Children and Families of the Incarcerated  
Pathways to Change: Policy Into Practice

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Based on the publication by Jessica Nickel, Cynna Garner, and Leah Kane, Children of Prisoners: An Action Plan for Federal Policymakers  

Numbers to Emphasize

1 in 100 = # of people in the USA who are in prison or jail  
Pew Report 2008

The number of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons was 1,479,179 in 2006. An additional 766,010 were held in local jails, for a total of more than 2.2 million.

Recommendation Highlights

The Need to Collect Data: There are no systems in place to gather data on children of the incarcerated.  

Create incentives and guidelines to encourage effective information-sharing among agencies that may already collect relevant data on children of incarcerated parents.

Highlights

The Need to Understand the Impact: Data is often misinterpreted and circulated without accurate citation.  

More research is needed on the long term impact of parental incarceration on children especially on variations between boys and girls, children with incarcerated fathers versus incarcerated mothers and children of different ages. Variations in family and caregiver situations and supports must include children not known to public systems to combat or substantiate statements suggesting that CIPs are more likely than their peers to themselves become incarcerated.

Numbers to Emphasize

In 2007, 1.7 million minor children had a parent in prison, an 82% increase since 1991  

One in 43 American children has a parent in prison.  

One in 15 black children and 1 in 42 Latino children has a parent in prison, compared to 1 in 111 white children.  

The Sentencing Project 2009

Highlights

The Need to Evaluate Programs  

Evaluate the effectiveness of existing program models in improving child outcomes, including a study of Child Protective Services (CPS) practices regarding children of incarcerated parents in the child welfare system and permanency outcomes for such children.
**Implications to Program and Practice**

Additional Research Recommendations

*Evaluate the potential for research protocols to inadvertently cause harm:*

- increase stigma
- decrease willingness to be honest
- interfere with access to supports

**Implications to Program and Practice**

Research questions that cause harm

- “Do you ever wish you had a different parent?”
- “Have you ever seen your parent use drugs?”
- “Has your child’s caregiver ever been incarcerated?”

**Highlights**

Sharing of Information: Coordination Across Service Systems

*Encourage collaboration between child welfare agencies, corrections, education and health and mental health services with guidelines to ensure that the sharing of data follows privacy and confidentiality laws governing the sharing of client information.*

**Implications to Program and Practice**

Additional Research Recommendations

- Evaluate the effect of training (on the specific needs and concerns of children of the incarcerated) of program staff and volunteers on program effectiveness and child outcomes
- Conduct research on the unique challenges experienced by caregivers of children with a parent in prison, as well as the effectiveness of existing services designed to address these challenges.
- Conduct studies (not yet done) on the presence and role of trauma, stigma and shame in the lives of these families

**Implications to Program and Practice**

Focus group families said:

- They are wary of cross system communication
- They want communication with them!
- They were not aware of resources for them

*Establish a navigator system across programs that are accessible to a broad array of caregivers in contact with the criminal justice system.*

**Implications to Program and Practice**

Obstacles and Pathways

*Enhance the capacity of other child serving systems to meet the needs of these children by making recommendations to Departments of Education and Health (Mental Health) that information about children of the incarcerated be provided on a national or state basis*

- Pediatricians and TB
- Teachers and Monday morning meltdown
Implications to Program and Practice

Establish task forces at the state and federal levels

- Leverage the resources of agencies already in contact with these children and families, to identify existing programs and services for children and families of the incarcerated, identify gaps in services, and devise strategies for improving coordination between agencies
- Develop a needs assessment tool could be developed that could help agencies understand where on the continuum of need a child or family falls coordinate services

Highlights

Support for Caregivers

- Establish a federal policy that would permit kinship care agencies to serve families that are not in the child welfare system.
- Identify promising examples of kinship navigator programs and disseminate this information to the field.
- Analyze the impact of AFSA on children of incarcerated parents who are in foster care and provide a more detailed definition of ASFA’s “reasonable efforts” requirement.

