

# FOCUS ON CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS



An Overview  
of the Research  
Literature



**A Report Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

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## The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for vulnerable children and families in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother.

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## Introduction

What is it like to grow up with a parent in prison? What are the immediate and long-term effects of parental incarceration on children? How can we best serve the needs of these children and ensure that they receive the support they need to thrive under challenging circumstances?

These are questions that still need to be answered. Research that focuses on children whose parents are incarcerated has been quite limited, despite the growing numbers of children who are affected by the imprisonment of their mother or father.

Over 1.5 million children in the United States have a parent who is in prison.<sup>1</sup> Several million more have grown up with a parent in prison during some part of their formative years.

The children of incarcerated parents have long been an almost invisible population, but in recent years, they have begun to receive attention from public policymakers, traditional social service providers and academic researchers. Some, concerned about the rapidly growing correctional population of more than two million people,<sup>2</sup> fear that these children are at a higher risk to become incarcerated themselves as adults. Others are motivated by a desire to better understand and promote the well-being of children living in challenging life circumstances.

As government and foundations begin to support research and expand the development of programs and services for incarcerated parents and their children, it is an opportune time to review the research and resources that exist around this complex issue. *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents* provides an overview of major research findings concerning children whose parents are incarcerated. The report is intended to serve as a foundation for this developing area of service and

inquiry, and its focus is on the children themselves.

Although imprisonment is a global issue, and similar situations and concerns may affect other countries, *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents* is confined primarily to studies about prisoners and their children in the United States.

This overview is based primarily on research published during the last 20 years, though some earlier works are included. It also draws on several years of consultation on programs and research involving prisoners and their families.

In my work, I have had the opportunity to communicate with many prisoners and their families. Where possible, I have drawn from these to provide context for topics covered, interpret research findings and support proposed policy and program directions.

In general, published research and my own observations confirm that incarceration of a parent is a challenging and potentially traumatic event for children. The arrest and removal of a mother or father from a child's life forces that child to confront emotional, social and economic consequences that may trigger behavior problems, poor outcomes in school and a disruption or severance of the relationship with the incarcerated parent that may persist even after the parent is released from prison.

The incarceration of a parent may present a more complicated challenge for the child than other types of parental absence because of the added effects of social, community and institutional stigma. Although child development theories are useful in exploring the effects of parental incarceration on children, research is needed to better understand how the effects of parental incarceration differ from other types of parent-child separations and other childhood trauma. Studies that compare children of incarcerated

1. Mumola, 2000

2. Sabol, Minton, & Harrison, 2007

fathers and mothers and that provide information on differences for boys and girls, children of different age groups and children from different racial and cultural backgrounds are also needed.

The notion that children whose parents are imprisoned are several times more likely than other children to be incarcerated when they become adults is widely accepted as fact in scholarly, political and bureaucratic circles. There is no solid evidence, however, to support this assertion and its continued use in policy arenas is highly questionable. Children whose parents are in prison are exposed, however, to many factors such as parental substance use and poverty that place their well-being at risk.

Some research indicates that facilitating and maintaining contact between incarcerated parents and their children can be beneficial to the child and to the family as a whole.

However, parents and children may find it difficult to maintain contact during the incarceration period. Divisive factors include: unaffordable collect-call charges for phone calls made from prison; unsympathetic, hostile and restrictive prison visiting policies; remote and hard-to-visit prison locations and strained family relationships.

Incarceration can lead to family rifts that do not 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 re-integrate and re-establish ties with their children.

A range of programs and services exist to help incarcerated parents establish, maintain and strengthen relationships with their children. Parent education programs offered in the prisons, parent-child visiting programs, child-in-residence programs, mentoring programs and counseling and support groups all offer different types of support with varying degrees of success. However, further research is needed to determine the efficacy of these programs and make the best use of scarce resources.

Although too little research is available to establish best practices, *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents* concludes with the presentation of key findings drawn from the existing body of research and my own experience and observations, accompanied by policy suggestions and practice guidelines that may contribute to best practices in the future.

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## BY THE NUMBERS

A statistical profile of incarcerated parents

The most comprehensive source of statistics on children of incarcerated parents in the United States is the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, designed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and conducted by the Bureau of the Census from June through October, 1997.

This survey consists of personal interviews with a representative sample of the 1.3 million individuals housed in state and federal prisons. Researchers gathered a range of information on 12,663 prisoners, including their family background and status. Women made up 20 percent of the sample, although they account for only six percent of the prison population nationally. The ethnic mix of the sample was representative of the prison population at that time; 50 percent African-American, 35 percent Caucasian and 17 percent Hispanic.

The survey results illustrate inmates' pre-prison domestic arrangements and provide insight into their parental roles and family relationships before and during incarceration.

Most importantly, the numbers tell us that parenthood is a reality for most incarcerated adults, male and female.

The numbers also reveal that the image of the traditional nuclear family does not represent the experience of most parents in prison. Three in four parents were divorced or unmarried. Most mothers, but fewer than half of fathers, in state prisons had one or more of their children living with them at

the time of their arrest. Nearly one third of women and four percent of men were single parents living alone with their children. Studies of parents in prison show that before going to prison, some parents have all or some of their children living with them; while, some have none. In addition, children in the same family may have different mothers or fathers.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous parents whose children did not live with them were still involved in their children's lives. Many of the fathers surveyed in one study who did not live with their children saw them regularly; two-thirds said they also supported them financially.<sup>2</sup> In another study, mothers who did not live with their teenage daughters before incarceration rated their relationships with their daughters as very good or excellent.<sup>3</sup>

When mothers are incarcerated, their children are most often cared for by grandparents or other relatives. The majority of fathers indicate, however, that their children are cared for by the child's other parent. About two percent of fathers and 10 percent of mothers indicate that they have children in foster care. The number may be higher as many incarcerated parents do not have up-to-date information on their children or do not view state-sponsored kinship care as a form of foster care.

1. Hairston, 1991, 1995

2. Ibid.

3. Lawrence-Wills, 2004

## By the numbers – statistics from the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities

### Parental and spousal status of incarcerated individuals

The majority of prisoners had children under age 18. Eighty-six percent of prisoners' minor children were under 10 and 22 percent were under five. The majority of parents had either never been married or were divorced.

Family Status	State	Fed
Percentage of prisoners who are parents of dependents under age 18	55%	63%
Percentage of women who are parents	65%	59%
Percentage of men who are parents	55%	63%
Percentage of incarcerated parents who are married	23%	36%
Percentage of incarcerated parents who are divorced	28%	25%
Percentage of incarcerated parents who were never married	48%	38%

### Children's living arrangements before parental incarceration

Prior to their admission, 46 percent of all imprisoned parents lived with any of their minor children. The majority of mothers and nearly half of fathers lived in the same homes as their children before incarceration. Overall, only 20 percent of fathers and 12 percent of mothers lived with their children and a spouse prior to incarceration. However, many parents reported maintaining contact with their children even if they did not live with them.

Living Arrangements	State	Fed
Percentage of mothers who had at least one minor child living with them before incarceration	64%	84%
Percentage of mothers who lived as a single parent, with no other adults in the household before incarceration	31%	35%
Percentage of mothers who lived with their children and spouse prior to incarceration	12%	20%
Percentage of fathers who had at least one minor child living with them before incarceration	44%	55%
Percentage of fathers who lived as a single parent, with no other adults in the household before incarceration	4%	4%
Percentage of fathers who lived with their children and spouse prior to incarceration	19%	30%

### Children's living arrangements during parental incarceration

Overall, 80 percent of incarcerated parents said their children were living with the other parent; 18 percent said grandparents and other relatives were caring for them.

Incarcerated mothers report their children are living:	State	Fed
With fathers	28%	31%
In foster care	10%	3%
With grandparents	53%	45%
With other relatives	26%	34%
With friends or other	10%	12%

Incarcerated fathers report their children are living:	State	Fed
With mothers	90%	92%
In foster care	2%	1%
With grandparents	13%	10%
With other relatives	5%	5%
With friends or other	4%	6%

Percentages add to more than 100% because some prisoners had multiple children living with multiple caregivers.



## STAYING IN TOUCH

### Parent-child contact during incarceration

An examination of the 1997 survey data on state prisoners indicates that most children's contact with their parents in prison is irregular or nonexistent. Since being admitted to prison, more than half of parents with minor children had never seen any of their children.

**Gender and ethnicity are associated with the likelihood that incarcerated parents will maintain contact.**

It is likely that the number of children who had not seen their parents since they entered prison is higher than this number reflects. This is because parents provided information for at least one of their children, but not necessarily for all of them. Since many parents with two or more children had different levels of contact with them prior to imprisonment, these different patterns might continue during incarceration. Prison rules and restrictions, the distances involved, increased family tensions and the effects of stigma all hamper the communication between incarcerated parents and their children.

### Gender and ethnic differences

The likelihood that incarcerated parents will maintain contact with their children appears to be based in part on their gender and ethnicity.

Mothers in prison stay in touch with their children more than fathers in prison, and African-American incarcerated parents of either gender maintain connections more than parents of other ethnicities.

Sixty-one percent of Hispanics and 60 percent of Caucasians had not visited with their children in-person since they were incarcerated, compared to 55 percent of African-Americans. Twenty-four percent of African-Americans reported monthly visits with their children, compared with 21 percent of Caucasians and 20 percent of Hispanics. The numbers are similar for phone contact; 33 percent of African-Americans maintained weekly phone calls with their children, compared to 26 percent of Caucasians and 22 percent of Hispanics. Conversely, 50 percent of Hispanics, 45 percent of Caucasians and 33 percent of African-Americans had never spoken with any of their children by phone. Divided by gender, 31 percent of mothers and 42 percent of fathers had never talked with any of their children by phone.<sup>1</sup>

1. Hairston, Rollins and Jo's 2004 analysis of the 1997 Survey data

### Methods of communication

Two thirds of mothers and half of fathers sent and/or received mail from their children at least monthly, making it the most common method of staying in touch.

