

School Engagement among Criminal Justice-Involved Families

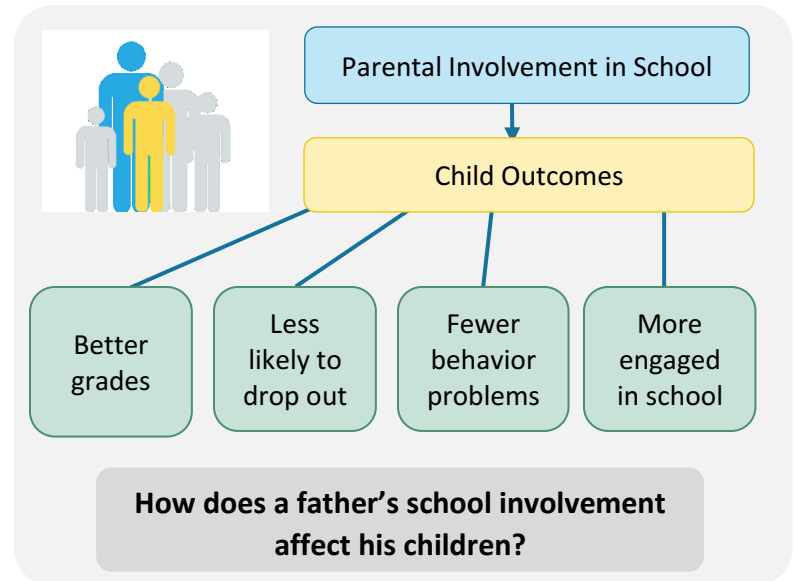
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Background

- Schools are **conduit institutions** that offer access to resources and avenues of economic mobility and social integration.
- Schools do **surveillance** by keeping formal records and making direct connections to public agencies, such as the police and CPS.
- Parents who have been incarcerated may be suspicious of schools, making them reluctant to be involved with their child's school activities.

Why might formerly-incarcerated fathers be less involved?

1. **System Avoidance:** People who have been involved in the criminal justice system avoid later engagement with surveilling institutions like schools. Fathers may avoid activities that require interaction with the school, such as volunteering or attending parent teacher conferences.^{ix}
2. **Opting Out:** Many parents “opt-out” of meaningful interactions with institutions because of stigma or fear of having their criminal records discovered by teachers, school officials, other parents, or their own children. Opting-out can happen because parents worry they won't be allowed to participate in school activities such as volunteering because offender checks are conducted in some states, including schools within New York State.^x



Parental Involvement and Incarceration

- Parental educational involvement is beneficial for children's grades, school engagement, and educational attainment.^{i,ii}
- Parents with lower levels of involvement – or who avoid schools altogether – have less access to information and relationships with other parents and school staff. Parents may also distrust school staff.^{iii,iv}
- Fathers' involvement in school activities can serve as a key protective factor for disadvantaged children.^v

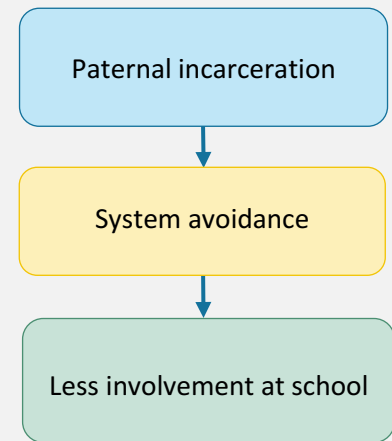
The Study

- Data were from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 4,898 children and their parents)
- Analyzed links between paternal involvement and child outcomes, including the role of system avoidance

Summary of Key Findings



- Paternal incarceration is associated with less school-based involvement. This was not true, however, for home-based activities such as helping with homework or talking about school.
- **System avoidance** appears to be one reason why fathers are less involved in activities at their child's school following their incarceration.



Policy Implications

Involvement by previously incarcerated fathers in their children's schooling can be encouraged if parents see schools as safe spaces.^{xi}

- To the degree possible, schools can avoid surveillance, or the perception of it, especially for families that have already experienced the stress of an imprisoned parent.
 - Use a trauma-informed and inclusive lens when structuring family-school partnerships
 - Respect privacy and support family connections
- Policymakers should consider holistic social policies that take into account how families, schools, and the criminal justice system interact.
 - Identify supportive programs and help in connecting system-involved families to supports
 - Organize learning events that educate and inform school personnel and the school community of the impact of parental incarceration

References

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- ^{xi} The Osborne Initiative. "The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents Creating Safer Spaces." www.osbornenewyork.org