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## **Effects of Parental Incarceration: A Grandparent's Perspective**

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*Research Article***Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children:  
A Grandparent's Perspective**

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study explored grandparents' perceptions of parental incarceration effects on the grandchildren they are raising. Children of incarcerated individuals are directly affected by the high incarceration rate in the United States and often find themselves displaced from the people and environment they know. As one of the most common caregivers for children with incarcerated parents, grandparents offer a unique perspective on the effects that parental incarceration has on children. The study found that grandparents perceive that the effects of parental incarceration on children are diverse. Children represented in the study were negatively affected emotionally and behaviorally by parental incarceration, displacement, and associated traumas, yet placement with a grandparent during periods of parental incarceration had positive effects on child outcomes. Grandparents indicated a need for external support, more of a voice, and a more efficient process for kinship care. To be most effective, social workers who encounter children and grandparents affected by parental incarceration should take time to carefully understand the unique effects of parental incarceration on the child, being careful not to assume that a child has been impacted by parental incarceration in any way.

*Keywords:* parental incarceration, grandparents, effects on children, child outcomes, child displacement, kinship care

Although the incarceration rate in the United States has declined in the past 20 years, the United States still has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Carson, 2018; Walmsley, 2018). Incarceration remains a pressing problem with a substantial impact on the lives of many individuals in the United States. This impact goes beyond the 1.5 million prisoners under state and federal jurisdiction (Carson, 2018). In particular, incarceration has a significant impact on the lives of the family members of incarcerated individuals.

Children of incarcerated individuals are directly affected by the high incarceration rate in the United States. In 1999, an estimated 721,500 parents with minor children were incarcerated in State and Federal prisons (Mumola, 2000). This number rose to 809,800 by midyear 2007 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics special report on parents in prison and their minor children, 1.7 million minor children currently had a parent in prison midyear 2007, an increase from 1.5 million in 1999 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000). Therefore, in the mid-2000s, increasing numbers of children were experiencing parental incarceration in the United States. However, in more recent years, the Child and

Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative's National Survey of Children's Health indicates a decrease in the number of children who had experienced parental incarceration at some point during their lives between 2016 and 2018. While still more than 5.7 million children in the United States had experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives in 2016, this number decreased to 5.4 million children in 2018 (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2016, 2018). Despite indications that the number of children in the United States affected by parental incarceration is declining, millions of children are still impacted by the incarceration of a parent.

Children for whom parental incarceration is a reality often find themselves displaced. According to Mumola (2000), about half of children with mothers incarcerated and 15% of children with fathers incarcerated live with a grandparent. Grandparents are the most common caregivers, other than a parent, for children experiencing parental incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Experiencing the incarceration of a parent is a stressor and risk-factor for children by itself, and when children are displaced—removed from the people and environment they are most familiar—further stress and risk is created for them.

According to the United States Census Bureau, “in 2012, 2.7 million grandparents in the United States were raising their grandchildren” (Ellis & Simmons, 2014, p. 16). This is an increase from 2.4 million in 2000 (Simmons & Dye, 2003). As mentioned above, grandparents are one of the most common caregivers for children with incarcerated parents, second only to the parent who is not incarcerated (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). For this reason, the parents of incarcerated individuals are also impacted substantially by the high incarceration rate in the United States. As the parents of incarcerated individuals take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren, they face substantial stressors.

The effects of raising grandchildren on grandparents themselves has been studied extensively (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Dolbin-MacNab, 2006; Grant, 2000; Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007; Sampson & Hertlein, 2015), and the effect of parental incarceration on children also has been studied with frequency (Allard & Greene, 2011; Bryan, 2017; Comfort et al., 2011; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Murray et al. 2012; Nichols et al., 2016). However, the effects of parental incarceration on children from the perspective of the grandparents—who, in many cases, find themselves responsible for the primary care of their grandchildren—have not received such attention in research. Only one study has presented any data on children's problems stemming from parental incarceration as identified by the caregiver, and this data was very limited and is dated (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993). The purpose of this study seeks to fill this gap in literature, exploring how grandparents perceive the effects of parental incarceration on the grandchildren they are raising. As one of the most common caregivers for children experiencing parental incarceration, grandparents provide a unique and valuable perspective on the effects that parental incarceration can have on children and their outcomes in various areas of life.