Phone calls were the second most common means of communication, with 54 percent of mothers and 42 percent of fathers maintaining monthly contact by phone.

A much smaller group of families sustain regular in-person visits. Overall, 25 percent of mothers and 22 percent of fathers reported having visits with one or more of their children at least monthly.

### Distance makes a difference

Prison location affected prisoners' visits with their children. The farther prisoners were from their homes, the greater the likelihood that they would have had no visitors in the past month. Of the prisoners whose homes were within 50 miles of the prison where they were placed, 54 percent had one or more visitors in the past month compared with 44 percent who lived from 50 to 100 miles, 30 percent who lived 101 to 500 miles and 16 percent who lived over 500 miles away. The negative association between visits and miles from home held for male and female prisoners as well as for different ethnic groups.

### Maintaining contact: phone calls

Phone calls help many incarcerated parents to talk regularly with their children and other family members. Most correctional institutions in the United States do not allow children or other family members to call incarcerated persons, but incarcerated persons can initiate calls to their children.

Phoning is a convenient way for incarcerated parents to maintain contact with their children, and prisoners and families generally welcome this form of communication. At the same time, they identify some drawbacks. The costs of phoning, restrictions on placing collect calls and difficulty scheduling calls that work with their children's schedules or bedtimes are some of the issues.

Since being admitted to prison, more than half of parents with minor children had never seen any of their children.

Also, phone calls from prisons are usually monitored or recorded and limitations are placed on the time when calls can be placed, the number and/or names of persons on each prisoner's call list and the length of time before a call is automatically terminated. In addition, most calls must be placed collect from the prison and billed to the individual responsible for the receiving phone line.

### A communication breakdown

Some children's caregivers accept the collect calls and budget for them accordingly; others are unable or unwilling to do so. They may block collect calls, refuse to accept calls, or place strict limits on the number and/or duration of calls. Sometimes caregivers' phones are disconnected because they accept the collect calls but are then not able to pay the bills. This may account for the fact that while grandparent caregivers in one study favored communication between incarcerated parents and children in their care, only eight percent said they accepted collect calls.<sup>2</sup>

2. Bloom & Steinhart's (1993)

In many ways, prison visiting policies do not reflect the needs or best interests of children.

### **Prohibitive costs**

The greatest drawback to staying in touch by phone is the tremendous expense it can incur for children's caregivers. The amounts caregivers pay for this opportunity to connect children with their parents are exorbitant. Persons accepting collect phone calls from prison are charged a per-minute rate and a surcharge that far exceed typical phone rates. It is not unusual for a 30 minute interstate collect call to cost as much as \$30.

### **Unfair profits**

Providing phone services for incarcerated individuals is so lucrative that phone companies who provide collect call services will pay a commission to governmental jurisdictions for these contracts. Families of incarcerated individuals pay rates that far exceed the true cost of doing business and generate enormous profits for phone companies and correctional system budgets. The exploitive nature of this arrangement has caused considerable concern to many people and correctional institutions' collect call enterprises have been the topic of numerous newspaper articles, policy briefs, advocacy campaigns and even lawsuits.<sup>3</sup>

While this profit-making practice is still prevalent, some jurisdictions have declared that such practices are not in the interest of the state, the children or their families. After years of consciousness-raising by advocacy groups and a critical review of the system, New York's Governor eliminated the state's commission on prison-based collect telephone calls in the spring of 2007, thereby reducing rates by half. Other correctional departments have implemented alternative phone plans, such as prepaid debit card calling systems that, though still costly, are not as expensive as the usual correctional institution collect call plans.

### **Visiting policies and practices**

With few exceptions, children must visit the prison where their parents are housed in order to see them. Prison visits often take place in environments that are not friendly or hospitable.

In many ways, visiting policies and practices do not reflect the needs or best interests of children or families. They inhibit the quality and frequency of contact and undermine meaningful communication between incarcerated parents and their children.

Most visits occur in a secure room or outdoor area on prison grounds that are designated for visits. With the exception of prisoners who are in super max prisons or in administrative segregation, prisoners in United States federal and state prisons are permitted contact visits, meaning there are no barriers or partitions between themselves and their visitors. Visitors may be required to remain seated throughout the visit, sit on opposite sides of a high table, or even sit side by side on benches. In these contact visits, prisoners and visitors are able to see and touch each other,

3. See, for example, Criminal Justice Newsletter, 2007

though touching might be limited to a hug at the beginning or end of visits and prisoners might not be able to hold their children. Some institutions allow only no-contact visits where parents and their children are separated by a glass partition and talk to each other using phones.

The conditions of prison visiting rooms and visitor processing areas vary widely. Some are hot, dirty, overcrowded and lack basic amenities such as drinking fountains.<sup>4</sup> Others are clean, well-maintained and equipped with vending machines. Some have special visiting areas for children and activities, reading materials and games for adults and children. The latter types of facilities allow informal, relaxed interactions between prisoners and visitors while allowing prison staff to monitor visits and maintain security.

There is little consistency in visiting policies from one prison to another. Some prisons permit children to visit only if the accompanying adult is the child's biological parent; others require documentation that the incarcerated individual is the child's biological parent. Still others require written permission from the child's custodial parent for the child to visit. Some prisons permit weekly visits on more than one day a week. Others restrict visiting to weekends or alternate weeks or days for visits. Some allow visitors to spend only an hour or two; others permit six- or seven-hour visits. A few women's prisons permit overnight visits for incarcerated mothers and their children. Only 18 percent of states permit prisoners in some institutions to have periodic, private overnight visits with their families and children on prison grounds.<sup>5</sup>

Families and prisoners often report that prison visiting policies and staff practices are among the main reasons children do not visit their parents more often.<sup>6</sup> Grandmothers say the conditions they are subjected to during prison visits make the experience unpleasant,<sup>7</sup> and negative perceptions of prison visiting policies, particularly of harsh rules and poor treatment of visitors by staff, recur during interviews with teenagers who visit incarcerated parents.<sup>8</sup>

There is some evidence that harsh prison policies, procedures and environments also significantly affect children's perceptions of the visits. One study found that children who visited parents in prisons that had special visiting programs and designated areas for children had much more positive views about visiting their parents than those who visited under regular visiting conditions.<sup>9</sup> During regular visits, prison staff focused on preventing drug smuggling and other contraband, severely restricting movement and physical contact between parents and their children.

There is some evidence that harsh prison policies, procedures and environments significantly affect children's perceptions of the visits and their parents.

4. A study by the Florida legislature found such conditions to be prevalent in several Florida institutions during the 1990's (Taylor, 1999).

5. Hoffman, Dickinson, & Dunn, 2007

6. Christian, 2005; Hairston, 1991; 1995

7. Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Council on Crime and Justice, 2006

8. Bates, Lawrence-Wills, & Hairston, 2003; Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Withers, 2001

9. Boswell and Wedge, 2002. The Boswell and Wedge study was carried out in England, but the visiting situations they describe are quite similar to those found in maximum security prisons in the United States.

### **Treating visitors like prisoners**

Many visitors describe prison visits as physically and emotionally exhausting. They are typically tense, stressful situations involving pat and frisk searches, long waits, a lack of privacy and intense scrutiny and surveillance.

Sometimes visitors are subjected to belittlement and humiliation. The visiting process may make them feel like prisoners themselves.

Prison policies do not always reflect families' cultural and social realities.

A study of prison visits at San Quentin, a high-security prison in California, noted that visitors' clothing is a recurring target for regulation with one-third to one-half of visitors being ordered to change some aspect of their attire before they are permitted into the facility. Posted notices regarding dress codes are not only derogatory, but are also awkwardly phrased, leading to confusion. In addition, they change frequently and unpredictably, and are irregularly and haphazardly applied.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ignoring cultural and social realities**

Prison policies that restrict visitation privileges to biological relatives do not reflect some families' cultural and social realities. These policies can seriously disrupt parent-child contact during incarceration.

For instance, many African-American children are not reared by their biological mother and biological father; childrearing and family responsibilities are often shared among family members and it is not unusual for a man living in a household with children to be known to those children as their father, despite being neither their biological nor their legal father. A young aunt or uncle, rather than an elderly grandmother or estranged wife who has legal custody, may be the best or even the only person who is able and willing to take children on a prison visit. An ex-girlfriend may be willing to have someone take her child to visit his father, but have no interest in visiting her former boyfriend herself.

Policies that tie visiting to legal custodial arrangements and a biological definition of parenthood prohibit the maintenance of family ties in these different situations. They ignore cultural traditions and realities, and prevent families from fostering relationships and delegating responsibilities in ways that work for them.

### **Imposing long distances**

Policies governing the location of prisons also pose a problem for families. Prisons are often located in rural areas with poor transportation systems, and are far away from the cities and towns where prisoners' children reside. Many families indicate that distance from the prison and related problems of transportation are a major factor prohibiting frequent visitation.

10. Comfort, 2005

### New visiting technologies

Television/video communication has been instituted in some locales, allowing prisoners and their families to see and talk to each other even when they are separated geographically. Families and children go to a designated location where a video communication system is set up for this purpose. As with other forms of communication, these television visits are monitored and regulated by the correctional institution.

This form of communication is currently used as an option for persons who are unable, or would find it extremely difficult to visit relatives in prison. Some jurisdictions are also exploring the possibility of replacing some types of in-person visits with this kind of communication in order to reduce prison costs and security risks associated with in-person visits.

