

Understanding the Adversity of Parental Incarceration to Promote Child Health and Well-Being

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that activate a biological toxic stress response in critical periods of a child's life. This type of stress can cause disrupted neurodevelopment leading to poor social and emotional skills, poor academic performance, and an increased likelihood of engaging in risk behaviors in young adulthood, ultimately affecting adult health and well-being.

Incarceration in South Carolina

21,000

individuals currently incarcerated

90%

are males

61%

of state prisoners are black although Blacks comprise approximately 25% of the state's population

Incarceration of a parent can lead to increased stress in the household, divorce or formal separation, increased economic strain, and lack of positive relationship development between a parent and child.

Parental incarceration has also been identified as a risk factor of child abuse and neglect. A parent's incarceration may have resulted from other ACEs (e.g. violence, abuse, neglect, and substance use) in the home. Additionally, a parent's incarceration may result in the child being placed in vulnerable conditions, such as foster care or with an unfamiliar family member.

Thus, it is important to understand the role of incarceration as a childhood adversity in South Carolina to help develop targeted efforts to strengthen families, improve racial equity, and prevent child abuse and neglect.

Research

Questions

1. What is the prevalence of individuals who experienced parental incarceration in childhood?
2. How does household incarceration co-occur with other ACEs?
3. How does this prevalence differ by race/ethnicity?

Methods

This study used the 2014 and 2015 South Carolina BRFSS (n = ~11,000) to examine prevalence, associations, and interrelatedness of household incarceration with other types of ACEs. Two ACE exposure variables were included, prevalence (yes/no) and odds ratios. Race/ethnicity variables included Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/American Indian, Other Race, and White.

Results

62%

of South Carolinians have reported experiencing at least one ACE

9%

reported experiencing incarceration of a parent in their childhood

4.9

TIMES GREATER ODDS*

for individuals who experience incarceration in childhood of experiencing domestic violence in the household

4.1

TIMES GREATER ODDS*

for individuals who experience incarceration in childhood of experiencing divorce or separation in the household

10.3

TIMES GREATER ODDS*

for individuals who experience incarceration in childhood of experiencing substance abuse in the household

19%

OTHER RACE

13%

BLACK

7%

WHITE

Those who identified as Other Race or Black more frequently reported parental incarceration compared to White individuals

Discussion and Implications

The intersectionality of the parental incarceration ACE with race/ethnicity and other forms of childhood adversity reveals significant potential to improve public health outcomes and promote greater equity of opportunity for children in South Carolina. Our results align with research indicating that parental incarceration may be linked with an increased risk of child abuse and neglect.

Policy implications of this research include:



Avoidance of Public Costs

(e.g. healthcare, foster care, criminal justice)



Greater Equity of Opportunity

Through a decrease in disproportionate incarceration of minority populations



Increased Positive Outcomes for Children

Leading to social and economic prosperity for the state


Children's Trust
OF SOUTH CAROLINA

* Parental incarceration is likely to co-occur with household domestic violence: (prevalence= 22.2%, OR= 4.9, CI: 4.1-5.8), parental divorce/ separation (prevalence= 17.8%, OR= 4.1, CI: 3.5-4.8), and household substance use (prevalence 24.3% OR= 10.3, CI: 8.3-12.0).