

Embracing Children with Incarcerated Parents

"Just because your mother's in prison doesn't mean you can't fulfill your dreams." 14-year-old son of incarcerated mother

(www.takingaim.net)

The Data

- **The magnitude of parental incarceration on children.** Three times as many children are affected by parental incarceration as are affected by foster care placement. Over 1.5 million children currently have at least one parent in prison (J. Travis & M. Waul, *Prisoners Once Removed*, Urban Institute Press, 2003), and an estimated 7 million have a parent under some form of correctional supervision. (C.J. Mumola, *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*, BJS, USDJ, 2000)
- **Who cares for the children?** When fathers go to prison, 89% of their children are cared for by the child's mother. When mothers go to prison, 53% of the children are cared for by their grandparents; about 28% stay with the father; another 10% enter foster care. (C.J. Mumola, above)
- **The vulnerability of child involvement with the criminal justice system.** Children of imprisoned parents are vulnerable to emotional, social, and academic difficulties, including a decline in school performance, behavioral problems, and feelings of abandonment and loss. The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents reports that children of prisoners are five times more likely than other children to end up in prison themselves. (K. Gabel & D. Johnson, *Children of Incarcerated Parents*, 1997)

The Issues

- **Social silence.** Family members may avoid difficult discussions with children to explain the absence of an incarcerated parent, thus producing emotional and psychological problems for the child and complicating the restoration of the parent-child relationship upon return. They may keep silent about this situation with friends and neighbors, as well, thus reducing their own network of social support. Child-serving systems such as schools and youth organizations may be unaware of a child's struggle with parental incarceration and thus unable to offer specific support. (J. Travis et.al., *Families Left Behind*, Urban Institute, 2003)
- **Altered family circumstances.** Children are vulnerable to changes in family structure and living arrangements, loss of family income (71% of parents were employed prior to their arrest), separation from their siblings, and changes in their family roles. (D. Braman, "Families and Incarceration" in *Invisible Punishment*, The New Press, 2002)
- **Challenges of maintaining contact.** Mothers and fathers are typically imprisoned a considerable distance from their children, with women averaging 160 miles and men 100 miles. Over half of all incarcerated parents report never receiving a visit from their child. Further, because prisoners can only make collect calls, and because prisons often contract with phone companies to receive revenues from charging very high rates, this form of contact can be very costly, if not prohibitive, for families. (*Families Left Behind*, above)

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Options for Philanthropy

- **Promoting leadership development for those most affected by the issues.** The most compelling voices on this issue can be the children themselves and their family members. Ensuring that their voices are heard and building their capacity for advocacy and leadership brings power to the issue. Organizations like the Osborne Association (www.osborneny.org) and AIM (www.takingaim.net) model how to do this respectfully and effectively.
- **Supporting successful practice and replication of promising interventions.** The Family and Corrections Network website (www.fcnetwork.org) and the National Institute of Corrections' publication "Services for Families of Prison Inmates" (www.nicic.org/Library/017272) describe a range of programs to keep children connected to their parents (which reduces parental recidivism upon release) and to sustain children during the difficult time of their parent's incarceration. In-prison parenting classes, family visitation programs in family-friendly spaces, group activities and mentoring for children in similar circumstances, and support for grandparent caregivers hold promise as critical child and family supports. (R.D. Parke & K.A. Clarke-Stewart, "The Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children" in *Prisoners Once Removed*, 2003)
- **Underwriting policy advocacy and system reforms.** The Center on Law and Social Policy's *Every Door Closed: Barriers Facing Parents with Criminal Records* (www.clasp.org) describes a range of opportunities and policy options for enabling parents to become family-supporting upon their return to their community. In addition, advocacy with corrections systems for more child-friendly visitation and more affordable telephone calls from prison would keep families more connected.

Key Resources

- **Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center.** Publications on family and child issues around incarceration and re-entry based on the latest research and data. (www.urban.org/content/PolicyCenters/Justice/Projects/PrisonerReentry/Publications/pubs.htm)
- **Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners, Child Welfare League of America.** Publications, data, training for advocates and practitioners. (www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated/)
- **Annie E. Casey Foundation.** Examples of what faith-based organizations can do: J. Read & M.M. Dohadwala, *From the Inside Out: Coming Home from Prison to the Islamic Faith*, Research & Action Brief #1, and R.A. Cnaan & J.W. Sinha, *Back into the Fold: Helping Ex-Prisoners Reconnect Through Faith*, Research & Action Brief #2.
- **Re-Entry National Media Outreach Campaign.** Media resources to generate solutions-oriented community conversations about a range of family and community issues. (www.reentrymediaoutreach.org)



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