

Exploring Early Care and Education Policy for Young Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Abstract

Children of incarcerated parents may face an increased risk for developmental and behavioral problems. Early care and education can play a positive role in addressing these risks and providing positive support. However, these children are largely hidden when it comes to formal early care and education policy and program initiatives. This article will focus on the impacts of parental incarceration on young children, consider trends and opportunities in early care and education policy that can help address the needs of children of incarcerated parents, and provide suggestions for future policy strategies.

In the United States, 5% of children under 6 years old will experience parental incarceration (Burnson & Weymouth, 2019; Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Research has shown that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have other risks such as exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, child abuse, and violence in the household that may increase their engagement in early childhood services such as early intervention, home visiting services, or child protective services (Turney, 2018). Although some research has focused on the impact of incarceration on children's development, policymakers need more information about this population in order to craft effective policies to support them. Many of these children are likely to participate in the early care and education (ECE) system, defined here as child care, pre-kindergarten, or Early Head Start and Head Start programs, making this a ripe area for policy development.

Despite the large numbers of children affected by parental incarceration, these children are largely hidden when it comes to formal ECE policy and program initiatives. Although one study has attempted to uncover the number of preschool children served in formal care arrangements (Ruprecht, Tomlin, Perkins, & Viehweg, this issue, p. 41), much remains unknown about this population and a more proactive approach from policymakers interested in ECE is needed to effectively address this population of children. Given the likelihood that large numbers of affected children participate in ECE programs, these systems offer an important opportunity to positively affect the lives of young children of incarcerated parents. This article will focus on the impacts of parental incarceration on young children, consider trends and opportunities in ECE policy that can help address the needs of children of incarcerated parents, and provide suggestions for future policy strategies.

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The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

Understanding the impact of incarceration on young children is critical to developing policy issues and solutions. Although



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Separation from parents can impact children's sense of security and developmental trajectory, depending on how emotionally available and involved the parent experiencing incarceration was in daily caregiving.

the research literature in this area is complex and not yet fully developed, several areas have implications for ECE policy. While the research is not inclusive of all children of incarcerated parents, most of the literature has indicated the potential for increased risks relating to social-emotional development and attachment, school readiness and educational attainment, and economic and other supports for well-being (Martin, 2017; Turney, 2018). However, the risks associated with incarceration are highly variable. Factors that influence the impact include the child's relationship and attachment history with the parent, the availability of other responsive caregivers in the child's life, and contextual factors in which the child lives (Bell, Bayliss, Glauert, & Ohan, 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan, Sugrue, Duron, Ciro, & Messex, 2018). Although a thorough discussion of the research is beyond the scope of this article, see Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan (2019) for a review.

Many young children may experience the impact of incarceration starting at the time of their parent's arrest, given that children may experience trauma related to witnessing the removal of a parent from the household (Haskins & Turney, 2018). The trauma can be related to many factors associated with the arrest, such as the interactions between the police and the parent being arrested and how the parent is removed from the home (Poehlmann-Tynan, Burson, Runion, & Weymouth, 2017). Trauma may also occur due to separation from the family, including the parent, grandparent, or siblings. Some research found many parents of young children who experience incarceration also reported significant arrest histories, meaning that the child may have experienced parental incarceration multiple times (Burnson & Weymouth, 2019; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017). Other impacts that children may experience due to parental incarceration may include:

- **Disrupted attachment relationships with the parent who experiences incarceration** (Poehlmann-Tynan &

Arditti, 2018). Although the effects might be mitigated by other attachment relationships, separation from parents nevertheless can impact children's sense of security and developmental trajectory, depending on how emotionally available and involved the parent experiencing incarceration was in daily caregiving.

- **Material hardship, food insecurity, residential and housing instability, homelessness, and family relationship dissolution due to incarceration** result in strain on the family system that affects children in the immediate term and has longer term implications for well-being across health, academic, and behavioral outcomes (Haskins & Turney, 2018).
- **Challenging behaviors, such as increased aggressive and externalizing behavior in children as young as 3 years old** (Haskins & Turney, 2018). This observation is repeated elsewhere—young children having an incarcerated father appears to predict increased aggressive behavior for children at 5 years old, especially for boys. Some research has noted that the absence of the father due to incarceration produced stronger effects for aggressive behaviors compared to father absences for other reasons (Burnson & Weymouth, 2019; Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, & Mincy, 2012).
- **Significantly lower non-cognitive skills, such as executive functioning, particularly for boys at school entry who have an incarcerated father.** This finding has spillover implications for increased participation in special education during elementary school years and has implications for school readiness. The study that produced this finding noted that the impact did not vary by race and was generally applicable to boys (Haskins, 2014).
- **Impacts on cognitive development, such as reading and math skills.** One study drawing on the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study found that children between 1 and 9 years old with first-time paternal incarceration had lower scores on reading and math assessments and short-term memory skills (Haskins, 2014; Turney, 2017; Turney & Haskins, 2019).

