

# The Relationship Between Parental Imprisonment and Dependent Children’s Mental Health

Alexis King, MSW Student | California State University, Fullerton | Department of Social Work

Capstone Advisor: Dr. Karen Kyeunghae Lee

## ABSTRACT

The number of children whose biological mother or father are imprisoned is rising in the United States. The stress of parent-child separation, social stigma, and social and economic strain from parental imprisonment may contribute to adverse outcomes for children. This research study examined dependent children's depression and anxiety experiences when their biological mother or father is arrested or jailed during their lifetime. This current study was a secondary data analysis of the Pathways to Desistance. This cross-sectional study used baseline interviews conducted in 2000. The participants were 1,354 severe juvenile offenders from juvenile and adult court systems. Unfortunately, the research study did not find any significant results. Policies and services are described that would reduce incarceration rates and assist children who have already been impacted by parental incarceration.

## INTRODCUTION

### Significance of Study:

- In our society, incarceration is relatively common among minorities and the poor because of the rapid rise in incarceration in recent years.
- The incarceration of a parental figure is connected with bleak outcomes that endanger children that include instability and poverty compared to children who have not experienced parental incarceration.

### Purpose:

- Evaluate whether dependent children with incarcerated parent(s) are at an increased rate to experience poor mental health outcomes correlated to those without an imprisoned parent.

### Research Question:

- What is the relationship between parental imprisonment and depression amongst dependent children?
- What is the relationship between parental imprisonment and anxiety amongst dependent children?

### Hypotheses:

- Among dependent children, there is a positive relationship between parental imprisonment and symptoms of depression.
- Among dependent children, there is a positive relationship between parental imprisonment and symptoms of anxiety.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- More than five million children in the United States had at least one parent in prison at any given time, accounting for around 7% of all children in the country.
- Parental imprisonment is associated with high rates of mental health concerns such as anxiety, sadness, suicide thoughts, and self-injurious conduct.
- Children whose parents are incarcerated are twice as likely to have poor mental health outcomes than children whose parents are not incarcerated.
- Parental incarceration during early or middle childhood has been linked to lower cognitive results in reading, math, and memory comprehension tests

## METHODS

### Research Design

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from The Pathways to Desistance.
- The baseline interviews were conducted in 2000, and follow-up interviews were administered every year for the next six years.
- The research design of the present study is a cross sectional, as it is only using the baseline data.

### Sample and Sampling Method

- The researchers utilized purposive sampling. From November 2000 to January 2003, respondents were enrolled, and baseline interviews were completed.
- The respondents were 1,354 serious juvenile offenders from juvenile and adult court systems in Phoenix, Arizona and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.
- Participants were American/Black (41.4%), Hispanic (33.5%),or other (4.8%). Majority of the participants were male (86.4%).

### Measures

- ❖ Independent Variable
  - Parental imprisonment: Measured by two single items, whether biological mother or father was arrested or jailed, respectively.
- ❖ Dependent Variable
  - Depression and anxiety were measured using the Brief Symptom Inventory. The BSI is a 53-item self-report measure in which participants rate the extent to which they have been bothered in the past week by various psychological symptoms

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=1,354)

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	1170	86.4
Female	184	13.6
Age in years	<i>M</i> = 16.04	<i>SD</i> = 1.14
Racial origin		
White	274	20.2
Black and/or African American	561	41.4
Hispanic	454	33.5
Other	2	4.8
Enrolled in school (currently/before coming to detention)		
No	65	
Yes	382	28.2
Ever been suspended from school		
No	972	71.8
Yes	122	9.0
	1232	91.0
Employed currently or before coming to facility		
No	1000	73.9
Yes	354	26.1
Anyone in your family ever been arrested		
No	292	21.6
Yes	1058	78.1
Don't Know	4	.3
Anyone in family been in jail or prison		
No	159	11.7
Yes	892	65.9
Don't Know	7	.5

## Results

### Mann-Whitney U Test

- A series of Mann-Whitney U Test were computed to determine the relationship between parental incarceration and dependent youth experiencing depression or anxiety.
- The analysis showed no significant difference in depression or anxiety scores between participants whose biological mother/father was arrested or jailed and participants whose biological mother/father was arrested or jailed. .

