PACE

COMMENTARY

Falling Behind?

Children's Early Grade Retention After Paternal Incarceration

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Approximately 2.6 million children have a parent currently incarcerated in prison or jail in the United States. This number, combined with the number of children who have formerly incarcerated parents, constitutes nearly 10 percent of the U.S. population under age 18. The large number of children exposed to parental incarceration, especially *paternal* incarceration, has spawned a rapidly growing literature on its deleterious intergenerational consequences. However, despite growing attention to incarceration's unintended and collateral consequences, relatively little research explores the consequences of paternal incarceration for children's educational outcomes or for the elementary school-aged children who comprise the majority of children affected by the penal system.

In our research, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a cohort of urban children followed from birth to age nine, to provide the first estimates of the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's grade retention in elementary school. In this study, we find that children who experience paternal incarceration between ages one and five, compared to those who do not experience paternal incarceration, are more likely to be retained in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade. We also find that this relationship is not driven by test scores or behavior problems. Instead, we find preliminary evidence that teachers' perceptions of children's academic proficiency explains much of this relationship.

These findings suggest that elementary school teachers may play an important role in the lives of children experiencing paternal incarceration. More generally, given that early schooling experiences are consequential for a host of later life course outcomes, our findings not only highlight another way in which the large-scale incarceration of men limits the potential of their children but also draw attention to the interconnected nature of three of America's most powerful social institutions—the family, the educational system, and the penal system. Individuals embedded in the educational system (including teachers, counselors, and practitioners) may benefit from training that increases their awareness, support, and sensitivity toward the challenges faced by children of incarcerated fathers. Individuals embedded in the penal system may benefit from knowing that incarceration has unintended spillover effects for children's educational experiences. More generally, our findings suggest the need for holistic social policies—policies that acknowledge the ways families, schools, and prisons are linked—to prevent the cyclical reproduction of inequality across generations.

The full study can be found in Kristin Turney and Anna R. Haskins, Falling Behind? Children's Early Grade Retention after Paternal Incarceration, Sociology of Education October 2014 vol. 87 no. 4 241-258.

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