

**Name:** Déshané Velasquez

**Project Title:** Parental Incarceration and the Benefits of Child Contact While in Prison

**Organization:** Georgia State University, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies

**Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Cynthia Searcy

## **INTRODUCTION**

America has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with an estimated 2.2 million American inmates. Over the past thirty years, the number of inmates has increased by 500 percent. The justice system affects more Americans today than ever before, with an estimated 4.7 million either on parole or probation. (Porter, 2016). Certainly, the minor children of America are also affected. A report from Child Trends states that more than five million (approximately 7%) of American children have at least one parent in jail. (Murphey, 2015). Parent-child relationships that may have been strong pre-incarceration may not thrive once the parent goes to jail. For example, out of 52% of state inmates and 62% of federal inmates who are parents to minor children, only 40% received visits from their children (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013). Thus, when these parents are sent to jail, their children may also feel the consequences of their crimes.

Prior to imprisonment, many fathers and mothers are employed, contribute economically to family life, and are engaged in parenting their children (Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011; Turney, 2015). Once that parent is sentenced, his or her family may notice a significant drop in both financial and emotional support. Consequentially, these sudden changes may have negative effects on the children and their caregivers. As studies suggest, the children of inmates are more exposed to

economic and social disadvantages than their counterparts (Turney & Wildeman, 2013). While research exists on the impact of parental incarceration on their children and families, few studies explore how the inmates themselves are affected by the familial and social disturbance of being incarcerated (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013). Research suggests that inmates with children are more distressed than other inmates, and that diminished child contact is a factor in inmate distress (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013).

This research explores if child contact motivates inmates to seek self-help through educational programs to create a better life for themselves and their families after prison. Specifically, it focuses on factors that can be associated with participation in parenting skills classes, job and vocational training, and employment counseling programs. This paper starts with a literature review focused on the effects of incarceration on parental inmates and their relationships with minor children. Specifically, it reviews research about the benefits of child contact and visitation used as agents to reduce recidivism. The literature review then discusses the effects of program participation on employment outcomes post-release. Next, this paper tests two research questions to link child contact and program participation in-prison. In detail, the first research question explores factors related to child contact in prison, focusing on the child living arrangements while the parent is incarcerated, and parent-child financial support pre-incarceration. The second research question explores the relationships between child contact in-prison and program participation. Findings from the statistical models are presented for each research question. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of public policy implications for inmates with children.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This review will discuss existing literature on parental incarceration, starting with its effects on parent-child relationships. Specifically, it will attribute high stress and anger levels among parental inmates to lack of communication with their children. Then, it discusses ways to alleviate parental inmate stress, such as increased exposure to their children's lives. Moreover, it explores efforts that inmates can make in-prison to create a better life post-release. It addresses the effects of program participation and familial visitation on recidivism.

According to a Virginia study of 57 pairs of inmates and their child caregivers using the "The Messages Project," there is evidence that parent-child relationships are significantly strained (Loper, Phillips, Nichols, & Dallaire, 2014). This strain can be shown in the form of high stress levels among parental inmates. For example, a study using the 2004 Survey of Inmates in States and Federal Correctional Facilities from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics concluded that inmates with children are significantly more distressed than inmates who do not have children (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013). This study also finds that incarcerated parents who have a child in foster care experience more anger than other parent inmates. Due to long distance and lack of communication, these disparities in stress and anger levels among inmates may seem to be expected. However, there is also evidence that these stress and anger levels can be reduced by more frequent parent-child contact during incarceration. Specifically, mail contact between incarcerated parents, especially mothers, is associated with lower subjective anger (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013). More visitation, mail contact, and phone calls may give inmates a sense of responsibility, and even inspiration, to participate in beneficial programs while they are in jail.

In order for inmates to create a better life for their children post-release, inmates may participate in programs, such as those that teach vocational and parenting skills. These programs are beneficial for inmates, because it is one of the only ways that they are able to invest in their human capital during their sentence. Educating oneself, or investment in human capital, is known in economics to increase employment opportunities. Training programs may be even more important to potential employment post-release, given that deficits in human capital, social network disruptions, and discrimination severely limit their chances of finding work post-release. A study in Ohio, Texas and Illinois reported that 70% of inmates felt that their criminal history negatively affected their job search (Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008). This same study found, however, that inmates engaged in trade and job training in-prison were almost 20% more likely to be employed 8 months after their release, compared to non-participating inmates (62% vs 41%) (Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008). (Maldonado, 2006).

