Amato 1993). The direct and indirect effects of parental incarceration may depend on a host of factors including age of child at time of incarceration and attachment to parent, the level of pre-incarceration dysfunction, experiences in living arrangements during incarceration, multiple incarcerations, and the level of reintegration and adjustments post-incarceration (Parke & Clarke-Stewart 2001).

	<b>No Incarceration</b>		<b>Incarceration</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Child Abuse**</i></b>				
No	619	81	213	62
Yes	147	19	133	38
<b><i>Placement History**</i></b>				
No	552	72	172	50
Yes	214	28	174	50

\*\*sig. at  $p=.0001$

**Significantly higher proportions of youth with a parental incarceration history had a child abuse/neglect history.**

Neglect often leads to inability to empathize with others, creating a disconnection between one's criminal actions and the experiences of the victims. Abuse, in the form of physical punishment and sexual mistreatment leaves youth feeling angry and disconnected from society, also.

These findings corroborate with those of Phillips et al (2002) that such youth are exposed to more risk factors including child abuse and neglect. Often the abuse precedes parental incarceration (Parke & Clark-Stewart 2001).

**Half of the youth with a parental incarceration history have been removed from their home at some point in their childhood, indicative of a significant disruption in their lives.**

Parental incarceration often means finding alternative care for a child, especially when it is the mother who goes to prison because women are most often the caregivers. Placement could be motivated by the need for an alternative caregiver or guardian or for health or behavioral reasons. Regardless of the reason for the placement, relocation and placement with an alternative caregiver are major disruptions in the life of a child.



## Parent Characteristics

Effective parenting mediates against the trauma of disruptions and transitions that children do not have the resources with which to cope. In addition, the behavior monitoring of an effective parent can discourage antisocial behaviors.

<b>Table 4: Parent Characteristics &amp; P.I.</b>				
	<b>No incarceration</b>		<b>Incarceration</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Mental Health Disorder*</i></b>				
No	718	94	306	88
Yes	48	6	40	12
<b><i>Substance Abuse History.**</i></b>				
No	638	83	157	45
Yes	128	17	189	55
<b><i>Parent Style</i></b>				
Effective	222	29	71	20
Moderately Ineffective	428	56	177	51
Severely Ineffective	116	15	98	28
*sig. at p=.001				
**sig. at p=.0001				

**Higher proportions of youth with a history of parental incarceration had parents with a mental illness.**

**These figures are slightly lower than national statistics. In 1997, 14% of incarcerated parents had a mental illness (13% of men and 23% of women). (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999)**

One implication of having a mental illness is that it can hinder one's ability to parent effectively.

**More than half of the youth who had parents with an incarceration history also had parents (probably the same parent) who had a history of substance abuse, once again reinforcing the close relationship between criminal behavior and substance use.**

While it is possible that differences in how data are reported lead to different results, nationally 85% of incarcerated parents have a history of substance abuse (Mumola 2000). Parents who themselves abuse substances are likely to be more tolerant of their children using, too. In fact, in a recent study of Drug Courts in Missouri, it was found that many individuals received their first drugs from their parents, often in early childhood (OSCA 2001).

Substance abuse may stand at the nexus between parent criminality and youthful offenders. At the very least it is one of a group of factors linking parental incarceration to impaired youth functioning (Biederman et al. 1995). Phillips et al. (2002) in a study of youth in mental health treatment also found

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that significantly more of those with the parental incarceration history also had a parental history of substance abuse.

**The greatest difference between youth with and without a parental incarceration history is that a greater proportion (28%) of those with such a history had experienced severely ineffective parenting.**

Parenting style is a function of the structure, support, and supervision parents offer their children. Inept parenting practices promote impulsive, antisocial behavior (Patterson, Reid, Dishion 1992; Simons, Wu, Conger, & Lorenz 1994), the same types of behavior that can lead a parent or child into criminality.

Those youth with ineffective parents miss out on a valuable coping resource, raising their vulnerability to engage in risky behaviors.



## Social Skills and Interactions

Youth who cannot rely on their parents for help in overcoming traumatic life events and for guiding them into adulthood, may still have natural abilities or be surrounded by a social support system that can mitigate against negative experiences.

	No Incarceration		Incarceration	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Table 5: Social Skills &amp; Interactions &amp; P.I.</b>				
<i><b>Interpersonal Skills*</b></i>				
Good	331	43	123	35
Moderately Impaired	384	50	195	56
Severely Impaired	51	7	28	8
<i><b>Attitude toward Change**</b></i>				
Motivated	432	56	144	42
Not motivated	274	36	164	47
Resistant	60	8	38	11
<i><b>Peer Influence*</b></i>				
Neutral	205	27	64	18
Negative	423	55	212	61
Strongly negative	138	18	70	20
<i><b>Social Support**</b></i>				
Strong	146	19	30	9
Limited	446	58	197	57
Weak	156	20	90	26
Negative	18	2	29	8
*sig. at p=.01				
**sig. at p=.0001				

**The youth with a parental incarceration history were rated lower on interpersonal skills.**

These results suggest an indirect link between parental incarceration and juvenile delinquency. Through social role modeling and innate abilities one learns to behave appropriately in a social setting, to express feelings, resolve conflicts, and enlist the support of others. Impaired social skills lead one to behave in dysfunctional ways. Impaired social skills are associated with deviant peer groups (Simons et. al. 1994). Pro-social peers ultimately reject those with poor social skills (Dodge & Coie 1983). Those who are rejected then tend to associate with other rejected peers who reinforce each other (Parker & Asher 1987). Those poor social skills may be either learned from the parent or could be the result of parents not correcting antisocial behavior. Either scenario is likely in the context of parental incarceration.

