Parents in Prison and their Minor Children: 
Comparisons between State and National Estimates

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Research Summary

To estimate the number of parents among state prisoners in Minnesota, inmates (N = 2,242) completed a brief survey. More than two-thirds reported having minor children. More women than men reported being a parent; over half reported living with their children before arrest. In a multivariate model, parent gender, residing with children pre-incarceration, and child age predicted interest in parenting programming. The current study yielded a higher prevalence of parental incarceration than national and other state estimates. Findings underscore the importance of documenting the prevalence of parents in prison, and identifying programs and policies to address their needs.

Keywords: prisons, incarcerated parents, children
Introduction

Since the 1970s, the era of mass incarceration in the United States (U.S.) has ushered in unprecedented growth in state prison populations. In 1978, the state imprisonment rate (per 100,000) was 119 (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2016). After reaching a high of 447 in 2007, the rate has recently fallen, dropping to 412 in 2014—the most recent year for which data are available (Carson, 2015). Still, the rate in 2014 was 3.5 times greater than it was in 1978.

The surging prison population has, at various times, given rise to a host of concerns. For example, as state prison populations grew sharply during the 1990s, so did interest in the issue of prisoner reentry (Lynch & Sabol, 2001). The federal government has sponsored several major initiatives for the implementation of community-level prisoner reentry projects across the country since the early 2000s (Young, Taxman, & Byrne, 2002). The rapid growth in state prison populations also meant that many institutions were operating above capacity. In one notable example, California was required to reduce its prison population as a result of a federal order (Brown v. Plata, 2011). In recent years, there has been discussion about reducing the federal prison population and, more specifically, enacting sentencing reform, mostly for drug and non-violent offenses (Samuels, La Vigne, & Taxy, 2013; Smarter Sentencing Act, 2015; Subramanian & Delaney, 2014).

As we note in more detail below, one issue that has been largely overlooked in the public debate over mass incarceration is its impact on children and families (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). This issue has likely been overlooked, at least in part, because of a lack of current data on the number of children and families impacted. In 2007 – the last year for which national data are available – it was estimated that more than 1.75 million children under the age of 18 had a parent in a state or federal prison in the U.S. (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010).
More recent estimates using data from the National Survey of Children’s Health indicate that more than 5 million U.S. children have experienced the incarceration of a co-resident parent, although this study cannot discern which parent was incarcerated or whether the parent’s incarceration was in jail or prison (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). National estimates suggest 53% of men and 61% of women in the U.S. prison population are parents with minor children (Maruschak et al., 2010). In 2007, this represented nearly 810,000 incarcerated parents, most of whom were men.

Although there are substantially more fathers than mothers incarcerated in the U.S., rates of maternal incarceration are increasing at a much faster rate (Maruschak et al., 2010). Between 1991 and 2007, the number of incarcerated fathers increased 77% (Maruschak et al., 2010). In contrast, during that same time, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122% (Maruschak et al., 2010). It is important to note that a disproportionate number of children from racial minority backgrounds are impacted by parental incarceration. Indeed, African American children were almost eight times more likely than white children and nearly three times more likely than Hispanic children to have a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Parental incarceration has consequences for children and families, and may confer risk through a number of mechanisms including the disruption of family relationships, challenges with parenting, economic instability, and residential mobility (Travis et al., 2014). A growing body of qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that maternal and paternal incarceration are associated with children’s increased risk for both internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety, withdrawal) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) behavior problems, substance use, cognitive skill deficits, physical health problems, and academic concerns (e.g., poor grades, school failure; Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010; Travis et al., 2014).
Research on the differential effects of maternal versus paternal incarceration has been mixed (Burgess-Proctor, Huebner, & Durso, 2016; Dallaire, 2007; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011); although, national data indicate that incarcerated mothers were more likely than fathers to be living with their children prior to arrest (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), suggesting that children may experience more disruption in their living and caregiving arrangements when mothers are incarcerated, compared to when fathers are incarcerated (Enos, 2001; Murray & Murray, 2010; Seymour & Hariston, 1998).

