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

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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.¹

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 40.² 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.³ 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 14.⁴

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.⁵ More than one quarter million children entered and more than 460,000 were residing in an out-of-home placement in 2012.⁶ In Wisconsin, 3 percent of children were reported to CPS in 2012, 13 percent of whom were confirmed.⁷ 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 18.⁸

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
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. Intrigenerationally, 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). 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
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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3 Carson and Golinelli, *Prisoners in 2012*.


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