The majority of families indicated that children want and need to see their incarcerated parents.

Few people suggest, however, that this type of communication is the best way for children and parents to communicate. Existing research has focused on improving the technology and developing policies and procedures; no research has been conducted on the effects of this type of communication on children and their families.

### Social factors that break parent-child ties

While all forms of contact between prisoners and their families and friends are regulated by correctional policies, prisoners and their families are able to exercise some power in deciding whether or not they want to communicate.

The majority of families participating in research surveys indicate that children want and need to see their incarcerated parents and support the idea of children visiting their parents during incarceration.

Ninety percent of grandmother caregivers said that they thought it was important for their grandchildren to see their incarcerated parents.<sup>11</sup> Mothers and fathers in prison say their children want to see them<sup>12</sup> and even teenagers say they want to see their incarcerated parent.<sup>13</sup>

However, there are still a number of reasons why incarcerated parents, families and caregivers and even the children themselves choose to limit or eliminate contact between the incarcerated parent and their child.

### Incarcerated parents prevent contact

Parents who do not want their children to visit them in a correctional facility are in the minority. They are usually those serving short sentences in local jails. In one study, women confined in a county jail reasoned that they would be there only a short time and visits were not necessary; others said the visit would be too emotionally upsetting for them and their children.<sup>14</sup> In another study, incarcerated parents said they did not want their children to visit them because they wanted their families and children to move on with their lives, they were ashamed to have their children see them in prison, or they wanted to keep their children away from other convicts who were perceived as a negative or harmful influence.<sup>15</sup>

11. Bloom and Steinhart, 1993

12. Hairston, 1991; 1995

13. Bates, Wills, & Hairston, 2003

14. Hairston, 1991

15. Tripp, 2001

The level of commitment between a child's parents often determines whether or not the child maintains contact with an incarcerated parent.

### Caregivers discourage contact

Sometimes family members and romantic partners of prisoners are relieved that the prisoner is no longer a part of their daily lives. Other times, they do not care or even know that he or she is incarcerated. The prisoner's pre-prison behavior may have damaged family relationships beyond repair. In those situations, families may feel that the costs of maintaining connections during incarceration outweigh benefits and they sever all family ties, including parent-child relationships.

Recent studies have identified why some caregivers prevent or discourage children from visiting their incarcerated mothers. Some believe that the mother brought it on herself and should suffer by not seeing her children. Some feel that children will be harmed by visiting a prison or having contact with an incarcerated parent. Others suspect that the incarcerated parent will resume a negative lifestyle once released and abandon and/or hurt the child's emotional well-being.<sup>16</sup>

Research on prisoners and their families suggests a number of reasons why some children's mothers prevent or discourage children's visits with their incarcerated fathers. These include conflict between the mother and father, the father's lifestyle before incarceration and/or negative influence on, or lack of involvement with, his children before incarceration and the mother's involvement with another romantic partner.<sup>17</sup>

### Parents are estranged

The level of commitment between a child's parents often determines whether or not the child maintains contact with an incarcerated parent.

Mothers who are in committed relationships or are on good terms with their children's incarcerated fathers put more effort into maintaining father-child relationships than those who are not in committed relationships.<sup>18</sup> They will take children to visit, accept phone calls and receive and send mail. Parents' legal relationships with each other also affect whether children visit their fathers in prison. Men who are married to the mothers of their children see those children more often than men who are divorced from their children's mothers or who were never married to them.<sup>19</sup>

Given that approximately three out of every four fathers incarcerated in state prisons are either divorced or unmarried, there are obvious challenges involved in maintaining parent-child communications during incarceration, especially given that some fathers have been in prison longer than they were with the children's mother.<sup>20</sup>

16. Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Council on Crime and Justice, 2006

17. Braman, 2004; Hairston & Oliver, 2006; Nurse, 2002

18. Fishman, 1990; Hairston & Oliver, 2006; Nurse, 2002

19. Hairston, 1995

20. Nurse, 2002

**The incarceration is hidden from the child**

Some children do not visit or have other contact with an incarcerated parent because they do not know that the parent is in prison. Caregivers and/or parents may tell children that the incarcerated parent is away at college, on a job assignment in another city or in the armed forces, reasoning that children would suffer emotional strain and stigma if the truth was revealed.

Younger children who are being deceived about their parents' situation may still communicate with their parents in prison. Some children, having been exposed to television shows about jails or overhearing adult conversations, are much more aware of their parents' incarcerated status than their caregivers realize.

When the child is older or a teenager, it is increasingly difficult to hide the parent's incarceration. Phone calls are announced as coming from a correctional institution; mail is marked with an institutional stamp and correctional facilities can rarely be mistaken for a college campus.

**The child is reluctant to maintain contact**

When interviewed, few children say they do not want to see their incarcerated parents.

However, prison visiting conditions, the way they are treated by prison staff and a sense of sadness when they leave their parents at the institution may increase their reluctance.<sup>21</sup> There are also times when children prefer to spend time engaged in an activity with friends rather than on a prison visit.

When children choose not to communicate with their incarcerated parents, it is usually because they have difficulties trusting the parent or believing that the parent cares about them. Children who perceive their incarcerated parents are uninterested, neglectful, unreliable or untrustworthy are most vocal about not wanting to visit them in prison.<sup>22</sup>

When interviewed, few children say they do not want to see their incarcerated parents.

21. Bates, Lawrence-Wills, & Hairston, 2003; Boswell & Wedge, 2002

22. See Hairston & Oliver, 2007; Withers, 2001 for examples



## IMPACT ON THE CHILDREN

Economic, emotional and social consequences of parental incarceration

Prisoners are not lone individuals operating without social ties or consequences. They are members of families, and have family roles, commitments and obligations. Incarceration involves not only the physical separation of prisoners from society, but separation from their families, children and friendship networks as well.

Research shows that prisoners and their families identify numerous financial, social and emotional issues associated with parental incarceration.<sup>1</sup> Incarceration of a parent is very much a family matter. It has long-range economic, emotional and social consequences that affect prisoners, families and that can affect children's well-being.

### Economic consequences

When parents go to prison, most families experience financial losses or incur additional financial expenses. Financial problems are greatest for those families where the imprisoned family member carried out responsible parenting roles prior to imprisonment and where families seek to help the prisoner, provide care for his or her children and maintain parent-child relationships. Families, many of whom are poor, use their meager incomes to meet many, if not all, of the costs required to raise prisoners' children. They also subsidize prison operations by sending prisoners money to buy toiletries and

food from the prison commissary, cover prisoners' co-pays for health care and pay for collect phone costs. Wives with incarcerated spouses identify financial problems and the loss of spousal income as a major problem<sup>2</sup> and grandparents raising grandchildren indicate that financial problems represent one of their main difficulties as well.<sup>3</sup>

Data from a national study of income dynamics in the United States show that when resident fathers go to prison, the family income declines significantly during the incarceration. Moreover, the family does not resume/regain this pre-incarceration income level in the first several years following the father's release.<sup>4</sup>

Financial problems are greatest for families where the imprisoned family member carried out responsible parenting roles and for families who seek to help the prisoner, provide care for his or her children and maintain parent-child relationships.

1. Hairston, 2003

2. Fishman, 1990

3. Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Mackintosh, Myers, & Kennon, 2006; Smith, et. al., 2004

4. Johnson, 2007

Changes in family finances related to incarceration may not be understood by children, but they feel the effects. A decrease in a family's expendable resources, whether due to the loss of income from the family's primary breadwinner, or the additional costs of accepting collect phone calls and making prison visits means less money is available to provide for children. A family's move to a less expensive apartment in a poorer neighborhood, decreased funds for extracurricular and recreational activities and a caregiver's inability to buy new school clothes are examples of the ways in which changes in a family's financial status directly affects their children. The availability of financial resources can also determine how often children can see or talk with their incarcerated parent.

### Emotional consequences

Prisoners and their families often experience a tremendous sense of loss when incarceration occurs. The daily interactions, experiences and sharing that sustain marital and other intimate adult relationships are disrupted, resulting in loneliness, mental health problems and a range of feelings about the separation, criminal justice system and each partner's honesty and fidelity. Relationships between couples are strained, with most prisoners, even those that are married, relying on their mothers rather than their spouses or partners for support.<sup>5</sup>

The rate of divorce and break-ups are very high during incarceration, especially among young couples where fathers' relationships with their children's mothers are strained and contentious rather than warm and supportive.<sup>6</sup> In the cases of young couples, grandmothers, rather than children's mothers, often determine the types of relationship and contact children have with their fathers while they are incarcerated, as well as once they are released.<sup>7</sup>

Although breakups are common during the incarceration period, there are couples who sustain — and even strengthen — their relationships. Some prisoners also establish new romantic and emotional attachments, renew bonds with former mates and children with whom they had previously severed contact and take on new family roles as step-parents.

Incarcerated mothers say that separation from their children is one of the most difficult aspects of imprisonment, and incarcerated fathers and mothers alike worry about what is happening to their children during their absence. Fathers and mothers express concern and remorse about the disruption that they are causing in their children's lives and about the lost opportunities for parental involvement — seeing the baby's first steps, attending the high school graduation — that cannot be recaptured. While most parents believe that their children are in safe living situations, many still worry about their children's well-being and about their guidance and supervision.<sup>8</sup>

Prisoners and their families often experience a tremendous sense of loss when incarceration occurs.

The way adults manage the emotional issues associated with incarceration affects their children. Given the financial and social stressors they face, caregivers living in the community and parents in prison may not be able to provide the nurturing, care and guidance that children need. Without the support and attention of these adults, children's own emotional issues can be exacerbated.

