



THE CENTER ON  
IMMIGRATION  
AND CHILD WELFARE



# The Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Children and Families

Scholars Taking Action for Families (STAFF): A CICW Workgroup

Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Erin Sugrue, Augsburg University; Jacquelynn Duron, Rutgers University; Dianne Ciro, San Diego State University; Amy Messex, New Mexico Highlands University



## Introduction

The crisis of family separation precipitated by the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy on the southern border has focused the nation's attention on the negative short- and long-term consequences of separating children from their parents. The negative outcomes of separating children from their parents have been documented through decades of rigorous research, with public awareness and action occurring to change practices around separation in children's hospitals, military families, orphanages, and child care settings. However, there is much less public awareness of the impacts of parental incarceration on children, although the numbers are increasing dramatically both because of immigration policy and the growth of punitive criminal justice policies over the past 30 years<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, between 1991 and 2007, the number of parents in federal and state prisons increased by 79%.<sup>2</sup> Children of incarcerated parents comprise a mostly invisible population for several reasons. First, government agencies often do not keep adequate records that link children with their incarcerated parents. Consequently, agencies that may be available to provide dyadic, child-, or adult-oriented services are not aware of these children or their needs, and thus do not serve them. In addition, social scientists have not studied these children until recently.<sup>3, 4</sup> In recent years, the sheer numbers of children and families affected has begun to increase the visibility of this population among public policymakers, social service providers, and academic researchers.

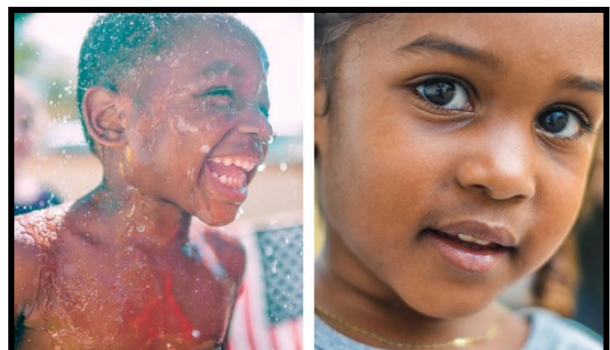
At year end 2016, more than 6.6 million adults were under the supervision of U.S. correctional systems<sup>5</sup>, including individuals incarcerated in prisons and jails, as well as those on probation and parole. Because most incarcerated individuals are parents<sup>2</sup>, it is not surprising that more than 5 million U.S. children have experienced a co-resident parent leaving for jail or prison<sup>6</sup>--and these numbers do not include children whose non-resident parent is behind bars. Because of staggering racial disparities in incarceration, children of color experience parental incarceration to a much greater extent than their white counterparts (7.5 times more often<sup>2</sup>). Further, they face more post-incarceration challenges even when considering pre-existing risks.<sup>7</sup> Recently, the population of children with incarcerated parents has exploded and the harm that parental incarceration causes to children and families has become much more evident. This brief will summarize recent research findings related to the detrimental impacts of parental incarceration on children and families, delineate factors that most directly relate to negative outcomes in children, establish the connection to detention of immigrant parents and effects on children, and conclude with recommendations for relevant policy and practice.

### **Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children**

There is ample scientific evidence that family separation is harmful to children and other family members. Decades of rigorous research has shown that a stable relationship with a primary caregiver is critical to a child's safety, ability to trust others, sense of self, and capacity to thrive.<sup>8, 9, 10, 11</sup> Separation from parents is among the most potent traumatic stressors that a child can experience, and the adverse effects are exacerbated when separation occurs under frightening, sudden, chaotic, or prolonged circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Such separations increase children's risk of developing depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress symptoms and other trauma reactions.<sup>13, 14</sup> Research shows that experiencing multiple stressful and unpredictable events during childhood, known as

adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), is cumulative and results in stress that can negatively affect health and well-being throughout one's own life as well as through subsequent generations.<sup>15</sup> Parental incarceration is one of the categories of ACEs and its effects seem particularly detrimental because of the unique combination of trauma, shame, and stigma that occurs, as well as the externally enforced separation.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there are often many unknowns about the incarcerated parents' circumstances, which can lead to painful feelings of ambiguous loss for children and other family members.<sup>17</sup>

In the past twenty years, a growing body of research has documented the specific harmful effects of parental incarceration on children's development and well-being.<sup>18</sup> The negative potential effects of parental incarceration include increases in infant mortality, child homelessness, child behavior problems (including elevated aggression and antisocial behavior), impaired academic performance, and less optimal health; these effects persist even when controlling for prior risks and other social determinants of health.<sup>19, 20</sup> Children affected by parental incarceration often experience subsequent traumatic symptoms, residential instability, and financial insecurity as well as exposure to more ACEs, compared to other children.<sup>1, 6</sup>



