

MISSISSIPPI

Dads Matter: The Taxpayer Cost of Fatherlessness

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Executive Summary

Social science research shows engaged fathers are critical for a healthy society. By comparison, fatherlessness creates myriad costs, both social and economic. Studies show that fatherless children do not go as far in school, have more health problems, and are less financially secure as adults.¹

Other studies show fatherless boys are more likely to become men who enter the corrections system.² Still more research shows fatherless girls are more likely to become teenage mothers.³ Both incarceration and teenage pregnancy are strongly associated with the high school dropout rate.⁴

These results of fatherlessness are a tragedy for children, and taxpayers often bear the financial costs. More than 250,000 Mississippi children live in fatherless homes.⁵ This means fatherlessness is a problem taxpayers cannot afford to ignore. The Mississippi Office of the State Auditor compiled research to show how the costs of fatherlessness affect taxpayers and all Mississippians.

Fatherlessness costs taxpayers due to increased incarceration rates.

Fatherless children—particularly boys—are more likely to be incarcerated as children and adults than their peers with present fathers.⁶

This report estimated the number of fatherless male prisoners in Mississippi through research on fatherlessness, dropout rates, and incarceration rates. Research shows 70% of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes.⁷ Further, approximately 80% of incarcerated people are high school dropouts,⁸ and, as of 2021 in Mississippi, approximately

¹ See reports on [health problems](#) and [poverty](#).

² See Fatherhood Initiative [statistics](#).

³ See [research](#) from the Family Research Council.

⁴ See Mississippi Department of Health [report](#) and [study](#) on incarceration.

⁵ See Census [data](#).

⁶ See Heritage Foundation [report](#).

⁷ See [statistics](#).

⁸ See Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond [report](#).

90% of incarcerated people are males.⁹ This means nearly 9,800 imprisoned men—roughly 50% of Mississippi’s prison population—likely come from a fatherless home.

(Figure 1) According to research and public data, Mississippi spends approximately \$180 million each year to incarcerate men who came from a fatherless home.

$$19,426 \text{ Incarcerated People} \times \frac{8 \text{ High School Dropouts}}{10 \text{ Incarcerated People}} \times \frac{7 \text{ Fatherless Children}}{10 \text{ High School Dropouts}} \rightarrow$$

$$10,878 \text{ Fatherless Inmates} \times 90\% \text{ Male Population} \rightarrow 9,790 \text{ Fatherless Men in Prison}$$

$$9,790 \text{ Fatherless Men in Prison} \times \$50.63 \text{ per Inmate per Day} \rightarrow$$

≈ \$180.9 Million to Incarcerate Fatherless Men Annually

Fatherless male prisoners alone, by this estimation, cost the taxpayers approximately \$180 million per year to incarcerate in Fiscal Year 2020.¹⁰

Fatherless children struggle in school, which hurts our economy.

The absence of a father negatively affects a child’s education. Research shows father absence decreases the likelihood the child will graduate from high school.¹¹ Seventy percent of high school dropouts are fatherless children.¹²

Failing to obtain a high school diploma has numerous negative effects on both the individual and the economy. Several studies have shown high school dropouts are twice as likely to be unemployed or incarcerated and nearly four times as likely to receive government assistance as people who have obtained a high school diploma.¹³ Separate research found that high school dropouts cost the economy around \$292,000 over their lifetime due to lower tax revenues and other societal costs.¹⁴ Combined, these data suggest taxpayers will lose \$560 million attributable to fatherless students who dropped out of

⁹ See Mississippi Department of Corrections [2020 Annual Report](#).

¹⁰ See Mississippi Department of Corrections’ FY 2020 Cost Per Inmate Day [report](#).

¹¹ See [report](#).

¹² See [data](#) and previous note.²

¹³ See [unemployment](#), [earnings](#), [government assistance](#), and [incarceration](#) data for high school dropouts.

