

PARENTAL INCARCERATION AND CHILDREN IN NONPARENTAL CARE

Key Findings

1. Nearly half of children in nonparental care have experienced parental incarceration.
2. Children in nonparental care who have experienced parental incarceration are more likely than others to have encountered additional adverse experiences.
3. Among children in nonparental care, those who have experienced parental incarceration were more likely than children with no exposure to parental incarceration to live in voluntary kinship care arrangements that were arranged by a child welfare agency, but do not involve ongoing supervision or services. Children with no identified parental incarceration were more likely to live in private kinship caregiver settings with no involvement with child welfare agencies. Relatively few children in either group were in foster care with relative or non-relative foster parents.
4. Children who have experienced parental incarceration are more likely to experience developmental and learning disabilities than those with no exposure to parental incarceration.
5. When a child enters nonparental care as a result of a parent's incarceration, that parent is less likely to see the child regularly or be involved in decisions regarding the child's health care, compared to children who enter nonparental care for other reasons.

Background

Parental incarceration may affect children in many ways, such as disrupted relationships, family economic stress, and changes in caretaking arrangements. Parental incarceration may also be associated with parental substance use, family violence, divorce, and other experiences that may have a negative impact on children. Children who experience parental incarceration are more likely to experience emotional difficulties and problems in school.

An estimated 2.7 million children under age 18—3.6 percent of all children—had a currently incarcerated parent in 2008 (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Children were approximately eight times more likely to have incarcerated fathers (3.2 percent of children) than mothers (0.4 percent). Parental incarceration also varies by race and ethnicity, with far more non-Hispanic Black children (11.4 percent) experiencing parental incarceration than Hispanic (3.5 percent) or non-Hispanic White (1.8 percent) children, as shown in Table 1. An estimated 5 million children have experienced the incarceration of a residential parent at some point during their lives (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

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Nearly half of incarcerated parents lived with their children prior to their incarceration (49 percent overall, 47 percent of incarcerated fathers and 66 percent of mothers). Among children of incarcerated fathers, the most likely caregiver is the child’s mother (88 percent of children) or grandparent (13 percent). Among children of incarcerated mothers, the most likely caregiver is the child’s grandparent (45 percent) or father (37 percent). Caregivers also include relatives other than grandparents (5 percent of incarcerated fathers, 23 percent of incarcerated mothers), foster caregivers (2 percent and 11 percent, respectively), and friends or others (2 percent and 8 percent, respectively) (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Children of incarcerated parents may experience difficulties including traumatic separation, stigma, and disrupted living arrangements (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). In a systematic review encompassing 40 studies, children who had experienced parental incarceration had higher rates of antisocial behavior (Murray et al., 2012) compared to other children. Some studies have reported educational, health, substance abuse, and mental health issues among children who have experienced parental incarceration (Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013; Murray et al., 2012). However, other studies have shown null effects of parental incarceration on children. The research is especially mixed on the effects of maternal incarceration on children (Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Children who have experienced parental incarceration are far more likely than others to have also experienced frequent economic hardship, violence between their parents or guardians, or parental divorce or separation, or living with someone who had a substance abuse problem (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). These factors, rather than parental incarceration itself, appear to explain some reported differences in children’s outcomes (Murray et al., 2012).

Both parental incarceration and the issues that are associated with it may precipitate a need in which someone other than a parent is providing care for children. This brief expands our understanding of the circumstances of children who have experienced parental incarceration and are being cared for by others, and how the well-being of children in nonparental care due to parental incarceration compares to other children who have experienced parental incarceration.

