

INCARCERATED FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN



What Policymakers Need to Know

The majority of incarcerated men are fathers. The majority are nonviolent offenders who will return to society within a few years.

Strong family connections and employment are the two most critical elements that reduce the likelihood that fathers will return to prison once released.

These men possess low levels of literacy and lack marketable job skills, making it difficult for them to maintain employment once released.

Former inmates need services that support their return to communities in order to prevent recidivism and keep communities safe.

In most states, when a father becomes incarcerated his child support obligation continues at the same level, despite his inability to pay. This leads to massive debt in many cases. Fathers feel discouraged about their ability to pay support once released if they have no realistic hope for repayment.

Fathers are often unaware that they can ask for their child support order to be modified downward if their circumstances change, including if they are incarcerated.

Families of incarcerated parents have special needs and issues that need support. They have higher rates of poverty, hunger, homelessness, abuse and violence.

Visiting spaces in prisons tend to lack child-friendly space that helps facilitate a child-centered visit between dad and child.

What Policymakers Can Do

- 4 Use prison programs to assist inmates with developing relationship, communication, conflict resolution and anger management skills that will help to manage relationships with families and their children.
- 4 Use literacy programs, basic education and GED curriculums to help fathers write letters to children and families, make tape recordings of children's books or other activities that help fathers make a connection to their families prior to their release.
- 4 Develop pre- and post-release support programs that assist men to obtain job skills and job referrals prior to their release; supplement these programs with support groups to help men keep jobs.
- 4 Facilitate the development of mentorship programs with former inmates who have successfully kept a job and stayed out of jail. These mentors serve as peer support networks for newly released fathers.
- 4 Establish procedures that notify incarcerated fathers of their right to a modification.
- 4 Explain the modification process and procedure so that inmates or former inmates are aware of how to exercise their right to request a modification.
- 4 Apply an automatic modification for incarcerated fathers.
- 4 Cease the accumulation of interest while fathers are incarcerated.
- 4 Offer training to social workers, teachers, community services groups, prison wardens and lawyers on the special issues facing these families.
- 4 Encourage prison facilities to make information available to inmates and families on community resources and services.
- 4 Develop policies that support educational and recreational activities and counseling for prisoners' children.

What Policymakers Need to Know and
What They Can Do

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(CONTINUED)

Q: Dads should be responsible for their kids. Why shouldn't dads continue to pay child support while they are in prison?

A: Dads in prison have a small income that only allows them to pay for personal items like soap, shampoo and shaving cream. Collecting support from fathers in prison may be an unrealistic expectation. Additionally, arrearages that have accumulated during incarceration reduce the likelihood that fathers will satisfy this debt once they are released. Employment prospects for men with a criminal record are difficult and coupled with the mounting pressures of child support debt may discourage fathers from succeeding in the work force.

Q: Fathers who are in prison were not thinking about the effects on their children when they committed their crime. Why should we now care to provide programs or services that will help fathers reconnect with their children?

A: Research reveals that a father's involvement in his child's life greatly improves the child's chances for success. Helping incarcerated fathers foster stronger connections with their children (where appropriate) can have positive effects for children. Strong family connections can help to ensure that fathers stay out of jail once they are released.

Q: Is it beneficial or harmful for a child to have a relationship with their father who is in prison?

A: Not all children who have a dad in prison should have contact with him. But there are many children who had a relationship with their father prior to imprisonment who would benefit from continued contact. Positive family relationships help both father and child cope with incarceration. In some situations, prison is the first opportunity men have to conduct a self-evaluation and learn what it means to be a responsible adult. These men are eager to rebuild relationships.

Q: How can incarcerated fathers stay involved in their children's lives while they are in prison?

A: In some cases father involvement may occur through phone calls, letter writing or recording themselves reading books or stories on cassette tapes that can be sent to the children. Facilitating transportation to and from prison facilities can help ensure that families who wish to visit are given the opportunity. Equipping visitation rooms with child-friendly activities—toys, games or books—can provide fathers an opportunity to interact with their child.

Q: Does it really benefit incarcerated fathers to stay involved in their children's lives while they are in prison?

A: Studies show that prisoners who maintain family ties have significantly greater success once released. Lack of contact between prisoners and children has been shown to jeopardize the chances of families reuniting after inmates are released.