

# Vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents and siblings

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This study documents life course patterns of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents and siblings in the United States.

**Background:** The criminal legal system shapes family outcomes in important ways. Still, life course patterns of vicarious exposure to the system—especially to lower-level contacts—among parents and siblings are not well documented.

**Method:** Using longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Kaplan–Meier survival curves, and Cox regression models, we estimate cumulative risks of vicarious exposure to arrest, probation, and incarceration among parents ( $n = 3885$  parents; 185,444 person-years) and siblings ( $n = 1875$ ; 44,766 person-years) and examine disparities by race–ethnicity, gender, and education, and at their intersections.

**Results:** Vicarious exposure to the system is common—but highly unequal—among parents and siblings. Racially minoritized parents and siblings had greater levels and earlier risks of exposure. For example, by age 50, an estimated one in five Black parents experienced having a child incarcerated, a risk about twice as high as White and 50% higher than Latinx parents. By age 26, an estimated 6 in 10 Black young people with brothers experienced having a brother arrested; more than 4 in 10 experienced a brother on probation; and more than 3 in 10 experienced brother incarceration. For many estimates, racialized inequities in risks of vicarious system exposure widened at higher levels of education.

**Conclusion:** These findings provide essential context for understanding the role of the criminal legal system in maintaining and exacerbating family inequality.

**KEYWORDS**

criminal justice system, incarceration, longitudinal research, parents, race, siblings

**INTRODUCTION**

The rise of proactive policing, carceral supervision, and mass incarceration in the United States over the past several decades has played a critical role in shaping a variety of family outcomes and structuring broader patterns of family inequality. Each year more than 10 million people are arrested (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019), roughly 4.5 million are on some form of correctional supervision including probation or parole (Kaeble & Alper, 2020), and millions more are stopped by police. On any given day, more than 2 million people are incarcerated in prisons and jails (Walmsley, 2018). The rapid growth of the criminal legal system in the United States has had particularly devastating direct consequences for young men of color from poor families and neighborhoods (National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Sewell et al., 2016), whose high risks of system involvement in large part reflect racist policies and practices governing carceral surveillance and punishment (Alexander, 2020; R. A. Brown, 2019). Studies across disciplines document the especially high risks of criminal legal system contact for Black men with low levels of educational attainment, with estimates indicating that more than 60% of Black men without a high school degree can expect to be imprisoned by their mid-30s (Pettit & Western, 2004; Western & Wildeman, 2009).

The growth of the criminal legal system in recent years has extended the reach of carceral surveillance, control, and punishment into the lives of families and produced staggering disparities in familial connectedness to the system (Chung & Hepburn, 2018; Enns et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011). The disproportionate risks of arrest, correctional supervision, and incarceration among poor young Black boys and men, for example, mean that the family members of these young people also experience heightened levels of vicarious exposure to the system. Criminal legal system contacts have been linked to a host of negative spillover effects for family members, including strained or reduced relationship quality (Bacak & Kennedy, 2015; Turney & Sugie, 2021; Williams & Perry, 2019), increased health risks (Brown et al., 2016; Goldman, 2019; Patterson et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2014), shortened life expectancy (Sundaresh et al., 2021), and declines in household economic resources (Sykes & Maroto, 2016). In these ways, the expansion of police surveillance and punitive punishment over the past several decades had harmful consequences both for system involved young people and for the family members who care for and about them.

Still, despite increased attention to the spillover effects of family criminal legal system contacts, we lack estimates of many forms of family connectedness to the system in ways that restrict research, intervention, and policy efforts (Lee et al., 2015). While a large body of research on familial connectedness to the system focuses on estimates of child exposure to parental imprisonment (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011; Wildeman, 2009), there is less evidence of patterns of parental connectedness to their children's system involvement and young people's vicarious exposure to sibling involvement in the system. Both parental and sibling connectedness to the criminal legal system have been associated with a variety of negative outcomes (Goldman, 2019; Green et al., 2006; Miller, 2021; Tadros et al., 2020; Wildeman & Lee, 2021), but more descriptive empirical evidence of the unequal patterning of these particular forms of family connectedness to the system is needed. Further, research in this area largely focuses on documenting patterns of exposure to incarceration, but less is known about family connectedness to other forms of system involvement, especially lower-level contacts like arrest and probation. While levels of incarceration are high, risks of other forms of system contact are even

higher (Hepburn et al., 2019), suggesting that estimates of familial connectedness to the criminal legal system may be grossly underestimated if they focus solely on incarceration and exclude lower-level contacts. These limitations should be concerning for family researchers for several reasons; they not only restrict scholarly understanding of the role of the criminal legal system in shaping family outcomes but also hinder our ability to inform and design effective policies and interventions aimed at reducing the system's adverse impacts on families and improving family well-being, more generally (Wakefield et al., 2016).

Using nationally representative, longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), this study links data on young people and their families to document life course patterns of parental and sibling vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system, including vicarious exposure to arrest, probation, and incarceration. We pay particular attention to disparities in risks by race–ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES), as well as at the intersections of these systems of stratification, revealing striking patterns of within and between group inequality and highlighting the critical importance of intersectional frameworks for understanding these inequities (Few-Demo, 2014). In addition to examining disparities in levels of vicarious system exposure, we also assess disparities in the life course timing of vicarious exposures. In doing so, we show that racially minoritized parents and siblings—especially Black parents and siblings—face both *greater* overall risks of vicarious exposure and *earlier* risks, with implications for a host of life course and family outcomes, including family health, relationship quality, and socioeconomic well-being, among others.

By focusing on the parents and siblings of system involved young people and drawing attention to the unequal burden imposed by the system's surveillance and control in the lives of racially minoritized families, in particular, our study provides essential context for understanding the role of the state in shaping family life and producing, maintaining, and exacerbating disparities across a variety of family outcomes. One way that structural racism is maintained over time is through its covertness, insidiousness, and invisibility (Gaby et al., 2021; Harris-Perry, 2011). A lack of understanding of the true scope of the criminal legal system leads to a collective misrecognition of its role in racial inequality, generally, and family inequities, specifically. The descriptive facts documented in this study can therefore be used in pursuit of agenda for transformative change aimed at equity and justice. Such an agenda must be attuned to the many intersecting agencies and institutions—including those governing policing, prisons and jails, correctional supervision, child welfare, public education, and immigration, among others—that make up the carceral state and effectively regulate and punish poor and racially minoritized families, in particular (Roberts, 2000, 2017; Wacquant, 2020).

## BACKGROUND

### The uneven expansion of the criminal legal system in the United States

Between 1970 and 2010, the incarcerated population in the United States increased roughly eightfold (Travis et al., 2014). Though the number of people incarcerated has slowly declined over the past decade (Phelps & Pager, 2016), the United States is still a global leader in imprisonment. Over the same period, mass probation expanded alongside mass incarceration in the United States (Phelps, 2017, 2020), with probation being the most frequent form of correctional supervision among convicted individuals. In 2007, 1 in every 53 adults—including 1 in 12 Black men—was on probation (Phelps, 2017). In addition to high levels of imprisonment and supervision, residents of the United States also experience high levels of police surveillance. In 2011, nearly 63 million individuals aged 16 or older—more than a quarter of the United States population—had at least one contact with the police in the previous 12 months (Langton & Durose, 2016).

Scholars identify a shift to “tough-on-crime” policies and the widespread expansion of proactive policing as critical factors contributing to the growth of the criminal legal system over the past 70 years. Punitive policies increased mass incarceration by expanding use of prison sentences for lower level offenses, increasing minimum sentences and time served, and hypercriminalizing drug possession and use (Phelps & Pager, 2016; Travis et al., 2014). The shift to proactive policing—a strategy that involves proactively deploying law enforcement officers to “high crime” areas in an effort to prevent crime before it occurs—also played an important role in the expansion of the criminal legal system by increasing law enforcement’s surveillance of and interactions with predominately Black and Latinx communities and neighborhoods, in particular (National Academies of Sciences, 2017). Together, these shifts in carceral policies and policing practices contributed to heightened levels of system involvement for individuals, families, and communities.

