Which Is Worse on Kids: Having a Parent Divorce, Go to Jail, or Die?

August 21, 2014

Children with a parent behind bars are at a huge risk of mental health and behavioral issues, according to new findings published in the Journal of Health & Social Behavior and included in a press release from the University of California, Irvine (UCI). The study looked at the effects of incarceration in America and also addressed racial inequalities in the U.S. prison system.

For the study, UCI researchers culled data from a population-based sample of people 17 years old and younger who took part in the 2011 to 2012 National Survey of Children's Health. Scientists found that parental incarceration was strongly linked with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavioral problems, developmental delays and speech issues among children.

These problems were so acute that when scientists compared children who had a parent in jail with kids whose parents were divorced or whose mother or father had died, the first group was actually more likely to suffer from ADD, ADHD and behavioral problems than the latter. (Children who had a parent who died more often suffered just from ADD or ADHD.)

"Our results suggest that children's health disadvantages are an overlooked and unintended consequence of mass incarceration," said study author Kristin Turney, PhD, an assistant professor of sociology at UCI. "Given its unequal distribution across the population, [incarceration] may have implications for racial and social class inequalities."

Currently, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with more than 2 million people behind bars. The report estimated that about 2.6 million children in America have a parent in jail at any given time. What's more, the findings showed that among African-American children, nearly 50 percent will have a parent incarcerated by age 14, compared with just 7 percent of white kids with similar socioeconomic status.

Click here for more information on how mass incarceration affects the public health of minority communities in the United States.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.