## **Literature Review**

As incarceration rates have risen in the United States, addressing the effects of incarceration on the children of prisoners has become increasingly important (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Parental incarceration can affect many areas of children's lives and understanding these effects can assist social workers in working more effectively with this population.

## **Social Connection**

Parental incarceration affects many areas of children's lives including their patterns of social connection. Research studies conducted by Allard and Greene (2011) and Bryan (2017) reveal that

parental incarceration negatively affects children socially. Allard and Greene (2011) specifically found that many children experiencing parental incarceration have an undermined sense of stability and safety as well as a compromised sense of connectedness and worthiness. In addition, children with incarcerated parents experience a loss of attachments and ability to trust resulting in a minimized sense of belonging in the world. Similarly, Bryan (2017) finds that compared with other adolescents, adolescents who have recently experienced the incarceration of their fathers are less connected in their schools and are more socially marginalized; furthermore, their friends are generally less advantaged, less academically successful, and more delinquent. Both studies indicate that parental incarceration has a negative impact on children's social connections.

### ***Criminal Behaviors and Violence Perpetration***

Parental incarceration impacts children's tendencies towards criminal behaviors and violence perpetration. Muftić and Smith (2018) found a significant difference in the likelihood of perpetrating violence between students who were affected by parental incarceration and those who were not, leading them to conclude that parental incarceration is a predictor of violence perpetration in early adulthood. This is of concern because violent tendencies often lead to criminal behaviors. Murray et al. (2012) found an association between parental incarceration and increased youth theft. Both tendencies—violence perpetration and theft—place these youth at risk for future incarceration.

### ***Academics***

Findings regarding the effects of parental incarceration on children's academic performances vary. Allard and Greene (2011) found that parental incarceration negatively affects children academically. Findings by Nichols et al (2016) agree with this conclusion, showing a small but significant association between parental incarceration and academic achievement; they also found that parental incarceration has a small but significant association with patterns of truancy and lifetime academic achievement. In contrast, Murray et al. (2012) did not find an association between parental incarceration and child outcomes of poor academic performance. Conclusions regarding the effect of parental incarceration on children's academic performances conflict with one another.

### ***Mental Health***

Parental incarceration may also affect the mental health of children. Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) indicate an association between paternal incarceration and mental health problems among children. The findings of Allard and Greene (2011) are congruent with this conclusion, supporting that parental incarceration negatively affects children's mental health. Murray et al. (2012), however, do not ascertain an association between parental incarceration and child outcomes of depression. Although this finding suggests parental incarceration does not put children at higher risk for depression, it does not indicate whether other areas of children's mental health are affected.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The developmental ecological model is foundational to this study. This theory focuses on the interaction between an individual's development and ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, a child's development is directly affected by their relationships within their immediate social context as well as the systems and environments in which they live (Nichols et al., 2015). This means that child development is impacted by the environment at all system levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, the development of a child is influenced by the incarceration of a parent. When a parent

is incarcerated, children's ecological environments are changed through separation from a parent, living with a grandparent, possible social stigmatization, as well as an indirect connection with the criminal justice system.

According to the developmental ecological perspective, children's development, embodied in behaviors, is affected by the environment that parental incarceration creates. This study will explore how these effects manifest themselves in manners perceivable by grandparents who are their primary caregivers. Social workers working with grand-families are trained in the ecological model or person-in-environment theory. This allows them to encompass goodness of fit when working with the children in their grandparents' home.

### Methodology

This cross-sectional qualitative study utilized an exploratory research design to explore the perceptions grandparents have regarding how parental incarceration has affected their grandchildren (Krysiak & Finn, 2013). A cross-sectional approach was chosen based on the nature of the study as it looks at one particular group at a specific moment in time. The specific time being when the child was in the care of the grandparent. The study design was approved by The Institutional Review Board of Indiana Wesleyan University.

### Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and chain-referral sampling methods (Krysiak & Finn, 2013). Purposive sampling allowed for careful selection of potential participants based on eligibility criteria (Table 1) that served the purpose of the study, with the goal that each participant would be able to provide a unique and rich perspective (Suen et al., 2014). Further participants were recruited using a chain-referral sampling method in which voluntary participants were asked if they knew of other grandparents meeting eligibility criteria who may be interested in participating in the study. With their informed consent, eight grandparents (Table 2), representing nine children (Table 3), participated in the study.

**Table 1**  
*The Eligibility Criteria for Participants*

<b>Eligibility Criteria</b>
<p><b>Grandmother or Grandfather:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primary caregiver of grandchild ages 2-21 [past or present]</li> <li>Primary caregiver of grandchild for at least 6 months</li> <li>Grandchild placed in care due, at least in part, to the incarceration of one or both of the child's parents</li> </ul> <p><i>Note.</i> Several grandparents met these criteria and had multiple grandchildren, so they included information about multiple grandchildren, including those younger than age 2 and those who were in their care for less than 6 months. One grandparent only had care of grandchild on weekends.</p>

**Table 2**  
***The Characteristics of the Eight Participants***

<b>Characteristics of Participants</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Grandmother	5
Grandfather	3
Age: $M = 57.125$ , $Md = 56$ , Range = 40-68	
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	6
Biracial	1
African American	1
Marital Status	
Never Married	1
Married	3
Divorced	3
Other	1
Employment Status	
Full-Time Employed	3
Part-Time Employed	1
Retired	3
Unemployed/Disability	1
Annual Income	
< \$25,000	1
\$25,000-\$50,000	3
\$50,000-\$75,000	3
\$75,000-\$100,000	1
Caregiver at Time of Interview	
Yes	5
No	3

**Table 3**  
***The Characteristics of the Nine Children Represented by the Participants***

<b>Characteristics of Children Represented</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Gender	
Male	4
Female	5
Current Age: $M = 8.95$ years, $Md = 8$ , Range = 15 months-21 years	
Age at Parent's First Incarceration: $M = 4.73$ years, $Md = 1$ year, Range = 7 weeks-13 years	
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	4
Biracial	5
Incarcerated Parent	
Father	3
Mother	5
Both	1
Length of Parent's Incarceration: Range = 2 days-5 years	
Parent Incarcerated at Time of Interview	
Yes	4
No	5

No

Time in Grandparent's Care:  $M = 5.32$  years,  $Md = 2$  years,  
Range = 2 weeks-21 years

*Note.* Two Children were represented by both a grandmother and a grandfather. Reason for parent's incarceration was related to drug use in all cases.

### Data Collection

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, guided by a list of broad questions that allowed the sequencing and wording of questions to differ between interviews depending on the participant (Krysiak & Finn, 2013). Data collection was led by the participant, allowing the interviewer to expand, follow-up, and explore areas as they transpired rather than sticking to scripted questions. Areas addressed during the interviews included: discussion of the grandchild's incarcerated parent, the relationship between the grandparent and grandchild, contact between the grandchild and their incarcerated parent, and how the grandparent thinks the incarceration of the child's parent affected their ability to make social connections and friends, academic performances, spirituality, mental health, emotional health, and physical health. Thoughts about how social workers could best support them and their grandchild in their situation were also discussed.

Participants were interviewed individually in a mutually established private location. At the beginning of each interview, participants were given time to ask any questions they had regarding the study and signed an informed consent form, as well as a consent to audio record the interview. To protect participant privacy, participants were assured that they may refuse to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable, and if at any point they desired to withdraw their participation from the study, they could do so freely. All participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy, and interview duration ranged from 20 to 120 minutes. Participants were asked to fill out a short demographic survey following the interview. Each participant was offered a gift card after the interview.

### Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and interpretative thematic data analysis was utilized to identify themes regarding child outcomes that arose across multiple interviews (Peterson, 2017). This process included coding data and marking up the transcriptions by highlighting keywords and sentences that were most meaningful or relevant to the categories of interest identified (Krysiak & Finn, 2013). Data was interpreted by connecting emerging themes to the research question (Belotto, 2018).

### Results

The analysis yielded three major themes with nine subthemes and eight sub-subthemes (Table 4). Statements supporting these themes are linked to unique participants [1-8].

**Table 4**  
*Themes Yielded through Interpretative Thematic Data Analysis*

Themes	Participants (n/8)	Children Represented (n/9)
Negative Effects	8	9
Emotional	8	8
Confusion	4	4
Anger	4	3
Distress	6	4
Lack of Trust	3	4
Behavioral	8	9
Stigma	4	3
Bullying/Fighting	6	4
Defiance	3	3
Trouble Sleeping	3	3
Positive Effects	8	9
Stable Environment	4	3
Developmental Advancement	2	3
Improved Academics	3	2
Spiritual Development	4	2
Needs	3	6
External Support	3	6
Voice	3	6
More Efficient Process	2	4

### **Theme 1: Negative Effects**

All participants discussed at least one way that they have seen parental incarceration negatively affect the grandchild or grandchildren in their care. Negative effects of parental incarceration manifested emotionally and behaviorally for most children represented in the study.

#### ***Emotional Effects***

Every child represented by a grandparent in this study displayed varying emotional response to the incarceration of their parent and any associated displacement or traumas. These findings align with the theoretical framework chosen for study. The ecological model suggests these emotional effects could be caused by the distress of their environment. The most common emotional responses that emerged were confusion, anger, distress, and lack of trust.

#### ***Confusion***

Four participants discussed their grandchild experiencing confusion in response to their parent's incarceration. Some children simply did not understand what was going on, while

others were confused about specific aspects of their parent's incarceration. For example, one participant stated, "he's confused with the whole judicial system and how it works" [5]. Another participant specifically recalled that when she and her grandson would pass by the prison where her grandson's mother was incarcerated, her grandson would state, "My mommy lives there" [8]. One participant indicated that she believes one of the reasons that her granddaughter acts out in negative ways is because of the amount of confusion she is experiencing in her young mind [3].

### ***Anger***

Four participants mentioned anger associated with parental incarceration. All children discussed who responded with anger were male and in or nearing their teenage years. One participant specifically stated "He's just so mad about everything...he's not gonna take any crap from anybody and that's just how he relates" [5]. Another recalled that "there was a lot of underlying anger and resentment...that has probably manifested itself...when he got to his teen years" [1].

### ***Distress***

Six participants indicated that a grandchild experienced emotional distress linked with parental incarceration. Distress was exhibited in various ways, including crying, sadness, worry, and fear. One participant stated, "he's older, and he's understanding more of what's going on. It's not just that she's gone. It's...she's in jail...and I can't see her, and he does get upset" [2].

### ***Lack of Trust***

Three participants discussed a grandchild displaying a lack of trust. One participant captured the reason behind this negative emotional response when she stated, "If you can't trust your mom, who can you trust?" [5] One child represented exhibited a lack of trust in multiple ways. Her grandmother explained that "She still doesn't have any trust to...men...At first meeting she won't...allow it at all. It takes time for her to let any men, and even the men that are in my family that have always loved her, she had to build a trust with 'em before she lets 'em in." In addition, "She is scared to death if anybody rushes her. She won't have that. She'll start screaming right away" [3].

### ***Behavioral Responses***

Children represented by a grandparent in this study also displayed varying behavioral responses to parental incarceration. The most common negative behaviors identified by participants were experiencing stigma, bullying and fighting, defiance, and trouble sleeping.

### ***Stigma***

Four participants recalled instances when their grandchild experienced stigma as a result of parental incarceration. This stigmatization tended to result in negative behavioral responses from these children, including fighting and defensiveness. One participant recounted that his grandson "has a specific kid that he's had quite a few altercations with that I guess for some reason he knows what [he] is going through, and he's teased him and made fun of him and it turns into a fight" [5]. Another participant stated that her grandson "said kids at school used to say stuff...'Where's your mom and dad?'...'How come you live with your grandparents?'...He always had to defend...his life" [8].