Table 1. Percent of Children with a Parent in Prison or Jail, by Child Race and Ethnicity

	<i>Child Race and Ethnicity</i>			
	<i>White Non-Hispanic</i>	<i>Black Non-Hispanic</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>All Children</i>
All Parents	1.8%	11.4%	3.5%	3.6%
Fathers	1.5%	10.4%	3.2%	3.2%
Mothers	0.3%	1.0%	0.3%	0.4%

Source: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010

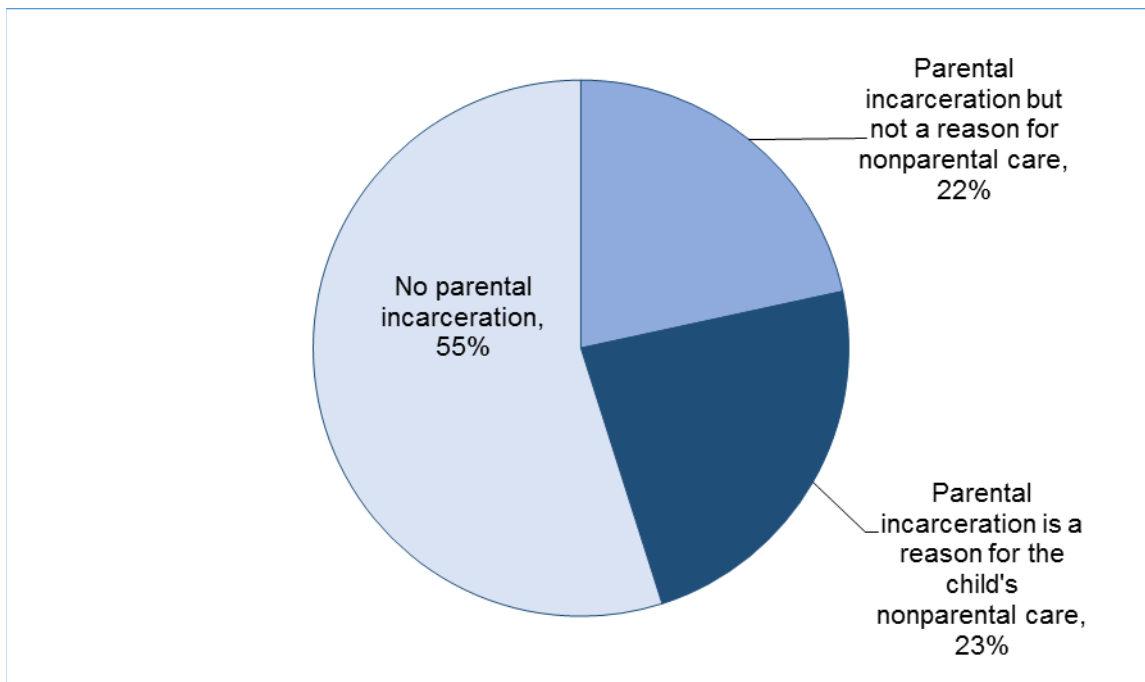
Methods and Data

This brief describes the number and characteristics of children who in 2011 or 2012 lived with someone other than their parents and who had experienced the incarceration of a parent or guardian. Children in nonparental care include those living with a foster parent and supervised by a child welfare agency, and those cared for by a relative or other caretaker without child welfare involvement. The brief compares children in nonparental care as a result of parental incarceration, those who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, and children with no experience of parental incarceration. Analyses examine parental incarceration in relation to other adverse family experiences, children’s living situations, developmental and learning difficulties, caregivers’ expectations that children will remain with them until grown, and ongoing parental involvement in children’s lives. Data are drawn from the 2013 National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care (NSCNC), a population-based, nationally representative survey of nearly 1,300 children living with nonparental caregivers. These data are supplemented by data on the same children from the 2011–2012 National Survey of Children’s Health from which the NSCNC sample was drawn. These surveys are described in detail at the end of this brief.