Although program participation is associated with increased employment outcomes, little research explores what encourages inmates to participate in these programs. This research will contribute to the existing literature by investigating a potential link between child contact and increased program participation, which then is expected to translate to increased employment outcomes post-release. Specifically, this paper empirically estimates the factors associated with child contact in prison and if frequent contact increases the likelihood that a parent will participate in an education or training program. If child contact is positively related with participation, then policy-makers may want to consider removing barriers to inmates communicating with their children as an effort to boost employability of prisoners post-release.

## **SPECIFIC AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research aims to identify relationships between child contact and program participation. It hypothesizes that inmates who are in contact with their children on a frequent basis are more likely to participate in parenting and other enrichment programs while imprisoned, which leads to better employment outcomes after their release. It uses data from the United States Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF) to explore two research questions:

### **R1: What factors are associated with an inmate's likelihood to have contact with his/her children while in prison?**

This research question will explore associations with child contact among parental inmates. The dependent variable was recoded from responses to questions S7Q10A-C of the SISCF, which asked inmates to describe the frequencies of phone, mail, and visitation contact with their minor children. The child contact variable is discrete and indicates who responded that they contacted their children daily/ almost daily, or at least once a week, either by phone or mail. The inmates who reported receiving visits from their children at least once a month are also represented in this variable.

Independent variables included in this research question are gender, age, race, offense type, time incarcerated, and child financial support. These variables were recoded from the responses to questions S1Q1A, S1Q2A, S1Q3C\_1, S2Q2C, S2Q3C, and S10Q12B\_2, which respectively ask inmates to report their date of birth, sex, race (white inmates are compared to nonwhite inmates in linear regression model), offense

type (property, drug, and public order offenders are compared to violent offenders in the linear regression mode), admission date, and whether or not parental inmates reported to be their child(ren)'s primary source of financial support. I expect females to be more likely to have contact with their children compared to males given the greater role that women play in child rearing. Also, I expect the older parental inmates and those who have been incarcerated for longer periods of time to have less contact with their children. Perhaps these parents could have more difficulties getting in touch with their children, or have not been successful in keeping their parent-child relationship strong over the years. I have no expectations for the direction of associations with race and offense type. Finally, I expect parents with a history of financially supporting their children to have a strong interest in maintaining their parent-child relationships by contacting their child(ren) frequently in-prison.

- Child Contact= Prior Inmate-Child Financial Support History + Gender + Age + Race + Offense Type + Time Incarcerated (Years)

**R2: How is child contact and visitation associated with inmates' participation in parenting, educational, job training, and parenting skills programming in prison?**

This research question seeks clarity on child contact as a motivator for parents to seek self-help through programs in prison. My dependent variable and principal independent variable of interest are program participation and child contact, respectively. Parental inmate program participation includes programs that provide educational training, such as high school or GED courses, as well as job training, employment counseling, and parenting skills development. These dependent variables are estimated as separate models and correspond to questions S10Q11A, S10Q10A, S10Q12B\_1, and

S10Q12B\_2 of the SISCF, respectively. I expect the parents who have frequent contact with their children are likely to participate in developmental programs. When parents are in touch with their child(ren), this exposure to their child(ren)'s everyday life could provoke a sense of responsibility in the inmate prior to release. This particular sense of responsibility could also be a factor in the difference between inmates who are more successful in finding employment post-release than those who are not. The SISCF does not incorporate post-release employment outcomes, so this analysis will not be able to explore this association directly.

Similar to the first research question, other independent variables in the program participation model include gender, age, white, offense type, and time incarcerated. I expect females to be more likely to participate in programs, because they women participate in education programs at higher rates than men. I expect older inmates to participate in programs less than younger inmates, because they may have already developed their skills prior to incarceration. Further, those who have been incarcerated longer may be more discouraged about their prospects of finding work the longer that they're in prison. I have no expectations for the relationships with race and offense type. Program participation= Child Contact + Gender + Age + Race + Offense Type + Years Incarcerated.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This study uses data from the 2004 U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics. The research questions explore variables from a 9- month long Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF). This nationally representative data incorporates inmate responses to a questionnaire administered to

36 federal prisons and 1,549 state prisons. (United States Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004).