### ***Bullying/Fighting***

Six participants indicated that they saw behaviors of bullying and fighting displayed by their grandchild as responses, at least in part, to experiencing parental incarceration. For one child, the incarceration of his parent has affected “his ability to cope with stressful situations. Without a doubt...The stress gets high and instead of him...relaxing or getting away from it...it just takes over and next thing you know, it turns into a fight with him” [5]. Another participant recalled that his grandson “was always a right fighter...He got himself in trouble on the bus many a time because he stood up for people. He would get into a fight, and then when we finally got down to what happened about the fight, it was because two kids...were bullying a girl...he got in trouble for that, but he was doing it for, in his mind, the right thing” [7].

### ***Defiance***

Three participants mentioned tendencies towards defiance. Children who displayed defiance were among the older children represented in the study and tended to display defiance towards authority figures, particularly female authorities. One participant stated that his grandson’s “difficult area is accepting females in positions of authority” [1]. Another said that “since his mom's not been around, he thinks that he can tell women what to do...he thinks that he can tell us...what to do cause he don't have that father figure in his life to tell him no, right from wrong, you know, he needs that father figure” [4].

### ***Trouble Sleeping***

Three participants discussed instances when the grandchild in their care experienced trouble sleeping, indicating that this behavior is likely linked to the child’s experience of parental incarceration and associated traumas. These children tend to have trouble sleeping because of dreams or simply waking up and not being able to fall back asleep. One participant stated, “every now and then the dreams get him” [5]. Another said, “I'll take her up and put her to bed, and she screams like she's terrified of something up there. I'll go up and rub her belly, rub her face, and give her hugs. And then, it's still, as soon as I walk out of the room, it's the same thing, and I have to just wait a while, and then she'll calm down and go to sleep. And she wakes up in the middle of the night cryin' again” [3].

## **Theme 2: Positive Effects**

All participants discussed at least one way that having their grandchild placed with them during the incarceration of the child’s parent positively impacted on the child’s outcomes. Positive effects of placement with a grandparent include having a stable environment, developmental advancement, improved academics, and spiritual development.

### ***Stable Environment***

Four participants saw that providing a stable environment for their grandchild during times of parental incarceration positively impacted the child in their care. The children represented displayed a need for structure and consistency that the grandparent was able to provide for them. One participant stated that her grandson “likes that structure. He likes to know, I've got to get good grades, I got to do my chores, I got to do all those things” [2]. Another participant indicated that her young granddaughter looks to her grandparents for “consistency and structure” [3].

### ***Developmental Advancement***

Two participants indicated that their grandchildren who were behind developmentally when they entered their grandparents' care showed great developmental advancement because of the care their grandparents provided. One participant saw developmental advancement in two of her granddaughters. One granddaughter was born prematurely and came to live with her after nine days in the hospital, and after being in her grandparents' care, the child advanced to high developmental percentiles. Another of her granddaughters only said "bubu" and "papa" when she came into her grandparents' care, but after only two weeks, she began vocalizing at least 40 different words [6]. Another participant noted that she has noticed a "huge shift" in her granddaughter's development. At 15 months old, this child was significantly behind developmentally and did not talk, stand, or walk. At 28 months, after being in her grandparents' care for 13 months, she is ahead developmentally. "She doesn't shut up," can jump up and down, throws a ball, and is able to stand on one foot [5].

### ***Improved Academics***

Three participants mentioned an improvement in their grandchild's academic performance after being placed with them. One participant said that her oldest granddaughter could barely read when she first came to live with her, but now she is on the honor roll [6]. Another participant said that when her grandson was placed with them "grades weren't all that great, and now he's getting all A's" [2].