Findings

Based on data from the National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, nearly half of children in nonparental care have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives. This includes those who cannot live with one or both parents due to the parent's or parents' incarceration (21.6 percent of all children in nonparental care), and those who have experienced incarceration of a parent with whom they lived, although incarceration was not identified as a reason for nonparental care (23.5 percent). Among children who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, the most frequently reported reasons for nonparental care were the following: parenting issues such as child abuse or neglect (58.7 percent), substance use (31.4 percent), and unspecified other issues (68.4 percent).¹

Figure 1. Experience with Parental Incarceration among Children in Nonparental Care



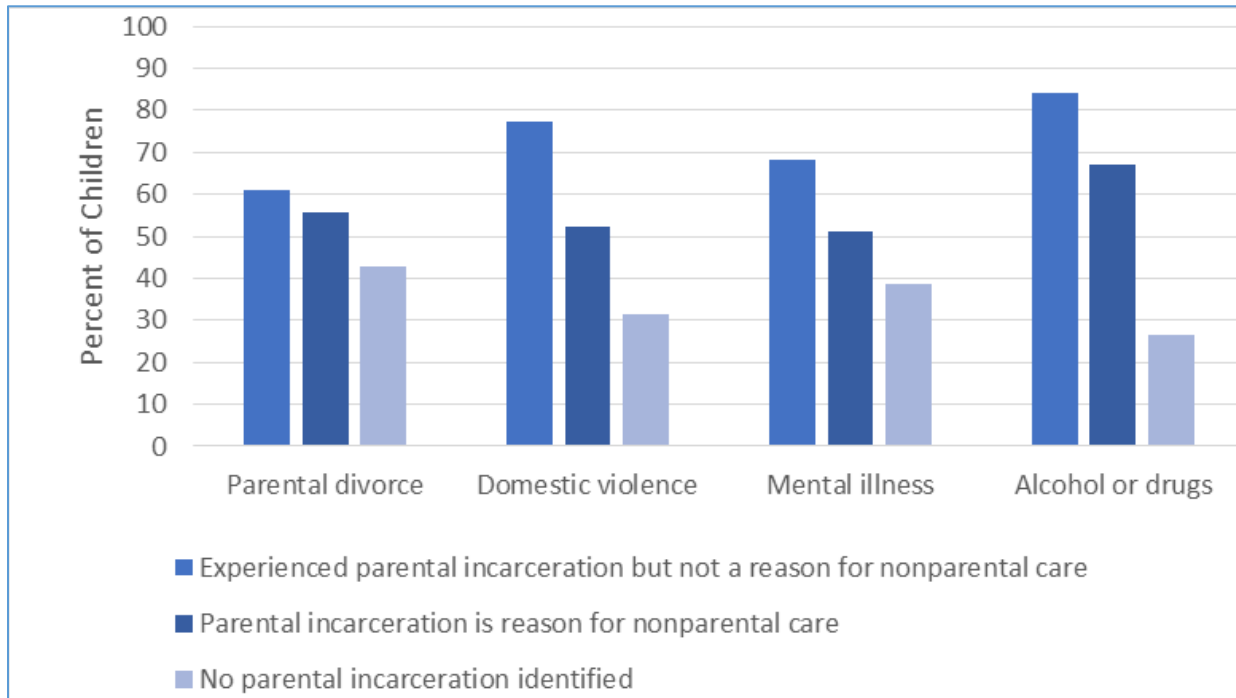
Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

Adverse Family Experiences:

Children who experienced parental incarceration are likely to have had other adverse family experiences. Compared to children with no experience of parental incarceration, those who have experienced parental incarceration were more likely to have experienced parental divorce, been exposed to violence between parents or guardians, lived with an adult who had a mental illness, or lived with an adult who had an alcohol or drug problem. These adverse experiences were most common among children who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, and somewhat less common among children for whom parental incarceration was the reason for nonparental care, as shown in Figure 1 (Appendix Table 1).

¹ Note that caregivers could identify multiple reasons why a child did not live with the parent, and that reasons reflect caregiver reports rather than confirmed parental behaviors.