Table 1 reports the demographic characteristics of inmates in the data presented for federal and state prisons. The sample of 3,686 federal inmates is 74% male and 47% white, 42% black, and 25% Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> The average age of inmates is 37.5. Most of the inmates at the federal level are never married (44.8%), although 26% are married and 21% are divorced. The majority of the federal inmates in this sample were drug offenders (42.2%). Federal drug offenders include those who were arrested for crimes such as conspiracy, or manufacturing illegal substances (Bennardo, 2013). Property offenders (30.2%) and violent offenders (24.6%) are also present in the sample, which include those convicted for crimes such as theft and tax evasion, as well as murder and forcible rape. Finally, nearly 78 percent of inmates have minor children.

At the state level, the sample of 14,499 inmates is 80% male and 50% white, 43% black, and 18% Hispanic. Similarly to those at the federal level, most state inmates have never been married (55.3%). The majority of inmates in the state sample are violent offenders (49.9%), who could have committed crimes such as assault or aggravated stalking. Property, drug, and public order offenders make up 23.5%, 21.8%, and 4.9% of the state sample, respectively. These inmates could have committed crimes such as vandalism, possession of marijuana, or prostitution (Sapp, 2014). Finally, 78 percent of state prisoners are parents of minor children.

These data are used in two linear probability models that explore the research questions presented in the previous section. This method permits me to estimate the

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<sup>1</sup> The SISFCF allows inmates to self-identify multiple races.

probability of an event occurring—in this case, an inmate having frequent contact with his/her child (R1) and program participation in prison (R2). The model is similar to a multiple regression model, except that the dependent variables are discrete. Although linear probability models can result in probabilities of events that are greater than 1 or less than 0, the purpose of this research is to explore associations, not causation, making the magnitude of the estimates for each independent less important than understanding the overall relationship.

## **FINDINGS**

This section begins with a review of summary statistics for the variables of interest for each research question. It reports descriptive statistics from federal and state surveys about the caretaking responsibilities that inmates had for their children before incarceration. It also reports child contact and program participation levels by prison type. Following the summary statistics, findings from the multivariate analyses of the two research questions are presented.

### **Summary Statistics**

Table 2 reports the parent-child relationship information of federal and state inmates who are parents of children under 18 years old. The majority of inmates provided or shared most of their child(ren)'s child care needs (93.0% and 91.1%). Also, many of them were either the primary source of financial support (65.9% and 53.9%) or lived with their child(ren) prior to incarceration (57.6% and 46.7%), at the federal and state levels, respectively. In addition, most parental inmates reported that their children lived with their other parent/stepparents (75.9% and 75.1%), and most of the children who had siblings lived together (63.2% and 61.2%). Moreover, more than one quarter of

both federal and state (26.6% and 32.7%) parental inmates reported that their child(ren)s' guardian received some form of public financial support to care for their child(ren). There are also a small number of parental inmates who reported that their children either lived with their grandparents (22.5% and 24.2%), other relatives/friends (11.0% and 10.4%), or foster home/ agencies (5.0% and 7.6%) , at the federal and state levels, respectively.

Table 3 reports the child contact and program participation levels of federal and state inmates with minor children. Although the majority of federal inmates reported speaking to their child(ren) at least once weekly, state inmates did not talk to their children as frequently (55.8% and 23.8%). Federal inmates also reported higher frequencies of program participation in all subjects, compared to state inmates. For example, inmates in federal prisons participate in educational training (43.4% vs 30.7%), vocational training (32.3% vs 26.8%), and parenting skills programming (23.4% vs 12.6%) at levels that are consistently higher than inmates in state prisons. Lastly, 4.09 and 4.89 are the the average number of years incarcerated among federal and state inmates.

### **Multivariate Results**

This section reports results from the linear probability models exploring predictors of child contact and its relationship to prison program participation.

Table 4 explores financial support history, gender, age, race, offense type, and that average amount of years incarcerated as factors associated with child contact. In both federal and state samples, financial support history is positively associated with the probability of child contact. Specifically, inmates who report providing prior financial support have a 10.9 percent (federal) and 11.7 percent (state) greater likelihood of

having frequent contact with their children. These relationships are statistically significant at the 99.9 percent level. Control variables largely have expected associations. Males are less likely to have frequent contact with their children as well as older inmates. Finally, property and drug offenders are more likely to have contact with their children compared to violent offenders.