### ***Spiritual Development***

Four participants discussed evidence that experiencing parental incarceration contributed to their grandchild's choice to seek God. One participant said that she believes all her grandson has experienced has "drawn him closer [to God]...If he gets upset...about something...[I say,] 'Hey, let's pray about your mom'...then he will pray. We will pray...He believes. He's just like, 'Grandma can we pray? Will you pray with me?'...He'll be upset or something and we'll pray about it...It seems to calm him down" [2]. This child's spiritual development and growth was supported and encouraged by his grandmother. Another participant stated that, "God changed his entire life...His outlook...He's got this happiness in him. I don't know where he'd be without it. I think he would've stayed angry or sad, and this kind of gives him...a path to follow" [8]. For these children, spirituality has helped them to cope with the negative effects of experiencing parental incarceration.

## **Theme 3: Needs**

Three participants identified specific needs that individuals in their situations have. Needs that grandparents caring for grandchildren experiencing parental incarceration have include external support, more of a voice, and a more efficient process for kinship care. Some participants had some of these needs met, but other needs arose in discussion because they were not sufficiently met.

### ***External Support***

Participants indicated a need for external support during the time that they were caring for a grandchild due to parental incarceration. This external support should serve several purposes, illustrated by the specific statements of participants. One participant stated that after

her grandson's mother was released from jail, she needed "that person to be there to say, 'You know, wait a minute'...and to set those boundaries because it's hard as a mom to be in the middle...To be able to say, 'It's not in my control. I didn't make that decision.' Then she can't be mad at [me]...'It's not up to me how often you see [your son]. It's not up to me...if it's supervised or not.' I don't want to be that person" [2]. Another participant recounted the positive characteristics of one social worker who provided external support during the time she was caring for her granddaughters. She stated that her social worker "listens and she's real and she has a tactfulness about her...She's very accommodating. And when I'm like, I really need something, she will do what she can to help with that process...I feel like she is on my side even though I also know that she's still trying to do her job and maintain her professionalism." In addition, this participant stated that social workers providing external support "should all be very equipped, have this toolbox of resources to help people" [3].

### ***Voice***

Participants stressed a need for more of a voice to advocate for the needs of their grandchildren. One participant discussed the struggle of having no voice as a grandparent. With frustration, she stated that "in the system, it is all about reunification, not truly what is best for the child. Parents have all the say" [6]. Another participant echoed a similar sentiment, expressing her frustration that a man who wasn't even her grandson's biological father signed the birth certificate, so he has rights, but "as grandparents you don't have rights" [2]. Another participant whose granddaughters had to have visits with their father after he was released from jail said, "It's frustrating to me that those people are never gonna see what he's like on his own...If anybody would ask me, I would say, I would scream, 'No!' He is not somebody that I would ever trust to leave any kids, not just...his children, any kids. I would never allow him to babysit, watch or otherwise any, 'cause his fuse is too short" [3]. Grandparents are concerned for the well-being of the grandchildren in their care, but because they do not have rights, they do not have a voice to advocate for the needs of the children they have cared for during times of parental incarceration.

### ***More Efficient Process***

Participants discussed a need for a more efficient process for grandparents beginning kinship care. Key pieces of this process mentioned by participants were financial assistance and help with childcare. One participant stated that "the state does not offer great resources for relative care. They will push you to start...getting your foster license so that you can get foster pay through the state...that process is six months plus before you see anything...and you don't get back pay." She went on to say, "we went almost eight months without having much of any financial help...My emergency fund was gone from childcare for two kids, and it's sad that you have to look for the cheapest...When you're a grandparent, you've already budgeted your funds for what you have and then throw in something like that, and let us not forget about diapers and the food...My income is based on the bills that I have without children" [3]. The lack of resources and an efficient process for kinship care puts a strain on grandparents and limits the quality of care they can provide their grandchildren with when they enter their care due to circumstances including parental incarceration.

## Discussion

The major finding of this study is that based on grandparents' perceptions, effects of parental incarceration on children are diverse. Every child is unique. These negative and positive effects suggest the importance of understanding that every child experiences and responds differently to parental incarceration and placement with a grandparent. To be most effective, social workers who encounter children and grandparents affected by parental incarceration should take time to understand the unique effects of parental incarceration on the child, being careful not to assume that a child has been impacted by parental incarceration in a particular way.

