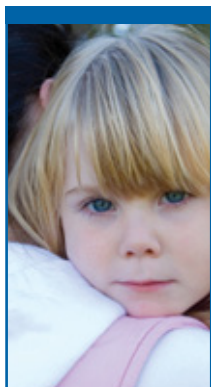


# CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY



The United States leads the world in rates of incarceration with 1 in every 100 American adults residing in jail or prison. Sixty-three percent of federal prisoners and fifty-five percent of state prisoners are parents of children under age 18. In fact, the number of children with an incarcerated parent has increased by nearly eighty percent since 1991, and the number of children with a mother in prison has more than doubled during that time. The incarceration of women, the fastest growing segment of the prison population in all 50 states, has particularly profound consequences for children given their role as the primary caregiver for many households.

International human rights advocates have argued that parental incarceration is one of the greatest threats to child well-being in the United States. Research shows that when a parent is incarcerated in jail or prison, the impact on their children is often traumatic. Children may encounter shame and stigma from peers and adults, increased risk for developing school and mental health problems, household disruption, and increased poverty. Despite the association between incarceration and negative parental/child outcomes, little is known about the relationship between prisoner parents and child well-being. Institutions charged with dealing with incarcerated adults - such as the police department, jail personnel, or probation officers - rarely inquire about what becomes of their children. Similarly, there are little requirements that systems serving children - child welfare, schools, juvenile justice - address parental incarceration. The social service and corrections systems often work with the same families, in the same communities, yet there is little coordination between these systems.

The majority of mothers are incarcerated for drug-related, non-violent offenses. Most incarcerated parents have significant family roles and commitments prior to incarceration, and the majority will be reunited with their families and children upon release.

The experiences of many jurisdictions demonstrate that much can be done to improve services for children with incarcerated parents. Some examples of positive reforms include:

- Developing arrest protocols with police and probation departments when children are present at the time of parental arrest to reduce trauma and harm to children and unnecessary involvement with the child welfare system;
- Improving visitation policy, telephone access, transportation services, and physical visiting room environments to be more conducive to parent-child interaction;
- Addressing the challenges facing relative caregivers by establishing subsidized legal guardianship programs, support groups, and information/referral services;
- Developing specialized staff and services to children in foster care with a parent in jail or prison to ensure that the child welfare agencies fulfill their court-mandated duty to provide diligent efforts to maintaining parent-child relationships; and
- Utilizing local alternatives to incarceration for non-violent, low-risk offenders in order to avoid imprisoning parents in facilities hundreds of miles away from their families.

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