Table 5 explores child contact, gender, age, race, offense type, and average amount of years incarcerated as factors of program participation. Across both federal and state samples, frequent child contact is positively correlated with participation job training, employment counseling, and parenting skills programming. Specifically, federal inmates with frequent child contact were 9.7% more likely to participate in job training and 11.6% more likely to participate in parenting skills programming. These results are statistically significant at the 99.9% significance level. In addition, state inmates with frequent child contact were (6.4% and 3.5%) more likely to participate in parenting skills programming and job training programs. In contrast, federal inmates with frequent child contact are 1.3% more likely to participate in employment counseling programs. Moreover, control variables largely have expected associations. For example, age is negatively associated with all levels of program participation, and Non-White inmates are 3% more likely to participate in job training programs. In addition, public order offenders in state prisons are (12.8% and 10.2%) less likely to participate in job training and educational training program, compared to violent offenders. Lastly, Drug offenders are more likely to participate in employment counseling and parenting skills programs (2.8% and 4.3%) compared to violent offenders at the federal level. However, at the

state level, drug and property offenders in are (4.3% and 6.7%) less likely to participate in job training programs.

## **Discussion**

Limitations of this study include phone usage restrictions, especially at the state level. Parental inmates in the SISFCF sample reported phone usage at a rate 32 percentage points less than federal inmates. One possible explanation of this discrepancy could be characterized in the differences related to offense types across state and federal prisons. At both levels, phone use is a privilege and not a right. In fact, it is not rare for correctional institutions to prohibit or limit phone use privileges among inmates who have histories of conducting criminal activity over the phone (Farber, 2008). Thus, it is likely that correctional institutions may prohibit or limit phone usage for inmates that pose security threats. However, state prisons typically house more violent and drug offenders. Therefore, one possibility is that phone privileges are more frequently revoked or less frequently awarded to inmates compared to those in federal prisons.

Interesting findings from the bivariate and multivariate statistics suggest that the parental inmates with more frequent child contact in-prison were likely to have been their child(ren)'s primary source of financial support prior to incarceration. Thus, these inmates with frequent reports of child contact are more likely to participate in developmental programs during their incarceration. Prior research indicates that inmates have increased employment outcomes when they report higher frequencies of child contact and program participation in-prison. This could be associated with parental inmates developing a sense of responsibility after being in touch with their children.

Therefore, policy makers might want to reconsider removing some of the contact barriers that complicate phone access and privileges, especially to those parental inmates in state prisons.

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<b>Table 1: SISFCF Demographic Information</b>		
	<b>Federal</b>	<b>State</b>
<b>Average Age</b>	37.5	35.4
<b>Race</b>		
White	47.0%	49.6%
Black	41.9%	42.6%
Hispanic	24.5%	17.4%
American Indian or Alaska Native	5.2%	5.3%
Asian	1.4%	0.9%
Pacific Islander/ Other	6.8%	5.1%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Never Married	44.8%	55.3%
Married	26.4%	16.6%
Divorced	21.0%	20.0%
Separated	5.8%	5.7%
Widowed	2.0%	2.4%
<b>Type of Offense</b>		
Violent	24.6%	49.9%
Property	30.2%	23.5%
Drug	42.2%	21.8%
Public Order	3.0%	4.9%
<b>Inmates with Minor Children</b>	77.6%	77.9%
<b>Male Proportion</b>	74.0%	79.8%
<b>n =</b>	<b>3686</b>	<b>14499</b>
Notes: Respondents were able to identify with more than one race		
Data Source: United States Department of Justice Bureau Statistics Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities		

<b>Table 2: SISFCF Parent/Child Relationship Information</b>				
	<b>Federal</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Parental Support Prior To Incarceration</b>				
Inmate Provided/Shared Most of Child Care	93.0%	<b>1237</b>	91.1%	<b>3565</b>
Inmate Was Primary Source of Financial Support to Child(ren)	65.9%	<b>2148</b>	53.9%	<b>7621</b>
Children Lived with Inmate Prior To Incarceration	57.6%	<b>2148</b>	46.7%	<b>7638</b>
<b>Current Minor Child Living Status</b>				
Children Living Together	63.2%	<b>844</b>	61.2%	<b>2365</b>
Guardians Receiving Public Financial Support to Care for Child(ren)	26.6%	<b>1896</b>	32.7%	<b>6524</b>
<b>Current Caregiver of Inmate's Child(ren)</b>				
Child's Parent/Step-parent	75.9%	<b>2149</b>	75.1%	<b>7641</b>
Child's Grand-parents	22.5%	<b>2149</b>	24.2%	<b>7641</b>
Other Relatives/Friends	11.0%	<b>2149</b>	10.4%	<b>7641</b>
Foster Home/Agency/Other	5.0%	<b>2149</b>	7.6%	<b>7641</b>
Notes: Percentages only reflect information of inmates who responded that they have child(ren) under 18 years old.				
Current Caregiver of inmate's children is not mutually exclusive.				
Inmates with two or more children responded to the question asking if their children live together. Public financial support includes Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), WIC, or any other financial assistance to help care for the child(ren).				
Data Source: United States Department of Justice Bureau Statistics- Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities				