Figure 2. Adverse Family Experiences among Children Who Have Experienced Parental Incarceration



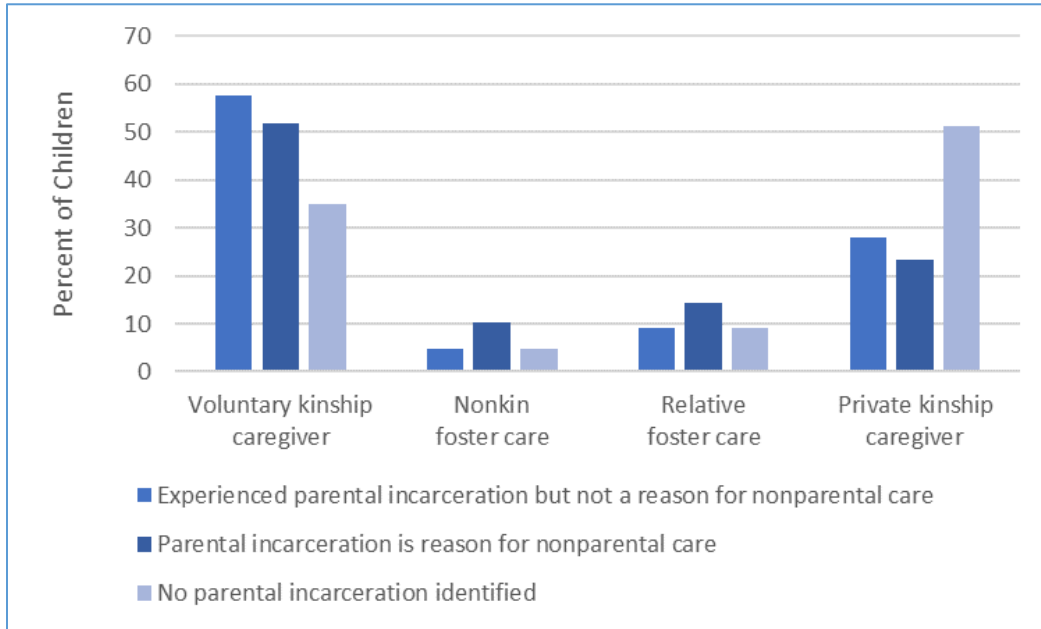
Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

Living situations:

Living situations for children in nonparental care varied according to their experience of parental incarceration, as shown in Figure 2 and Appendix Table 2. **Children who experienced parental incarceration were more likely than others to live in voluntary kinship care**, in which a child welfare agency was involved in arranging the child’s placement but the child is not in state custody. More than half of children in nonparental care who experience parental incarceration lived in voluntary kinship care (57.8 percent of those who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, and 51.9 percent of those for whom parental incarceration was the reason for nonparental care, compared to 34.8 percent of children with no identified parental incarceration). Children with no identified parental incarceration were most often cared for in private kinship care arrangements, with no child welfare involvement in placement or supervision. These represented more than half (51.2 percent) of arrangements for children with no identified parental incarceration, compared to 28.1 percent of those who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, and 23.2 percent of those for whom parental incarceration was the reason for nonparental care. Kin or nonkin foster homes, in which a child welfare agency oversees placement and ongoing services, account for fewer caregiving arrangements overall.²

² See Testa (forthcoming) for additional discussion of nonparental caregiving arrangements.

Figure 3. Caregiving Arrangements for Children Who Have Experienced Parental Incarceration