More research is needed to fully understand the consequences of parental incarceration for young children. However, research to date has demonstrated that children of incarcerated parents share the same risks and potential for negative outcomes for development, behavior, and school readiness as other populations considered to be at risk. The available data are helpful in examining how ECE policy can help meet the developmental needs of young children who have an incarcerated parent. Given that high-quality ECE can lead to positive developmental outcomes for children experiencing other types of risk, it is reasonable to conclude that children of incarcerated parents would also benefit from participation in high-quality ECE programs (Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). The next section will review trends and opportunities in ECE policy that can help address this issue.

Trends and Opportunities in ECE Policy

In recent years, there have been considerable efforts in the ECE field to address issues related to expanding access to high-quality programs, expanding quality initiatives, and developing meaningful family engagement practices. Although some policies have been adopted at the federal and state levels to address these issues, more work is needed to fully recognize and incorporate children of incarcerated parents into these discussions.

Preschool Suspension and Expulsion

The research and policy development on preschool suspension and expulsion reveals that this practice may disproportionately impact children of incarcerated parents. Analysis of the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health found that approximately 50,000 preschoolers were suspended at least once, and an estimated 17,000 preschoolers have been expelled from their early care and education setting. On average, 250 preschoolers are suspended or expelled from preschool each school day (Malik, 2017). Further analysis found that African American children are 2.2 times more likely to be suspended or expelled, and although boys represent roughly half of the preschool population, they receive 82% of the suspensions and expulsions. These findings echo previous findings that show the typical child who experiences suspension or expulsion from preschool is a 4-year old African American boy (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Schachner et al., 2016). The short- and long-term consequences of this practice are critical issues to understand and address.

Research found that experiencing adverse experiences, such as parental incarceration, increased the likelihood of exclusion from preschool (Zeng, Corr, O'Grady, & Guan, 2019). Other evidence suggests that parental incarceration is also associated with other adverse experiences (Turney, 2018). Thus, children of incarcerated parents may be a subset of those at greatest risk for preschool suspension or expulsion. Moreover, incarceration is significantly higher in African American and Hispanic populations compared to the white population in the United States. African Americans are 6 times more likely and Hispanics are 3 times as likely to be imprisoned compared to whites (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). Coupled with the research that shows that young children with behavior problems in early childhood are at increased risk for later delinquency and involvement in criminal justice systems (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; White, Moffitt, Earls, Robins, & Silva, 1990), the issue of preschool suspension and expulsion becomes very salient for children of incarcerated parents.

The ECE field has attempted to address the preschool suspension and expulsion issue and to increase emphasis on the social-emotional health of all children in child care settings. For example, the 2016 Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) stated that suspensions must be limited and used as a temporary "last resort" and expulsions due to behavioral challenges are prohibited (HSPPS, n.d.).



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More research is needed to fully understand the consequences of parental incarceration for young children.

The HSPPS states that programs must, at a minimum, provide mental health consultant services to the family and make appropriate referrals to special education services if needed.

In addition, the 2014 federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (the federal programs to promote access, quality, and supply in child care, with a focus on the needs of low-income children) provided guidance to states and territories that administer the Child Care Development Fund program regarding ways to support all children's social-emotional needs. While not as specific as the HSPPS, the guidance provided by the federal Office of Child Care outlines that states should include "policies regarding the social-emotional and behavioral health of young children, which may include positive behavioral intervention and support models and policies on expulsion of preschool-aged children, in early childhood programs receiving [Child Care Development Fund] assistance." (U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, 2015).

The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 also enabled states to use quality improvement funds for professional development, "including effective behavior management strategies and training, including positive behavior intervention and support models, that promote positive social and emotional development and reduce challenging behaviors, including reducing expulsions of preschool-aged children for such behaviors" (Section 658G(b)(1)(C) of the CCDBG Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9858e(b)(1)(C)).

These policies help articulate the importance of preventing suspensions and expulsions, emphasize the importance of professional development to support children's social-emotional health, and highlight the ability to use federal funds to implement these policies. Although these policy areas are likely to benefit a child with an incarcerated parent, they have not typically been applied specifically to this population. In



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Children of incarcerated parents are one group of children within early care and education settings who may benefit from early childhood mental health consultation.

setting forth additional policy opportunities in ECE, we will focus on three key areas—quality initiatives to support children of incarcerated parents, family engagement, and access to ECE.

Quality Initiatives

Although public policy in ECE may be trending toward specific policy initiatives that address social–emotional health, as well as equity, they are not doing so with a targeted focus on children with incarcerated parents. This section will focus on two initiatives—early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS)—as opportunities to expand services and outreach to children of incarcerated parents.

ECMHC

ECMHC is a partnership model in which ECE providers gain skills in supporting child social–emotional development through ongoing collaboration with a mental health professional (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2005). Child outcomes such as preventing or reducing challenging behavior and increasing social–emotional competence are achieved through changes to the ECE environment or setting and by increasing the capacity and skills of the providers in the setting.

Growing evidence supports the use of ECMHC to prevent and reduce problem behavior in young children (Brennan, Bradley, Allen, & Perry, 2008). Perry and colleagues’ review of the evidence for ECMHC indicated that it can support children’s social–emotional development and can reduce externalizing and internalizing behavior concerns (Perry, Allen, Brennan, & Bradley, 2010). ECMHC delivered in center-based and home visiting contexts has been shown to be effective with children who have experienced adversity, including homelessness, poverty, foster care placement, and parental mental health issues (Ondi et al., 2019; Perry & Conners-Burrow, 2016).

For several reasons, children of incarcerated parents are one group of children within ECE settings who may benefit from ECMHC. First, families that experience incarceration are likely to also have additional risk factors that can negatively affect children’s development and behavior, including poverty, minority status, and greater levels of trauma exposure. Second, the child’s experience of parental incarceration (e.g., witnessing the arrest, loss of access to the parent), may by itself be traumatic for children, bringing with it the risks similar to other adverse experiences. Third, once a family experiences incarceration, additional risks can accrue and compound, including reduction in family income, increased stress on the non-incarcerated caregiver, and stigma.

QRIS

Besides work to develop a systematic approach to ECMHC supports within child care programs, there are other state policies opportunities that can embrace the needs of young children with incarcerated parents. For example, QRISs exist across the country, with the aim of providing opportunities for ECE programs to be supported to improve and sustain quality (Elicker & Ruprecht, 2019). There are 42 QRISs in the country at present (BUILD Initiative & Child Trends, 2017). Within the QRIS approach, there is an increasing emphasis on assisting staff and programs to focus on continuous quality improvement, with technical assistance provided through site-based coaching as well as professional development and higher education offerings. This emphasis means that children’s social–emotional development, which is at risk for children with incarcerated parents, is part and parcel of the QRIS understanding of quality throughout the US. And, with states increasingly intentionally adopting an equity focus within their QRIS and overall ECE policy approach, the opportunity to leverage the equity and social–emotional focus suggests that QRIS can be a partner for those seeking to build a strong platform of proactive, asset-based services that meet the needs of children with incarcerated parents.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is deeply embedded in the policy framework for Head Start and is typically part of a state’s QRIS framework as well. There are significant opportunities to address the unique needs of children with an incarcerated parent through implementation of these family engagement frameworks and national resources that can help ECE programs. Following are some opportunities for states and programs to consider:

- Sesame Street’s Coping With Incarceration (Sesame Street in Communities, n.d.), has a variety of printable and interactive resources to assist young children and caregivers. Sesame Street (n.d.) also produced the “Resilience” series that has a specific focus on resilience, appropriate for use with children and caregivers.
- In the recent Preschool Development Grants Birth to Five competition, the first set of states that applied included

one state—Indiana—that identified incarcerated parents as one key audience to elicit information from during their needs assessment process (BUILD Initiative, n.d.).

- Head Start can leverage its home visiting requirement to potentially provide support for incarcerated parents. Although child care is typically not resourced to provide home visits and connect with family members in this way, states could seek to partner their home visiting programs with their child care efforts and explore the provision of child care side by side with home visiting. Furthermore, home visiting could expand to include parents who are in jail as well as the caregiver with the child, thus supporting the development of parent–child relationships.

Access to ECE

Providing access to high-quality ECE programs for children of incarcerated parents may be another way to meet their needs. Four states (Connecticut, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Vermont) recognized children with incarcerated parents as a vulnerable population in their initial Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (BUILD Initiative, n.d.).

Head Start Examples

There are different policy examples in Head Start that states and other early childhood organizations may want to consider to expand eligibility to this population. For Head Start, children with an incarcerated parent may meet the ongoing eligibility requirements for the program. For children who are living in kinship care arrangements, Head Start specifically mentions incarceration as a basis for considering a child to be homeless, and thus eligible for participation in Head Start:

Head Start follows the definition of a homeless child in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11434a(2)). If a child is living with non-parent relatives due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, the child may meet this definition of a homeless child. A child experiencing homelessness is eligible for Head Start.