**Separation from parents is among the most potent traumatic stressors that a child can experience, and the adverse effects are exacerbated when separation occurs under frightening, sudden, chaotic, or prolonged circumstances.<sup>12</sup>**

In a recent large-scale research study, Bell and colleagues<sup>21</sup> found that having an incarcerated parent places children at risk for experiencing challenges across multiple developmental domains, including physical, social, emotional, communicative, and cognitive development. In addition to the potential adverse effects of any family separation, children who have an incarcerated parent experience additional challenges that have been referred to as “incarceration-related risk factors”.<sup>22</sup> These risk factors include financial obstacles to visitation, reliance on other adults to facilitate contact between the child and parent, excessive distance between the child’s location and the correctional facility (both of which may change multiple times, often without notification to the child’s caregiver), as well as children’s fears about their parent’s well-being within the corrections environment.<sup>21</sup> Many children with incarcerated parents have also witnessed the parent’s arrest, contributing to increased emotional and cognitive difficulties<sup>23</sup> as well as insecure attachment<sup>22</sup>. Younger children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of parental incarceration due to their greater attachment needs, dependence on caregivers, and less developed cognitive and coping abilities.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, increased negative outcomes have been noted for younger children with an incarcerated parent, in comparison to adolescents who also experience detrimental effects.<sup>24</sup>

Challenges in maintaining contact and family relationships during the incarceration period can also have negative effects on children and families.<sup>16, 25</sup> Obstacles include: unaffordable collect-call charges for phone calls made from prison; unsympathetic, hostile and restrictive prison and jail visiting environments and policies; remote and hard-to-visit prison locations and strained family relationships.<sup>26, 27</sup> Further, the circumstances of visitation—especially non-contact barrier visitation that is common in jails—can also have negative emotional consequences. Visits tend to be brief and end abruptly and participants are subject to highly intrusive physical searches and procedures.<sup>28</sup>



**Potential long-term consequences on the children include behavioral issues, academic issues such as dropping out of school, reliance on maladaptive coping strategies such as excessive use of illegal drugs and alcohol, or being diagnosed with chronic illnesses in adulthood, such as diabetes or heart disease.**

Parental incarceration can also lead to family conflicts that do not readily heal when the parent is released from prison. Social and family pressures, social stigma and institutional policies and practices can make it difficult for parents to reintegrate and re-establish ties with their children.<sup>16</sup> Research indicates that the negative impact of incarceration-induced family separations often continues long after parents are released from jail or prison. Potential long-term consequences on the children include behavioral issues, academic issues such as dropping out of school, reliance on maladaptive coping strategies such as excessive use of illegal drugs and alcohol, or being diagnosed with chronic illnesses in adulthood, such as diabetes or heart disease.<sup>15, 29, 30</sup>

### **Factors Related to the Impact of Parental Incarceration on Families**

To understand the impact of parental incarceration, it is also important to consider who is watching and caring for the child during the parental incarceration period (children’s caregivers).<sup>31</sup> Sometimes children live with the non-incarcerated parent, especially when the father is incarcerated, whereas other children live with a non-parental relative, especially grandparents when the mother is incarcerated.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, when mothers are incarcerated, children are five times more likely to be placed in a foster home than when fathers are incarcerated.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of caregivers in shaping a child’s future trajectory “cannot be overstated”.<sup>33</sup> And as noted by,<sup>24</sup> caregivers often experience significant increases in parenting stress subsequent to incarceration. This can be caused by multiple factors: the need to provide emotional and financial support to the incarcerated parent (often in the face of monumental logistical challenges), the economic decline associated with the loss of one parent’s income and caregiving time, and reduced time available to spend with each individual child in the family, among many other factors. The mental health and well-being of a child’s caregiver has a direct and significant impact on the future well-being of that child.<sup>34, 22</sup>

Social support for children with an incarcerated parent is a significant protective factor; social support in this context refers to the ability to maintain stable relationships with teachers, caregivers, and peers, as well as access to prosocial activities such as sports.<sup>35</sup> Changes in placement, schools and regular activities contribute to negative outcomes for children experiencing the extreme disruption involved in the incarceration of a parent.