¹⁴ See [research](#) from Northwestern University study.

school during the 2021-2022 academic year alone.¹⁵ Figure 2 presents some of these challenges faced by high school dropouts.¹⁶

(Figure 2) Lower education attainment levels are associated with fatherless children. Those who do not complete high school are more likely to be unemployed, make less money, are more likely to receive government assistance, and are more likely to be incarcerated.

	Highest Level of Education	
	Some High School	High School Diploma
Unemployment Rates	13%	7%
Median Annual Earnings	\$26,000	\$32,000
Percentage on Government Assistance	67.9%	17.6%
Percentage Incarcerated	41.3%	22.6%

Fatherless girls are more likely to become pregnant in their teen years, again costing taxpayers.

Research shows fatherless girls are more likely to be sexually active and become pregnant as teenagers than girls with involved fathers.¹⁷ In addition, teenage pregnancy is often paired with dropping out of high school. Only half of teenage mothers obtain a high school diploma.¹⁸

Research also suggests the period of time in which a girl experiences fatherlessness is important.¹⁹ For example, girls who lived in fatherless homes as young children were up to eight times more likely to be pregnant as teenagers than young girls who lived in a home with a father.²⁰ The same research showed girls who lived in fatherless homes as older children were only two to three times more likely to be pregnant as teenagers than older girls who had present fathers.²¹

¹⁵ See Mississippi Department of Education [report](#).

¹⁶ See previous note.¹⁴

¹⁷ See Journal of Family Issues [report](#) on teen pregnancy.

¹⁸ See [report](#).

¹⁹ See National Library of Medicine [report](#).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

If fatherless girls are twice as likely to become teen mothers as their peers with present fathers, nearly 2,000 fatherless young women bore children in 2019.²² By combining this research with publicly available data, analysis shows taxpayers spent between \$51.1 and \$57.5 million as a result of fatherless teen mothers in 2019 alone.²³ This additional taxpayer expense is due to increased spending on foster care, the criminal justice system, etc.

Fatherlessness is a vicious cycle.

The cyclical nature of the problem exacerbates the risks of fatherlessness. Research shows fatherless children are more likely to commit a crime and enter the juvenile justice system than their peers who have fathers at home.²⁴ Further research shows juvenile criminals are likely to also be incarcerated as adults.²⁵ A recent national survey showed over half of incarcerated men each left nearly two young children in a home without them—beginning or continuing the cycle of fatherlessness in their own family.²⁶

Conclusion

Fatherlessness poses threats to both the economic and social wellbeing of Mississippi communities. Data suggest even a small decrease in the number of fatherless homes might save taxpayers money.²⁷ This report estimates that, through increased incarceration rates, increased education costs, and other drivers of taxpayer spending, Mississippi taxpayers will see an additional \$700 million in current and future spending obligations each year due to fatherlessness.

Countless studies prove our communities and families—along with the average taxpayer—would benefit from strong, engaged fathers and father figures in the lives of Mississippi's children. One program interrupting the cycle of fatherlessness is the Junior Reserve Officer's Training Corps (JROTC). Retired military service members teach this program for high school students. JROTC teaches military history, provides structure and discipline, and requires physical exercise. In a 2020 report, the Auditor's office noted nearly 100% of students

²² See 2019 Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) Births to Teen Mothers [report](#).

²³ This cost uses inflation-adjusted [MSDH](#) projections and the most recently reported teen birth rate ([2019](#)). Inflation [calculation](#) considers time from January 2010 to December 2019.

²⁴ See previous note.⁶

²⁵ See Massachusetts Institute of Technology [report](#).

²⁶ See United States Department of Justice [report](#).

²⁷ See MSDH [report](#) and Columbia University [report](#).

enrolled in the JROTC program at Jackson Public Schools obtained a high school diploma despite a 75% district-wide graduation rate.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has also taken the lead on promoting policies to address fatherlessness. DeSantis recently signed legislation to create a mentoring program for children from broken homes and a statewide campaign encouraging fathers to be involved in their children's lives.²⁸

Mississippi policymakers should expand programs like JROTC and consider new ways to address fatherlessness and mitigate its effects. Mississippi children, families, and taxpayers alike will be better for it.

²⁸ See [press release](#).