



*Despite a decline in the U.S. prison population in recent years, the incarceration rate remains exceptionally high, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. This is well-known. Less well-known is that the incidence of child protective services (CPS) involvement in the United States is also quite high and, again, particularly so among disadvantaged groups. Incarceration and CPS involvement may have a range of independent and interactive influences on parents, children, and families; involvement in one system may also be associated with subsequent involvement in the other. This brief describes our work using a unique longitudinal data system of linked administrative data from Wisconsin to describe overlap between parental incarceration and child CPS involvement, and between adolescent CPS involvement and subsequent incarceration in young adulthood.*

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## Incarceration and CPS involvement

Lawrence M. Berger, Maria Cancian, Laura Cuesta, and Jennifer L. Noyes

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Lawrence M. Berger is a Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor and doctoral program chair in the School of Social Work, and director of the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP), at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Maria Cancian is professor of public affairs and social work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and former director of IRP. Laura Cuesta is assistant professor of social work at Rutgers University. Jennifer L. Noyes is a distinguished researcher and IRP associate director of programs and management.

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The adult incarceration rate in the United States is the highest of any industrialized country, despite a decline in the prison population in recent years. Moreover, it is well-known that people from socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the United States are disproportionately likely to spend time in jail or prison. Less well-known is the relatively high incidence of child protective services (CPS) involvement in the United States, which is also much more frequent among disadvantaged groups. Incarceration and CPS involvement may have a range of influences, independent and interactive, on parents, children, and families. Also, involvement in one system may be associated with subsequent involvement in the other. Our work examines overlap between parental incarceration and child CPS involvement, and between adolescent CPS involvement and subsequent incarceration in young adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 1.6 million people in the United States were in a prison facility at the end of 2012, the majority of whom were African American males under age 40.<sup>2</sup> Incarceration

rates are higher among men than women (0.91 percent and 0.06 percent, respectively); and among blacks than whites, nationally (2.84 percent and 0.46 percent, among men, respectively), and even more so in Wisconsin (0.42 percent of white adults versus 4.42 percent of black adults, in 2005). The racial gap is greater for men than women, and the gender gap is greater for blacks than whites, which likely reflects the very high incarceration rate of black men.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, about 25 percent of black children and 4 percent of white children born in 1990 had a parent in prison or jail by age 14.<sup>4</sup>

CPS agencies received reports concerning approximately 6.3 million children in 2012, representing about 4.6 percent of the child population in the United States. About 20 percent of these children were determined to be victims of abuse or neglect, with the vast majority having been neglected.<sup>5</sup> More than one quarter million children entered and more than 460,000 were residing in an out-of-home placement in 2012.<sup>6</sup> In Wisconsin, 3 percent of children were reported to CPS in 2012, 13 percent of whom were confirmed.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, an estimated 13 percent of all U.S. children and 21 percent of black U.S. children are substantiated as maltreatment victims by CPS at some point between their birth and age 18.<sup>8</sup>

Our work focuses on links between parental incarceration and child CPS involvement, which we refer to as intergenerational intersection, as well as between adolescent CPS involvement and subsequent incarceration during young adulthood, which we call intragenerational intersection. Intergenerational overlap may occur for several reasons. Parents may be incarcerated for child abuse or serious neglect; children whose parents (particularly mothers) become incarcerated may be taken into custody by CPS if another adequate caregiver has not been arranged before the parent's incarceration; and parental incarceration may adversely

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influence family economic stability and maternal well-being and social support for the non-incarcerated parent, as well as lead to family instability and poorer post-incarceration parenting. Intragenerationally, experiencing maltreatment (and subsequent CPS involvement) is associated with a range of social and emotional problems, including risk of criminal justice involvement during adolescence. Furthermore, socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and families may be systematically more likely to experience both CPS involvement and incarceration than their more advantaged counterparts exhibiting identical behaviors.