Despite staggering national statistics and a growing body of evidence about the negative impact of incarceration on parents and children, this topic has received relatively little attention from scholars, practitioners, and policy makers – until relatively recently. In 2003, Eddy and Reid noted that one of the fundamental challenges with research on this topic is that none of the relevant academic disciplines (i.e., child development, psychology, sociology, social work, criminology, nursing, public health) has identified children of incarcerated parents as a population of particular interest, and as such, this population has remained largely “invisible.” Ten years later, we have considerably more research (including Eddy & Poehlmann’s 2010 Handbook on the topic and the National Research Council’s review of the consequences of mass incarceration for children and families [Travis et al., 2014]), with many studies that examine the effects of parental incarceration using longitudinal data (e.g., Gaston, 2016; Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011; Haskins, 2014; Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013; Roettger, Swisher, Kuhl, Chavez, 2011). In addition, there is growing interest on this topic at the Federal level, as evidenced by major initiatives like the Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents (Youth.gov, 2016).
However, we still lack essential information about the scope of this problem at a state level, ultimately limiting states’ abilities to use local data to inform practice and policy-based solutions. Like many corrections departments in the U.S. (Maruschak et al., 2010), the Minnesota Department of Corrections (MnDOC) – where data from the current study were drawn – does not systematically collect information about parenting status in a way that yields reliable estimates about the number of adult prisoners who are parents with minor children. Thus, little is known about the actual prevalence of parental incarceration or the number of children impacted in the state, inhibiting the state’s ability to make data-driven decisions about incarcerated parents and their minor children. This challenge is not unique to Minnesota. A study by the National Conference of State Legislatures concluded policymaking is “hindered by lack of reliable data on the characteristics of these children” (Christian, 2009). Additionally, a Pennsylvania advisory committee recognized the importance of having data to guide practice and policy, and in 2011 recommended the state legislature “Require the Department of Corrections and any other pertinent agency to collect the necessary data to acquire an accurate count of the number of children in the Commonwealth who have an incarcerated parent” (Joint State Government Commission, 2011).

When a parent is incarcerated, children and families are directly and indirectly impacted. Many children engage directly with the criminal justice system when they have contact with their incarcerated parent through visits, phone calls, or letters. Indirectly, children and families are impacted when a parent is moved to another prison or when the parent begins planning for release. Yet, at this point in time, few considerations are given to the way prisons’ practices and policies impact children and families. This may be due, at least in part, to corrections administrators’, policymakers’, and their constituents’ limited awareness and understanding of
the sheer number of parents who are incarcerated and the collateral consequences of incarceration for children and families.

Given the numerous ways that children are directly and indirectly interacting with the corrections system, as well as the potential long-term consequences of parental incarceration for the health and well-being of children and families, having reliable estimates about the scope of the problem is essential. Understanding the prevalence of parental incarceration and the number of children impacted will guide the development of targeted, state-specific, evidence-informed prevention and intervention efforts for this population, which are sorely needed.

**Prior Research on Estimating Parental Imprisonment Rates**

**National Estimates.** The BJS periodically conducts the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF). The SISFCF is the only nationally representative survey of prisoners’ characteristics and well-being, and includes questions about demographic information, experience with sexual and physical abuse, incarceration-related history, substance use and treatment, and medical and mental health treatment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Of relevance to the current study, specific questions on the SISFCF addressed parental status and minor children under the age of 18 years (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

In 2004, the BJS conducted the most recent SISFCF (BJS, 2004; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). A total of 287 state prisons participated in the survey (Glaze & Maruschak, 2018). Within the 287 facilities, 16,152 inmates (81.1% male) were invited to participate (BJS, 2004; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Inmates were informed that answers were confidential (BJS, 2004). In total, 14,499 inmates (79.8% male) participated, with a nonresponse rate of 10.2% (BJS, 2004).