<b>Table 3: SISFCF Child Contact and Programming Information</b>				
	<b>Federal</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Child Contact</b>				
Inmate talks to their child(ren) at least once a week	55.8%	<b>2757</b>	23.8%	<b>7624</b>
Inmate sends/receives mail from their child(ren) at least once a week	34.5%	<b>2754</b>	30.9%	<b>7625</b>
Inmate is visited by their child(ren) at least once a month	21.2%	<b>2143</b>	19.7%	<b>7627</b>
<b>Program Participation</b>				
Educational Training	43.4%	<b>2728</b>	30.7%	<b>9714</b>
Vocational Training	32.3%	<b>2729</b>	26.8%	<b>9710</b>
Parenting/Child Rearing Skills	23.4%	<b>2726</b>	12.6%	<b>9710</b>
Employment Counseling	13.0%	<b>2726</b>	9.5%	<b>9711</b>
<b>Average Years Incarcerated</b>	4.03	<b>2033</b>	4.89	<b>5429</b>
Notes: Percentages only reflect information of inmates who responded that they have child(ren) under 18 years old. Educational Training includes GED, high school, college, english as a second language, and basic- level courses.				
Data Source: United States Department of Justice Bureau Statistics- Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities				

**Table 4:**  
**Linear Probability Model (Research Question 1)**  
**Child Contact via Phone, Mail or Visitation In-Prison**

Independent Variables	FEDERAL		STATE	
Primary Support of Financial Support Prior to Incarceration	.109	***	.117	***
Male	-.097	**	-.179	***
Age	.001	**	-.006	***
White	-.019		-.065	***
Property Offenders	.090	*	.066	**
Drug Offenders	.095	**	.056	**
Public Order Offenders	-.066		.016	
Years Incarcerated	-.001		-.005	
	<b>n=</b>	<b>2766</b>	<b>14445</b>	

Notes: \*p< .05 \*\*p< .01 \*\*\*p < .001  
Child contact includes weekly phone calls, weekly mail or monthly visits.  
The property, drug, and public order offenders are in comparison to violent offenders  
Data Source: United States Department of Justice Bureau Statistics- Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities

**Table 5:**  
**Linear Probability Model (Research Question 2)**  
**Program Participation**

Independent Variables	Educational Training		Job Training		Employment Counseling		Parenting Skills		
	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	
Child Contact	.089	-.013	.097 ***	.035 *	.013 *	.030 **	.116 ***	.064 ***	
Male	-.018 **	-.080 ***	-.034	-.033	-.071 *	-.038 **	-.108 ***	-.166 ***	
Age	-.005 ***	-.006 ***	-.004 ***	-.005 ***	-.002 **	-.001 *	-.008 ***	-.033 ***	
White	.016	-.022	-.019	-.030 *	-.013 *	-.035 ***	-.023	.011	
Property Offenders	-.052	-.022	-.063	-.067 **	.053 *	.032 *	.042	.010	
Drug Offenders	.013	-.011	-.047	-.043 *	.028 *	.022	.080 **	.007	
Public Order Offenders	.043	-.102 *	.053	-.128 *	.117	.032	.088	-.018	
Years Incarcerated	.020 ***	.022 ***	.024 ***	.031 ***	.011 **	.009 ***	.012 ***	.011 ***	
	<b>n=</b>	<b>2728</b>	<b>9714</b>	<b>2729</b>	<b>9710</b>	<b>2726</b>	<b>9711</b>	<b>2726</b>	<b>9710</b>

Note: \*p< .05 \*\*p< .01 \*\*\*p < .001  
Program participation only reflect information of inmates who responded that they have child(ren) under 18 years old.  
Educational Training includes GED, high school, college, english as a second language, and basic- level courses. Property, drug, and public order offenders are in comparison to violent offenders.  
Data Source: United States Department of Justice Bureau Statistics- Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities