

## Breaking the Cycle: Education as a Tool to Support Children Affected by Paternal Incarceration

Lauren Seabrooks  
*Stanford University*

I am not a teacher. Nor am I a principal. In fact, I am not an educator in any way. But I am an advocate for a number of marginalized students whose stories are often silenced or remain invisible in the eyes of their educators and administrators.

3.6% of our nation's youth—2.7 million children—are affected by paternal incarceration. However, 11.4% of black youth are disproportionately targeted by this national epidemic (Pettit & Western, 2010). I am one of the 11.4% of black children whose fathers are currently in jail or prison. My own father was arrested and thrown behind bars a couple of months before the end of my eighth grade year. Soon after, I fell into a relentless depression that led to slipping grades, forgotten friendships, and measures to take my own life. I carried this baggage to school with me every day through my sophomore year of high school. Unfortunately, most of my teachers failed to recognize the load that I carried, leading me to further internalize my pain. However, thanks to the persistent efforts of my mother, I am grateful to say that I was able to overcome these low points and am now a second-year student at Stanford University.

In recent months, I have taken a heightened interest in how the absence of a father due to incarceration can affect child development. Through my research on the effects of paternal incarceration, I have realized that although I am among the substantial number of black youth whose parents have been incarcerated, my experience growing up in a predominantly white, upper-middle class community has mediated the impact of my father's incarceration. Had I grown up in a predominantly black, low-income community, the effects would have manifested differently. While the two experiences are connected in many ways, there are significant differences. Thus, I would like to use my own experience with paternal incarceration as a lens to understand the injustices that many black children in impoverished communities are facing.

Losing a father to incarceration has cascading effects that ultimately hinder many black children's success, both inside and outside of the classroom. Thus, my purpose in writing this piece is to illuminate the differences in the short- and long-term outcomes for black children in

black communities and black children in white communities. In doing so, I will describe how education can be used to support all children affected by paternal incarceration.

### Black Children in Black Communities

According to Western and Wildeman (2009), researchers in sociology and population studies at Harvard and the University of Michigan, respectively, paternal incarceration has become “commonplace” for children in low-income, black communities (235). It is in these communities that black male incarceration is most heavily concentrated. Educational attainment is a predictor of incarceration rates, as 69% of black male high school dropouts are incarcerated and 18% of black men with no more than a high school diploma are incarcerated (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Overall, more than one third (35.7%) of men in these communities who have not attended college will go to jail or prison during their lifetimes (Western & Wildeman, 2009). This substantial absence of fathers due to incarceration has significantly affected many black youth.

Based on a study conducted on black prisoners’ families in Alabama, most children in black communities know about their fathers’ imprisonment; in other words, they are aware of the reasons for his absence and will likely visit him in prison. Interestingly, according to reports from their mothers in this particular study, most children were “not affected” or only “slightly affected” by the imprisonment. Further, the majority of children in this study did not receive any stigmatizing remarks from their peers after their father’s arrest (Gabel, 1992).

Despite the results from this one study, the fact of the matter is that children are deeply affected on a socio-emotional level and often experience serious mental health issues, such as depression. Boys in particular cope with this depression by displaying increased aggressive behaviors and attention problems in the classroom (Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, & Mincy, 2012). Girls are more likely to respond to the depression with internalizing behaviors (Wildeman, 2008).

The normalcy of incarceration in these communities limits children from effectively communicating their pain. Children are able to relate to each other because their shared experiences create a common bond that makes children feel normalized, rather than outcast. However, there is little chance that children receive sympathy from their peers. As described in an on-campus interview with one young woman whose father was sent to jail when she was a toddler, there is not much pity when a father is incarcerated because so many within the community are also struggling with the same loss. Thus, although there is a shared identity within the community, many children's pain is likely further internalized in toxic ways.

Moreover, these children’s exposure to poverty and violence put them at a heightened risk of going to jail or prison themselves, creating an intergenerational cycle of imprisonment (Western & Wildeman, 2009).

This cycle is amplified by both socioeconomic status and children's educational outcomes (Pettit & Western, 2010):

After the incarceration of a father, the average child's income falls by 22% (Pettit & Western, 2010) because more than 54% of imprisoned fathers were the primary wage earners in their households prior to their incarceration (Pettit & Western, 2010). Parental income is a strong indicator for children's economic mobility, their ability to move up the income ladder. Race too is related to socioeconomic status, as black children have a 54% chance of remaining at the bottom of the income ladder into adulthood.