## The multi-sample person file data system

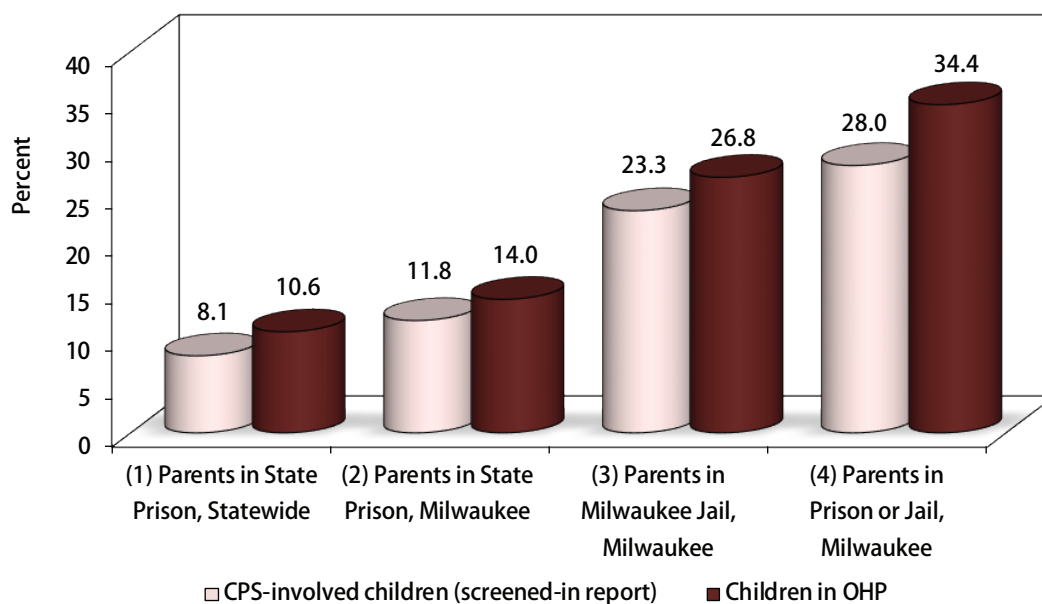
We exploit a unique data system housed at the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF), to examine for the first time in the United States (as far as we know) overlap between parental incarceration and child CPS involvement, and between adolescent CPS involvement and subsequent incarceration in young adulthood. The MSPF includes linked longitudinal administrative data on the full universe of participants in most state-administered social welfare programs, including child protective services, Wisconsin’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, child support enforcement, and Unemployment Insurance (which includes both wage and benefit data). The MSPF also includes data from the Department of Corrections (on state prison incarceration) and Milwaukee County Sheriff (on Milwaukee County jail incarceration).<sup>9</sup>

Our data are drawn from the 2013 MSPF, which includes an individual if she or her family or household member has participated in one or more of these programs at some point. Anyone who is part of a social welfare benefit case (i.e., a member of a family or household considered for eligibility or benefit determination) is included in the database, whether or not he is the actual benefit recipient. Once an individual is included in the MSPF, she continues to be included, backward and forward in time, regardless of prior or current benefit receipt. We focus our analyses on the period from 2004 to 2012.

## Results

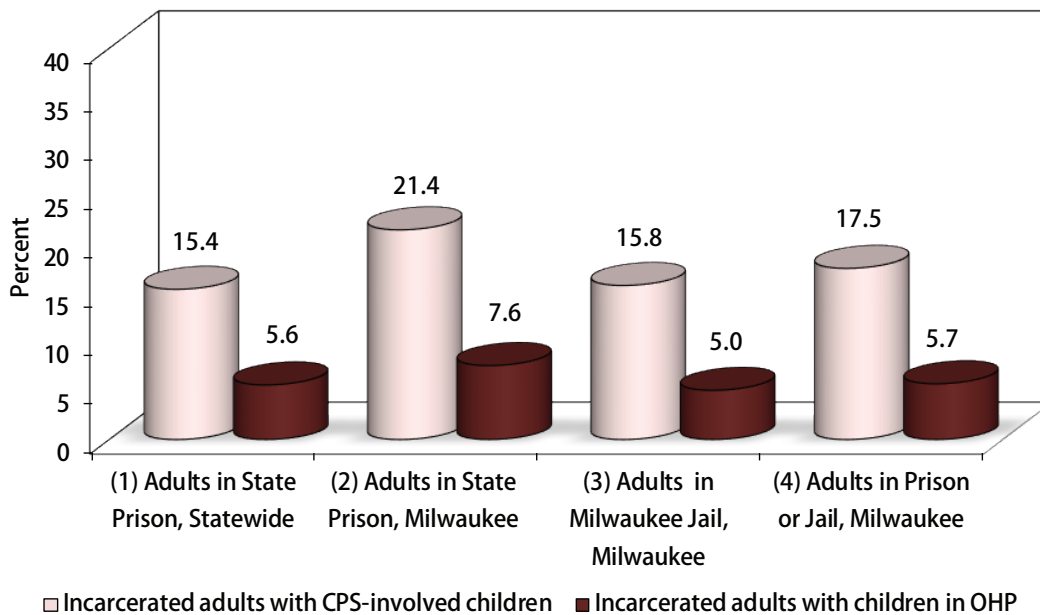
### CPS-involved children with incarcerated parents