The criminal legal system’s increased surveillance and punishment has fallen disproportionately on poor communities and communities of color, with research providing convincing evidence that policies and practices governing policing, correctional supervision, and incarceration are not race neutral and instead reflect the U.S.’s long history of structural racism (Alexander, 2020; R. A. Brown, 2019). Compared with White people, Black and Latinx individuals are more likely to be stopped, searched, and arrested by police (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Black men are more than three times as likely as White men to be under system supervision through probation or parole (Phelps, 2017), and Black and Latinx men face higher rates of conviction and more punitive sentences when convicted compared with White men charged with similar offenses (Rehavi & Starr, 2014). Among men 20–40 years old, Black men are seven times more likely and Latinx men nearly three times more likely to have a felony conviction than White men (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

## Patterns of family connectedness to the criminal legal system

Importantly, contacts with the criminal legal system not only have direct consequences for system involved young people; these experiences reverberate through families and further extend the reach of the system (Chung & Hepburn, 2018; Enns et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Wildeman, 2021). As the system has grown over the past several decades, so too has the number of families left in its wake. Though family member connectedness to the criminal legal system is now a common experience among American families, it is also wildly unequal, with individual-level disparities in police contact and punitive punishment producing staggering inequities in familial connectedness to the system.

A growing body of evidence shows that Black and Latinx individuals are more likely than Whites to experience the arrest, supervision, and incarceration of family members (Chung & Hepburn, 2018; Enns et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Wildeman, 2009). The overwhelming majority of research in this area focuses on patterns of family member incarceration, including parental incarceration. Studies find that Black and Latinx children are more likely than White children to have a parent incarcerated (Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Wildeman, 2009), and Black parents are more likely to experience the incarceration of their adult children than White parents (Goldman, 2019; Green et al., 2006; Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Research by Lee et al. (2015) showed that Black women experienced especially high levels of familial incarceration, with 44% of Black women reporting having a family member in prison, compared with 12% of White women. More recent data showed that nearly half of all Americans have experienced having a family member in prison, with the highest prevalence for African American and Hispanic individuals (Enns et al., 2019; Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Importantly, these recent studies show that having a sibling incarcerated was the most common form of family member incarceration (Enns et al., 2019; Lee & Wildeman, 2021).

While there is a prominent socioeconomic gradient in family connectedness to the criminal legal system (Enns et al., 2019), studies also show that having a family member incarcerated is a

relatively common experience even among highly educated, high earning Black individuals. Recent estimates indicate that Black individuals with a college degree are as likely to have a family member imprisoned as Whites with less than a high school degree (Enns et al., 2019; Wildeman & Lee, 2021). At similar levels of wealth, Black individuals experience higher incarceration risks than Whites (Zaw et al., 2016), which again suggests relatively high levels of vicarious exposure among Black families across the socioeconomic distribution. Taken together, research in this area indicates that familial connectedness to the criminal legal system is simultaneously racialized, class stratified, and gendered, with significant consequences for broader patterns of family inequality.

## Consequences of system surveillance and punishment for families

Though they were not typically directly involved in the situations that resulted in their family member's arrest, carceral supervision, and/or imprisonment, families still experience the harms of system involvement (Lee & Wildeman, 2021). As Miller (2021) describes in writing about the collateral damages of imprisonment for families,

The story of mass incarceration in America is bigger than American jails and prisons, even with their two million captives. And it's bigger than probation and parole, even with the five million people held in the prison of their homes through ankle bracelets, weekly drug tests, and GPS technology ...[Prison] lives on through the grandmothers, lovers, and children forced to share their burdens because they are never really allowed to pay their so-called debt to society (p. 8).

Vicarious exposure to criminal legal system through family member involvement has been associated with a host of negative outcomes, with much of the work in this area focused on the deleterious effects of parental incarceration for children (Foster & Hagan, 2007; Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2014; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011). Among adults, family member incarceration has been associated with increased physical (Goldman, 2019; Lee et al., 2014; Sirois, 2020) and mental health risks (Brown et al., 2016; Goldman, 2019; Patterson et al., 2021), shortened life expectancy (Sundaresh et al., 2021), and declines in household wealth (Sykes & Maroto, 2016). A relatively small but growing number of studies further show that arrests and other forms of police contact have detrimental impacts on family members. For example, recent research links family member police encounters to relationship quality (Turney & Sugie, 2021; Williams & Perry, 2019) and health risk (Turney & Jackson, 2021). Research suggests that women and girls may be particularly vulnerable to the collateral harms of familial system involvement given their multiple social roles as caretakers and their disproportionate responsibility in providing social support to family members who are system involved (Lee et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2021; Wildeman & Lee, 2021).

Studies in this area generally conceptualize family contacts with the criminal legal system as stressors, shocks, and turning points that fundamentally alter family well-being. The life course notion of linked lives suggests that events and transitions not only have direct effects for individuals but also have important consequences for others, including family members (Settersten Jr, 2015). Consistent with this idea, an individual's contact with the criminal legal system can affect their family members through a variety of mechanisms. Family members may experience financial burdens stemming from fines and fees (Harris et al., 2010) and keeping in touch with and providing material support to system involved people (Allen, 2017; Braman, 2007; Miller, 2021; Western et al., 2015). A family member's system involvement can serve as a source of stigma and shame and disrupt and deteriorate the quality of social relationships between family members (Braman, 2007; Tadros et al., 2020). In general, family member system contacts serve as sources of extreme stress, worry,



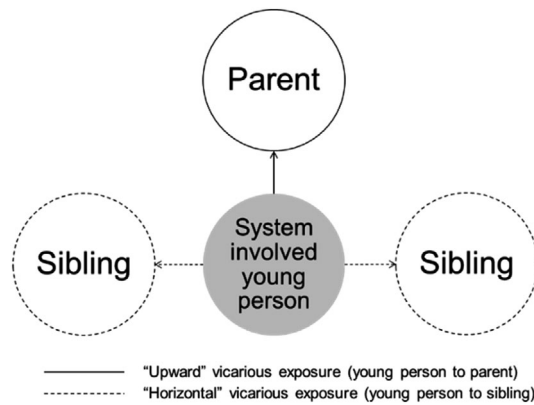
and loss (Allen, 2017; Brown et al., 2016; Comfort, 2007; Miller, 2021; Tadros et al., 2020) in ways that shape a variety of individual- and family-level outcomes.

Importantly, disparities in family connectedness to the criminal legal system can both reflect and reinforce macrolevel systems of inequality, including structural racism. As described, the expansion of carceral surveillance, supervision, and punishment has disproportionately impacted structurally oppressed and disadvantaged families in the United States, including poor families and families of color. These families also experience a host of other disadvantages that often precede family member system involvement, including high levels of health risks and exposure to violence (Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Contacts with the criminal legal system further destabilize and disadvantage these already structurally vulnerable families. In these ways, racial–ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic disparities in vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system can serve as a mechanism of cumulative dis/advantage across a host of family outcomes (Roberts, 2000; Sirois, 2020; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman & Muller, 2012).

## Contributions of the present study

Despite increased empirical attention to patterns of family member incarceration and the consequences of family member system involvement, there is limited empirical evidence of many forms of family connectedness to the criminal legal system, including life course patterns of vicarious exposure to lower-level system contacts among parents and siblings. This lack of descriptive estimates restricts understanding of the true scope of the system in the lives of families and impedes efforts to reduce or mitigate the system's collateral damages (Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Wakefield et al., 2016). Using nationally representative longitudinal data on young people and their parents and siblings, the present study examines age patterns of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents and siblings, including cumulative risks of exposure to arrest, probation, and incarceration. Building on work showing how familial connectedness to the criminal legal system is highly unequal, we assess racial–ethnic, gender, and educational disparities in parental and sibling vicarious exposure to the system—as well as inequities the intersections of these systems of inequality—as parents and siblings age.