Further, children of incarcerated fathers are more likely to experience difficulties in school; 23% have been expelled or suspended, compared to 4% of children whose fathers have not been incarcerated. Education can also significantly affect economic mobility, as 45% of children who do not receive a college degree remain at the bottom of the income ladder (Pettit & Western, 2010).

As paternal incarceration impacts black children's financial resources and academic performance, the intergenerational cycle of imprisonment is intensified. However, the intergenerational cycle does not seem to be as present in wealthier, white communities.

### Black Children in White Communities

Currently, most of the research on the effects of paternal incarceration on black children is concentrated in low-income, predominantly black communities. The effects of paternal incarceration on black children raised in white communities is less understood.

Black children born to educated, middle or upper class parents are more likely to live in predominantly white communities. Due to their socioeconomic status and experiences in higher education, these parents typically voluntarily choose to raise their children in predominantly white communities (Banks, 1984). At the schools in these neighborhoods, these children are indisputably the racial minority.

As they are socialized to a friend group that is predominantly white, these children become "highly attitudinally assimilated into white society," as described by James Banks (1984), a professor of social studies education and multicultural education at the University of Washington (pp. 4). With increased attitudinal assimilation, black children develop more positive attitudes towards their white schools, neighborhoods, and peers. However, these children develop less positive attitudes towards other blacks (Banks, 1984). As a result, they aim to achieve "racelessness" by deemphasizing any characteristics that connect them to the perceived subordination of being black (Fordham qtd. in Tatum, 1997, pp. 63). For example, black children may avoid playing basketball or listening to rap music in an effort to show that there are exceptions to black stereotypes. The phenomena of making one's blackness more subtle and developing

more positive attitudes towards whites than blacks is called internalized whiteness (Tatum, 1997).

Education, which is positively correlated with socioeconomic status, can be used to predict the lifetime risks of imprisonment for black men in predominantly white communities, according to a report released from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevale, Cheah, & Rose, 2010). If a black man has completed some or all of college, there is only a 7.6% chance that he will be arrested (Western & Wildeman, 2009). With these relatively low rates of black male incarceration and even lower rates for white male incarceration, it is not typical for fathers in wealthier, whiter communities to go to jail. Thus, when their fathers go to jail, black children in white communities are not prepared for the sudden loss.

This lack of preparedness is worsened by the reactions of the white community to black fathers' imprisonments (Gabel, 1992). Communities stigmatize, deplore, and ostracize black fathers, and this stigma "bleeds" onto their children and the rest of their families (Arditti, 2012, pp. 32). For this reason, these children's families rarely disclose the details of their fathers' incarceration and may even conceal the true reasons for the fathers' absences (Gabel, 1992). Some families may even practice partial deception to shield their children from the system of incarceration.

As community members make unsolicited, irrational assumptions about these children based on the actions of their fathers, they are expected to face more "isolation, peer hostility, and social rejection" ("Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing", 2013). These assumptions can be observed in the classroom, where one study finds that teachers will judge children of incarcerated parents as less competent than children whose parents are absent for other reasons ("Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing", 2013). The pain that can be caused by the community is also illustrated in Nell Bernstein's *All Alone in the World* (2005). When one child's father was lost to cancer, the community rallied to raise money and collect donations for the family. But when another child's father was lost to prison because the father committed a white-collar crime and the family was evicted from their home and put on welfare, the public did not answer their cries for help.

Despite once having been fully adapted to and accepted by their white communities, many black children face the negative black stereotypes that they had worked their entire lives to disprove after their fathers are jailed. In other words, they are not only isolated because of their fathers' incarcerations, but also because of the color of their skin.

This community isolation has implications for many children's relationships with their fathers. Joyce Arditti (2012), an expert on the familial effects of parental incarceration at Virginia Tech, explains that the more stigma a family receives from their community following the incarceration of a loved one, the more likely they are to avoid contact with the loved one. I specifically recall how, after my father went to jail, my

mother (who had divorced my father eight years prior) prohibited both my younger brother and me from visiting him and even talking to him on the phone. As time went on, we, like the rest of our community, began to internalize his criminality and grew further apart from him. I imagine that my mother took these measures, not because she wanted to dissolve our relationship with our dad, but because she wanted to distance herself and protect my brother and me from the stigma and stereotypes that she was experiencing in her workplace, in interactions with other parents, and in our neighborhood. The burning alienation of being a black person affected by incarceration in a wealthy, white community can become so gnawing that children's relationships with their fathers are sacrificed to avoid false stereotypes.

### Racism

Evidently, black children affected by paternal incarceration in white communities are impacted much differently than their peers in black communities. However, the experiences of paternal incarceration for black children in both black and white communities draw attention to a unique definition of racism. Beverly Tatum (1997), President of Spelman College and an anti-racist psychologist and professor, defines racism as "a system of advantage based on race" (pp. 7). In our country, both at large and in education, this system operates to the advantage of whites. Contrary to the previous discussion of the effects of paternal incarceration on black children, white children have a statistically lower chance of their fathers going to jail and white children from wealthier communities are not stereotyped after the incarceration of their fathers; these facts are both significant advantages over their black counterparts.

Thus, the children of incarcerated black men are particularly disadvantaged due to their race. While these effects have heavy implications on our criminal justice system, many of our reformists and politicians are already aware of this racism. However, there is a second problem that we are facing that many reformists and educators are not yet aware of. This problem can be illuminated by exploring the differences in the long-term outcomes for black children in black communities and black children in white communities. Due to the lack of research on black children affected by paternal incarceration in white communities, I will return to reflecting on my own experience to discuss these long-term effects.

### What Money Can Buy

After my father was arrested, my mother was able to ensure that my brother and I had access to all of the possible resources to cope with the loss. She spent thousands of dollars finding the best psychologists to whom we could privately and candidly disclose our pain. When my brother was expelled from school -- as a result of the aggressive and disruptive behavior that is characteristic of any son whose father is

incarcerated -- she secured the best home school teachers and eventually got him into a high-quality boarding school, in order to keep him out of the under-resourced and understaffed continuation school. Similarly, when I slipped into depression and suicidal ideation, she found me the best psychiatrists to prescribe the appropriate combinations of medicine to alleviate my pain.

On the other end of the spectrum, in poor black communities where far more fathers are going to jail and paternal incarceration is commonplace, children are similarly acting out in school and growing depressed. But due to their poverty, these children are not exposed to the luxuries afforded in wealthy, white communities.

As illustrated throughout *All Alone in the World* (2005), a collection of narratives from children whose parents have been incarcerated, these children are expected to return to life as usual after they lose their fathers. They are expected to perform the same way in their classes, without additional help from their teachers or administrators. They are expected to stop complaining that their fathers are gone and act as though everything is all right. They are expected to provide for themselves, despite having lost a primary source of income and support.

Unless these children's mothers or primary caregivers refuse to let their children fall behind, or unless these children are exceptionally self-motivated, the reality is that most will develop attention problems in schools, struggle to perform, and remain a part of the unfortunate generational cycles of poverty and incarceration.

The stark contrast between the outcomes of black children in predominantly black, low-income communities and black children in wealthier, predominantly white communities is a product of classism: a system of advantage based on socioeconomic status. Due to their access to money, black children in white communities have access to productive mechanisms to grieve, cope, and re-assimilate after losing their fathers. They can therefore stay on track to graduate high school, go to college, and remain in their middle or upper-class standings. But poor black children are often left to their own devices to succeed in school and break out of the cycle, which is, in many cases, impossible.

Given this discussion, it is not, in fact, paternal incarceration that is directly causing the intergenerational cycle of imprisonment for many low-income black communities. It is the socioeconomic inequalities that limit black children's resilience and mental health in these communities. Consequently, many are not able to transition out of poverty.

While there are other problems causing the intergenerational cycle in low-income communities, such as mental illness and violence, the issue all seems to come back to classism. For example, when children—and adults—experience depression, they cannot afford appropriate resources to recover from this health problem, such as psychiatry or antidepressants. Rather, many turn to illicit drugs, which put them on the path to incarceration. Additionally, as they do not have access to professional

help, some children choose gang participation to achieve a sense of validation and belonging, further guaranteeing that they will wind up in prison themselves. In order to break this intergenerational cycle of imprisonment, we need to target the classism surrounding it.

### How Can We Fix It?

To close these socioeconomic disparities, it is imperative that we move towards a society where the incarceration of black fathers is not normal in low-income, black communities. Educators have the power to lead this transition. Rather than being treated as a normal life event, paternal incarceration should be treated as cases of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders in the classroom. These disabilities entitle students to academic accommodations under the American Disability Act (Burgstahler, Rickerson, & Sousa, n.d.).

Teachers should be prepared to accommodate students struggling with paternal incarceration in the necessary ways to promote their academic success. These accommodations can take the form of preferential seating so that students can leave the classroom for needed breaks; advanced availability of coursework and materials; private feedback on academic performance; alternative exam and other assignment formats; extended time to complete assignments; etc. (Burgstahler et. al., n.d.). These accommodations can lead children away from internalizing their pain and acting out in the classroom. Further, they can build trust between teacher and student, so that the student feels more supported in their academic endeavors.