5. Hairston, 1995; Hairston & Oliver, 2007; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; LaVigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005

6. Hairston & Oliver, 2006, 2007; Nurse, 2002; Tripp, 2001

7. Nurse 2002

8. See studies by Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Golden, 2005; Hairston, 1991, 1995; Lanier, 1991, 1993; Moe & Ferraro, 2006; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Tripp, 2001

Emotional issues between incarcerated and non-incarcerated adults can affect the children's ability to maintain contact with the incarcerated parent.

Incarcerated parents attribute lack of communication with their children to the lack of an adult escort for their children and the refusal on the part of the children's caregivers to encourage contact. According to one study, 42 percent of incarcerated fathers said that their children did not visit often because the child had no one to bring them and 22 percent said the child's mother would not allow the child to visit.<sup>9</sup> Only five percent of the participants said their child did not want to visit.

Though stigma has not been a key research topic, it is a reality for the families and children with incarcerated parents.

Since 76 percent of the children lived with their mothers and most of these women were not married to or in a committed relationship with the fathers, it is not surprising that many chose not to make the effort to escort the child for regular visits. Studies of prisoners' marital and romantic relationships provide insight on why some women do not take their children on prison visits. Some choose not to subject themselves to poor visiting conditions. Others give visiting a man with whom they have severed relationships a low priority and/or feel that their new romantic relationships may be jeopardized by visiting.<sup>10</sup>

### Social and community stigma

Social stigma and shame are among the key issues that families face when a member is incarcerated. Revealing that a close family member is in prison has many negative consequences. Many family members are embarrassed and do not tell even their closest friends or extended family about a relative's incarceration. The family secret is confined to a select few who are expected not to divulge the information. Mothers develop creative explanations for an incarcerated son's or daughter's absence from family reunions, funerals and other events where they would be expected to appear. Embarrassment and shame are an underlying reason for not telling children that their mother or father is in jail.<sup>11</sup>

While some social scientists reason that families with an incarcerated family member who live in areas with a high crime rate are not stigmatized by neighbors, others believe that residents in high-crime areas are more often the victims of crime and even more likely to ostracize other residents who engage in crime. Scholars suggest that social stigma and social exclusion by peer groups is a bigger issue for persons convicted of white-collar crimes than for those convicted of other types of offenses. It is possible that social exclusion is tied to the type of crime. Perhaps neighbors living in a neighborhood where drug arrests are common do not snub a family with relatives serving time for drug possession. But those same neighbors, including persons with prior drug convictions, might arm together to force out a family whose son commits a heinous crime against a child.

There is limited scientific research on the level of social stigma that families and individuals experience from peer groups and neighbors under different conditions and the way families manage these experiences. Widespread stories of overt and subtle discrimination against prisoners' families and children suggest that though stigma has not been a key research topic, it is a reality for the families and children with incarcerated parents.

9. Hairston, 1995

10. Braman, 2004; Hairston & Oliver, 2006, 2007; Nurse, 2002

11. Council on Crime and Justice, 2006; Smith, et. al., 2004

### Institutionalized stigma

Prisoners' families don't just experience social stigma and discrimination in their personal relationships, but also on an institutional level. Prisoners' wives report instances in which they were denied housing, charged higher insurance rates and barred from advancement opportunities when their husband's status as a convict became known.<sup>12</sup> In some cities, individuals applying for an apartment lease are routinely asked whether anyone living in the household has ever been arrested; if the answer is "yes," they are told that no apartments are available.

Institutional stigma is not confined to the incarceration period, a fact that is documented in policy directives and administrative regulations.<sup>13</sup> Former prisoners are legally barred from many jobs and professions, cannot vote in many states and are unable to live in public housing, take out certain types of loans, or receive food stamps if they have been convicted of drug charges. In some cases, they cannot live in their own homes. While the intent of these policies may be to punish the prisoner as an individual, these publicly sanctioned actions are discriminatory and a form of stigma that affects prisoners' families and children as well.

### Hiding the truth from children

There is limited research on why adults do not tell children that their parents are in prison, but the fact that children are usually given socially acceptable explanations for their parent's absence (such as a stint at college or in the army) indicate that adults' shame or embarrassment is a driving force.

Discussions in different parent support groups and forums reveal that adults' own feelings of shame are only one factor. Other reasons include the desire to save the child from shame, embarrassment and hurt, fear that the child will lose respect for the incarcerated parent and concern that the child is not old or mature enough to understand.

Some parents also indicate that they need to protect themselves and their children. Knowledge of a parent's criminal status could be damaging and affect the family's status in the community, position in the church hierarchy and adults' ability to keep certain jobs, or maintain different benefits. If the child is told his or her parent is in prison, he or she might unwittingly share this information with others, putting the whole family at risk. Withholding information from children allows the children's caregivers to prevent this from happening.

Although parents offer many reasons for not telling children about their parents' incarceration, this form of deception is often questioned by children's advocates, researchers and social service providers. They believe that it may be harmful to prevent children from seeing their incarcerated parents, talk about their parents' absence and openly express their feelings about what is happening.

Prisoners' families experience stigma on a personal and institutional level.

Research on the impact of withholding this information from children is sparse, as are resources to guide parents in decision-making. The one study with relevant information in this regard found that children who were told about their mothers' incarceration in an open, honest and age-appropriate manner and children who reacted with loneliness, rather than anger, to the separation from their mothers were slightly more likely than other children in the study to have secure, positive perceptions of their caregivers.<sup>14</sup>

12. Fishman, 1990

13. Hairston, 2001

14. Poehlmann, 2005b. Data were collected from 54 children ages 2 to 7 whose mothers were incarcerated.

## Parental incarceration and child development theories

Generally, the literature on parents in prison and their children indicates that parental incarceration and the resulting family disruption and separation of parents from their children produce negative short- and long-term outcomes for children. While recognizing that the removal of a parent from the home can be beneficial to children when the family situation poses a danger to them, most writings in this area focus on the negative consequences of parental incarceration. These writings, though not always grounded in rigorous research, are based on widely accepted child development theories and an extensive body of research on the negative impact of father absence on children's well-being.

Children dealing with parental incarceration may share some of the same symptoms as children experiencing other traumatic events.

Although research on the emotional difficulties and adjustments that children experience as a result of parental incarceration is in its infancy, child development theories on bonding and attachment, separation anxiety and post-traumatic stress offer guides for understanding the effects of parent-child separation caused by incarceration.

Discussions of these theories do not specifically address parental incarceration as a trigger for either separation anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorders. However, parental incarceration does involve a child's separation from a major attachment figure. The sentencing and confinement of a parent, similar to other sudden and unexpected events over which families and children have no control, amount to a family crisis. Children dealing with parental incarceration may share some of the same

symptoms as children experiencing other traumatic events, and may undergo similar phases in coping with those separations and events as well.

### Attachment theory

Attachment theory states that a child develops into a healthy, functioning adult in the context of a continuous relationship with and emotional attachment to a parent figure. Achieving and maintaining proximity to that parent figure provide the child with a feeling of safety; separation from a nurturing parent, on the other hand, produces stress for the child. A child's response to separation from his or her parent depends on several factors, including the child's age and the nature of the relationship between the child and parent.<sup>15</sup>

### Separation anxiety theory

Separation anxiety describes children's distress about harm that may come to them or to their parent when they are separated from them. Separation anxiety is a normal developmental phenomenon in the early preschool years. However, a major event such as the death of a parent can create excessive distress and separation anxiety. Symptoms of such distress among young school-aged children include nightmares and worry about unrealistic harm that may come to their parents; sadness or withdrawal are more common symptoms among older school-aged children. Among adolescents, frequent symptoms include a refusal to go to school and complaints about being ill.

A life-threatening crisis or serious event can generate traumatic stress and create changes in children's behavior, thought processes and personality. Preschool children may begin to wet their beds, stammer or have temper tantrums. School-aged children may become depressed, engage in aggressive behavior, or have fantasies of rescuing their parents. Among adolescents, reactions include rebellion, irresponsible behavior, loss of self-esteem and delinquency.<sup>16</sup>

15. Petras, Derezotes, & Wills, 1999

16. Fischer & Corcoran, 1994

### Post-traumatic stress

Trauma may impact children's attachment to a parent if they believe that they cannot place trust in the parent to protect them from harm.

Children's reactions to trauma may, therefore, depend on how the adults around them handle the crisis or event. Their reaction may be acute, with symptoms occurring immediately after the event and lasting several weeks, or chronic, lasting several months. Children go through phases in coping with a crisis or traumatic event.<sup>17</sup> Their immediate reactions are commonly shock and confusion, with fear, denial or anger emerging once the crisis is over. Eventually, children begin to adjust to their changed circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

### Parental incarceration and child behaviors

Some researchers question whether incarceration has a specific impact on children, citing the presence of other risk factors that account for some behavioral problems. They also point out that a substantial number of children were not living in the same homes as their incarcerated parents when their parents were admitted to prison.

This view overlooks a number of factors unique to separation by incarceration, particularly the lack of control that parents and children have over their ability to communicate, the conditions under which parent-child contact occurs and the social stigma associated with incarceration.

Most research on the emotional well being and adjustment of children whose parents are incarcerated is based on small, descriptive studies. Data are usually obtained from incarcerated parents or caregivers who are asked to indicate if children exhibit certain behaviors or to tell how a parent's incarceration has affected his or her children. A few studies interview children or adults who were children when their parents were in prison.

In general, the research studies do not compare children's behavior at different points in time or their behavior with children whose parents are not in prison. Most studies do not compare the behavior of boys and girls or the impact of paternal versus maternal incarceration.

The children who felt more warmth and acceptance from their caregivers had fewer behavior problems.