We found that a substantial proportion of CPS-involved children in Wisconsin have incarcerated parents (see Figure 1). Eight percent of children experiencing a “screened-in” report (a report that led to a CPS investigation or assessment) between 2004 and 2012 had a parent in state prison in the year after the report. For children in out-of-home placement (OHP), parental incarceration in state prison was even more common (11 percent). Parental incarceration was prevalent among CPS-involved children (including those in OHP, which could be foster care, agency, or institution) in Milwaukee, at 12 percent and 14 percent for all CPS-involved children and children in OHP, respectively. Within Milwaukee County, parental incarceration in county jail was considerably more common than parental incarceration in state prison (23 percent and 12 percent versus 27 percent and 14 percent for all CPS-involved children and children in OHP). In all, 28 percent



**Figure 1. Proportion of CPS-involved children with incarcerated parents, State of Wisconsin and Milwaukee County, 2004–2012, highest in Milwaukee.**

**Note:** The proportion of children observed to have an incarcerated parent in same month as a screened in CPS report (or the first month of an OHP spell) or in any of the subsequent 11 months, regardless of whether the incarceration period began prior to the CPS event, is presented. CPS-involvement and OHP are not mutually exclusive, nor are incarceration in state prison and Milwaukee County Jail. Denominators are: (1) the universe of CPS-involved children (or children in OHP) in Wisconsin, 2004 to 2012; and (2) through (4) the universe of CPS-involved children (or children in OHP) in Milwaukee County, 2004 to 2012.



**Figure 2: Proportion of incarcerated adults with CPS-involved children, State of Wisconsin and Milwaukee County, 2004–2012, highest among Milwaukee parents.**

**Note:** The proportion of incarcerated adults observed to have a child with a CPS report (or to be in OHP) in the month that the incarceration spell began or in any of the subsequent 11 months is presented. CPS-involvement and OHP are not mutually exclusive, nor are incarceration in state prison and Milwaukee County Jail. Denominators are: (1) the universe of adults incarcerated in Wisconsin state prisons, 2004 to 2012; (2) the universe of Milwaukee County adults incarcerated in Wisconsin state prisons, 2004 to 2012; (3) the universe of adults incarcerated in Milwaukee County Jail, 2004 to 2012; and (4) the universe of Milwaukee county adults incarcerated in either Wisconsin state prison or Milwaukee County Jail, 2004 to 2012.

of children with a screened-in CPS report and 34 percent of those in OHP in Milwaukee County had a parent who was incarcerated either in state prison or county jail at some point in the 12 months after their CPS involvement started.

Children involved with CPS were much more likely to have an incarcerated father than an incarcerated mother. Moreover, CPS-involved black children were much more likely to have an incarcerated parent than other CPS-involved children. Strikingly, 40 percent of screened-in black children and 43 percent of black children in OHP in Milwaukee County also experienced parental incarceration around the time of the screen-in date or start of an OHP spell or within 11 months of either screen-in date or beginning of OHP.

### **Incarcerated adults with CPS-involved children**

Statewide, about 15 percent of adults in state prison had one or more children involved in CPS and about 6 percent had children in OHP at the time of, or within 11 months of, their incarceration (see Figure 2). By comparison, almost 18 percent of Milwaukee adults incarcerated either in prison or jail had CPS-involved children and nearly 6 percent had children in OHP. Black adults were more likely than white adults to have CPS-involved children and children in OHP. Incarcerated women were more likely than incarcerated men to have CPS-involved children and children in OHP.