Regular contact between incarcerated parents and their children can strengthen parent-child and family relationships. In a recent white paper from the Urban Institute<sup>36</sup>, reviewed research and conducted interviews with eight experts in the field regarding parent-child visits during parental incarceration. They concluded that face-to-face family-friendly contact visits appeared the most helpful for children, especially when such visits are embedded in family-support programs (that also include elements like identifying and working through underlying issues to promote healthy parent-child and family relationships). Family-friendly visitation policies include more relaxed, child-sensitive security procedures, longer visitation periods, opportunities for families to engage in positive activities together (such as playing a game and physical contact such as hugs), and conducting visits in a less stressful setting (i.e. a

designated family visitation room) as opposed to the stark surroundings of most adult visitation environments.<sup>24</sup>



### **The Detention of Parents and Children in Immigration Settings**

As a result of the “Zero Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry,” several thousand immigrant children were separated from their parents during 2018, and a significant number of these children were younger than five years old at the time of separation. Parents in these cases were frequently either incarcerated or deported. Consequently, the children involved are exposed to risks associated with both family separation as well as parental incarceration, combined with the dangers and trauma of immigration. As reported by multiple news outlets in the United States, many children remain apart from their parents; these forced separations continue despite a federal court order issued on June 26, 2018 requiring their reunification. Obstacles to reunification include incomplete recordkeeping and confusion and a lack of transparency among agencies.

Research focused on the effects of parental incarceration on children and families has implications for our understanding of parent-child separations that have occurred for immigrants, including the detention of parents and their children. When the constant dread of arrest, detention, or deportation of parents culminates in actual family separation—whether short-lived or permanent—the results are particularly detrimental and far-reaching for children’s well-being.

Children of detained and deported immigrants suffer the consequences of economic instability, emotional distress, changes in daily routines, long-term financial instability, and finally, in some cases, family dissolution.<sup>37, 10</sup> This increased adversity is worrisome as research indicates a synergistic effect between increased stress and adverse life events. Higher levels of post-traumatic symptoms in children of detained and deported parents indicate that forced parental separation resulting from immigration enforcement is particularly detrimental to children’s mental health. Furthermore, the unpredictability and uncertainty associated with such forced parent-child separations may exacerbate trauma symptoms.

The constant fear of detection, detainment and deportation is integrated into caregivers’ daily lives. The development of related mental health symptoms and barriers in accessing adequate healthcare places families at higher risk of poor health outcomes. Immigrant detention, as a process related to the deportation of noncitizens, is part of a larger history of global, federal, local, and individual practices that criminalize immigrants, especially non-white immigrants. The incarceration of noncitizens is related to their surveillance, punishment, and overall inequality in the areas of labor, education, public health, political representation, and everyday mobility.<sup>38</sup> Many immigrant families have left countries where they experienced violence or war (as witnesses, victims, and/or perpetrators); lack of food, water, shelter, or medical care; torture; forced labor; sexual assault; and loss of loved ones.

### **Recommendations**

Government agencies, resettlement agencies, and service providers across sectors (e.g., child welfare, health care, corrections, education, mental health, housing, employment) have an opportunity to lessen the long-term effects of parental incarceration on children by adopting practices that have been shown to be effective in addressing their needs.<sup>39</sup> Prompt reunification of children with their parents is a top priority. Parents help children regulate negative

emotions, alleviate the impact of chronic stress on the nervous system, and promote connections in the brain that protect children from developing additional mental health concerns. Given the high level of stress experienced by these families, prompt family reunification and provision of mental health interventions is critical. Resettlement agencies and health care workers have the opportunity to help ameliorate the effects of trauma by providing culturally sensitive and trauma-informed interventions.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. Culturally- and linguistically- appropriate mental health services.**
- 2. Supportive services to caregivers and formerly incarcerated parents.**
- 3. Refraining from unnecessarily exposing children to the arrest of a parent.**
- 4. Ensuring that child-friendly visitation practices are established.**
- 5. Facilitating additional means of contact between children and their incarcerated parents.**
- 6. Disseminating materials that Sesame Street recently developed for young children with an incarcerated parent.**
- 7. Making non-contact visits more child-friendly.**
- 8. Decreasing stigma and shame by educating society.**
- 9. Changing policies to decrease reliance on incarceration, increase alternatives to incarceration, and decrease sentence length.**
- 10. Conducting program evaluations to determine the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions.**

*Such interventions and practices include:*

- Providing culturally- and linguistically- appropriate mental health services to the impacted children, incarcerated parents, caregivers, and other family members throughout the incarceration of the parent and following the incarceration to lessen the impacts of trauma and begin the healing process.

