

## Father Absence and Youth Incarceration

Harper, C.C. & McLanahan, S.S. (2004). Father absence and youth incarceration. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 14, 369-397.



Civilian-  
Focused  
Article



2,846 male youth participated in a longitudinal study testing whether risk factors associated with father-absent households were associated with youth incarceration. Paternal absence, teen motherhood, low parent education, racial inequities, and poverty explained some of the increased risk for incarceration among youth in father-absent households.

### Key Findings:

- Youth incarceration risks were elevated for adolescents in father-absent households.
- Father absence is more common among populations with higher rates of teen motherhood, low education, and racial disparities.
- The departure of fathers at different stages of childhood had a relatively stable association with the risk of incarceration. However, children born to single mothers who never had a father in the household had a higher risk of incarceration.
- Youth in stepparent households faced incarceration odds almost 3 times as high as those in mother-father households.
- An increased number of residential moves was associated with an increased risk of incarceration.
- 8% of the sample was incarcerated over the course of the study. 60% of those reported a serious delinquency in the past year, 25% reported being stopped by the police in the previous year, 10% were charged, and 5% were convicted.
- 10% of the sample reported a father absence at some point in their lives. 9% experienced paternal absence when they were 15-17 years old, 7% when 10-14 years old, 8% when 5-9 years old, and 5% from infancy to 4 years old.

### Implications for Programs:

- Programs serving young people could develop mentoring programs for adolescents in single parent households as a means of offering support and deterring delinquency and incarceration.
- Programs could offer single parents supportive resources such as free or low-cost child care or children's programming.

### Implications for Policies:

- Policies could recommend that parents who are incarcerated be offered parenting classes to help them interact in a supportive, healthy manner with their children, both during incarceration and upon release.
- Policies could allocate funding for parent and family support programs for single-parent households.

### Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could measure family conflict, parental supervision, and adolescent adjustment in order to more fully understand the processes underlying these risk factors for incarceration.
- Additional studies could measure neighborhood variables in order to illuminate the impact community-based variables may have on youth incarceration.



## Background Information

### Methodology:

- Participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth who were under 18 when the survey began (in 1979) were included in this study. No additional information on recruitment or methods was presented.
- Multiple data collections occurred until the participants were 30 years old; the frequency of these data collection points is not specified.
- Participants were asked about family structure, history of incarceration, demographic variables, family instability, father's departure during adolescence, and presence of additional caregivers in the household.
- Age-based history analysis was used to predict incarceration from other variables.

### Participants:

- 2,846 male youth participated.
- Average mother's education = 10.80 years
- 10% of mothers were teenagers at the child's birth.
- 77% of the participants lived in an urban area, 36% in the South, 26% in the North central, 20% in the Northeast, 19% in the West.
- Racial/ethnic composition of youth: 56% White, 27% Black, 17% Hispanic.

### Limitations:

- There is little information on the method used, making it difficult to understand how the study was conducted and how to interpret the findings.
- The findings are correlational and causal conclusions are inappropriate.

## Assessing Research that Works

Research Design and Sample					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent (★★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★)	Questionable (★)		
The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Research Methods					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent (★★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★)	Questionable (★)		
The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Limitations					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent Minor Limitations (★★★★)	Appropriate Few Limitations (★★★)	Limited Several Limitations (★★)	Questionable Many/Severe Limitations (★)		
The limitations of this study are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Implications					Quality Rating:	★ ★ ★
	Excellent (★★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★)	Questionable (★)		
The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications						
Overall Quality Rating						★ ★ ★