### **Incarcerated young adults involved with CPS as adolescents**

Incarcerated young adults ages 18 to 21 are extremely likely to have experienced CPS involvement at ages 15 and 16. About 18 percent of all 18- to 21-year-olds in state prison in

Wisconsin had been involved with CPS between ages 15 and 16, and 8 percent had experienced OHP. Most strikingly, more than 25 percent of all women who were in state prison between ages 18 and 21 had been involved with CPS as an adolescent, and about 9 percent had experienced OHP. In Milwaukee, these rates were 32 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

### **CPS-involved adolescents who were incarcerated as young adults**

Close to 5 percent of those involved with CPS at age 15 or 16 spent time either in county jail or state prison between ages 18 and 21, statewide, whereas almost 29 percent of all CPS-involved Milwaukee adolescents spent time either in county jail or state prison between ages 18 and 21. For those who experienced OHP during adolescence, these figures were 10 percent and 34 percent, respectively. Black CPS-involved adolescents in Milwaukee County were less likely than their peers in other racial/ethnic groups to spend time in state prison, but much more likely to spend time in county jail.

### **Implications for research, policy, and practice**

Incarceration of adults and CPS involvement for children and families, especially among disadvantaged groups, is widespread in the United States. A similar set of environmental factors is known to be associated with involvement in each system, as are limited economic resources and psychosocial problems among individuals and families. Parental incarceration may also cause CPS involvement, and involvement with CPS as a child may be a marker for potential risk of future incarceration. These factors underscore the importance of understanding both the

inter- and intragenerational overlap in incarceration and CPS involvement. But few existing studies explicitly address these issues.

Our descriptive analyses provide new insights into the intersection within and across generations between incarceration and CPS involvement, yielding implications for research, policy, and practice. For research, more study is needed on the extent to which inter- and intragenerational (and vice versa) intersection may be causal. Further, research into the reasons adolescents become involved with CPS and whether there is variation in their likelihood of subsequent incarceration is needed to shed light on intragenerational links between CPS involvement and subsequent incarceration. Likewise, more research is needed into the mechanisms linking parental incarceration and child CPS involvement, and whether there are differences in mechanisms by race.

Implications of our findings for practice and policy suggest that the high levels of intergenerational overlap in incarceration and CPS involvement imply the need for child welfare policies regarding child safety, removal, and permanency that consider the special needs of children with incarcerated parents, including their family situations before, during, and after periods of parental incarceration. It is also important to recognize that this is likely to be a heterogeneous group. In addition, parental gender and whether the parent is the child's primary or sole caregiver should be given particular weight in designing interventions; children with an incarcerated mother may have more intensive needs than those whose father becomes incarcerated. Finally, the high degree of intragenerational overlap between CPS involvement in adolescence and young adult incarceration—particularly for women—suggests that adolescents are at especially high risk for future incarceration and may need specialized and intensive preventive efforts. ■

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<sup>1</sup>This research brief draws from L. M. Berger, M. Cancian, L. Cuesta, and J. L. Noyes, "Families at the Intersection of the Criminal Justice and Child Protective Services Systems," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 665 (2016): 171–194.

<sup>2</sup>E. A. Carson and D. Golinelli, *Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991–2012*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Report NCJ 243920, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2013.

<sup>3</sup>Carson and Golinelli, *Prisoners in 2012*.

<sup>4</sup>C. Wildeman, "Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage," *Demography* 46, No. 2 (2009): 265–280.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. DHHS), Administration for Children and Families, Youth and Families Administration on Children, and Children's Bureau, *Child Maltreatment 2012*, Washington, DC: U.S. DHHS, 2012.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. DHHS, *The AFCARS Report FY 2012*. Washington, DC: U.S. DHHS, 2013.

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Institute for Research on Poverty  
1180 Observatory Drive  
3412 Social Science Building  
University of Wisconsin  
Madison, Wisconsin 53706  
(608) 262-6358  
Fax (608) 265-3119

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<sup>7</sup>Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (WI DCF), *Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Report: Annual Report for Calendar Year 2012*, Madison, WI: WI DCF, 2013.

<sup>8</sup>C. Wildeman, N. Emanuel, J. M. Leventhal, E. Putnam-Hornstein, J. Waldfogel, and H. Lee, "The Prevalence of Confirmed Maltreatment among American Children, 2004–2011," *JAMA Pediatrics* 168, No. 8 (2014): 706–713.

<sup>9</sup>See P. Brown, D. Ross, J. Smith, K. Thornton, and L. Wimer, *Technical Report on Lessons Learned in the Development of the Institute for Research on Poverty's Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) Data System*, Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, for a full description of the MSPF database and its development, 2011.

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