Another tool that schools can utilize to break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration for black children is school psychologists. School psychologists are trained to provide expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior to help children succeed academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. Unfortunately, school psychologists are in short supply, as many school districts have tightened their budgets and cut many psychology services for students. While the National Association of School Psychologists recommends that there is one psychologist for every 500-700 students, many districts have pushed this ratio as far as one to every 3,500 students (Weir, 2012).

I can attest that a school psychologist can be one of the most valuable resources that schools can offer their students affected by paternal incarceration. Outside of my weekly meetings with a private psychologist, I would frequently have internalized breakdowns in the classroom, and my school psychologist provided a safe space for me to externalize and parse through this pain in order to be more productive in the classroom. It is imperative that this position and service is given more value and weight.

Furthermore, students should be able to engage in brave, facilitated discussions with their peers that break down the normalcy of incarceration. This could take the form of support groups in which students can candidly share their experiences with losing fathers to

incarceration and hear other students do the same. Yes, this reinforces the commonality of incarceration, but it allows children to realize that their pain is normal and valid and hopefully gives them a platform to externalize and manage their emotions in a less toxic way.

Academic accommodations in the classrooms, appropriate access to school psychologists, and inter-student support groups are all mechanisms to validate children affected by paternal incarceration in the whirlpool of emotions that they are naturally feeling after losing their fathers. By coming from the school itself, these resources can better guide children in their academic journeys and help them stay on track to graduate from high school and hopefully go on to college, which has become the key to break out of poverty. As schools incorporate these tools and incarceration becomes less normalized, affected children may become more vocal in their experiences and teachers can more easily identify these cases of paternal incarceration, thus helping children whose conditions would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Despite losing my father to incarceration, despite racism within my community, and despite depression and suicide attempts, I am privileged to say that I am now a successful student at an elite university. However, this is only true because of the unique resources that were accessible to me, both within and outside of my school. And this accessibility can be attributed to what my mother could afford. The fact that there are students who are currently experiencing what I did and who have a similar potential to be successful, but do not have the resources to do so, is unjust. If educators and administrators began to erode the normalcy of parental incarceration in the school, how many more students would graduate from high school? How many more would go to college? In providing these students with tools to fully cope with their losses, schools can help to break the intergenerational cycle of mass incarceration from the inside out, and we can thus catapult more of our black youth towards academic and lifelong success.



## References

- Arditti, Joyce A. (2012) *Parental Incarceration and the Family: Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers*. New York: NYU.
- Banks, James A. (1984) "Black Youths in Predominantly White Suburbs: An Exploratory Study of Their Attitudes and Self-Concepts." *Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 53, No.1, pp. 3-17*.
- Bernstein, Nell (2012). *All Alone in the World*. New York: The New Press.
- Burgstahler, Sheryl, Rickerson, Nancy, & Sousa, Sousa (2017). "Academic Accommodations for Students with Psychiatric Disabilities." *Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology*. Retrieved from <https://www.washington.edu/doit/academic-accommodations-students-psychiatric-disabilities>.
- Carnevale, Anthony P., Cheah, Ban, & Rose, Stephen J. (2010). "The College Payoff Education: Occupations, Lifetime Earnings." *Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce*.
- Stewart, Gabel. (1992) "Children of Incarcerated and Criminal Parents: Adjustment, Behavior, and Prognosis." *The Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, Vol 20, No. 1, pp. 33-45*.
- Geller, Amanda, Cooper, Carey E., Garfinkel, Irwin, Schwartz-Soicher, Ofira, & Mincy, Ronald B. (2012). "Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development." *Demography, Vol 49, No.1, pp. 49-76*.
- Pettit, Becky, & Western, Bruce. (2010). "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effects on Economic Mobility." *Pew Charitable Trusts*.
- "Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing for Children of Incarcerated Parents." (2013). *Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents*.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. (1997). *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations about Race*. New York: Basic.
- Weir, Kristen. (2012) "School Psychologists Feel the Squeeze." *American Psychologist Association, Vol. 43, No. 8*.
- Western, Bruce, and Wildeman, Christopher. (2009) "The Black Family and Mass Incarceration." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 621, pp. 221-242*.
- Wildeman, Christopher. (2008). "Paternal Incarceration and Children's Physically Aggressive Behaviors: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study." *University of Michigan, School of Public Health*.