- Offering supportive services to caregivers and formerly incarcerated parents to create stability for children, including access to safe housing, medical and dental care, education, and food and financial aid to reduce economic strain.
- Refraining from unnecessarily exposing children to the arrest of a parent to protect children from trauma associated with witnessing parental arrest. The International Association of Chiefs of Police<sup>40</sup> have developed a model protocol and training materials regarding safeguarding children during the arrest of parents, available for adoption by law enforcement throughout the United States.
- Ensuring that child-friendly visitation practices are established during a parent's incarceration, including regular contact with longer periods of visitation, child-appropriate security procedures, access to pre-approved family activities (such as a game or coloring), providing child-friendly settings for visitation within correctional facilities, training corrections staff how to interact with children and families, fostering open communication among caregivers, children, incarcerated parents, and supportive professionals, preparing children for visits; and supporting incarcerated parents in the visit process, and allowing more appropriate physical contact during visits.
- Facilitating additional means of contact between children and their incarcerated parents, such as letters, shared drawings, cards, or videos, email contact, and telephone calls.
- Disseminating materials that Sesame Street recently developed for young children with an incarcerated parent, including an animated depiction of a child's visit to a corrections facility, a story book, videos, and a caregiver guide (Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration, 2013; <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration>). The materials are available in both English and Spanish. The caregiver guide suggests ways for families to stay in touch with children's incarcerated parents, such as sending cards or making phone calls between visits in addition to covering topics such as how to talk to very young children about parental incarceration and how to handle common emotional reactions that children have when their parents are incarcerated. Because these materials are free (available on Sesame Street's website, and as a free app) corrections facilities and social service agencies can use them widely.
- Making non-contact visits more child-friendly, even though Plexiglas and video visits are not inherently child-friendly.<sup>28</sup> Suggestions include increasing privacy, decreasing wait time, giving a warning before visits end, including more information about visits on websites and adding links to resources for families with children, providing staff with additional training, recognizing the key role that children's caregivers play, preparing children and adults, and enhancing the content of visits through establishment of routines, using positive nonverbal communication, and having caregivers prompt children to facilitate conversations.
- Decreasing stigma and shame by educating society about the vulnerability of children with incarcerated parents and encouraging members of society to engage in compassionate behavior.
- Changing policies to decrease reliance on incarceration, increase alternatives to incarceration, and decrease sentence length when incarceration is deemed necessary.
- Conducting program evaluations to determine the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions offered to families of the incarcerated.

## References

1. Arditti, J. A. (2012). *Parental incarceration and the family: Psychological and social effects of imprisonment on children, parents, and caregivers*. New York: NYU Press.
2. Glaze, L. E., & Maruschak, L. M. (2008). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. (revised 3/30/10) Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>
3. Eddy, J.M. & Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (Eds.) (in press). *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents*, 2nd edition. NY: Springer.
4. Miller, K. M. (2006). The impact of parental incarceration on children: An emerging need for effective interventions. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23(4), 472-486.
5. Kaeble, D., & Cowhig, M. (April, 2018). *Correctional Populations in the United States, 2016*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus16.pdf>
6. Murphey, D., & Cooper, P. M. (2015). Parents behind bars: What happens to their children. *Child Trends*, 42, 1-22. Retrieved from [http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/BTB\\_23\\_4K\\_6.pdf](http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/BTB_23_4K_6.pdf)
7. Wakefield, S., & Wildeman, C. (2011). Mass imprisonment and racial disparities in childhood behavioral problems. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 10, 793-817.
8. Bowlby, J. (1982). Attachment and loss: Retrospect and prospect. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 52(4), 664.
9. Cassidy, J. (2016). The nature of the child's ties. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*, 3rd edition (pp. 3-22). New York: Guilford Press.
10. Rojas-Flores, L. (October 18, 2017). *Latino US citizen children of immigrants - A generation at high risk: Summary of Selected Young Scholars Program (YSP) Research*. Foundation for Child Development.
11. Yoshikawa, H., Kholoptseva, J., & Suárez-Orozco, C. (2013). The roles of public policies and community-based organization in the developmental consequences of parent undocumented status. *Society for Research in Child Development Social Policy Report*, 27, 1-23. Retrieved from [http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-News/spr\\_273.pdf](http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-News/spr_273.pdf)
12. Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss, vol. II: Separation* (Vol. 2). New York: Basic Books.
13. Kobak, R., Zajac, K., & Madsen, S. D. (2016). Attachment disruptions, reparative processes, and psychopathology: Theoretical and clinical implications. *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*, pp. 25-39. NY: Guilford Press.
14. Murray, J., Farrington, D. P., & Sekol, I. (2012). Children's antisocial behavior, mental health, drug use, and educational performance after parental incarceration: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(2), 175-210.
15. Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)
16. Hairston, C. F. (2007). *Focus on Children With Incarcerated Parents: An Overview of the Research Literature*. A report prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
17. Poehlmann-Tynan, J., & Arditti, J. A. (2017). Developmental and family perspectives on incarcerated parents. In C Wildeman, AR Haskins, & J Poehlmann-Tynan (Eds.) *When parents are incarcerated: Interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children*. Urie Bronfenbrenner Series on the Ecology of Human Development. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
19. Wildeman, C., Haskins, A. R., & Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (2017). *When Parents Are Incarcerated: Interdisciplinary Research and Interventions to Support Children*. APA Bronfenbrenner Series on the Ecology of Human Development. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Wakefield, S., & Wildeman, C. (2013). *Children of the prison boom: Mass incarceration and the future of American inequality*. Oxford University Press.
20. Wildeman, C., Goldman, A. W., & Turney, K. (2018). Parental incarceration and child health in the United States. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 40(1), 146-156.