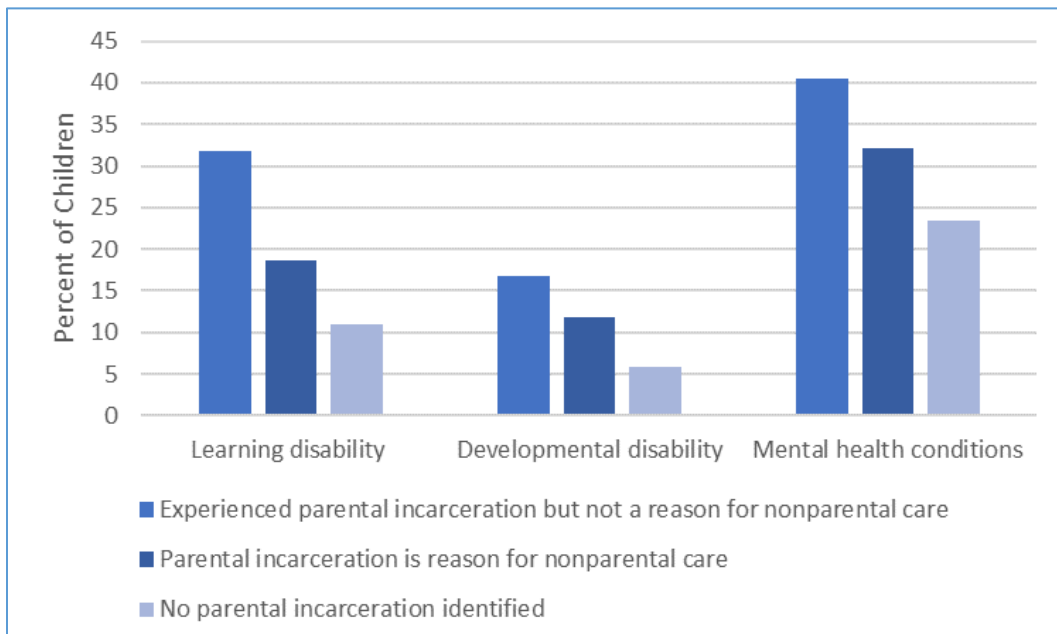


Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

Behavioral and Emotional Difficulties:

Research has found that children who experience parental incarceration are likely to experience behavioral and educational difficulties. Among children in nonparental care, those who have experienced parental incarceration were more likely to have learning and developmental disabilities, compared to children who have not experienced parental incarceration, as shown in Exhibit 3 (Appendix Table 3). Children who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care were more likely than those who have not experienced parental incarceration to have mental health conditions.

Figure 4. Health and Developmental Issues of Children Who Have Experienced Parental Incarceration



Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

Length of Care:

Most nonparental caregivers (85.7 percent) expect the children they care for to remain with them until grown. Caregivers of children who experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care were most likely to expect that children would stay with them until grown (95.6 percent). This compares to either children for whom parental incarceration was the reason for nonparental care (80.1 percent), or children with no identified parental incarceration (83.4 percent) (Table 2).

Table 2. Nonparental Caregivers' Expectations that Children Will Remain with Them until Adulthood

	<i>Experienced Incarceration but Not a Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>Incarceration Is Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>No Incarceration Identified</i>
Yes ^{a,b}	95.6%	80.1%	83.4%
No ^{a,b}	4.4%	19.9%	16.6%

Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

^a p = .08 for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to incarceration as a reason for nonparental care;

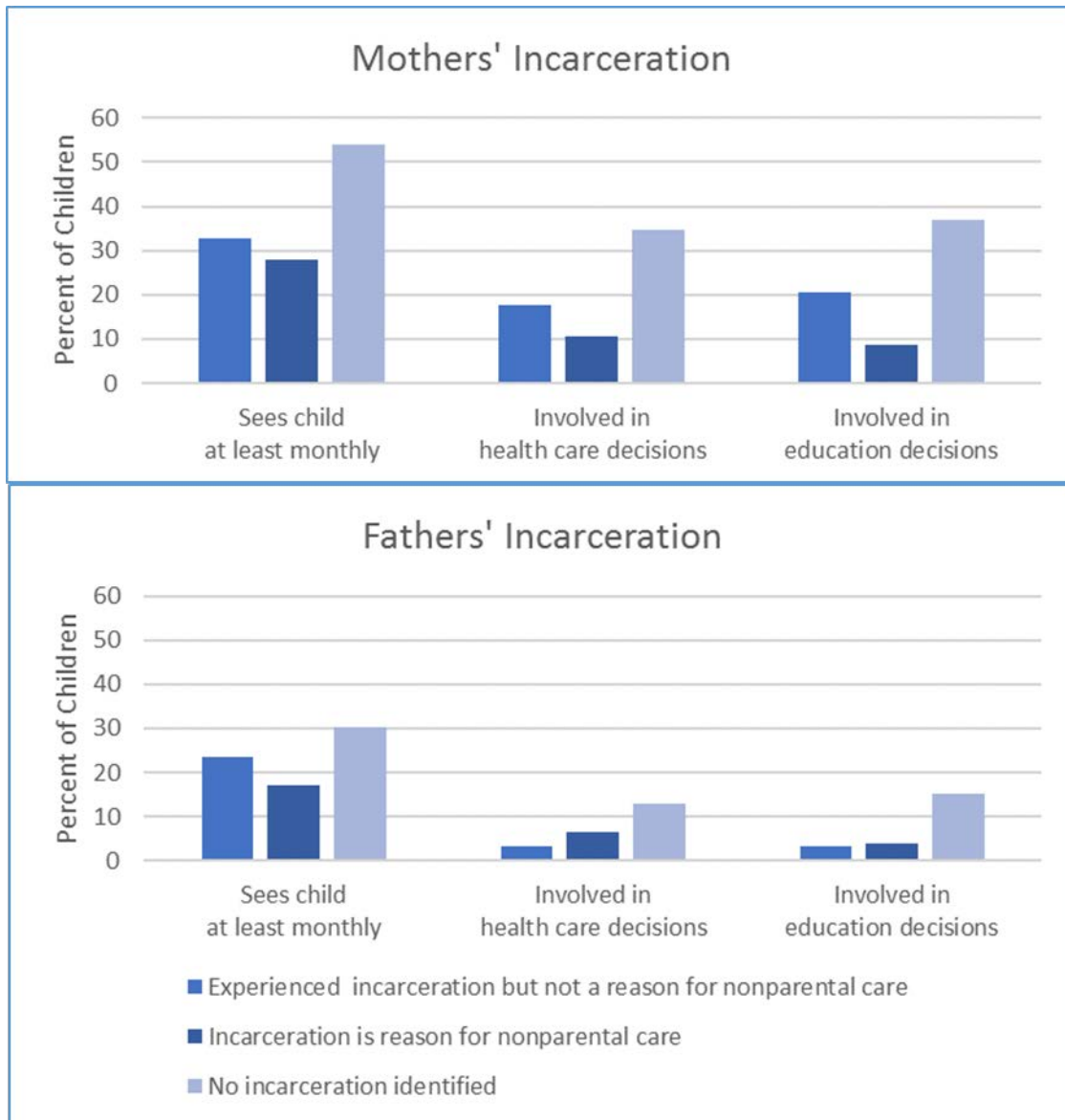
^b p = .08 for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

Incarceration creates substantial challenges for interaction between parents and children, and may have long-term impacts on relationships. This is particularly true when a mother's and father's incarceration is the reason for nonparental care, as seen in Figure 4 (Appendix Table 4). These parents were less likely to see their children at least monthly, or to "usually or always" be involved in decisions about the child's health care and education. As examples, 28.1 percent of mothers whose incarceration was a reason for nonparental care saw their child monthly, compared to 54.1 percent of mothers with no identified incarceration. The same pattern applied to fathers (17.1 percent and 34.4 percent, respectively). Parents who experienced incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care were also less likely to be involved with their children, compared to those with no identified incarceration.

Involvement of Incarcerated Parent(s):

Mothers who experienced incarceration were less likely to see their children at least monthly (28.1 percent when mother's incarceration was the reason for nonparental care; 32.8 percent when mothers experienced incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, versus 54.1 percent for no maternal incarceration), as seen in Figure 4 (Appendix Table 4). They were also less likely to "usually or always" be involved in decisions about the child's health care (10.5 percent when mother's incarceration was the reason for nonparental care; 17.8 percent when mothers experienced incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, versus 34.7 percent for no maternal incarceration) or education (20.5 percent when mothers experienced incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care, versus 37.0 percent for no maternal incarceration). Similar patterns occur for visits and involvement in decision making among fathers who experienced incarceration, although frequencies are lower overall.

Figure 5. Parental Involvement by Children's Exposure to Parental Incarceration



Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

Discussion

Parental incarceration touches approximately one in seven children nationwide (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015), including both residential and nonresidential parents, but nearly half of children in nonparental care experienced the incarceration of a parent with whom they lived. For some of these children, parental incarceration was the reason for being cared for by someone other than their parents. Others have experienced parental incarceration in addition to other events leading to nonparental care.