We advance scientific understanding of family patterns of connectedness to the criminal legal system in four key ways. First, we focus on vicarious exposure among parents and siblings. A large body of work examines patterns of child exposure to parental incarceration, but there has been less attention to “upward” vicarious exposure to the system from children to parents or “horizontal” patterns of exposure between siblings (De Neve & Kawachi, 2017; Sirois, 2020), as shown in Figure 1. Estimates of parental and sibling connectedness to the criminal legal system are particularly important for understanding the reach and role of the system in American family life, as young people's contacts with the criminal legal system may have especially grave collateral impacts on parents and siblings. For one, parent–child and sibling relationships are among the strongest and most influential of family ties (Brody, 2004; Conger & Little, 2010; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), suggesting that young people's involvement with the system may be a particularly salient source of stress, worry, and hardship for parents and siblings. While the generally strong nature of parent–child and sibling relationships can be a source of meaning and fulfillment in good times, these relationships can be a source of strain and tension during hard times, such as when young people are arrested, on probation, or incarcerated and increasingly rely on their parents and siblings for emotional and material resources (Braman, 2007). Further, age-specific rates of criminal legal system contacts reveal that encounters with the system often begin early in the life course—starting in childhood and surging during adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Brame et al., 2012). This is a time when many young people still reside with and receive substantial guidance and support from parents and siblings, again suggesting that contacts with the system during these early life periods may be particularly



**FIGURE 1** “Upward” and “horizontal” vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system

consequential for families. Indeed, a growing body of work shows that young people’s incarceration has negative consequences for both parents (Goldman, 2019; Green et al., 2006; Sirois, 2020) and siblings (Miller, 2021; Tadros et al., 2020). Still, patterns of “upward” and “horizontal” vicarious exposure to the system among are not widely documented. This study therefore centers on risks of vicarious system exposure among parents and siblings.

Second, we estimate risks of vicarious exposure to contacts along the criminal legal system continuum, including vicarious exposure to arrest, probation, and incarceration. Previous estimates of family member connectedness to the criminal legal system largely focus on incarceration but exclude other types of lower-level system contact, like arrest and probation. Given that proactive policing and mass probation have expanded alongside mass incarceration in the United States (National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Phelps, 2017), estimates of vicarious exposure to the system that focus solely on incarceration likely dramatically underestimate the reach of the system into families. Witnessing and/or experiencing the arrest of a family member is a highly stressful, disruptive, and burdensome experience for family members (Comfort, 2007; Turney & Jackson, 2021; Turney & Sugie, 2021; Williams & Perry, 2019). Similarly, probation can have a number of direct and indirect effects on family members, especially co-residential family members whose homes can be subject to searches and surveillance and who may be at risk of housing displacement if they reside with system involved individuals (Comfort, 2007). Family members can experience financial hardship as a result of the fines and fees associated with arrest and probation, even if individuals are never incarcerated (Harris et al., 2010). In these ways, understanding the role of the criminal legal system in the lives of families requires broadening the scope of study beyond incarceration to include other forms of system contact.

Third, drawing on the life course perspective (Kuh, 2003), we use nationally-representative longitudinal survey data from the PSID to improve understanding of how risks of vicarious exposure to the system evolve as parents and siblings age. Studies of family connectedness to the system typically rely on cross-sectional data, which are unable to estimate prospective patterns of risks across the life course. Still, theoretical insights from and empirical applications of the life course perspective suggest that it is not only *whether* social exposures like family member criminal legal system involvement occur that matters for families, but the life course *timing* of the exposures also has implications for family outcomes (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). For example, whether young people experience the arrest, probation, or incarceration of their siblings as children, in adolescence, or later in adulthood likely has varying consequences for life chances, well-being, and relationships. Further, disparities in the life course timing of vicarious system exposure may play an important role in patterning inequities in family outcomes, such as health, relationship quality, and socioeconomic well-being. Indeed, research shows that

structurally disadvantaged families experience both higher overall risks and earlier risks of vicarious system exposure. For example, Chung and Hepburn (2018) documented striking racial disparities in the life course timing of family member incarceration, showing that Black Americans first experienced family member imprisonment at age 7, on average, compared with age 39 among Whites. In this study, we assess disparities in the life course timing of vicarious system exposure among parents and siblings to shed light on how inequities in the life course timing of vicarious exposure might contribute to patterns of family inequality.

Finally, this study includes data on women and Latinx individuals and families and deploys an intersectional approach to improve understanding how systems of social stratification pattern risks of various exposure to the system among parents and siblings. Women are often excluded from estimates of criminal legal system involvement, despite evidence that women make up an increasingly large share of individuals arrested and incarcerated (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). The patterns, predictors, and consequences of system involvement also vary by gender (Patterson et al., 2021; Wildeman & Lee, 2021), further indicating the need for estimates of direct and vicarious system exposure among women. Additionally, because most research in this area uses administrative data that lack detailed race–ethnicity information, less is known about the criminal legal system experiences of Latinx young people and their families, who make up a large and growing segment of the U.S. young adult population (Urban Institute, 2016).

In addition to diverse samples, we also deploy an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009) to investigate how systems of social stratification jointly shape risks of family connectedness to the criminal legal system. This approach acknowledges that systems of domination and oppression like racism, sexism, and social class exploitation are mutually constituted and work in tandem to shape risks of vicarious criminal legal system exposure among parents and siblings. In response to an overwhelming body of scholarship focused on the experience of Black men as the primary targets of carceral surveillance, control, and punishment, Ocen (2013) called for an “unshackling” of intersectionality to better reflect the simultaneously racialized, gendered, and classed nature of carceral logic and practice in the United States. At the same time, family scholars have increasingly called for the integration of intersectional, feminist, and critical race theories into family science research (Allen & Henderson, 2022; Burton et al., 2010; Few-Demo, 2014). Still, there are few estimates of family connectedness to arrest, probation, and incarceration by race–ethnicity, gender, and SES—as well as at the intersections of these systems of stratification. By documenting inequities in vicarious system exposure not only by race–ethnicity, gender, and education but also at the intersection of these systems of stratification, this study advances understanding of how these structures jointly shape risks of vicarious exposure among families.

In providing estimates of cumulative risks of vicarious system exposure among parents and siblings as they age, findings from this study provide essential context for understanding the roles of policing, carceral supervision, and mass incarceration in patterning family life in the United States. By focusing on disparities in risks by race–ethnicity, gender, and education—as well as at their intersections—this study also offers new insights into the role of the criminal legal system in generating, maintaining, and exacerbating structural inequalities with devastating consequences for families.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data

This study uses data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID; <https://psidonline.isr.umich.edu/>), which is the longest running nationally-representative longitudinal study of individuals and their families in the United States. The PSID started in 1968 with an original



sample of roughly 18,000 individuals in 5000 families. The PSID grows naturally as the children and grandchildren of PSID families age and participate in the study, and in 2019, the PSID had grown to include more than 26,000 individuals from more than 9000 families. Since 1997, the PSID has interviewed respondents biennially. The PSID is ideal for this study because of its rich longitudinal data on individuals and families, including detailed information about young people's contacts with the criminal legal system.

We use data from both the Transition to Adulthood Supplement (TAS) and the main file of the PSID. Our primary exposure measures—which include information on young people's contacts with the criminal legal system—come from the TAS, which began in 2005. The original TAS cohort followed young people from the Child Development Supplement (CDS), who were 0–12 years old in 1997, as they transitioned to adulthood. Our data on siblings also comes from the TAS. We use data from seven waves of the TAS: 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017. In addition to the TAS, we also link information about young people and their system involvement to their parents, who are in the main file of the PSID (survey waves between 1968 and 2017).