On the SISFCF, about half (51.9%) of inmates reported having a least one minor child. More incarcerated women (61.7%) compared to men (51.2%) reported being parents. On
average, incarcerated parents reported two minor children \((M = 1.65, \ SD = 1.47)\) with a mean age of 9.00 \((SD = 4.53)\) years. Women were more likely than men to report having more than one minor child \((41\% \ vs. \ 29\%, \ respectively)\). Over one-third \((37.1\%)\) of inmates lived with their children in the month before arrest; mothers were more likely than fathers to report living with their children in the month prior to arrest \((55.3\% \ vs. \ 35.5\%, \ respectively)\).

The national estimates derived from the SISFCF are valuable, but using these data to guide practice and policy presents important challenges. First, these data are now more than 10 years old. Given the important shifts in the prison population over the last decade, updated estimates are sorely needed. Second, the SISFCF does not focus on parental incarceration; it consists of many questions, some about sensitive topics (e.g., history of abuse). The survey is not anonymous, since a representative from the U.S. Census Bureau reads the survey to inmates. As such, parents may be less likely to reveal information about parenting out of concern for how their responses will be used. Finally, a considerable body of evidence demonstrates the importance of access to local data for informing practice and policy (Tseng, 2012). While national estimates provide one measure of the scope of the problem, state and local legislators and decision-makers need state-specific data to inform practice and policy change.

**State Estimates.** To date, at least three other states have attempted to estimate the number of parents in prison with the goal of informing local practice and policy, each with varying levels of success. We review each of these states’ different approaches and their estimates next.

**New York.** In December 2010, the New York (NY) State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision administered a survey to inmates in seven state facilities (four for male inmates and three for female inmates), ranging from minimum to maximum security (New York
The survey was administered to a purposive sample of inmates in group settings (e.g., substance abuse treatment, anger management); female inmates were oversampled. Survey administrators explained the purpose of the survey and asked inmates to voluntarily complete the survey. Survey administrators, group staff, and other participants provided support to those who needed assistance completing the survey.

In total, 895 inmates (69% male) participated in the survey. No information was available about the number of inmates who were offered the survey but declined to participate. Nearly half (54%) of the inmates were parents with children under 21 years, and most (73%) reported having one to two minor children. More than half (56%) of participants reported living with their minor child(ren) prior to incarceration. No information was available about parenting status by parent gender. However, compared to mothers, fathers were less likely to report that they took care of or watched their minor children prior to their incarceration (67% vs. 49%, respectively).

**Ohio.** Between July 17 and August 31, 2014, the Ohio (OH) Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Director of Court and Community, and Bureau of Research and Evaluation administered the Survey of Incarcerated Parents. The survey inquired about inmates’ demographic characteristics, partners, children, household members, incarceration-related history, and past institutional experiences. The survey specifically asked about inmates’ dependent children, or children for whom the inmate had legal, financial, or parental responsibilities, which could include biological children, stepchildren, partners’ children, grandchildren, adopted/foster children, nieces, and/or nephews.
All prisons in OH (with the exception of the male reception centers [Correctional Reception Center and Lorain Correctional Institution] and the Franklin Medical Center for females) were selected for participation (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). The target sample at each facility was proportional to each facility’s total population (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). To be included in the sample, inmates needed to be incarcerated for at least nine months and have at least two months left in their sentence as of June 30, 2014 (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). A random sample of 1,509 inmates (76% male) were selected across the 25 prisons (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). Four female inmates were excluded, as they had previously completed the survey during a pilot phase of the study (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013), resulting in 1,505 participants. Of the 1,505 inmates, 398 (26.4%) declined to participate and 46 (3.06%) had missing surveys (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). Inmates who refused to participate were more likely to be older, male, and members of racial/ethnic minority groups (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). In total, 1,061 inmates participated (74% male; Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). To ensure confidentiality, each inmate was assigned a random survey identification number that was different from their inmate identification number.

Over half (54.1%) of inmates had a biological child who was less than 17 years of age (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). More incarcerated women reported having a minor child, compared to fathers (56.5% vs. 53.2%, respectively; Lamb & Dorsey, 2013). Among incarcerated parents, 51.1% indicated living with a minor child prior to their arrest (Lamb & Dorsey, 2013).

