

This Issue and Why it Matters

Parental absence due to incarceration is a unique family stressor. Many children have an absent parent because of events such as divorce or deployment, but an absence that is due to incarceration can be highly stigmatizing and may lead families to hide this fact. Teachers and other professionals are in a position to provide critical supports and services that build on family strengths and foster resilience in children affected by the trauma of parental incarceration. This issue of the Journal draws attention to the millions of children in the United States who have experienced parental incarceration and its consequences, and invites readers to consider how one can help.

Parental incarceration changes children's lives. Young children may experience broad consequences, including limited interaction with the incarcerated parent, reduced family income and standard of living, and uncertainty about the future. Although children's responses to the strain of parental incarceration vary, overall their development, behavior, and physical health are at risk.

All families are different, so studying family life and experiences is complex. We need many viewpoints to begin to comprehend the needs and challenges of families experiencing parental incarceration. To explore incarceration in the US and its effects on young children, we invited contributions from both direct service professionals and researchers. The authors are from disciplines that include early care and education, medicine, sociology, psychology, law, and mental health. With stories and data, these contributions convey the urgency of these children's situations, provide concrete strategies for helpful responses, and hold out hope for change at a system level. Collectively, the articles in this issue describe the scope of the problem and what it means to the lives of affected young children. The authors provide resources and strategies to assist those in the field to support children in their care who have experienced parental incarceration.

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