Some examples of circumstances leading a child to kinship care include economic hardship, substance misuse, or incarceration. If the child is living with non-parent relatives for these or similar reasons, the child may be considered homeless and then would be eligible for Head Start. (Head Start Policy and Regulations, 2019).

Some state and territory Head Start programs also address children of incarcerated parents. For example, Puerto Rico has automatic enrollment in Head Start for all children with a parent in prison. The Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation guarantees that all age-eligible children whose mother or father is in prison receive Head Start and Early Head Start services, according to the Puerto Rico Head Start Collaboration Office (Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center, n.d.). In Oregon, there is a Head Start program located on the grounds of the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility that



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works with mothers in a low-security prison to help establish and maintain bonds with their children (Reading, 2018).

Child Care Examples

States largely determine the policy framework for children who can participate in their subsidized child care systems. States may elect to use protective services categories to qualify children, and which may extend beyond formal child welfare and may also elect to include other vulnerable populations within their eligibility framework. Likewise, states make their own policy decisions about state pre-k programs. Washington state, which models its state pre-k effort on the federal Head Start program, specifically calls out the inclusion of children with an incarcerated parent (Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families, n.d.):

Children are eligible for ECEAP and Head Start based on their age and family income. Up to 10 percent of ECEAP and Head Start children can be from families above the income limit if they have:

- *Developmental factors such as developmental delay, disability, or other special needs.*
- *Environmental factors such as homelessness, family violence, chemical dependency, foster care, or incarcerated parents.*

Future Work

Our review suggests that there is more work to do around the issue of young children with an incarcerated parent as it relates to early care and education policy. There is scant attention by policymakers to identify this group of children and to determine whether there is enabling ECE policy to best support their healthy development. In addition to supporting a more robust research agenda that helps to shed light more clearly on the risks and needs of this growing group of children, and how

the ECE environment can best be shaped to provide a positive experience that aids their healthy growth and development, some additional work could include:

- **Improve awareness and understanding within the ECE policy and practice community of the numbers of young children who are impacted by parental incarceration.** Within this, ensure that data is provided on disproportionate impacts on children by race and ethnicity so that the early childhood policy and practice community is aware of higher impacts for African American and Latinx children.
- **Learn from work done to elevate policy and practice for highly vulnerable groups such as children who are homeless. Examine how these coalitions have made the issues more salient and relevant and specifically included in legislative, regulation, and other policy vehicles.** While more can and should be done for children who are homeless, there are many policy and practice leaders who have deeper awareness and have moved into action for this group of children and families. Much can be learned from how this issue has been approached to inform how best to help focus attention on the population of children and families experiencing parental incarceration.
- **Consider specific policies that would help ECE programs best meet the needs of children with incarcerated parents.** For example, there are many opportunities for states to set intake policy (e.g., through licensing, QRIS, preschool) to ensure that families are engaged and needs are discussed as part of the enrollment and orientation process. This effort could include probing on family circumstances, including parental absence due to incarceration. To do this well, states could also provide professional development support to ensure that professionals working in these settings are well-equipped to conduct these interviews in an equitable and respectful manner.
- **Convene a working group to develop recommendations about how to best improve current policies to ensure that children with incarcerated parents have access to quality ECE, whether through state child care or preschool efforts, that meets their needs.** The tool developed by the Child Care State Capacity Building Center (2018) on expulsion and suspension provides a model for examining multiple areas of ECE policy that could be adapted for children with incarcerated parents.
- **Intentionally include children with incarcerated parents, and their needs, in new program design work.** As states develop policies and programs through quality

initiatives, QRIS, professional development, or cross-sector partnerships, providing information on the growing number of young children with incarcerated parents and the relevance of these programs to their healthy development may assist professionals in their work.

Harriet Dichter, JD, has a track record of innovation, partnership, and accountability in early childhood at the local, state, and national levels. She has been effective as a leader and program-builder in different contexts, ranging from government agencies and foundations to advocacy organizations with shoestring budgets, and has strong policy, planning, implementation and advocacy skills. As Pennsylvania's founding deputy secretary, Office of Child Development and Early Learning, she gained national attention for the state's unique new solutions and partnerships. As executive director, Delaware Office of Early Learning, she accelerated the pace, quality, and accountability of the state's comprehensive work in early childhood. Ms. Dichter has held a variety of state-level policy positions in public welfare, education, maternal and child health, and early childhood. She has also worked extensively with national and local nonprofit and foundation partners on policy-related issues, including the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Pew Charitable Trusts, and local child advocacy groups.

Although some research has focused on the impact of incarceration on children's development, policymakers need more information about this population in order to craft effective policies to support them.

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Tough Stuff: A Home Visitor's Guide to Supporting Families at Risk in 2016. With team members, Dr. Tomlin was selected to participate in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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