**Tennessee.** In December 2007, the Tennessee (TN) Department of Corrections administered a large-scale survey in TN prisons (Nutt, Deaton, & Hutchinson, 2008). All 16 TN prisons were sampled and inmates from all security classifications were included (Nutt et al., 2008). Participants within each facility were randomly selected from the TN Offender
Management Information System; female inmates were oversampled (Nutt et al., 2008). Two lists of inmates were created at each facility (Nutt et al., 2008). Inmates were chosen for participation from the primary list; as inmates declined participation, other inmates were selected from the second list (Nutt et al., 2008).

Approximately 6,000 inmates from the primary list were invited to participate in the survey; less than half agreed (Nutt et al., 2008). Of the 3,329 surveys targeted for completion, 2,857 inmates (85%) completed surveys, representing 12.8% of male inmates and 34.4% of female inmates in TN state prisons (Nutt et al., 2008).

Surveys were administered in group settings or privately in the inmates’ cells (Nutt et al., 2008). Both methods of survey administration were used equally across facilities (Nutt et al., 2008). Each inmate received an envelope with a letter explaining the study, the survey, and a pencil (Nutt et al., 2008). The survey inquired about the inmates’ demographic information, relationships, family, children, and incarceration-related information (Nutt et al., 2008). To maintain confidentiality, inmates returned surveys to prison staff in the envelopes (Nutt et al., 2008). Research staff remained on site to provide assistance to prison staff and collect complete survey packets (Nutt et al., 2008).

Among the 2,857 inmates surveyed, approximately two-thirds (69.8%) indicated that they were parents to adult and/or minor children; 6% of the sample did not respond to this question (Nutt et al., 2008). More incarcerated women than men indicated that they were parents (85.5% vs. 72.2%, respectively; Nutt et al., 2008). Most (73%) parents reported having two or more children ($M = 2.11$), and mothers reported more children than fathers ($M = 2.16$ vs. 2.06, respectively; Nutt et al., 2008). Over half of incarcerated parents (58.3%) indicated that they lived with at least one of their children prior to arrest; mothers were more likely than fathers to
report living with one of their children before their incarceration (64.7% vs. 57%, respectively; Nutt et al., 2008). Information was not provided about the number of incarcerated mothers and fathers with minor children, specifically. However, Nutt and colleagues (2008) did report that approximately 65.7% of the children with incarcerated parents were 17 years old or younger.

**Current Study**

The BJS and each of these three states (NY, OH, TN) utilized different methodological approaches to estimating the proportion of state prisoners with minor children. Whereas BJS utilized probability samples, others utilized random (e.g., TN) or convenience (e.g., NY, OH) samples of inmates, with notable differences in response rates. Additionally, each study varied in the definition of “child”; BJS and OH included minor children (17 years or younger), NY included children 21 years or younger, and TN included both adult and minor children. As such, these four surveys yield different results, with rates of parental incarceration ranging from 51.9% (BJS) to 69.8% (TN). Importantly, each of these studies assessed the prevalence of parental incarceration with a point-in-time estimate of state prisoners who – at the time the parenting status was assessed – had been incarcerated for varying periods of time. In contrast, the current study sought to estimate the prevalence of parental incarceration among newly admitted state prisoners in Minnesota (MN) over a six-month period of time through a completely anonymous survey. The methods were carefully designed to yield the best estimate of parental incarceration in MN, by utilizing anonymity and brevity of the survey.

**Methods**

Data were collected from all new inmate admissions over the course of six months (July 1, 2014 to December 31, 2014) at the male (MN Correctional Facility (MCF)-St. Cloud) and female (MCF-Shakopee) intake facilities. A six-month data collection period was selected with
important methodological considerations in mind. First, this time frame yielded a sample size sufficient for all of the proposed analyses, including accurate estimations of the prevalence of parental incarceration in the state. Second, restricting the data collection period to six months ensured that inmates who were surveyed when they entered an intake facility were not resurveyed if they were released from prison and returned after committing a new crime or violating the conditions of their release during the data collection period. Finally, the data collection period was feasible, while not being burdensome, for MnDOC orientation staff responsible for administering surveys at both facilities. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board and the MnDOC Human Subjects Review Board.