Financial Barriers for Parents and Caregivers

Child Support Enforcement

Reach consensus so that incarceration is not considered “voluntary unemployment” or “abandonment” and streamline the review and adjustment processes for modifications of child support orders for parents in prison who lack the financial resources to provide long-term economic support to their children.

Highlights

Minimizing Trauma:

Responses During a Parents Arrest

Implement training and protocols for actions to be taken before and during arrests at which children are present – especially arrests involving custodial parents or guardians – to minimize trauma as much as possible and sensitize arresting officers to the impact of trauma on child development.

Highlights

Most initiatives focus on child placement issues

Focus group families said:

We are less concerned about the placement protocols than the issue of interrogating children about their parents whereabouts and activities and destroying children’s property in search of drugs in front of the child.

An additional concern is children who are not at home but arrive later after the arrest.

Ann Adalist-Estrin, Author. Used with permission.
Highlights

Minimizing Trauma: Parent/Child Interactions within Corrections

Engage courts to help reduce trauma or strain experienced by children as a result of parental incarceration by recommending that parents be incarcerated in proximity to their children, when appropriate, and suggesting that parents enroll in parenting classes.

Implications to Program and Practice: Corrections

Emphasizing the role of corrections in developing family strengthening visiting policies.

Implications to Program and Practice: Corrections

Provide parenting education classes that are specifically designed for incarcerated parents in the corrections setting. These programs are most effective when they are connected to visiting programs and when caregivers are included in the parenting class through mailed materials or parallel classes in the community.

Highlights

Minimizing Trauma: Parent/Child Interactions within Corrections

Promote promising practices of state and local corrections, child protection and community agencies to eliminate barriers to contact between incarcerated parents and their children, when appropriate and identify additional strategies to keep families connected and facilitate healthy parent-child contact to complement in-person visits (such as reading books on tape, teleconferencing, or other outreach).

Implications to Program and Practice: Corrections

Evaluate parent-child programs and policies to determine not only how many people with a demonstrated need participate in these programs, but also the outcomes for program participants.

Implications to Program and Practice: Corrections

Recommend that the National Institute of Corrections provide cross-training for corrections staff and child welfare caseworkers and community agency staff to highlight the impact of incarceration on children and families, with the goal of mitigating existing tensions between corrections and child serving agencies.
Highlights

Promoting Promising Practices

- Initiate efforts to identify promising program models and effective evidence-based practices that address the needs of children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers.
- Develop a consistent set of outcomes measures to be collected by participating programs to enable cross-site, cross-program evaluations and provide funding to conduct those.

Emphasis and Embedded Issues

- Eighty-six percent of prisoners’ minor children were under 10 years of age
- 22 percent were under five

Hairston (2008)

*The largest Federal Funding Initiative is Mentoring Programs which are best suited to children ages 8-16.*

Programs and practices focused on young children must be developed.

Implications to Program and Practice

92% of prison inmates are male, 8% female. The Sentencing Project 2009

*Most children of incarcerated parents have a father in prison or jail*

BJS, 2007 and Sentencing Project 2009

BUT

From 1991 to 2007, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122%, compared to a rise of 76% for incarcerated fathers.

*The Sentencing Project 2009*

*Programs focused on children and families of the incarcerated must be designed for children of incarcerated Mothers and Fathers*

Embedded Issues in Policy and Practice

Two-thirds of the incarcerated parent population is non-white.

*The Sentencing Project 2009*

- Disproportional Representation in the Criminal Justice System
- Disparity in Health/Mental Health Care
- Discrepancies in Sentencing

Embedded Issues in Policy and Practice

These policy recommendations do not address the fundamental issues in the U.S.:

- Racial Disparities
- Drug Addiction and Treatment
- Trauma
- Mass Incarceration
Closing Notes

➢ The needs of the children of the incarcerated must be included in the agenda of the proposed White House Conference on Children
➢ Family members must be included in all task forces, advisory groups and grant reading activities for this population

Presenter Contact Information

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➢ Disseminating accurate data
➢ Training, inspiring, preparing and connecting those working in and around the field
➢ Guiding family strengthening policy and practice
➢ Including the families in defining the problem and designing solutions