Compared to other children in nonparental care, children who have experienced parental incarceration are more likely to have experienced other adverse events, to live in nonparental care settings arranged by a child welfare agency, and to experience learning and developmental disabilities. They are more likely to have caregivers that expect that the child will remain in nonparental care until they reach adulthood, and less likely to see their parents or have parents involved in decisions about their well-being. For many of these indicators, comparisons are least favorable for children who have experienced parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care. This may reflect the impact of other issues in the child's family that contributed to the need for nonparental care, such as parenting problems or parental substance abuse.

Children who have experienced parental incarceration are most often cared for in voluntary kinship care, in which a child welfare agency was involved in arranging the caregiving situation but does not provide ongoing services or supervision. More than two-thirds of these caregivers were aged 60 or over, and fewer than 40 percent received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for the child,³ despite children's eligibility for this support when in nonparental care (Golden & Hawkins, 2012).

Taken together, these findings suggest that children who have experienced parental incarceration are likely to have relatively high needs compared to other children in nonparental care, yet frequently live with older caregivers who may lack access to financial support and other needed services. These caregivers would likely benefit from supports related to accessing benefits and parenting (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005; Nickel, Garland & Kane, 2009).

Incarceration is clearly associated with diminished parental engagement in children's lives, as evidenced by lower percentages of visits and involvement in decisions affecting the child. Many factors may affect parent-child relationships following incarceration. However, one study of incarcerated fathers (the large majority of incarcerated parents) found that contact during incarceration predicted the likelihood that the father would live with, and financially support their child following release. In this study, the quality of fathers' relationships with their children's mothers was associated with improved father-child relationships and greater likelihood of fathers financially supporting and engaging in frequent activities with their child following release (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2016). Such findings suggest that interventions focusing on conflict resolution and adult relationships show promise for improving the well-being of children who have experienced parental incarceration.

³ Data from RTI International's analysis of the National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care.

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Methodological Appendix

The National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care

Data for this brief are from two national surveys conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS): the 2011–2012 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), a nationally-representative survey of households with children, and the 2013 National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care (NSCNC), which re-interviewed almost 1,300 households identified as nonparental care households in the NSCH, including foster care, grandparent care, and other households with no parents present. Both surveys were modules of NCHS’s State and Local Area Integrated Telephone Survey (SLAITS). NSCH was sponsored by the Health Resources and Services Administration’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau, while NSCNC was sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, with supplemental funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

NSCH was a random-digit-dial landline and cell telephone survey that interviewed 95,677 households with children throughout the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The NSCH sample is nationally representative of children ages 0 to 17 years in households in the United States in 2011–2012. One child in each household with children was randomly selected to be the target of the NSCH interview. Respondents were adults in the household who were knowledgeable about the child’s health, usually the child’s mother.

NSCNC was a follow-back survey 1–2 years after the NSCH for children who had been living in households with no parents present and were still under age 18. Follow-back interviews were conducted via telephone with a current caregiver, in some cases the parent who had reunited with the child since the NSCH interview. To more accurately distinguish among relative foster care, nonrelative foster care, and informal relative care situations, respondents who identified themselves as foster parents were asked whether they were also related. Similarly, respondents who identified themselves as a relative to the child were asked whether they were also the child’s foster parent.

The NSCH had a 51 percent cooperation rate among eligible households but a 23 percent overall response rate (partly due to the inclusion of cell-phone sample to maximize coverage of the population), and NSCNC had a 52 percent completion rate among eligible households 1–2 years later. Weighting adjustments were applied such that the population estimated by the weighted sample of completed NSCNC interviews matched that of the pool of eligible households demographically. This dramatically reduced estimated nonresponse bias such that remaining bias in weighted estimates was smaller than sampling error, although the low overall response rate does mean that nonresponse bias cannot be completely ruled out. More information about NSCH and NSCNC may be found at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/slaits.htm>, or by referring to the associated documentation published by the SLAITS program (CDC, 2013; CDC, 2014).