21. Bell, M. F., Bayliss, D. M., Glauert, R., & Ohan, J. L. (2018). Using linked data to investigate developmental vulnerabilities in children of convicted parents. *Developmental Psychology, 54*(7), 1219-1231.
22. Poehlmann-Tynan, J., Burnson, C., Runion, H., & Weymouth, L. A. (2017). Attachment in young children with incarcerated fathers. *Development and Psychopathology, 29*(2), 389-404.
23. Dallaire, D. H., & Wilson, L. C. (2010). The relation of exposure to parental criminal activity, arrest, and sentencing to children's maladjustment. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*, 404-418.
24. Arditti, J. A. (2016). A family stress-proximal process model for understanding the effects of parental incarceration on children and their families. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice, 5*(2), 65-88.
25. Poehlmann-Tynan, J., & Pritzl, K. (in press). Parent-child visits when parents are incarcerated in prison or jail. In J. M. Eddy & J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Eds.) *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents*, 2nd edition. NY: Springer International Publishing.
26. Poehlmann, J., Dallaire, D., Loper, A. B., & Shear, L. D. (2010). Children's contact with their incarcerated parents: Research findings and recommendations. *American Psychologist, 65*(6), 575.
27. Young, D. & Smith, C. J. (2000). When moms are incarcerated: The needs of children, mothers, and caregivers. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 81*, 130-141.
28. Poehlmann-Tynan, J., Runion, H., Burnson, C., Maleck, S., Weymouth, L., Pettit, K., & Huser, M. (2015). Young children's behavioral and emotional reactions to plexiglas and video visits with jailed parents. In J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Ed.) *Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents* (pp. 39-58). Springer International Publishing.
29. Lee, R., Fang, X., & Luo, F. (2013). The impact of parental incarceration on the physical and mental health of young adults. *Pediatrics, 131*(4), e1188.
30. Shlafer, R. J., Poehlmann, J., Coffino, B., & Hanneman, A. (2009). Mentoring Children With Incarcerated Parents: Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy. *Family Relations, 58*(5), 507-519. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2009.00571.x>
31. Johnson, E. I. & Waldfogel, J. (2002). *Children of incarcerated parents: Cumulative risk and living arrangements*. Joint Center for Poverty Research. Retrieved from [www.jcpr.org](http://www.jcpr.org)
32. Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). *Child welfare practice with families affected by parental incarceration*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.
33. Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (Ed.) (2015). *Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents*. NY: Springer International Publishing.
34. Poehlmann, J. (2005). Children's family environments and intellectual outcomes during maternal incarceration. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*(5), 1275-1285.
35. Shlafer, R. J., & Poehlmann, J. (2010). Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment & Human Development, 12*(4), 395-415.
36. Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., & Sandstrom, H. (2017). Parent-child visiting practices in prisons and jails. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute White Paper. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/parent-child-visiting-practices-prisons-and-jails>
37. Dreby, J. (2015). *Everyday illegal: When policies undermine immigrant families*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), 245-258.
38. Hernandez, D. M. (2008). Pursuant to deportation: Latinos and immigrant detention. *Latino Studies, 6*, 35-63.
39. Bouchet, S. (2008). *Children and families with incarcerated parents: Exploring development in the field and opportunities for growth*. Retrieved from <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/children-and-families-with-incarcerated-parents-exploring-development-in-the-field-and-opportunities-for-growth.html>
40. International Association of Chiefs of Police (2014). *Safeguarding children of arrested parents*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance.