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Parental Incarceration and its Effects on Families and Children

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Overview

Tough-on-crime laws and rising incarceration rates have had an unintended consequence—they're tough on children, too. According to the Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners, 2.4 million children in America have a mother or father in jail or prison. Three in every hundred American children and one in eight African American children have a parent who is behind bars today.



These children have committed no crime, but the price they pay is steep. They may find themselves in the back seat of a police car when a parent is arrested, being delivered to an unfamiliar shelter or left to fend for themselves. Their parent may be sent hundreds of miles away, and collect call rates make phone contact prohibitive (Arditti, 2005).



Inside:

Overview & Statistics	1
Developmental Effects on Children	2-3
"Prison Widow Effect"	3
What Happens to the Children after Parental Incarceration?	4
Helpful Programs	5
Works Cited	6
Helpful Resources	6

**Center for Youth,
Family, and
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- The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that 2.4 million children are affected by the 1.1 million parents incarcerated in prison or jails, up from 500,000 children in 1991.
- More than 7 million children have a parent under some form of correctional supervision.
- Approximately 75% of incarcerated women are mothers and two-thirds have children under the age of 18.
- Seventy-two percent of female inmates with children under age 18 lived with those children before entering prison.
- Six percent of women entering prison are pregnant.
- 55% of men in prison have minor children, 65% of women do.

Possible Developmental Effects on Children after Parental Arrest and Incarceration

Developmental State	Developmental Characteristics	Developmental Tasks	Effects of Separation
Infancy (0-2 years)	Limited perception, mobility, total dependency	Development of trust and attachment	Impaired parent-child bonding
Early childhood (2-6 years)	Increased perception and mobility and improved memory; Greater exposure to environment: ability to imagine	Development of sense or autonomy, independence, and initiative	Inappropriate separation anxiety, impaired socioemotional development; Acute traumatic stress reaction
Middle childhood (7-10 years)	Increased independence from caregivers and ability to reason; Peers become important	Sense of industry; Ability to work productively	Developmental regressions; Poor self-concept; Acute traumatic stress reactions; Impaired ability to overcome future trauma
Early adolescence (11-14 years)	Organization of behavior in pursuit of goals; Increased abstract thinking; Puberty; Increased aggression	Ability to work productively with others; Control repression of emotions	Rejection of limits on behavior; Trauma-reactive behaviors
Late adolescence (15-18 years)	Emotional crisis and confusion; Adult sexual development and sexuality; Formal abstract thinking; Increased independence	Development of cohesive identity; Resolution of conflicts with family and society; Ability to engage in adult work and relationships	Premature termination of dependency relationship with parent; Intergenerational crime and incarceration

Source: Adapted from Katherine Gabel and Denise Johnston, *Children of Incarcerated Parents* (New York: Lexington Books, 1997), with permission from Lexington Books.

Effects on Children

The immediate effects on children are: shame, social stigma, loss of financial support, weakened ties to the parent, changes in family composition, poor school performance, increased delinquency, and increased risk of abuse or neglect. Studies show that children of incarcerated parents experience feelings of trauma, anxiety, guilt and fear, and are at greater risk of exhibiting school-related problems, and involvement in gangs and drug use (Arditti, 2005).

“Society offers prisoners’ children no means of rationalization or justifying their loss and many of them are forced to go underground” (Arditti, 2005).

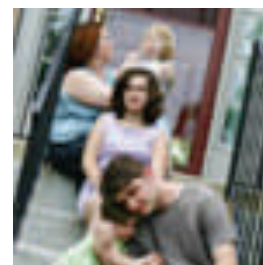
The tendency for shame to extend to family members may contribute not only to a lack of social support, but also to the avoidance of relations with the incarcerated family member. The involuntariness of single parenthood is often met with sympathy, supportive rituals, and child assurance in other contexts. Yet, the prison widow is typically denied these things. **Being a prison widow is like “going to a funeral that no one attends.”**

When a parent is sent to prison, many dimensions of family functioning undergo significant changes. The family structure, financial relationships, income levels, emotional support systems, and living arrangements may be affected.

Expense and distance make contact difficult between incarcerated parents and children. Another obstacle is often the caregiver’s protection of the child through less contact with the parent (Arditti, 2005).

- **Self-Image:** Identification with incarcerated parent, awareness of social stigma and low self-esteem;
- **Cognitive:** Intrusive thoughts about parents, concern about the future and uncertain futures, fatalism and flashbacks to traumatic events;
- **Emotional:** fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness, abandonment, embarrassment, guilt, resentment and emotional withdrawal from friends and family;
- **Mental Health:** Depression, eating and sleeping disorders, anxiety and hyper arousal, attention disorders and developmental regression;
- **Behavioral:** Physical aggression,, acting out inappropriately and disruptive behavior;
- **Educational:** Diminished academic performance, classroom behavior difficulties, truancy; and
- **Involvement:** In the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Mumola, 2000).

One incarcerated mother said, “All I’d do was cry. It is horrible being away from your kids, especially when they [are] the only people who care for you” (Poehlmann, 2005).





Risks to grandparents raising their grandchildren include: poverty, single parenting, health problems, and depression.

A program that helps is called:

Grandparent Caregiver Advocacy Project (GCAP)

This program provides direct legal and social service assistance and peer support to grandparent caregiver families.

Obstacles to Parent-Child Visits in Prison:

- Inadequate information about visiting procedures
- Difficulty scheduling visits
- Geographic location of prison facilities
- Family's inability to afford transportation
- Visiting procedures that are uncomfortable or humiliating
- Visiting rooms that are inhospitable to children
- Foster parents or caregivers who are unwilling to facilitate visits.



(Travis, 2005)

Parent-Child Contact: Distance Creates Difficulties

Distance of Prison from Last Place of Residence	Percent of Inmate Parents, 1997: State	Percent of Inmate Parents, 1997: Federal
Less than 50 miles	17.4%	7.5%
50-100 miles	20.7%	8.5%
101-500 miles	51.2%	40.7%
More than 500 miles	10.7%	43.3%



After parental incarceration the children live with:

- Other parent (85%)
- Grandparent (6.3%)
- Other relatives (6.4%)
- Foster home or agency (2.4%)
- Friends or others (5.3%)

"Being in the group homes and foster homes, knowing that my mom was in jail and then in prison, was hard for me. Going from here to there, you don't know these people; you don't know if they're using you just for the money, or if they really want you to be there, or even if they care about you. I don't care how bad whatever we was going through [at home], I just wanted to be with my mom" (Bernstein, 2005).

Programs that Support the Parent-child Relationship:

Family Works

Parent Organization:

The Osborne Association
175 Remsen St., 8th Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11201
Telephone: (718) 237-0686
E-mail: info@osborneny.org
www.osborneny.org

Family Works offers a prison-based parenting education program for incarcerated fathers.

Project HIP (Helping Incarcerated Parents)

Maine Correctional Center
17 Mallison Rd.
Windham, ME 04062
Telephone: (207) 892-6716

Project HIP supports incarcerated parents, offering support and continuing education groups. It brings together incarcerated parents and their children for increased parenting skills.

PACT

Parents and Children Together

2836 Hemphill Street
Fort Worth, TX 76110
Telephone: (817) 524-7776
E-mail: dawna@azmail.net

PACT provides transportation, overnight lodging, hospitality center, children's center in visiting area, and parent education.



"Prison can offer a redemptive moment in someone's life, when they have been taken out of the context where they were doing the things that got them there in the first place"

(Bernstein, 2005).

More Programs that Help....

Reconciliation Ministries

P.O. Box 90827
Nashville, TN 37209
Telephone: (615) 292-6371

Reconciliation Ministries is composed of Separate Prisons (a support group for women, children, and youth with a loved one in prison) and the Guest House for families visiting inmates. It provides a visiting handbook offering advocacy, counseling, and referral information on community education for families.

Center For Children of Incarcerated Parents

P.O. Box 41-286
Eagle Rock, CA 90041
Telephone: (626) 449-2470
E-mail: ccip@earthlink.net
www.eccip.org

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents offers a variety of education and training programs to serve children of criminal offenders and their families. They offer a variety of correspondence courses nationwide as well as regional courses and training.

Friends Outside National Organization

P.O. Box 4085
Stockton, CA 95204
Contact: Gretchen Newby
Telephone: (209) 938-0727

Friends Outside provides case management services in state prisons, including assistance with family issues and crisis intervention, a parenting education program for incarcerated parents, the Children's Visiting Program and prerelease planning.

Prison Programs that Bring Parents and Children Together:

Tennessee: Child visitation unit (16 beds for weekend visits).

Washington: The McNeil Island Correction Center provides comprehensive family and fatherhood program to teach the skills of active and involved parenting.

Florida: "Reading and Family Ties, Face to Face" live video recordings.



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Helpful Resources

Othello H., & Miller, R. R. (Eds.) (2003). *Impacts of incarceration on the African American family*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Travis, J., & Waul, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Prisoners once removed: The impact of incarceration and re-entry on children, families, and communities*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press.

Bureau of Justice website: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>

Online Resources for Current Research

[Incarcerated Parents: Adjustment of Their Children and Families](#)

[L.I.F.E. Living Interactive Family Education](#)

[California Research Bureau: Children and Family Supplements](#)