Scholarly reviews of research conducted as early as 1960 indicate that though many studies had methodological limitations, findings regarding the nature of children's problems are quite similar across studies.<sup>19</sup> Children whose parents were incarcerated exhibited externalizing behaviors such as aggression, defiance, and disobedience as well as internalizing behaviors such as depression, anxiety, and withdrawal. Children's reactions to their parents' absence included loneliness, fear, developmental regression, guilt, excessive crying, and sadness. School difficulties and problems with peers were common among school-aged children. Among younger children, emotional withdrawal, anxiety, anger, and hostility toward caregivers were more pronounced. Children's behavioral problems and adjustment issues were not unusual, but the majority of children seemed to do relatively well. One reviewer noted that separation from the incarcerated parent did not appear to be the greatest predictor of antisocial behavior. He concluded that the child's home environment and the influence of the remaining parent were crucial factors in children's adjustment.<sup>20</sup>

17. Fischer & Corcoran, 1994

18. Petras, Derezotes, & Wills, 1999

19. Gabel, 1992

20. See research reviews by Gable, 1992 and Park & Clarke-Stewart, 2003.

School-related problems have been identified as an area of concern in recent studies not addressed in the reviews noted above. School-related problems continue to be identified as an area of concern in several studies.

More recent research, as well as earlier research not examined by these reviews, supports their basic findings. Some studies provide deeper understanding of children's adjustment in specific areas and have more methodological rigor such as representative samples, comparison groups or standardized assessment instruments.

### **School behavior**

In interviews with 58 incarcerated mothers, school performance problems, including poor grades, truancy, suspensions and poor behavior at school and at home, were identified as the major problems their children were experiencing. These mothers also stated that when they were first taken into custody, their children's caregivers reported the children had nightmares and bedwetting incidents.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, interviews conducted with 83 African-American children, ages nine to 14, whose mothers were incarcerated and also addicted to drugs, revealed that 49 percent of the children had been suspended and 10 percent expelled from school. Thirty-three percent had failed a grade, although 86 percent were receiving passing grades at the time of the interviews. There was little evidence of psychopathology and males were at no greater risk than females in engaging in problematic behavior. The behavioral self-reports and personality results indicated that the majority of children were not poorly adjusted or especially deviant.<sup>22</sup>

Juggling feelings and answering questions about how a “bad guy” can still be a good parent present enormous challenges for children of any age.

### **Stress levels and separation anxiety**

Studies of children's relationships with their incarcerated parents and others provide information on children's emotional states. A study of the quality of relationships between children with incarcerated mothers and children's caregivers offers some insight on children's stress levels. The 69 children who participated in the study were six to 12 years old and had very stressful lives. Although 60 percent reported four or more sources of stress in their lives during the previous year, fewer than 25 percent displayed serious and/or significant behavior problems. The children who felt more warmth and acceptance from their caregivers had fewer behavior problems.<sup>23</sup>

An evaluation of a counseling program for children whose mothers were incarcerated concluded that the children experienced considerable cognitive and emotional dissonance. They tended to be reluctant to openly address their problems and, instead, presented a façade of well-being. Although the children did experience a number of emotional issues, they were within the normal range on instruments measuring behavior problems, stress levels and social competence.<sup>24</sup>

21. Snyder, Carlo, & Mullin, 2001

22. Hanlon, Blatchley, Bennett-Sears, O'Grady, Rose, & Callaman, 2005

23. Mackintosh, Myers & Kennon, 2006

24. Aid to Incarcerated Mothers, 1990

When attachment relationships were examined among 54 children, ages two to seven, of incarcerated mothers, children's common reactions to the initial separation included sadness, anger, loneliness and developmental regressions. Most of the children displayed insecure attachments to their incarcerated mothers and caregivers. Children who lived with their caregivers since separation from their mothers and those who were told about the incarceration in an open and honest manner were more likely than other children to have secure, positive relationships with their caregivers.<sup>25</sup>

### Shame and stigma

Children and youth with incarcerated parents participating in interviews reported that they were often in situations where they had to guard the secret of their parents' imprisonment. Managing information about a parent's incarceration status presented a real challenge in school settings where children and teachers ask questions frequently about the whereabouts or availability of parents.

Children also had to manage complex feelings about their parents. Juggling feelings and answering questions about how a "bad guy" can still be a good parent present enormous challenges for children of any age.<sup>26</sup>

The same types of problems are identified in a number of different studies, although different family members may see the extent or severity of the problem differently. In one study, grandparent caregivers believed their grandchildren's emotional and behavioral problems were more serious than the children's mothers did.<sup>27</sup> In another, caregivers believed they were warm and accepting of the children, but the children themselves did not have a corresponding sense of being accepted.<sup>28</sup>

### Other factors affecting child behavior

Parents, incarcerated parents and caregivers generally attribute children's emotional and behavioral problems to parental absence due to incarceration. Incarcerated mothers say their children are sad because they miss their mothers; incarcerated fathers believe their absence from the home negatively impacts the kind of supervision and guidance children receive and caregivers indicate that children who are behaving poorly would behave better if their parents were present.

However, a clear, causal relationship between parental incarceration and children's problems has not been established. Problems could be related to the incarceration of their parent, to pre-incarceration parenting or to other domestic factors. Existing research rarely attempts to isolate these different factors.

A clear, causal relationship between parental incarceration and children's problems has not been established.

Research that compares behavioral outcomes between children of incarcerated and non-incarcerated parents is also rare. However, one study on intrauterine cocaine exposure, involving 102 children from low-income urban communities, identified social and emotional differences between children with incarcerated and non-incarcerated fathers. Children ages nine to 11 who, between the ages of six and 11, experienced an incarceration of their father, had higher self-reported depressive

25. Poehlmann, 2005b

26. See Bates, Lawrence-Wills, & Hairston, 2003; Council on Crime and Justice, 2006; Weissman & Larue, 1998; Withers, 2001

27. Smith, et. al, 2004

28. Mackinnon, Myers & Kennon, 2006

symptoms than children whose parents were not incarcerated. Children whose fathers were, or had been incarcerated, also had higher reports from their teachers of disruptive in-class behavior. Children's levels of depression were also correlated with their exposure to violence but this did not alter the association of depression with paternal incarceration.<sup>29</sup>

Analysis of data from the national panel study of income dynamics and the child development supplement to the study indicates that when fathers resided in the same homes as their children prior to incarceration, paternal incarceration was associated with negative behavioral outcomes for children. Children with incarcerated fathers scored significantly higher on a child behavior problems index than children whose parents were not engaged in deviant behavior. In addition, the proportion of children with incarcerated fathers who were expelled or suspended from school was 22.8 percent, compared to four percent for children in families without a history of paternal deviant behavior.<sup>30</sup> Deviant behavior was defined as incarceration, being charged/booked for a crime, or expulsion/suspension from school. The child behavioral index measured internalizing (withdrawn, sad, etc.) and externalizing (aggressive, angry, etc.) behaviors.

Not everyone believes children should visit their incarcerated parents.

The initial results of a study of the impact of maternal incarceration on children also showed behavioral differences for children whose mothers are incarcerated. When the children of mothers in jail were compared with the children

of mothers on probation, the jailed mothers' children had more behavioral problems, lower self esteem, and performed less satisfactorily in school. The researcher's further analysis of the data indicated, however, that the difference in academic performance between the two groups could be better accounted for by the mother's criminal record and the family's socioeconomic status than by the mother's temporary status in jail or on probation.<sup>31</sup>

### Concurrent and pre-incarceration factors

Research shows that children whose parents are incarcerated are not only exposed to more risk factors but are also more likely than other youth to have behavioral problems. In a study of 258 adolescents receiving mental health services, youth who experienced the incarceration of a parent were discovered to have been exposed to more parental substance abuse, child abuse, neglect and extreme poverty than other youth receiving services. They were also more likely to have attention-deficit/hyperactivity and conduct disorders, but less likely to be depressed.<sup>32</sup>

Parental incarceration is a traumatic experience for families and children, but factors preceding incarceration may also contribute to significant emotional distress among children. Family and community violence, poverty and homelessness, children's exposure to criminal lifestyles and parental substance abuse are some of these factors.

Families indicate that these are strong forces in their lives and research confirms that they are particularly pronounced among incarcerated populations. For instance, 80 percent of the incarcerated mothers participating in one study said they used drugs daily or weekly at some point in their lives and 92 percent reported that their children were experiencing some kind of serious or chronic problem prior to the incarceration.<sup>33</sup>

29. Wilbur, Marani, Appugliese, Woods, Siegel, Cabral, & Frank, 2007

30. Johnson, 2007

31. Stanton, 1980

32. Phillips, Burns, & Wagner, 2002

33. Dalley, 2002

In another study, incarcerated mothers who were substance abusers reported that their drug use, as well as their incarceration had negatively affected their children.<sup>34</sup>

### Children's later-life risks

Studies of teenagers whose parents are incarcerated do not generally show evidence of widespread participation in socially deviant behavior or delinquency. When 100 mothers incarcerated in a Midwestern jail were asked to rate their oldest adolescent daughters' behavior on an index that measured antisocial behavior and participation in delinquent activities, the mothers reported that the girls had low levels of participation in both.<sup>35</sup> Another study collected data directly from teenagers whose parents were incarcerated. Although the study found high levels of school suspensions, there were low levels of delinquency and participation in antisocial behavior.<sup>36</sup> Neither study compared findings against those for youth whose parents were not incarcerated, so it is possible that while delinquency rates were low, they were still higher than other youth in similar situations whose parents were not in prison.