Most of the comparisons reported in this brief are statistically significant at the level of $p < .05$. Because of small sample sizes for some comparisons, a few results are reported at significance levels of $p < .10$ when these were meaningful and consistent with patterns seen in other analyses. Data with significance levels of $p < .10$ describe variation in parental divorce, children’s mental health conditions, and caregivers’ expectations that children will remain with them until grown. Estimates based on NSCH apply to noninstitutionalized children ages 0–17 in 2011–2012. Estimates of learning disabilities from NSCH are based on children ages 3–17 in 2011–2012, while estimates of developmental disabilities from NSCH are based on children ages 2–17 in 2011–2012. Because the sample frame for NSCNC was defined based on the 2011–2012 population, and children who entered nonparental care between then and the 2013 NSCNC survey could not be observed, estimates from NSCNC are based on children who were in nonparental care and ages 0–16 in 2011–2012.

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Appendix Table 1. Adverse Family Experiences among Children Who Have Experienced Parental Incarceration

	<i>Experienced Parental Incarceration but Not a Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>Parental Incarceration Is Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>No Parental Incarceration Identified</i>
Parental Divorce ^{a,b}	61.1%	55.8%	42.7%
Domestic Violence ^{c,d,e}	77.4%	52.1%	31.6%
Mental Illness ^{c,e}	68.2%	51.0%	38.5%
Alcohol or Drugs ^{c,d,e}	84.2%	67.2%	26.6%

Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

^a p = .08 for parental incarceration as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^b p = .08 for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^c p < .002 for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to incarceration as a reason for nonparental care.

^d p < .002 for parental incarceration as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^e p < .002 for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

Appendix Table 2. Caregiving Arrangements for Children Who Have Experienced Parental Incarceration

<i>Child Status</i>	<i>Experienced Parental Incarceration but Not a Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>Parental Incarceration Is Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>No Parental Incarceration Identified</i>
Voluntary Kinship Care ^{a,b}	57.8%	51.9%	34.8%
Nonkin Foster Care	4.9%	10.4%	4.8%
Relative Foster Care	9.3%	14.5%	9.1%
Private Kinship Care ^{a,b}	28.1%	23.2%	51.2%

Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

^a p = .01 for parental incarceration as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^b p = .01 for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

Appendix Table 3. Health and Developmental Issues of Children Who Have Experienced Parental Incarceration

<i>Child Health and Development</i>	<i>Experienced Parental Incarceration but Not a Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>Parental Incarceration Is Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>No Parental Incarceration Identified</i>
Learning Disability ^{a,b,c}	31.8%	18.6%	11.0%
Developmental Disability ^{b,c}	16.8%	11.8%	5.8%
Mental health Conditions ^{c,d}	40.5%	32.2%	23.5%

Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

^a $p < .02$ for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to incarceration as a reason for nonparental care.

^b $p < .02$ for parental incarceration as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^c $p < .02$ for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^d $p = .10$ for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

Appendix Table 4. Parental Involvement by Children's Exposure to Parental Incarceration

<i>Involvement with Parent</i>	<i>Experienced Incarceration but Not a Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>Parental Incarceration Is Reason for Nonparental Care</i>	<i>No Incarceration Identified</i>
Mothers' Incarceration			
Sees Child at Least Monthly ^{+*}	32.8%	28.1%	54.1%
Involved in Health Decisions ^{+*}	17.8%	10.5%	34.7%
Involved in Education Decisions ⁺	20.5%	8.6%	37.0%
Father's Incarceration			
Sees Child at Least Monthly ⁺	23.6%	17.1%	30.4%
Involved in Health Decisions ^{+*}	3.4%	6.5%	12.9%
Involved in Education Decisions ^{^+*}	3.2%	3.8%	15.2%

Source: National Survey of Children in Nonparental Care, 2013

[^] $p < .05$ for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to incarceration as a reason for nonparental care.

⁺ $p < .05$ for parental incarceration as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.

^{*} $p < .05$ for parental incarceration but not as a reason for nonparental care compared to no incarceration.