Participants

During the six-month data collection period, 2,521 prisoners (86.1% male) entered the two MN intake facilities. More than 95% of these prisoners (n = 2,416) attended orientation sessions; orientation sessions may have been missed for a variety of reasons (e.g., illness, lockdown). Of the 2,416 inmates who attended orientation sessions and were offered the opportunity to complete the survey, 2,242 (92.7%) completed the survey.

Survey

During orientation sessions, trained prison staff provided a brief introduction to inmates about the purpose of the survey. The survey was completely anonymous; it did not contain any identifying information (e.g., offender identification number, children’s dates of birth) that could be used to link responses back to an individual inmate.

The survey was intentionally brief, as only a limited amount of time was available during orientation sessions and corrections staff expressed valid concerns that additional questions
would reduce staff buy-in and inmate participation. The five-item survey was designed to parallel items from the SISCF and contained non-sensitive questions about parenting status, basic information about children’s ages, whether the inmate lived with his/her children in the month preceding their arrest, and whether the inmate was interested in participating in parenting-related programs or services during their incarceration (Table 1).

Analysis

For each variable, we first present descriptive statistics and then test for significant differences by parent gender using chi-squares for dichotomous variables and \(t\)-tests for continuous variables. Then, using bivariate and multivariate analyses, we examine how key variables (parent gender, living with child before arrest, number of children, and average child age) are associated with parents’ expressed interest in participating in a parenting class.

Results

More than two-thirds (67.5%) of MN state inmates reported having minor children. More women (76.4%) compared to men (66.0%) reported being a parent to minor children (\(\chi^2 = 21.74, p < .001\)). Over half (57.2%) of inmates lived with their children in the month before arrest. More mothers (66.1%) lived with children in the month prior to arrest compared to 55.5% of fathers (\(\chi^2 = 11.91, p = .001\)). On average, parents had 2.42 (\(SD = 1.58\)) minor children. There was no significant difference in the number of children among mothers (\(M = 2.09, SD = 1.48\)) and fathers (\(M = 2.15, SD = 1.71\)), \(t(1700) = 0.57, p = .570\). Children’s average age was 7.46 (\(SD = 4.32\)) years. On average, fathers (\(M = 7.20, SD = 4.29\)) had significantly younger children than mothers (\(M = 8.74, SD = 4.22\)), \(t(1494) = -5.19, p = <.001\). See Tables 1 - 3 for a summary of descriptive statistics and national estimates from the BJS.
Table 1

Parents in Minnesota Prisons Survey Questions and Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Total Sample (N = 2416)</th>
<th>Females (n = 350)</th>
<th>Males (n = 2066)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a mother [or father]?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76.4 2242</td>
<td>86.5 326</td>
<td>74.6 1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Females only] Are you currently pregnant?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5.6 301</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Parents only]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many children (under 18 years old) do you have?</td>
<td>1702 2.14 1.68</td>
<td>282 2.09 1.48</td>
<td>1420 2.15 1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How old are each of your children? Please list their ages.</td>
<td>1496 7.45 4.32</td>
<td>248 8.74 4.22</td>
<td>1248 7.20 4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the month before your arrest, how many of your children did you live with?</td>
<td>1666 1.04 1.29</td>
<td>277 1.22 1.28</td>
<td>1389 1.00 1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If parenting classes were available to you during your incarceration, would you be interested in participating?</td>
<td>69.5 1668</td>
<td>77.2 281</td>
<td>68.0 1387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among inmates who indicated they were parents of minor children, 75.3% reported that they would be interested in taking a parenting class while incarcerated. Mothers (84.7%) were more likely than fathers (73.3%) to express interest in a parenting class ($\chi^2 = 9.41, p = .002$). Parents who reported living with their minor child before arrest reported more interest in a parenting class than those who did not live with minor children before arrest (80.4% vs. 69.1%, respectively; ($\chi^2 = 69.36, p < .001$)). Further, parents were more interested in participating in a parenting class if their children were younger, $t(1467) = 7.10, p = <.001$, and if they reported having more children, $t(1662) = -8.23, p = <.001$).