**A significantly greater proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history were either not motivated to change (47%) or actively resistant to change (11%).**

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Attitudes develop through socialization and life experiences. Given the large proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history who also have poor socialization experiences (child maltreatment, parent with substance abuse problems, removal from home, ineffective parenting styles), the lack of motivation to change can be better understood.

**A slightly higher proportion of those with a parental incarceration history report negative peer influences.**

Negative peer associations may be in the context of gangs, especially for urban youth. Youth who have an unstructured and unstable home life and who are not performing well in school are more likely to associate with peers involved in deviant behaviors. Negative peer associations are related to poor social skills and parenting styles that do not counteract negative peer influences (Steinburg 1987).

**A significantly larger proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history has limited or negative social support.**

Social support can be a critical resource in helping youth to adjust to a parent going off to prison. In addition, a strong relationship exists between positive social support, effective parenting skills and child adjustment. Social support generally buffers against adverse events. Without strong positive social support, youth can follow a pathway to delinquency. Those with a parental incarceration history are more at risk as evidenced by the high proportion with a lack of such support.



## At-Risk Behaviors

<b>Table 6: At Risk Behaviors &amp; P.I.</b>				
	<b>No incarceration</b>		<b>Incarceration</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Substance Abuse**</i></b>				
No	471	61	177	51
Moderate	248	32	139	40
Severe	47	6	30	9
<b><i>Academic Performance*</i></b>				
Passing	249	32	92	27
Below Average	300	39	127	37
Failing	217	28	127	37
<b><i>School behavior problem**</i></b>				
Minor	225	29	66	19
Moderate	369	48	178	51
Severe	172	22	102	29
<b><i>Behavior problem***</i></b>				
None	187	24	41	12
Moderate	434	57	218	63
Severe	145	19	87	25
*sig. at p=.01				
**sig. At p=.001				
***sig. at n=.0001				

**Almost half of the youth with a parental incarceration history have a recognized substance abuse problem.** In a study by Teplin et al. (2002) about 50 percent of the youth had a substance abuse disorder. The J-TRAC sample is comparable.

**A slightly higher proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history is not doing well academically. The most significant difference is, in the proportion that are failing, 37% of those with the history of parental incarceration.**

Phillips et al. (2002) reports similar results. Those with a history of parental incarceration were more likely to fail or have low academic performance.

**A greater proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history is having behavior problems at school.** School problems are an indicator that youth are not engaging in school and more at risk for other behavioral problems. Their school behavior problems may be related to learning disabilities, traumatic childhood experiences, poor school performance, and other factors examined in this report. If a parent was incarcerated at the time a child was in school, the child's immediate emotional response and

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behavior may reflect the trauma s/he is experiencing. These reactions may evolve into long-term school problems if the child does not have the resources to cope.

**Significant differences exist between the two groups regarding behavior problems. A greater proportion of those youth with a parental incarceration history has such problems.**

Previous research reports a strong association between parental incarceration and increased incidence of problem behaviors in children (Cohen & Brooke 1998). Children may be acting out as a normal response to the anger, fear, and other emotions they experience at the time a parent is incarcerated. If these emotional responses are not addressed, the initial emotional reactions can become long-term behavioral problems.

In a study by Teplin et al. (2002) about 40 percent of the youth assessed had a disruptive behavior disorder, a rate that is lower than among the JTRAC sample. The differences may be accounted for by differences in screening criteria for this variable.

## Delinquent History

	No incarceration		Incarceration	
	N	%	N	%
<b><i>Age at first referral***</i></b>				
16	65	8	16	5
15	119	15	44	13
14	166	22	54	16
13	137	18	45	13
12	279	36	187	54
<b><i>Prior Referrals***</i></b>				
None	226	29	56	16
One or more	540	70	290	84
<b><i>Assault Referrals***</i></b>				
None	489	64	178	51
Misdemeanor	202	26	112	32
Felony	75	10	56	16

\*\*\*sig. at p=.0001

**One of the most significant differences between the two groups is in the significantly higher proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history (54%) who had a first referral at age 12.**

Early involvement in delinquent activity is related to continued involvement. Research findings suggest that youth display one of two pathways to delinquency. The early onset pathway begins with behavioral problems in childhood that escalate into delinquency and criminal adult activity. The late onset pathway begins in mid-adolescence (14-17) and usually fades out in early adulthood. It is hypothesized that the reason for the different pathways lies in family structure, parenting practices and socialization that develop the child's cognitive, social and behavioral patterns. Those with early onset are essentially taught antisocial behaviors and follow the path set by what they learn. Late onset youth have a strong foundation from which they temporarily deviate but then get back on a positive developmental pathway because they have the necessary skills to function well. (Moffit 1993; Simons et. al. 1994).

**A higher proportion of youth with a parental incarceration history had prior referrals.** Early onset of criminal activity, lack of parental monitoring, disruptions in life, and lack of social support are common characteristics of these youth, characteristics that help in understanding criminal involvement. A pattern of delinquent behavior that begins early is more likely to continue.

**The youth with a parental incarceration history had a significantly higher proportion with previous assault referrals.** Assaults are indicative of patterns of violent behavior. Juvenile violence is an area of particular concern because an aggressive child exhibits behavior patterns that are likely to continue in to adulthood without intervention. In addition, the majority of violent crimes are committed by a minority of youthful offenders (Loeber & Farrington 1998).



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