### Negative Effects

The diverse effects of parental incarceration on a child may include emotional and behavioral challenges. Some children may experience negative emotions of confusion, anger, distress, or a lack of trust. These emotions can contribute to the manifestation of negative behaviors including bullying, fighting, defiance, or trouble sleeping. Children may also experience stigmatization that can prompt further negative emotions and behaviors (Sampson & Hertlein, 2015). Because the effects of parental incarceration on children vary, the specific emotions and behaviors that arose in this study are in no way comprehensive. The incarceration of a child's parent often results in displacement or other traumas that further affect the child and contribute to negative emotional and behavioral responses (Comfort et al., 2011). The negative effects parental incarceration have on children can contribute to negative child outcomes if the child does not have proper support and is not provided with appropriate interventions. Parental incarceration is a risk factor for children that social workers need to be aware of, so they can support and help to meet their needs and help them to overcome the negative effects that manifest in their lives.

### Positive Effects

Placement with a grandparent during periods of parental incarceration appears to be a possible protective factor for children (Elkins, 2012). Based on the perceptions of grandparents in this study, being placed with a grandparent has diverse positive effects on child outcomes. These positive effects can include developmental advancement, improvement in academic performance, and spiritual development. Providing a stable environment for children also appears to mitigate some of the risk for negative effects and outcomes that parental incarceration can contribute to. As social workers encounter children affected by parental incarceration, they should consider the potential positive effects of placing a child with a grandparent.

### Needs

Social workers can play a key role in providing external support for grandparents caring for grandchildren affected by parental incarceration (Dolbin-McNab, 2005; Nichols et al., 2016). As grandparents expressed in this study, some ways that social workers may be able to help provide needed support include helping to set boundaries and enforce rules; listening; being real, tactful, and accommodating; and always being prepared with knowledge of available resources that can provide further external support to grandparents. Social workers can help to meet the needs expressed by several participants in this study by advocating for grandparents to have more of a voice and greater rights. There is also a need for social workers to advocate at a policy level for a more efficient process to allow grandparents to receive kinship care benefits in a timely manner (Poehlmann et al, 2016). Social workers working with grandparents and children

experiencing parental incarceration should be prepared to provide the external support needed and to serve as an advocate for grandparents and children in these situations.

### **Limitations of Study**

The research design of this study has several notable limitations. Because the study is qualitative and has a very small sample size of only eight participants, the findings presented and discussed have limited generalizability. Children who have experienced parental incarceration may experience diverse negative effects and be positively affected by placement with a grandparent during periods of parental incarceration, but this does not mean that all children who have experienced parental incarceration are affected in the way described by grandparents in this study (Krysik & Finn, 2013). Generalizability is also limited because no participants interviewed were over the age of 70 and the ethnic makeup of the sample was primarily Caucasian. Another limitation of the study, because it is qualitative, is that findings are subjective, meaning results could be based in part on the interpretation or judgment of the researchers (Krysik & Finn, 2013; Park & Park, 2016).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Further research is needed in order to continue understanding the diverse effects of parental incarceration on children. Future research in this area could involve the perspectives of other caregivers of children experiencing parental incarceration, including the parent who is not incarcerated, other kinship caregivers, and foster parents. Interviewing adult children who experienced parental incarceration would also be a valuable perspective, providing specific insight about the long-term effects of parental incarceration.

### **Conclusion**

Grandparents perceive diverse effects of parental incarceration on the grandchildren they are raising. Every child's experience and response to parental incarceration is unique. Children represented in this study appear to be impacted negatively by parental incarceration in various ways, but placement with a grandparent seems to mitigate some of the risk and negative effects that parental incarceration can cause.

With parental incarceration rates so high in the U.S, social workers may encounter children and families who are being impacted by incarceration. Social workers who work with grandparents and children affected by parental incarceration should be prepared to provide external support and advocate for the rights of their clients. They should also be prepared to address diverse challenges with children who have experienced parental incarceration.

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