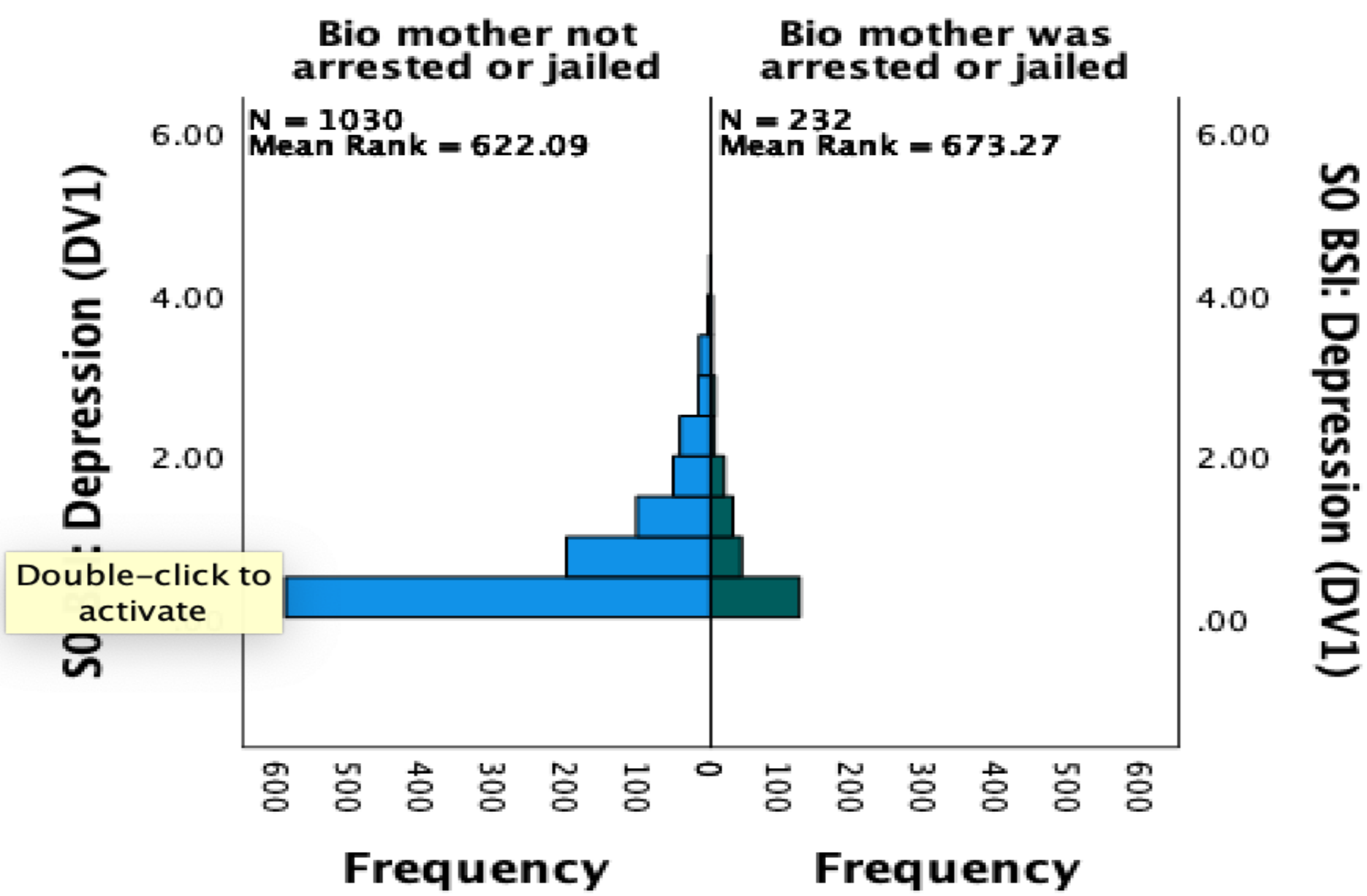
Table 2

Depression and Anxiety Differences Among Youth Offenders With or Without the History of Parental Incarceration

Variables	Mean rank	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Depression			
Biological mother arrested or jailed		1,291	.49
Yes	673.27		
No	622.09		
Biological father arrested or jailed		1,915	.19
Yes	648.98		
No	621.65		
Anxiety			
Biological mother arrested or jailed		1,244	.31
Yes	652.88		
No	626.68		
Biological father arrested or jailed		1,870	.56
Yes	627.16		
No	639.19		

Figure 1

Differences in Depression Scores Among Youth Offenders With or Without the History of Maternal Incarceration



## DISCUSSION

### Summary of Findings

- The results of the current study yielded four key findings.
- The first pointed to differences of depression amongst dependent youth who biological mother is arrested or jailed versus dependent youth who biological mother is not arrested or jailed. This result was inconsistent with the study’s hypothesis, there was not a significant difference between dependent youth experiencing depression who biological mother was arrested or jailed.
- A second key finding is inconsistent with the current study’s hypothesis, dependent youth do not experience higher rates of anxiety when their biological mother is arrested or jailed.
- The third key finding is inconsistent with the current study’s hypothesis, dependent youth do not experience higher rates of depression when their biological father is arrested or jailed.
- The fourth key finding is inconsistent with the current study’s hypothesis, dependent youth do not experience higher rates of anxiety when their biological father is arrested or jailed.

### Implications for Research and Practice

- The current research findings are important for social work practice and policy because it provides a basis for social workers and mental health professionals to implement programs, interventions, and policies aimed to assist, support, and advocate for dependent youth experiencing parental incarceration.
- Services should be implemented to assist incarcerated individual families throughout the incarceration process, as well as equipping families for a smooth transition when the imprisoned is released from jail or prison and reintegrated into society.

### Strengths and Limitations

#### Strengths

- Large sample size
- The current research study was able to create two groups that comprised of one group with a history of biological parental imprisonment and the second group without a history of biological parental imprisonment.

#### Limitations

- The current study uses a cross sectional design, which limits the present study because it uses observational methods for data collection.
- Lack of diversity in the sample

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Lee for her assistance and direction in completing this project. Also, I would like to express my gratitude towards the Department of Social Work for being accommodating and supportive throughout the global pandemic. I would like to thank my friends and family for their unwavering love and support during my graduate school career.