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Effects of parental imprisonment on child antisocial behaviour and mental health: a systematic review

Joseph Murray, David P. Farrington, Ivana Sekol,
Rikke F. Olsen



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Plain language summary

Parental imprisonment can cause many problems for the family left behind, including difficulty organising childcare, loss of family income, trouble maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent, stigma, and home, school and neighbourhood moves. Children and parents can be distressed by the separation. Children may respond by acting out or becoming withdrawn, anxious or depressed. We conducted an exhaustive search for studies that examined children's antisocial behaviour and mental health after parental imprisonment. We found 16 studies with appropriate evidence. These studies all showed that children of prisoners are more likely than other children to show antisocial and mental health problems. However, it was unclear whether parental imprisonment actually caused these problems. They might have been caused by other disadvantages in children's lives that existed before parental imprisonment occurred. Children of prisoners are a vulnerable group. More research is required to determine whether or not parental imprisonment causes an increase in child antisocial behaviour and mental health problems.