Table 2

Parents in U.S. State and Minnesota Prisons who Reported Living With Their Minor Children in the Month Before Arrest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State Prisoners</th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of minor children</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with their minor children in month before arrest</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$(Glaze & Maruschak, 2010)

As shown in Table 4, we estimated a logistic regression model to develop more precise estimates of the effects that parent gender, average child age, number of children, and living status prior to prison had on interest in parenting classes. Although number of children did not have a significant effect, the results show the other three variables were significant predictors of parenting class interest. Compared to males, females were 1.3 times more likely to express interest in a parenting class. Parents who lived with their children prior to prison were 49 percent more likely to report interest, while interest was also significantly greater for those with younger
children. In particular, a one-year increase in the average age of children was associated with a 9.5 percent decrease in parenting class interest.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of minor child</th>
<th>Percent of minor children among parents in state prisons</th>
<th>Percent of minor children among parents in Minnesota state prisons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4 years</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 years</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14 years</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-17 years</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Glaze & Maruschak, 2010)

To estimate the number of parents incarcerated in MN, the distribution of parents from the current survey period was applied to the prisoner custody population on July 1, 2014 (MnDOC, 2015). Assuming 66% of the 9,228 men imprisoned on July 1, 2014 were fathers with minor children (n = 6,090), and 76.4% of the 701 women were mothers (n = 536), then approximately 6,626 parents were incarcerated in MN prisons (MnDOC, 2015). The total number of children impacted was estimated by applying the average number of minor children for incarcerated fathers and mothers (2.43 and 2.37, respectively) to the estimated number of fathers (n = 6,090) and mothers (n = 536) incarcerated in MN on July 1, 2014. On the basis of July 1, 2014 census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), this yields approximately 16,069 – or 1,246 per 100,000 – children with a parent imprisoned in MN.
Table 4. Logistic Regression Summary Table for Interest in Taking a Parenting Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.848**</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>2.334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>-0.099**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live With</td>
<td>0.396*</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>1.485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.457**</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>4.295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model $\chi^2$ 15.33
Nagelkerke $R^2$ 0.84
Cox & Snell $R^2$ 0.06

Note. *<.01, **<.001

Discussion

In the current study, we used an anonymous survey to assess the prevalence of parental incarceration among newly admitted MN state prisoners over a six-month period of time. We found that more than two-thirds of imprisoned men were fathers with minor children and more than three-quarters of imprisoned women were mothers with minor children. Combined, these prisoners were parents to an estimated 1.3 percent of all MN children. More than half of fathers and more than two-thirds of mothers reported living with at least one of their children in the month before their arrest, and most incarcerated parents expressed interest in participating in a parenting class.

These results are consistent with estimates from BJS, OH, and TN, which report higher rates of parenting among incarcerated women than men. Indeed, estimates from BJS, OH, and the current study indicate that incarcerated women are 10 to 13 percent more likely to report
having children compared to incarcerated men. Similar to national estimates, data from the current study also indicate a higher percentage of incarcerated mothers who reported living with minor children prior to arrest, relative to incarcerated fathers.

Despite these similarities across studies, there are notable differences. Most obvious are estimates from the current study that yield a higher prevalence of parental incarceration than BJS, NY, and OH report. Indeed, estimates of parental incarceration in the current study were nearly 16 percentage points higher than BJS estimates (67.5% vs. 51.9%), with a similar magnitude of difference between MN and BJS estimates for incarcerated fathers (66% vs. 51%) and incarcerated mothers (76% vs. 62%).

There are a number of possible explanations for the differences between national estimates of the prevalence of parental incarceration, state estimates from NY, OH, and TN, and those presented here. First, many scholars have long since acknowledged that the BJS data are likely an underestimate of the number of parents in prison (Maruschak et al., 2010). There may be a host of reasons – including fear of child protection involvement or increased child support payments – that inmates may be reluctant to report having minor children in a face-to-face interview.

Surveys – as were used in each of the individual state studies – may be less intrusive and therefore yield more valid estimates. Given the higher estimates of state inmates with minor children in NY (54%), OH (54.1%), and the current study (67.2%), relative to the BJS estimates (51.9%), there may be some support for this explanation. Further, in OH and TN, some steps were taken to protect participants’ privacy, presumably with the goal of increasing inmates’ willingness to disclose sensitive information. In OH, participants were given a research identification number that was different than their inmate identification number. In TN, a
research identification number was used, but inmates were also instructed to put completed surveys in an envelope to protect confidentiality. Despite this, both OH and TN had high non-response rates (26.7% and 52.4%, respectively), suggesting that inmates may have still been reluctant to complete the surveys, despite protections in place to protect their confidentiality.

In the current study, prisoners were guaranteed both confidentiality and anonymity since they completed the pencil-and-paper survey themselves; were explicitly instructed to not include any identifying information (including their inmate identification number) in their response; and returned surveys in a way that maintained this privacy. This approach yielded a substantially lower non-response rate (6.9%) relative to the other studies. In this way, estimates obtained through an anonymous survey may not only be higher, but also more accurate, as participants trust that their answers can never be linked back to them.

It is also possible that the sampling approach used in the current study resulted in higher estimates relative to BJS and each of the other states. Indeed, BJS and each of the other states sampled inmates who had been incarcerated for some period of time. Parenting status may be confounded by sentence length, in that a prolonged period of incarceration impacts one’s ability to conceive children and inmates with long sentences may have been parents with minor children at some point during their incarceration, but those children have since become adults. As such, studies with samples in which there is unmeasured or uncontrolled variability in sentence length may reduce estimates of parental incarceration. In contrast, the current study surveyed inmates upon their admission to prison, effectively controlling for any impact sentence length may have on parenting status.

Limitations
This study is not without limitations. There is no way to explore potential differences between responders and non-responders, as the survey was completely anonymous. As such, there may be unmeasured selection effects, thereby limiting the study’s generalizability. Additionally, because we were particularly sensitive to protecting participants’ identities, we did not include questions about age or race/ethnicity, which could have been used to identify an individual inmate in a small orientation group. As such, we are unable to test for potential differences in parenting status based on key demographic characteristics. Given what is known about the marked disparities in parental incarceration by race (Maruschak et al., 2010), this is a critical area for future inquiry.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, this study has important implications for criminal justice practice, policy, and research. The current study provides compelling evidence in support of widely held assumptions that BJS data underestimate the true prevalence of parental incarceration. We found that a substantial majority of prisoners are parents with minor children, most of whom lived with their children prior to their arrest.

In addition, we found a majority of incarcerated parents indicated interest in participating in a parenting class. While parenting programs are available in correctional facilities in MN and across the country (Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010), they are underfunded and consequently serve only a fraction of incarcerated parents who might benefit (Loper & Novero, 2010). Indeed, fewer than 12 percent of incarcerated parents reported participating in a parenting or childrearing class during their time in state prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

In recent reviews of parenting programs of incarcerated mothers (Dallaire & Shlafer, 2017) and fathers (Eddy et al., 2017), the authors conclude that few of the existing parenting
programs are supported by strong evidence. Many existing programs are not systematically and rigorously evaluated and, among those that are, few programs have consistent positive effects on parents or children. With a growing emphasis on the importance of evidence-based practice in corrections (Latessa, 2004; MacKenzie, 2001; MacKenzie, 2013; MacKenzie, 2014), significantly more research is needed examining targeted interventions for incarcerated parents.

Expanding the availability of evidence-based parenting programming could have implications for both incarcerated parents and their children. Providing prisoners with parenting classes may help address a criminogenic need, which may increase the odds of achieving better recidivism outcomes (Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010. Moreover, increasing the provision of this programming may also help lessen the short- and long-term consequences of parental incarceration for children’s health and development (Loper & Novero, 2010; Eddy et al., 2017; Dallaire & Shafer, 2017). The relatively high level of interest in parenting programming evidence by this study – coupled with the limited availability – underscores the need for effective interventions that support incarcerated parents and their minor children and policies that emphasize support for inmates in their roles as parents.
References