A comparative study of Australian children indicates that children with incarcerated fathers had more substance use and antisocial behavior in adolescence than children whose fathers are not incarcerated. The differences disappeared, however, when the researchers factored in socioeconomic status, parenting style and maternal mental health for both groups.<sup>37</sup>

A summary of comparative studies of the impact of parental arrest, rather than incarceration, on children indicates that youth with parents who have been arrested or who demonstrate antisocial tendencies are more likely to exhibit conduct

disorders than other youth.<sup>38</sup> However, a recent analysis of data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW), a landmark study of children who are subjects of reports of maltreatment indicates that among children in in-home care, arrest was no more common among children of arrested parents than among children of never arrested parents. The children studied had serious emotional and behavior problems, but these problems were no more common among children with recently arrested parents than they were among other children in the study.<sup>39</sup>

More research is needed to better understand the impact of parental incarceration on children.

### Scientific research on intergenerational incarceration

Two studies conducted in Europe provide the only scientific information on later-life incarceration among children who experience parental incarceration. One study from the United Kingdom found that of boys who were separated from their parents before the age of 10 because of parental imprisonment, 48 percent were convicted themselves as adults. By comparison, only 25 percent of boys who were separated from their parents for other reasons were convicted. The sample, which included 411 boys born in 1953, from four working class London neighborhoods, included only 29 boys with incarcerated fathers.<sup>40</sup>

34. Smith, et. al., 2004

35. Lawrence-Wills, 2004

36. Hanlon, et. al., 2005

37. Kinner, Alati, Najman, & Williams, 2007

38. Eddy and Reid, 2003

39. Phillips & Gleeson, 2007

40. Murray & Farrington, 2005

Maintaining family ties can lessen the negative impact of incarceration on families and children.

The other study, which was undertaken in Sweden and was based on a larger sample of boys born in 1953, found that higher rates of adult conviction among children of incarcerated fathers disappeared when the fathers' criminality was controlled as a factor.<sup>41</sup>

The researchers reasoned that differences between the findings in England and Sweden may be due to several factors. These include shorter periods of incarceration and more family friendly policies in Sweden and major differences in social welfare policies in the two countries. Neither of these studies supports the assumptions about intergenerational incarceration prevalent in the United States, where, despite the lack of research on the subject, official government documents, scientific journals and program marketing materials often report that children of prisoners are approximately six times more likely than their peers to be imprisoned as adults.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, the findings of these studies may not be applicable to the United States, given major differences among the countries in incarceration rates, the racial make up of prison populations, and societal norms and expectations around social welfare issues. There may be an association between parental incarceration and later-life incarceration for prisoners' children in this country, but it is important to recognize that there are currently no empirical data validating this assumption. This misconception must be acknowledged if researchers and advocates are to adequately understand and address the challenges faced by children whose parents are incarcerated.

41. Murray, Janson, & Farrington, 2007

42. See, for example, Horn, 2005.

### Impact of prison visits on children's well-being

The maintenance of family ties during incarceration, especially through in-person visits, is one possible means of lessening the negative impact of incarceration on families and children. Visiting allows children to actually see their parents and be assured that they are safe. Without this contact, children may begin to view their parents as strangers and believe that their parents neither love nor care about them. Some research supports the view that visiting is integral to sustaining parent-child relationships during incarceration and enhancing the likelihood that the relationship will survive when the parent is released. One study found that African-American fathers' visits with their children during incarceration were, in fact, a predictor of parent-child attachment and involvement when fathers returned home.<sup>43</sup>

Not everyone, however, believes children should visit their incarcerated parents. There are members of the general public, and even social service professionals, who believe that children should not visit incarcerated parents because prison visiting conditions are too traumatic. Others believe that exposing children to prison life normalizes the prison experience and encourages visiting children to think it is acceptable to commit crimes and become incarcerated. Some people fear that further exposure to their criminal parents will increase children's chances of learning and practicing criminal lifestyles, while others simply believe that part of the punishment for parents should be their inability to see their children.

There is no published research on the impact that these visits have on children's delinquency or on their criminal inclinations later in life, but there are a few studies that provide some data on the short-term impact of visiting. The information provided by these studies presents different views on how visiting affects children.

43. Lavigne, et. al., 2005

Interviews with a group of mothers participating in a parent education program provide a positive perspective on children's visits to prison. One quarter of the mothers indicated that they believed their children's ability to cope with parent-child separation was due, in part, to regular visitation.<sup>44</sup>

A study of mother-child relationships indicated that there was a trend for young children who visited their mothers in prison to have less positive representations of their mothers two weeks after the visit than young children who had not visited their mothers.<sup>45</sup> Another report based on this research found that the frequency of phone calls (but not visits) significantly predicted the quality of the mother-child relationship. Mothers reported more warm and positive relationships with children when they spoke with children on the phone more often and when the children were older. These young children's contacts with their mothers were influenced significantly by other interpersonal dynamics. The more conflict and less warmth in the mother-caregiver relationship, the fewer visits and phone calls children had with their mothers.<sup>46</sup>

Though research is sparse, anecdotal observations by parents and caregivers provide insight into some ways that prison visits affect children. As noted previously, visiting conditions in many prisons are not ideal for children or adults. They often involve traveling a long distance and can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Immediately following prison visits with their parents, children are sad, tired, tearful and engage in aggressive and unruly behaviors. While most children are happy to have seen their parents, many are also sad that their parents are not able to come home with them. Children's parents and caregivers state that problem behaviors are usually short-term, lasting only a few days. Service providers indicate that preparing children for visits and debriefing them after the visits lessen these negative reactions.<sup>47</sup>

Although social scientists theorize that gender and race affect children's response to parental imprisonment, few studies provide comparative findings for boys and girls or children of different ethnic backgrounds. Studies also rarely differentiate between age groups. The research also tends not to identify whether or not children lived in the home with their parent prior to the incarceration, whether children have contact with their parents during incarceration and what kind of contact they maintain. Many children experience poor outcomes related to their parents' incarceration, involvement in substance abuse and criminal activity, but many are doing well. Identifying these variables could help in understanding the characteristics and situations that differentiate children who experience serious social and emotional problems from those who don't.

Many children experience poor outcomes related to their parents' incarceration, involvement in substance abuse and criminal activity, but many are doing well.

More research is needed to better understand the impact of parental incarceration on children. Many children of prisoners do experience serious social and psychological problems that may be short-term or enduring, but others seem to manage this difficult period in their lives without permanent damage. While children of prisoners are at risk of experiencing many adverse outcomes, the exact cause of these outcomes and how to improve them, is not clear.

44. Snyder, Carlo, & Mullins, 2001

45. Poehlmann, 2005 b

46. Poehlmann, 2005a

47. Aid to Incarcerated Mothers, 1990



## REUNITING... OR DRIFTING APART

When incarcerated parents return home

Research on prisoners' family roles and relationships following incarceration is even scarcer than research covering the period of incarceration. Most mothers in prison studies indicate that they plan to reunite with their children when they are released from prison.<sup>1</sup> Many fathers also intend to have an active parenting role when they return to the community following incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

However, the reality of parent-child reunifications following incarceration typically falls short of these expectations. Incarceration appears to lead to the permanent severance of family ties in many situations and decreased parent-child interactions in others.

For instance, a study of women incarcerated at a county jail found that the more times a woman had been incarcerated, the less likely she was to be living in the same household as her minor children at the time of her most recent incarceration.<sup>3</sup> In another study, the percentage of men living in the same homes as their children declined from 57 percent before incarceration to 35 percent following incarceration.<sup>4</sup>

And although more than one half of the men in one study lived with one or more of their children prior to going to prison, only 20 percent did so following their release.<sup>5</sup>

Myriad family and social factors affect incarcerated parents' reunification and relationships with their children post-release. Some parents lose permanent legal custody of their children while they are in prison, although the exact numbers who do so is not known as this information is not systematically collected and reported by child welfare agencies. One study suggests that many children are placed in foster care prior to their mothers' arrest and that children's placement often leads to a downward spiral in which family reunification is unlikely.<sup>6</sup> Although the study did not provide data on how many mothers resumed care of their children

Incarceration appears to lead to the permanent severance of family ties in many situations.

1. Arditti & Few, 2006; Hairston, 1991
2. Hairston, 1995; Lanier, 1993; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Tripp, 2001
3. Hairston, 1991
4. Visher & Courtney, 2007

5. Pearson & Davis, 2003
6. Ross, Khashu, & Wamsley, 2003

following release from prison, the lack of support available to incarcerated mothers would make this extremely difficult.

It is very difficult for imprisoned parents to meet child welfare mandates. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) enacted with the intent of achieving permanency for children, for example, has the potential of leading to the permanent severance of family ties between prisoners and their children. Theoretically, few prisoners are able to meet the law's requirements. ASFA requires that termination of parental rights (TPR) proceedings be filed whenever a child has been in foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months, a period of time that is significantly shorter than the expected average prison term.

Regardless of their intentions, parents in prison are not in a position to see their children on a regular basis.

Upon release from prison, they may also not be in a position to support their children financially, find a suitable home or even ensure that their children are safe and protected. If such demonstrations are required to regain legal custody of their children and maintain parent-child relationships, they are unlikely to be successful.

There is little information available on whether reunification bodes well or ill for children. However, wives and girlfriends of formerly incarcerated men indicate that men's resumption of street life, criminal activity and drug use are forces that negatively affect family life and lead to the breakup of intimate relationships and marriages.<sup>7</sup> These same factors may also be expected to impact parent-child reunification and children's well-being.

There is evidence that many children are not prepared for their parents' release from prison and that incarcerated parents are often not adequately prepared to resume a parenting role. Incarcerated parents' efforts to renew parenting roles as members of households where other adults have been children's primary caregivers seem to cause tension and create more stress when parents have not discussed and agreed on role changes.

Many children are not prepared for their parents' release from prison and incarcerated parents are often not adequately prepared to resume a parenting role.

Focus groups of wives and girlfriends of men in prison and on parole indicated that children and fathers are both inadequately prepared for a father's release from prison. Among the problems identified were children's resentment of fathers' disciplinary measures, fathers' lack of understanding of children's needs, mutual jealousies and children's belief that the father had broken promises to them.<sup>8</sup>

Grandparent caregivers express similar concerns about incarcerated mothers' abilities to resume parenting roles upon release from prison. Concerns about mothers' parenting abilities, caregivers' own attachment to the children under their care and doubts about mothers' desires to give up certain lifestyles are among the reasons that grandparents give for reluctance to relinquish their primary caregiving roles when incarcerated mothers return home.<sup>9</sup>

7. Fishman, 1990; Hairston & Oliver, 2006, 2007

8. Hairston & Oliver, 2006

9. Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Smith, et. al., 2004



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

### Programs and services for children and their parents

A number of programs and services have been designed to promote the well-being of children who are experiencing parental incarceration. The underlying assumption of these programs is that parental incarceration is not a normal life transition and that parents and children need help to cope with the problems that parental incarceration presents.

Many programs do not explicitly follow a particular approach or model, and many are not specific in terms of the problems they are attempting to address.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, however, programs try to help children cope with the incarceration of their parents or help incarcerated parents or children's caregivers provide support for their children.

Many of these programs are based on child development theories which state that children who deny or ignore a crisis are less able to cope with new demands or difficulties created by the situation. Children who are forewarned of an event and prepared to deal with it, have family members who offer genuine support and emotional closeness, have good peer and extra-familial support and have good problem-solving skills are more resilient and better able to meet the challenges.<sup>2</sup>

Programs and services for children whose parents are in prison fall into four basic categories: parenting classes, parent-child visiting services, mentoring for children and youth and support groups for

children and youth. Most programs have not been evaluated, or the evaluations lack scientific rigor and standards.<sup>3</sup> Evaluations comparing different program methods are rare and, if conducted at all, tend to focus on process and implementation rather than on outcomes and results.<sup>4</sup> When a program does have a stated or implicit goal, it is usually to reduce intergenerational incarceration.

In addition, many programs for children of parents in prison have short life spans, operate with small budgets and inadequate funding and use volunteers to provide services. When available, funding is used to provide direct services such as transportation, supplies and snacks for program participants. Many of these services are not a part of established social service programs or agencies and most, even when run by prisons, are not a part of the institutional budget. A notable exception is the parenting program and Children's Center at Sing Sing Correctional Facility.<sup>5</sup>

#### Education programs for incarcerated parents

Parent education courses are the most widespread and popular approach. Most women's prisons, and several prisons for men, offer parent education courses. The courses are not usually available to every prisoner, however. Courses also vary

1. Jeffries, Menghraj & Hairston, 2001

2. As summarized by Fischer & Corcoran, 1994

3. See summaries by Bates, 2001; Jeffries, Menghraj & Hairston, 2001; Pollock, 2002; Turek & Loper, 2006

4. See Bush-Baskette & Patino, 2004 for a description of program implementation issues.

5. Jeffries, Menghraj & Hairston, 2001

considerably in the content they cover, their objectives, the number of sessions offered and delivery approaches. Some cover basic child development while others focus on the development of parenting skills. A few focus on the realities of parenting from prison and children's reactions to parental incarceration. Courses offered as a part of responsible fatherhood initiatives also present material on child support payments and may also cover anger management and domestic violence. Though widely diverse in many respects, the overall goal of most parent education courses is to help program participants become better parents and improve outcomes for their children.

Evaluations of parent education programs are usually based on pre- and post-test comparisons of knowledge and/or attitudes, quizzes on content, testimonials and satisfaction surveys. Results are uniformly positive in reporting that participants increase their knowledge of child development, management and support techniques, enjoy the classes and/or think the classes are important. The results of pre- and post-test attitudinal surveys are mixed, revealing little or no difference and suggesting that most parents did not have negative attitudes about parenting prior to participation. Comments and testimonials often stress parents' appreciation that someone cares enough to offer the courses and recognize that prisoners have children they care about. Getting a break from the prison routine and receiving exposure to instructors from outside the prison might also influence prisoners' generally positive assessment of parent education courses. Few complaints or negative comments about the programs are recorded, except where participation was compulsory.

Evidence regarding the impact of parent education on prisoners' children is scant. One report indicates that when compared with a control group, 42 incarcerated fathers participating in a parent education course scored higher on parenting strategies and child development knowledge. There was no noticeable difference, however, in parent satisfaction, parent-child relationships or spousal support among the groups. This may be because the fathers had not yet had time to work on their relationships with their children and were not in

close relationships with their children's mothers.<sup>6</sup> Another study found that parent education courses did not generate changes in the quality of the relationship incarcerated fathers had with their children's mothers. The fathers did increase their parenting knowledge, however, and had, because of the program design, more frequent contact with their children.<sup>7</sup>

Although research to support providing parent education for prisoners as a means for improving outcomes for children is limited, the idea is theoretically sound and supported by research on parent education in other settings. Detrimental outcomes for children experiencing adverse circumstances can be mediated by nurturing, caring parents. The potential benefits for prisoners' children should not be dismissed for lack of research, but instead tested through sound program development and rigorous assessment.

Comments and testimonials often stress parents' appreciation that someone cares enough to offer the courses, or recognizes that prisoners have children they care about.

### Parent-child visiting programs

Visiting programs allow incarcerated parents, usually mothers, to spend extended time with their children within the institution. The programs include day-long visits, overnight visits and child-in-residence programs. The purpose of these programs is to maintain parent-child relationships during incarceration and to decrease the negative impact of incarceration and parental separation on children.

One example of this type of program is Girl Scouts Behind Bars. It allows girls to participate with their mothers in structured troop activities and one-on-one private conversations. The mother-

6. Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999

7. Robbers, 2005

girl troop meets twice monthly at the prison and girls also participate in a community-based troop. The program provides counseling and support to the girls and allows them to spend more time with their mothers. An assessment found that, compared to a control group, mothers and children participating in the program had more frequent visits. Also, interviews with the caregivers of girls participating in the program indicated that the girls' self-esteem had improved and antisocial behavior at home and school had decreased since participating in the program. There was also better communication and understanding between incarcerated mothers and their daughters.<sup>8</sup>

Evaluations of children-in-residence programs conclude that children can be provided for safely in institutional and community-based programs.

Structured visitation programs include overnight or day-long visits with special activities for incarcerated parents and their children. Overnight visits are typically held in special areas on the prison grounds, such as trailers or camps, while day-long visits may be held in special child-oriented visiting rooms or spaces within the institution. Parents and children participate in different activities, such as arts and crafts, story-telling and games, prepare and/or eat meals together and spend some time in relaxed, informal interaction. Parents who participate in these programs must usually meet certain requirements in terms of the type of criminal offenses they have on their records. They must often also participate in a parent education course, avoid rule infractions and participate in post-visiting counseling sessions. While day-long programs involve teenagers as well as younger children, adolescent boys are excluded as participants in overnight programs. The child's other parent or caregiver is also excluded from overnight programs and is typically not included in the day-long programs.

Sometimes, community agencies provide transportation to the prison for children who participate in the structured visitation programs. In those instances, the ride to and from the prison visitation site may serve as a part of the structured program and both visiting preparation and debriefing services are provided for the children.

### **Child-in-residence programs**

A few corrections departments allow women to keep their infants or young children with them while they serve their time. Mothers and their children are housed in a separate wing of a correctional facility or in a secure community setting. In addition to meeting the expectations required of all prisoners, parents are also responsible for the daily care of their children and participation in any special programs related to their parenting role. Prison nurseries in New York state are the most notable examples. Illinois, Indiana and Nebraska are also among the states that have provided children-in-residence programs for incarcerated mothers.

Evaluations of children-in-residence programs conclude that children can be provided for safely in institutional and community-based programs. Incarcerated mothers learn and practice parenting skills that will help them foster their children's development and well-being while they are in prison and when they return to the community.

There is some concern, however, about how different correctional policies undermine the effectiveness of these programs. One study indicated that though a residential program was conceptually sound and based on tested theories, the program was not implemented effectively. Practical problems and policy barriers hampered the program, and as a result, several infants experienced many disruptions in their primary care and women's relationships with their children who did not reside at the facility were also negatively affected or compromised.<sup>9</sup> There are not yet any studies reporting outcomes for children once they are no longer in their incarcerated mother's care.

8. Block & Potthast, 1998

9. Hairston, Bates, & Lawrence-Wills, 2003

### Mentoring programs

The Amachi Program, based in Philadelphia, is the most visible mentoring program for children whose parents are in prison. The program is aimed at preventing intergenerational incarceration. Children are matched with mentors who commit to spending at least one hour a week for a period of at least one year with the children they mentor. The Amachi model is based on the premise that a caring adult can make a difference in a child's life and that effective mentoring can prevent children from participating in antisocial behavior.

Mentoring for children of prisoners has been promoted by the federal government as an effective, low-cost approach to helping children and as a means of involving faith-based and other community organizations in preventing crime. Government funds have been provided to support this initiative and programs have been implemented in several communities. There are no published reports of the short- or long-term impact of mentoring programs for children whose parents are in prison, but research exists on the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program that serves as the model for the mentoring programs. A large-scale evaluation of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters school-based program found that children participating in the program improved in many areas including academic performance, academic attitudes and school behavior. Several positive outcomes were not sustained, however, when mentoring did not continue beyond the first year. Evaluators concluded that short-term mentoring programs for youth do not induce long-term change and, in some cases, can be harmful to the child's well-being if the mentor does not stay in the child's life for a sufficient length of time.<sup>10</sup>

As a cost-effective means of helping children avoid involvement in the criminal justice system, and with the availability of federal funds to support program implementation, the Amachi mentoring model has spurred interest in children with incarcerated parents across the country.

But there are some challenges. For instance, the Amachi model is based on a one-year mentorship, yet

early evaluations suggest mentorship should be of a longer duration in order to be effective over the long term. Some prisoners' families and children's advocates also believe that children's incarcerated parents, custodial parents and relative caregivers need to be more closely involved in the program design. They also point out the detrimental effects on children of mentors who leave the program abruptly, and question whether mentoring programs represent the best approach to helping children and families, given the limited resources available.<sup>11</sup>

### Counseling and support groups

A few organizations provide counseling services and/or support groups for children with incarcerated parents. Examples include Project Seek, which operated for several years in Michigan, the Aid to Incarcerated Mothers Counseling Project in Atlanta, Georgia, Reconciliations' Support Groups and Summer Camps in Nashville, Tennessee and the Center for Community Alternatives Youth Support Group in Syracuse, New York.

These programs offer a setting where children of prisoners, including adolescents, can meet with peers who are also experiencing parental incarceration, talk freely about the experience and sometimes participate in social activities together.

The Amachi mentoring model has spurred interest in children with incarcerated parents across the country.

Identified challenges include recruiting and retaining participants, managing the stigma that may be associated with participating in a program for prisoners' children, gaining the trust of caregivers and children, handling logistical problems related to transportation, service areas and funding requirements and the need for different programming for different age groups.<sup>12</sup>

10. Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, McMaken & Jucovy, 2007

11. Boudin, 2003

12. Aid to Incarcerated Mothers, 1990; Weissman, & Larue, 1998



## KEY FINDINGS

Key findings, policy suggestions and practice guidelines

As stated at the outset of this report, research on children whose parents are in prison has not been extensive.

With the exception of large-scale surveys providing basic statistics, most studies have used small, non-representative samples; some have also lacked methodological rigor. The findings, however, are remarkably consistent in many areas. While they do not provide a firm foundation for articulating best practices, these studies, along with knowledge gathered from related work, do provide useful guidelines for the further development of knowledge and services.

Key findings taken from the research are presented below. They may help guide further inquiry into best practices for children's well-being, parental decision-making and wider policy and program development.

### 1. Most incarcerated parents want to maintain relationships with their children.

Although the majority of incarcerated parents do not see their children on a regular basis during incarceration, many maintain some form of contact and most plan to reside with them upon their release from prison. Children's caregivers generally support communication between parents and their children, though they may not accept collect phone calls or visit themselves.

Despite their best intentions, the plans many incarcerated parents make for family reunification often do not materialize for many different reasons. Prison-based programs that help parents better understand their children's needs and how to parent more effectively may help them be successful in reuniting with their children upon release from prison.

### 2. Single-parent, male-headed families should be represented in research, programs and policies.

Many men, as well as women, were residing in single-parent households prior to their incarceration and had responsibility for the care of their children. A substantial number of men also assume responsibility for the care of their children when mothers are incarcerated. Children in these types of male-headed households are not visible, however, in research, program plans or policy agendas. Their circumstances and needs may differ from those of children whose primary caregivers are their own mothers or maternal grandmothers. Moreover, their fathers' access to services for them may be limited by their parents' lack of knowledge of services and by cultural and program biases. To meet the needs of children in single-parent, male-headed families, this type of family configuration must be acknowledged and accounted for.

**3. There is no solid evidence that parental incarceration predicts later-life incarceration among prisoners' children.**

Despite widespread beliefs that children of incarcerated parents are many times more likely than other children to be incarcerated as adults, there is no research evidence to support this assertion. These unsupported statements should not be accepted as fact and printed in official documents and research papers. They perpetuate the spread of inaccurate information in a field sorely in need of substantiated knowledge to guide its development. These incorrect statements may also act to increase the stigma that children with incarcerated parents experience, as they become mis-identified as potential criminals and treated as threats to society.

**4. The full range of risk factors affecting children of incarcerated parents must be recognized and accounted for in research, programs and policies.**

Research shows that children whose parents are incarcerated are exposed to many situations and conditions that pose risks to their well-being and healthy development. Risk factors such as poverty, parental substance abuse and family violence were present in many children's homes and lives prior to their parents' incarceration. Parental incarceration causes additional stress for families, including the experience of social stigma and family disruption, and it poses additional risks for children as well. Programs aimed at children of incarcerated parents need to address the many different problems that place children at risk.

**5. The majority of children of incarcerated parents do not exhibit delinquency or antisocial behavior, but they do need extra help to succeed in school.**

Research indicates that despite dealing with many adverse situations, the majority of school-aged children whose parents are incarcerated are not engaged in antisocial behavior or delinquency. Their self-esteem and their behaviors fall within the norm for their age groups.

However, school performance problems were identified among substantial numbers of children. The reasons that school experiences are negative for so many children whose parents are in prison have not been systematically investigated. However, school is a significant part of the lives of children and youth, and success in school is critical to their overall success and well-being. The goal of enhancing these children's overall school performance needs to be given high priority in initiatives designed to help them.

**6. Prisoners who participate in prison-based parent education courses enhance their parenting knowledge.**

Appropriately designed courses may help prisoners understand not only basic child development, children's needs and parenting techniques, but also how they might parent more effectively from a distance, co-parent with another individual who has responsibility for the daily care of their children and better prepare for parenting roles upon release. Application of this knowledge could lead to better support and a higher quality of life for their children.

**7. Prison visiting policies and environments need to become more child-friendly to encourage parent-child contact during the incarceration period.**

In order to see and spend time with their incarcerated parents, children must visit the prison, which is often in a remote location and at some distance from the child's home. Prison visits can be emotionally and physically exhausting for adults, and may be even more so for children. Child-friendly visiting rooms are not the norm, though some prisons have structured visitation programs for incarcerated parents and their children and/or special children's visiting areas. These visiting situations, along with visiting policies, directly affect the frequency with which children visit their incarcerated parents.

The memories that adults retain about visiting their parents in prison suggest that visiting

conditions and situations are negative and demeaning for both children and parents. However, there are more positive visiting environments that demonstrate visits can be managed in ways that do not compromise the safety and security of the institution, and are at the same time pleasant, respectful experiences for visitors. Concerted efforts need to be undertaken to make such visits the norm rather than the exception.

**8. Decisions about parent-child contact during incarceration need to serve the best interests of the child.**

Children whose parents are in prison need some assurance that their parents care about them even though their parents are serving time for committing illegal acts. Most incarcerated parents had some connection with their children before incarceration, even if they did not live with them. Children usually want to see their parents and maintain those connections. Contact should not be severed by correctional communication policies that make it impossible for children to see their parents or by institutional decisions that children should not visit prisons.

Conflict between intimate partners and other family disagreements should also not be the basis for the dissolution of parent-child ties. Decision-making in individual situations should center on the child's best interest, the child's desires and whether or not the parent-child relationship would be supported if the parent lived in the community rather than in prison.

**9. The stigma surrounding the incarcerated parent, their family and their children must be acknowledged and addressed in any program or service intended to engage them.**

Despite high need, many programs for children have difficulty recruiting participants. While there are certainly practical reasons for low recruitment rates, the stigma that surrounds incarceration is also a large part of the

reason. This stigma attaches not only to persons convicted of crime, but to their families and children as well. Within incarcerated populations, and also on the outside, there are further distinctions, with some crimes viewed as much worse and more stigmatizing than others.

Similarly, families of incarcerated parents, particularly extended members who may resume child care responsibilities, may not want to be associated with other prisoners' families. When programs advertise that they are for children of inmates, family members may find it difficult to accept services.

**10. Programs and services for incarcerated parents and their children must acknowledge and include the non-incarcerated parent or caregiver.**

When parents are in prison, most children live with relatives — often the child's other parent. Many also have some form of communication with the parent who is incarcerated. Since these children are not orphans, programs to serve them should be offered as additional supports for existing parents and families rather than as substitutes for them. It is important that the integrity of parents' and caregivers' roles in caring for and protecting their children be recognized and respected in service delivery.

**11. More resources must be allocated to the evaluation of existing programs.**

There are many program approaches and models being used and advocated to meet the needs of children whose parents are incarcerated. All have elements that offer promise in meeting some aspect of children's needs, but none have been empirically validated as having long-term or short-term impacts on children's well-being. Widespread implementation and adoption of a particular approach should be undertaken with caution. At this early stage, the allocation of resources to rigorous outcome and impact studies for specific programs and approaches would be a wise investment.

## Next Steps

The research discussed in this report shows that, on the whole, research on children with incarcerated parents is still in its early stages. There are some areas of knowledge that are enhanced by national statistics, as in the case of children's living arrangements and connections with their parents. There is also ample evidence that many policies, such as those that create an intimidating, demeaning experience for children visiting incarcerated parents, are counterproductive. In many other areas, such as children's adjustment to parental incarceration, knowledge is based primarily on small studies conducted discretely and supplemented with research on related topics and implications drawn from child development theory. These studies, though sparse, provide a useful reference point on which to build and are already being used to inform program and policy development.

A broader, more comprehensive knowledge base is needed, however, to support major changes that can be expected to have a long-term, positive impact on the well-being of the millions of children whose lives are affected by parental incarceration. This report is intended to draw together the existing research and knowledge and provide a starting point for further research and understanding.

There are millions of children in America whose formative years will include the experience of having a parent incarcerated for some period of time. The research reviewed in this report, and the use to which it is put by researchers, social service and non-profit agencies, faith-based organizations and others will help determine the future well-being and success of these children as family members, as students and as adult contributors to their communities.

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