## Analytic samples

Analytic samples include 3885 parents (185,444 person-years) and 1875 siblings (44,766 person-years) of TAS respondents. The full TAS sample from waves 2005–2017 includes 4058 individual respondents. We excluded respondents who were missing information on criminal legal system involvement, parental education, and those who did not identify as White, Black, or Latinx or were missing race altogether, leaving 3883 TAS respondents with complete information. We matched 5162 parents from the core PSID with at least one of these 3883 TAS respondents; we excluded 1200 of these parents who were not part of the 1997 core PSID sample. After excluding 77 parents who did not identify as White, Black, or Latinx or who had missing data on the covariates, we had a final sample of 3885 parents. For the sibling sample, we matched a total of 5745 siblings to the sample to TAS respondents. Of these respondents, we retained 2533 siblings who were also part of the CDS and TAS. We excluded 658 respondents who were not enrolled in the original 1997 wave of the Child Development Survey (CDS), giving us a final sample of 1875 siblings. Because of concerns about smaller samples at older ages, we censor our observation of parents at age 50 and siblings at age 26. More detailed information about sample sizes by age is available in Appendix S1.

Because of small sample sizes ( $n < 20$ ), we do not show results stratified by child gender for Latinx parents with college+. Instead, we only show parental exposure among all Latinx parents (daughters and sons combined) with this level of education. Similarly, we do not show results stratified by parental education for Latinx siblings whose parents have some college or college+. Instead, we show sibling exposure among all Latinx siblings (brothers and sisters combined) and those with a high school education or less.

## Measures

Our outcome variables include the age at which parents/siblings first experienced the arrest, probation, and incarceration of their child/sibling. Beginning in 2005, the TAS asked respondents in each survey wave whether they had ever been arrested, on probation, and/or incarcerated and the age at which the experience occurred. Additionally, during their first TAS interview, when respondents were 18 years old, respondents were asked about whether and at what age they had contacts with the criminal legal system during childhood and adolescence. Using this information, we are able to generate complete criminal legal system contact histories

for the TAS respondents from childhood through early adulthood (through age 26). We link information about the TAS respondents' contacts with the criminal legal system to their parents and siblings to create measures reflecting the age when the parents/siblings first experienced the arrest, probation, and incarceration of their child/sibling. For parents with multiple children and young people with multiple siblings, these measures reflect the age at which any of their children/siblings were first arrested, on probation, and incarcerated.

We measure time in our study using parent/sibling age (years). We further examine patterns of system exposure by parent/sibling race–ethnicity (1 = “non-Latinx White”; 2 = “non-Latinx Black”; 3 = “Latinx”) and parental education (1 = “HS or less”; 2 = “some college”; 3 = “Bachelor’s degree or higher”). We use the self-identified race of parents and siblings in our analyses, which are over 96% concordant with the self-identified race of their children and siblings for White and Black respondents and 81%–92% concordant among Latinx respondents. Supplementary analyses using the race–ethnicity of children/siblings provided substantively similar results. In the analyses of parent connectedness to the system, the measure of parental education reflects the parent’s highest level of educational attainment; in the sibling analyses, the measure of parental education reflects the educational attainment of the respondents’ highest educated parent. Supplementary analyses separating less than high school from high school completion and using a measure of maternal education provided substantively similar results. We also show results by gender of the system involved young person (for parents, showing results by parents of daughters and sons separately; for siblings, showing results by siblings of sisters and brothers). For these gender-stratified analyses, denominators (e.g., the “at risk” populations) include only parents with sons or daughters and siblings with brothers or sisters, respectively.

## Methods

We begin with weighted descriptive statistics, which describe our study populations. We then use Kaplan–Meier survival curves to estimate parent and sibling age patterns of cumulative risks of vicarious exposure to the arrest, probation, and incarceration of their children/siblings. The use of Kaplan–Meier survival curves allows us to define the cumulative probability of experiencing vicarious contacts with the criminal legal system as parents and siblings age while accounting for attrition and censoring. At each age, “failure” probabilities are calculated as the number of parents/siblings whose child/sibling had been arrested, on probation, or incarcerated divided by the number of parents/siblings at risk. Cumulative probabilities of failure at each age are then calculated by multiplying all the probabilities of failure at all preceding ages. We use the cumulative probabilities of “failure” at each age to determine cumulative risks of parent/sibling vicarious exposure arrest, probation, and incarceration at each age.

In our presentation of results, we focus on inequities in risks by parent/sibling race–ethnicity, gender of the system involved young person, and parental educational, as well as the intersections of these dimensions of inequality. To assess the statistical significance of group differences in risks, we use Cox regression models and Wald tests, which are preferred to log-rank tests when using survey weighted data. In presenting results for parents, we highlight risks at ages 40 and 50 to illustrate how these risks evolve as parents age. For the sibling analyses, we highlight risks of vicarious exposure at ages 18 and 26, which represent the end of the adolescent period and the transition to adulthood.

All estimates are weighted to correct for survey design effects using the 1997 nationally-representative baseline weights for respondents. For parents, 1997 baseline weights come from the main file of the PSID. For siblings, 1997 baseline weights come from the CDS. The PSID provides additional weights that include model-based adjustments for attrition, but these weights are not available for the full sample of parents and siblings. Results using alternative weighting strategies produced substantively similar results.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Table 1 provides weighted descriptive statistics for parents and siblings. These descriptive statistics provide preliminary evidence of the commonality of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents and siblings (an estimated 31% of all parents and 27% of all siblings had some form of vicarious exposure by age 50 and 26, respectively), with parents of sons and siblings with brothers having especially elevated risks.

### Cumulative risks among parents

Age patterns of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents by race–ethnicity are in Figure 2, which shows patterns stratified by parents of sons (Panels A–C) and daughters (Panels D–F), as well as overall risks among parents regardless of child gender (Panels G–I).

As seen across Figure 2, Black parents generally face the greatest risks of exposure, particularly Black parents of sons. While we found significant racialized disparities in parental exposures among parents with sons, the racial–ethnic disparities in exposures among parents with daughters were smaller in magnitude and statistically insignificant. At age 40, an estimated 16% of Black parents had experienced their child being arrested, compared with 6% of White ( $p < .001$ ) and 12% of Latinx parents ( $p = .005$ ). By age 50, an estimated 37% of Black parents had a child arrested, a risk higher than experienced by White (21%;  $p < .001$ ) and Latinx (26%;

**TABLE 1** Weighted descriptive statistics

	Parents with:			Siblings with:		
	Sons <i>n</i> = 2404	Daughters <i>n</i> = 2471	Any children <i>n</i> = 3885	Brothers <i>n</i> = 1038	Sisters <i>n</i> = 1052	Any siblings <i>n</i> = 1875
Parent/sibling race–ethnicity (%)						
White	72%	73%	73%	64%	65%	66%
Black	15%	14%	15%	17%	14%	16%
Latinx	13%	13%	12%	19%	21%	18%
Parental education (%)						
HS or less	32%	34%	33%	34%	34%	33%
Some college	33%	31%	33%	27%	26%	27%
College+	34%	35%	35%	39%	40%	40%
Vicarious child/sibling criminal legal exposure (%)						
Never arrested (i.e., no contact)	64%	83%	69%	67%	83%	73%
Ever arrested	36%	17%	31%	33%	17%	27%
Ever on probation	20%	8%	17%	20%	9%	16%
Ever incarcerated	16%	7%	14%	15%	8%	13%
Parent/sibling age (mean years)						
Age at first child/sibling arrest	45.0	45.3	45.1	17.3	18.0	17.5
Age at first child/sibling prob.	45.1	45.8	45.4	17.7	18.3	17.8
Age at first child/sibling incar.	45.4	46.2	45.7	18.3	18.9	18.5

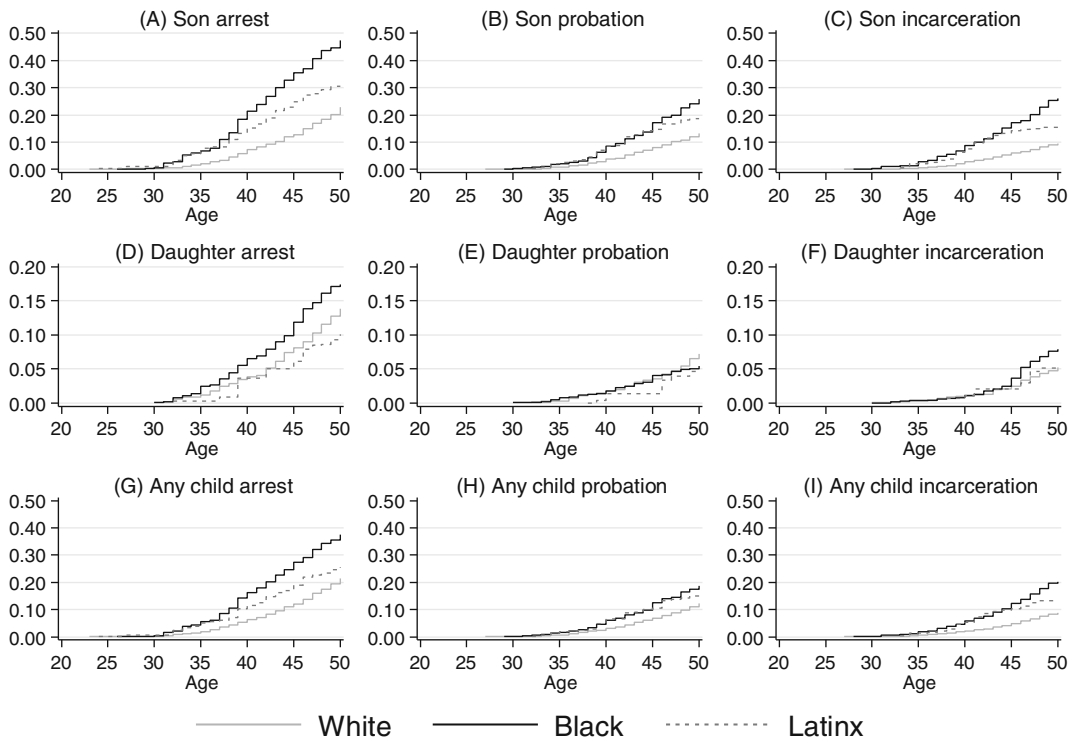
*Note:* Weighted descriptive statistics. Categories of criminal legal system involvement are not mutually exclusive (e.g., all those who have ever been on probation or incarcerated have also been arrested). Vicarious exposure comes from last wave of observation.

$p = .004$ ) parents. Given gendered patterns of policing, parents of sons experienced higher vicarious exposure to arrest (Figure 2, Panel A) than parents of daughters (Figure 2, Panel D). By age 50, we estimated that nearly half (47%) of Black parents with sons had a son arrested, which was higher than the risks faced by White (23%;  $p < .001$ ) and Latinx (31%;  $p = .003$ ) parents.

Life course patterns of vicarious exposure to child probation by race–ethnicity are in Panels B (parents of sons), E (parents of daughters), and H (all parents) of Figure 2. By age 50, an estimated 13% of parents had experienced having a child on probation, with striking disparities by race–ethnicity. An estimated 26% of Black parents with sons had a son on probation by age 50, which is double the risk experienced by White parents (13%;  $p < .001$ ).

Panels C, F, and I show life course patterns of parental exposure to child incarceration. By age 50, an estimated 20% of all Black parents—including 26% of Black parents of sons—had a child incarcerated. We estimated that 14% of Latinx parents and 9% of White parents had a child incarcerated by age 50.

Table 2 provides additional estimates of parental exposures at the intersections of race–ethnicity, gender, and parental education and reveals a strong educational gradient in parental risks of vicarious exposure—with parents with the lowest levels of educational attainment facing the greatest risks—that is simultaneously highly racialized. Among parents with a high school education or less, an estimated 33% had a child arrested by age 50, compared with 13% among parents with a college degree or higher. Still, even within educational categories, Black parents—especially Black parents of sons—generally faced the greatest risks.



**FIGURE 2** Age patterns of parental risks of vicarious system exposure by race–ethnicity and child gender.

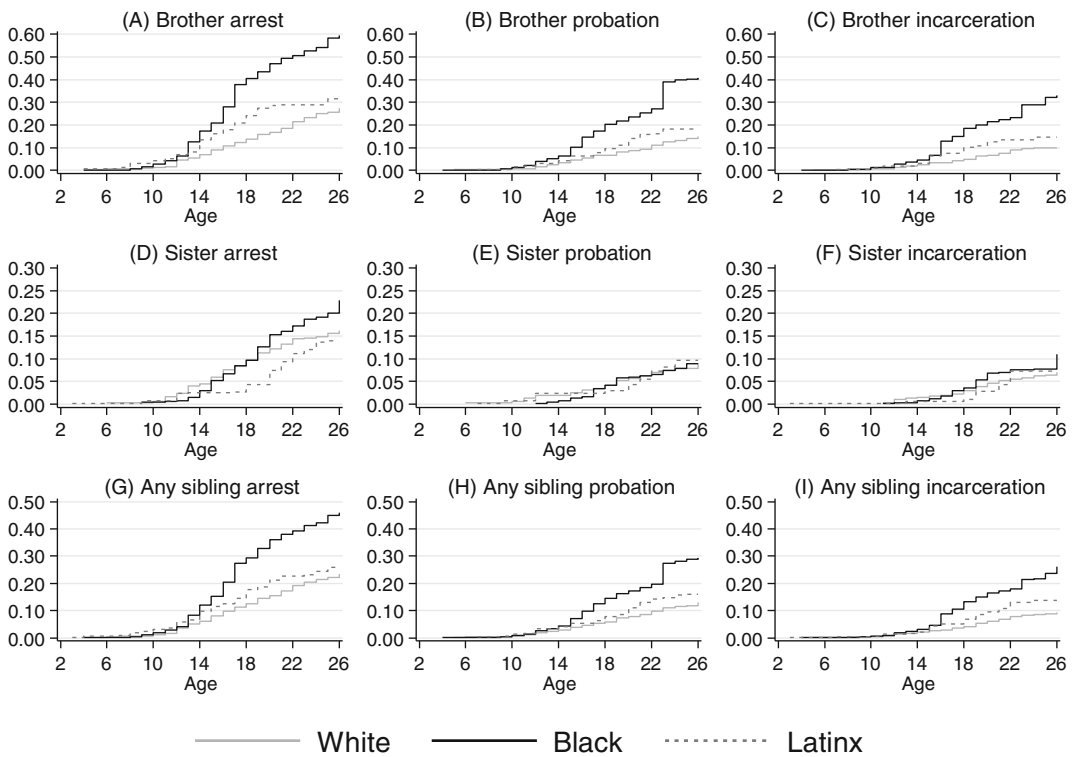
Weighted Kaplan–Meier estimates of cumulative risks of vicarious exposure to child arrest, probation and incarceration among parents by age, child gender, and parent race–ethnicity.  $n = 185,444$  person-years from 3885 unique individuals with children (including 114,415 person-years from 2404 unique individuals with sons and 119,100 person-years from 2471 unique individuals with daughters)

**TABLE 2** Cumulative risks of vicarious system exposure at age 50 among parents by race-ethnicity, child gender, and parental education

	Parents with sons				Parents with daughters				All parents			
	Parental education				Parental education				Parental education			
	HS or less	Some Coll.	Coll.+	Total	HS or less	Some Coll.	Coll.+	Total	HS or less	Some Coll.	Coll.+	Total
<b>Child arrest</b>												
White	0.35 <sup>†</sup>	0.25 <sup>††</sup>	0.13 <sup>†</sup>	0.23 <sup>††</sup>	0.24 <sup>‡</sup>	0.15	0.07 <sup>†</sup>	0.14 <sup>†</sup>	0.34	0.24 <sup>†</sup>	0.12 <sup>†</sup>	0.21 <sup>††</sup>
Black	0.51 <sup>††</sup>	0.51 <sup>*</sup>	0.34 <sup>*</sup>	0.47 <sup>††</sup>	0.19 <sup>‡</sup>	0.20	0.09 <sup>*</sup>	0.17 <sup>††</sup>	0.40 <sup>‡</sup>	0.42 <sup>*</sup>	0.26 <sup>*</sup>	0.37 <sup>††</sup>
Latinx	0.32 <sup>†</sup>	0.42 <sup>*</sup>		0.31 <sup>*†</sup>	0.10 <sup>*†</sup>	0.11		0.10 <sup>†</sup>	0.27 <sup>†</sup>	0.29	0.16	0.26 <sup>*†</sup>
Total	0.37	0.31	0.15	0.28	0.20	0.15	0.07	0.14	0.33	0.28	0.13	0.24
<b>Child probation</b>												
White	0.24	0.13 <sup>†</sup>	0.07 <sup>†</sup>	0.13 <sup>††</sup>	0.12 <sup>‡</sup>	0.08	0.03	0.07	0.21	0.13 <sup>†</sup>	0.07 <sup>†</sup>	0.12 <sup>†</sup>
Black	0.32	0.26 <sup>*</sup>	0.14 <sup>*</sup>	0.26 <sup>*</sup>	0.07	0.06	0.02	0.05	0.22	0.20 <sup>*</sup>	0.10 <sup>*</sup>	0.19 <sup>*</sup>
Latinx	0.22	0.12 <sup>*</sup>		0.19 <sup>*</sup>	0.06	0.05		0.05	0.19	0.10 <sup>*</sup>	0.05 <sup>*</sup>	0.15 <sup>*</sup>
Total	0.25	0.15	0.08	0.16	0.1	0.08	0.03	0.07	0.20	0.14	0.07	0.13
<b>Child incarceration</b>												
White	0.16 <sup>†</sup>	0.11 <sup>†</sup>	0.05 <sup>†</sup>	0.10 <sup>†</sup>	0.11	0.06	0.01	0.05 <sup>†</sup>	0.16 <sup>†</sup>	0.10 <sup>†</sup>	0.04 <sup>††</sup>	0.09 <sup>††</sup>
Black	0.31 <sup>*</sup>	0.25 <sup>*</sup>	0.19 <sup>*</sup>	0.26 <sup>*</sup>	0.08	0.12	0.01	0.08 <sup>*</sup>	0.22 <sup>*</sup>	0.22 <sup>*</sup>	0.13 <sup>*</sup>	0.20 <sup>*</sup>
Latinx	0.18	0.18		0.16 <sup>*</sup>	0.06	0.05		0.05	0.16	0.13	0.03 <sup>*</sup>	0.14 <sup>*</sup>
Total	0.19	0.14	0.06	0.13	0.09	0.06	0.01	0.06	0.17	0.12	0.05	0.11

*Note:* Kaplan Meier survival estimates of cumulative risks of having a child arrested, on probation, or incarcerated by parent race-ethnicity, child gender, and parental education. *n* = 185,444 person-years from 3885 unique individuals with children (including 114,415 person-years from 2404 unique individuals with sons and 119,100 person-years from 2471 unique individuals with daughters). \*Significantly different than White subgroup (Wald test; *p* < .05); †Significantly different than Black subgroup (Wald test; *p* < .05); ‡Significantly different than Latinx subgroup (Wald test; *p* < .05).





**FIGURE 3** Age patterns of sibling risks of vicarious system exposure by race-ethnicity and gender. Weighted Kaplan–Meier estimates of cumulative risks of vicarious exposure to sibling arrest, probation and incarceration among young people by age, gender of system involved young person, and race-ethnicity.  $n = 44,766$  person-years from 1875 unique individuals with siblings (including 24,441 person-years from 1038 unique individuals with brothers and 25,616 person-years from 1052 unique individuals with sisters)

Among parents with a high school education or less, an estimated 51% of Black parents with sons experienced having a son arrested by age 50, compared with 35% of White and 32% of Latinx parents of sons. Among parents with sons, the racial disparity in son arrest widened at higher levels of education, with college-educated Black parents of sons having nearly triple the cumulative risk of experiencing a son's arrest by age 50 than college-educated White parents of sons (34% vs. 13%, respectively;  $p < .001$ ). By age 50, we estimated that 19% of college-educated Black parents with sons experienced a son being incarcerated, a risk nearly four times greater than that experienced by college-educated White parents with sons (5%;  $p < .001$ ). The racialized disparities in parental risks were generally less prevalent among parents with daughters, and in some cases, White parents faced higher risk of having a daughter arrested, on probation, or incarcerated compared with Black parents of daughters with similar levels of education.

### Cumulative risks among siblings

Age patterns of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among siblings by race-ethnicity are in Figure 3, which shows patterns stratified by young people with brothers (Panels A–C) and sisters (Panels D–F), as well as overall risks among siblings (Panels G–I). Overall, results in Figure 3 show that having a sibling being arrested, on probation, and/or incarcerated is a relatively common early-life exposure for young people. Still, results in Figure 3 reveal striking

**TABLE 3** Cumulative risks of vicarious system exposure at age 26 among siblings by race-ethnicity, gender, and parental education

	Young people with brothers				Young people with sisters				Young people with any siblings			
	Parental education				Parental education				Parental education			
	HS or less	Some Coll.	Coll+	Total	HS or less	Some Coll.	Coll+	Total	HS or less	Some Coll.	Coll+	Total
<b>Sibling arrest</b>												
White	0.37 <sup>†</sup>	0.34 <sup>†</sup>	0.20 <sup>†</sup>	0.27 <sup>†</sup>	0.29	0.18	0.10 <sup>**</sup>	0.16	0.34 <sup>†</sup>	0.28 <sup>†</sup>	0.17 <sup>†</sup>	0.23 <sup>†</sup>
Black	0.68 <sup>**†</sup>	0.62 <sup>*</sup>	0.42 <sup>*</sup>	0.60 <sup>**†</sup>	0.23	0.22	0.23 <sup>**†</sup>	0.23	0.53 <sup>**†</sup>	0.44 <sup>*</sup>	0.34 <sup>*</sup>	0.46 <sup>**†</sup>
Latinx	0.28 <sup>†</sup>			0.32 <sup>†</sup>	0.14			0.14	0.27 <sup>†</sup>	0.28		0.26 <sup>†</sup>
Total	0.41	0.40	0.23	0.34	0.22	0.19	0.11	0.17	0.36	0.31	0.18	0.27
<b>Sibling probation</b>												
White	0.21 <sup>†</sup>	0.18 <sup>†</sup>	0.11	0.15 <sup>†</sup>	0.16	0.08	0.06 <sup>‡</sup>	0.09	0.19 <sup>†</sup>	0.14	0.09	0.13 <sup>†</sup>
Black	0.56 <sup>**†</sup>	0.36 <sup>*</sup>	0.19	0.41 <sup>**†</sup>	0.12	0.06	0.04	0.09	0.41 <sup>**†</sup>	0.23	0.15	0.29 <sup>**†</sup>
Latinx	0.15 <sup>*†</sup>			0.18 <sup>*†</sup>	0.09			0.10	0.16 <sup>*†</sup>	0.20		0.16 <sup>*†</sup>
Total	0.27	0.23	0.12	0.20	0.13	0.10	0.06	0.09	0.23	0.17	0.10	0.16
<b>Sibling incarceration</b>												
White	0.15 <sup>†</sup>	0.15 <sup>†</sup>	0.06 <sup>†</sup>	0.10 <sup>†</sup>	0.12	0.10	0.04 <sup>†</sup>	0.07	0.14 <sup>†</sup>	0.13	0.05 <sup>†</sup>	0.09 <sup>†</sup>
Black	0.45 <sup>**†</sup>	0.26 <sup>**†</sup>	0.19 <sup>*</sup>	0.33 <sup>**†</sup>	0.11	0.09	0.15 <sup>**†</sup>	0.11	0.33 <sup>**†</sup>	0.19	0.20 <sup>*</sup>	0.26 <sup>**†</sup>
Latinx	0.17 <sup>†</sup>			0.15 <sup>†</sup>	0.07			0.07	0.16 <sup>†</sup>	0.11		0.14 <sup>†</sup>
Total	0.23	0.15	0.08	0.15	0.10	0.10	0.04	0.08	0.19	0.14	0.07	0.13

*Note:* Kaplan Meier survival estimates of cumulative risks of having a sibling arrested, on probation, or incarcerated by race-ethnicity, gender of system involved young person, and parental education ( $n = 44,766$  person-years from 1875 unique individuals with siblings, including 24,441 person-years from 1038 unique individuals with brothers and 25,616 person-years from 1052 unique individuals with sisters). <sup>\*</sup>Significantly different than White subgroup (Wald test;  $p < .05$ ). <sup>†</sup>Significantly different than Black subgroup (Wald test;  $p < .05$ ). <sup>\*\*</sup>Significantly different than Latinx subgroup (Wald test;  $p < .05$ ).

racial–ethnic disparities in risks, with Black young people with brothers having the greatest risks of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system.

Black young people faced the greatest risk of having a sibling arrested. As seen in Panel A of Figure 3, the risks of brother arrest for Black young people surged in adolescence, producing a divergence of risks by race–ethnicity relatively early in the life course. By age 18, an estimated 40% of Black young people with brothers had experienced a brother being arrested, compared with 24% of Latinx ( $p = .001$ ) and 14% of White ( $p < .001$ ) young people with brothers. The racial–ethnic disparities in experiencing brother arrest diverged with age such that, by age 26, we estimate that 60% of Black young people with brothers had a brother arrested, a risk more than twice as high as experienced by White (27%;  $p < .001$ ) and Latinx (32%;  $p = .002$ ) young people with brothers.

Risks of sibling probation and incarceration followed similar racial–ethnic and gendered patterns. By age 18, an estimated 8% of young people with siblings experienced having a sibling on probation and 6% had experienced sibling incarceration. By age 26, these overall risks roughly doubled, reflecting broader age patterns of criminal legal system involvement. Again, Black young people with brothers experienced the greatest risks of sibling probation and incarceration. An estimated 41% of Black young people with brothers had a brother on probation and 33% experienced having a brother incarcerated by age 26, risks that are substantially higher than those experienced by White (15% and 10%, respectively,  $p < .001$ ) and Latinx (18%,  $p = .004$  and 15%,  $p = .008$ , respectively) young people.

Table 3 displays cumulative risks of sibling exposure at age 26 at the intersections of race–ethnicity, gender, and parental education. Consistent with the estimates for parents in Table 2, there was a socioeconomic gradient in sibling risks of vicarious exposure—with siblings whose parents had a high school education or less having the greatest risks—that was simultaneously highly racialized and gendered.

For example, among young people with siblings whose highest educated parent had a high school education or less, an estimated 36% had a sibling arrested and 19% had a sibling incarcerated by age 26, which sharply contrasted with the risks among young people whose highest educated parent had a college education or more (18% experienced sibling arrest and 7% had a sibling incarcerated by age 26). Still, the educational gradient in risks of vicarious sibling exposure was highly racialized, especially among young people with brothers. Among those whose highest educated parent had a high school education or less, an estimated 68% of Black, 37% of White, and 28% of Latinx young people with brothers experienced having a brother arrested by age 26. The Black–White disparity in brother arrest widened among young people whose highest educated parent had some college, where Black young people with brothers had roughly double the estimated risk of experiencing a brother arrested than White young people. Black young people with brothers whose highest educated parent had a high school education or less also had more than double the risk of experiencing brother probation and three times the risk of experiencing brother incarceration compared with White ( $p < .001$ ) young people with similar levels of parental education. The racial–ethnic disparities in sibling risks of vicarious exposure in Table 2 are generally less prevalent among young people with sisters, though there was a strong educational gradient in Black–White disparities in the risk of sister arrest and incarceration. Black young people with college-educated parents experienced over twice the risk of sister arrest ( $p = .03$ ) and three times the risk of sister incarceration ( $p = .008$ ) than White youth with college-educated parents.

## DISCUSSION

The unprecedented growth of the American criminal legal system over the past several decades has had tremendous consequences for families and patterns of family inequality. The impacts of criminal legal system involvement are not limited to system involved individuals, but these experiences reverberate in families, with a growing body of research documenting a host of

negative spillover effects of criminal legal system involvement for family members. Still, despite increased attention to the collateral consequences of criminal legal system contacts for families, we lack estimates of many forms of family connectedness to the system in ways that restrict family research, intervention, and policy. In particular, most studies of family connectedness to the criminal legal system focus on imprisonment, with less attention to vicarious exposure to other forms of system contact like arrest or probation. Further, life course patterns of vicarious exposure among parents and siblings—including disparities in these “upward” and “horizontal” family exposures by race–ethnicity, gender, education, and at the intersections of these dimensions of stratification—remain to be better understood. Using nationally-representative, longitudinal data on young people and their parents and siblings, this study estimated cumulative risks of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system—including vicarious exposure to arrest, probation, and incarceration—among parents and siblings as they aged, paying particular attention to the life course patterning of racial–ethnic, gender, and educational disparities in risks. By examining risks across the criminal legal continuum at the intersections of multiple axes of stratification across the life span, our results revealed striking patterns of within and between group inequality, with consequences for a host of family outcomes. Taken together, findings from this study provide important context for understanding the reach of the criminal legal system in families and the role of the system in producing, maintaining, and exacerbating disparities in family well-being.

Our findings showed that having a child or sibling arrested, on probation, and/or incarcerated is a relatively common experience, but it is highly unequal, with Black and Latinx parents and siblings facing particularly high risks. By age 50, we estimated that roughly one in four parents had a child involved in the criminal legal system. By age 26, we estimated that more than one in four young adults with siblings had experienced having a sibling arrested, on probation, and/or incarcerated. The ubiquity of this experience in families reflects the expansion of carceral surveillance and punishment in the United States over the past several decades and has important implications for a host of family outcomes. As Braman (2007, p. 112) wrote, “were this something that few families faced, it might be overlooked. But our criminal justice system is pulling millions of families into its orbit, slowly draining them of emotional and material resources.” Our results show that experiencing having a child or sibling arrested, on probation, and/or incarcerated is not rare or exceptional in the United States; it is a relatively common family experience—one that remained largely invisible for quite some time. As such, efforts by family researchers and practitioners to interrogate and reduce family inequities must acknowledge and seek to understand and redress the carceral context in which U.S. families live and age.

Despite the ubiquity of these experiences, our results also revealed tremendous inequities in risks, including especially staggering racial–ethnic inequities that were simultaneously stratified by gender and education. Informed by an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Few-Demo, 2014), findings from this study revealed how macrolevel structures of stratification jointly pattern family connectedness to the system within and between groups. In particular, Black and Latinx parents of sons and Black young people with brothers—especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged families—faced the greatest risks of vicarious exposure. By age 50, we estimated that nearly half of Black parents of sons experienced having a son arrested, a risk that was more than double that of White parents of sons and more than 50% higher than Latinx parents with sons. Black parents of sons were more than twice as likely as White parents of sons and over 50% more likely than Latinx parents of sons to have a son incarcerated by the time they were 50. Our results showed similarly staggering racial–ethnic disparities among siblings, where we documented especially high risks of vicarious exposure among young Black people with brothers. By age 26, an estimated 6 in 10 Black young people with brothers had experienced having a brother arrested; more than 4 in 10 had experienced a brother on probation; and more than 3 in 10 had a brother incarcerated. These risks were substantially higher than those experienced by White and Latinx young people.

Levels of system involvement among women were generally lower, though we still document disparities at the intersection of race–ethnicity and parental education. For example, by age 26, Black young people with a college-educated parent were more than twice as likely to experience sister arrest and three times more likely to experience a sister being incarcerated than White young people with a college-educated parent. These heightened risks among racially minoritized families reflect the highly unequal and discriminatory nature of policing, carceral control, and punitive punishment regimes in the United States (Alexander, 2020; R. A. Brown, 2019), which systematically target and disproportionately burden poor young Black men, in particular (National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Pettit & Western, 2004; Sewell et al., 2016). The growth of the criminal legal system in the United States did not happen in a race-neutral fashion (Alexander, 2020), and neither did the expansion of carceral logic embedded in and deployed by other institutions, such as those governing child welfare, health and human services, and public education (Roberts, 2000, 2017; Wacquant, 2020). As reflected in our results, Black families have been the primary targets of carceral surveillance, control, and punishment. Racialized inequities in family exposures to the criminal legal system can therefore both reflect and reinforce structural racism.

Our results also provided new evidence of educational gradients in vicarious risks of system exposure among parents and siblings. A main advantage of this study its use of nationally representative survey data, which—unlike the most administrative data—allowed for examining individual- and family-level socioeconomic disparities in risks. We examined parental risks of vicarious exposure by parental education and sibling risks of exposure by levels of parental education. Results showed strong educational gradients in parental and sibling risks that were simultaneously highly racialized and gendered. Risks of vicarious exposure were generally highest among parents with low levels of education and young people with low levels of parental education, consistent with evidence that carceral surveillance, control, and punishment disproportionately burden socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, families, and communities (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). Still, our results showed that, even within parental educational categories, Black parents and siblings generally faced the highest risks. In fact, for many estimates, racial–ethnic disparities widened at higher levels of education. Consistent with findings from Zaw et al. (2016) showing that Black individuals experienced higher risks of incarceration than Whites with similar levels of wealth, our results suggest that socioeconomic gradients in risks are not equivalent by race–ethnicity, with Black and, to some extent, Latinx parents and siblings with similar levels of individual and parental education having greater risks than their White counterparts.

Taken together, these results suggest that racism patterns risks of vicarious exposure among parents and siblings through several interconnected pathways. For one, racism produces highly racialized distributions of SES, including education, in ways that pattern risks of vicarious system exposure among parents and siblings. Centuries of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and violence have produced high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage among Black and Latinx families relative to White families (Darity & Mullen, 2020). Socioeconomically disadvantaged families and communities—who are disproportionately Black and Latinx—experience heightened levels of carceral surveillance, control, and punishment (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015), which suggests that the racial–ethnic stratification of socioeconomic resources and opportunities is a critical pathway underlying racial–ethnic disparities in system involvement. Still, as documented in this study, even highly educated Black and Latinx parents and siblings with high levels of parental education face high risks of vicarious exposure compared with Whites with equivalent levels of education. These findings are consistent with a growing body of work indicates that the policies and practices governing policing and punishment in the United States are not “colorblind” and instead reflect and reinforce structural racism (Alexander, 2020; R. A. Brown, 2019). That the realities of system’s impact on racial minoritized families has not been fully documented or accounted for is in and of itself a form of racial violence; its invisibility allows for a misrecognition of the true impact of the



criminal legal system and a perpetuation of the inequities that result from its reach (Gaby et al., 2021; Harris-Perry, 2011). Taken together, findings from this study showed that carceral surveillance and punishment disproportionately impact socioeconomically disadvantaged Black—and to some extent, Latinx—men, with collateral consequences for their parents and siblings. These results underscore the importance of critical theory (Allen & Henderson, 2022; Burton et al., 2010) and intersectional frameworks and analyses (Few-Demo, 2014) that jointly consider how racism, gender inequality, unequal class relations, and other systems of domination and oppression pattern risks of system involvement within and between families.

Another contribution of this study is that we expand on studies of family connectedness to incarceration by also estimating risks of vicarious exposure to lower-level contacts, including arrest and probation. While levels of incarceration in the United States are high, risks of other forms of system involvement are even higher (National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Phelps, 2017). Results in Tables 2 and 3 show that roughly twice as many parents and young people experience having a child/sibling arrested than experience a child/sibling incarcerated. We also find evidence of tremendous inequities in non-incarceration forms of vicarious system exposure, with important implications for a host of family outcomes. For example, among Black young people with brothers and low levels of parental education, more than two in three had experienced having a brother arrested and more than one in two had a brother on probation by age 26, risks that are significantly higher than those experienced by White and Latinx young people. These results indicate that estimates of family connectedness to the system that focus solely on incarceration drastically underestimate the reach of the system in families and mask tremendous racial-ethnic disparities in vicarious exposure to non-incarceration system contacts.

Drawing on the life course perspective, our study advances understanding on patterns of family connectedness to the criminal legal system by examining disparities in the life course timing of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents and siblings. In doing so, we showed that Black and Latinx parents and siblings not only faced greater overall risks of cumulative vicarious exposure to the system, but their first vicarious exposures also occurred earlier in the life span. For example, cumulative risks of son incarceration among White parents with sons at age 50 (an estimated 10% of White parents had a son incarcerated by age 50) are similar to cumulative risks experienced by Black parents of sons roughly 9 years earlier (an estimated 10% of Black parents had experienced a son being incarcerated by age 41). At age 26, an estimated 27% of White young people with brothers had experienced their brother being arrested; this cumulative risk is similar to the risk experienced by young Black people with brothers roughly 10 years earlier (an estimated 28% of Black young people had a brother arrested by age 16). Among Black young people with siblings, in particular, vicarious exposures to the system through siblings started relatively early in childhood and surged across adolescence and early adulthood; these are especially sensitive life course periods during which stressful and traumatic experiences like having a sibling arrested, on probation, or incarcerated have the potential to fundamentally alter life-long patterns of development and well-being (Ben-Shlomo, 2002; Sawyer et al., 2012). Across Figures 2 and 3, results showed that Black and Latinx parents and siblings not only experience earlier vicarious system exposure than Whites but—consistent with theories of cumulative dis/advantage—racial-ethnic disparities in vicarious system exposure further diverge with age. Given that the timing of social exposures plays a critical role in patterning outcomes (Boen, 2020; Kuh, 2003), our findings suggest that group differences in the life course timing of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system may be a mechanism producing divergent trajectories of well-being among parents and siblings across a host of outcomes.

Despite its advances, this study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, given strongly gendered patterns of policing and punishment, we stratify our analyses by the gender of system involved young person. Because of sample size concerns, we could not simultaneously stratify by the gender of parents and siblings and the gender of the system involved young person. Still, the impacts of family connectedness to the system are likely

gendered (Lee et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2021; Wildeman & Lee, 2021), so further investigations of the gendered nature of vicarious system exposure is needed. Second, we are also unable to examine geographic variation in risks, though this is an important area for future research given regional, state, and local differences in criminal legal system policies and practices. Third, given data constraints, we cannot distinguish jail from prison or assess other forms of system involvement, like police stops. Finally, to complement the use of administrative records in previous research, this study self-reported survey data on arrests, probation, and incarceration, which may be subject to reporting errors and recall bias. Future research should use complementary methodologies and data sources to triangulate findings.

Regardless of whether they themselves have ever been arrested, on probation, or incarcerated, the family members and loved ones of those who have been swept up into the system feel, deal, and live with the collateral damages of carceral surveillance and punishment (Braman, 2007; Comfort, 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Miller, 2021; Wildeman & Lee, 2021). Because the expansion of proactive policing, carceral supervision, and mass incarceration over the past several decades has occurred so unevenly—by purposively and more indirectly targeting the most structurally marginalized individuals and communities—those collateral damages have been disproportionately shouldered by poor and racially minoritized families, who not only experience greater overall risks of vicarious system exposure but earlier risks at younger ages. Given the pervasiveness of the system, generally, and the staggering inequities in system involvement, specifically, it is essential that family scholars be attuned to the roles of carceral surveillance, control, and punishment in shaping family outcomes and patterning, maintaining, and exacerbating family inequality. Transformative change aimed at dismantling structural inequities produced by the criminal legal system and supporting families impacted by the system requires having a clear picture of the scope of the problem. Continued scholarly attention to the reach and role of the criminal legal system in shaping family life and in generating broader patterns of family inequality can be used in support of radical change in pursuit of equity and justice. Such an agenda should resist an over-reliance on reformist interventions focused on marginal changes in favor of transformative change that dismantles the many interconnected practices, politics, and systems that punish disenfranchised and marginalized families and communities and charts a new course toward freedom and justice.

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