

# Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being for Children of Incarcerated Parents

A Product of the Federal Interagency Working Group  
for Children of Incarcerated Parents

June 2013



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## I. Overview

The high rates of incarceration in the United States are felt far beyond prison walls. According to a recent analysis by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, as of 2007, an estimated 1.7 million children under the age of 18 had a parent in prison,<sup>2</sup> and even more children have had an incarcerated parent at some point during their childhood. Growing up with an incarcerated parent is associated with a variety of negative outcomes resulting from financial instability, changes in family structure, and societal stigma. Furthermore, children with a parent in prison also may face a number of other challenging circumstances such as witnessing drug abuse or violence in the home or in their community. They also may have experienced trauma relating to their parent's arrest or from experiences leading up to it.<sup>3</sup>

Systems that reach children of incarcerated parents and their families have the power to significantly improve outcomes by integrating a focus on well-being into their policies, programs, and practices. The purpose of this paper is to call attention to these children and identify the ways in which government programs and other services can address their potentially unique social and emotional needs. The hope is that, by increasing awareness and building knowledge and capacity of programs and services, we will improve the likelihood that these children will succeed.

## II. The Well-Being of Children of Incarcerated Parents

This section outlines the ways in which children may be impacted by the incarceration of a parent. Although it is difficult to isolate the effect of a parent's incarceration from other, often co-occurring experiences, such as violence, drug and alcohol abuse, neglect, and poverty, research demonstrates that children with parents in jail or prison constitute a particularly fragile population that may be at risk for negative outcomes.

**Financial Hardship.** Families often experience financial hardship after the incarceration of a parent. Approximately one-half of parents in state prison report that they were the primary providers of financial support for their child prior to their incarceration.<sup>4</sup> Families also can be left with the burden of legal fees associated with criminal defense and appeals.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining communication with a parent in prison can exacerbate these financial challenges, since

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<sup>1</sup> The Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents includes representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Justice, the Department of Education, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Agriculture, and the Domestic Policy Council.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2011. *More Information and Collaboration Could Promote Ties Between Foster Care Children and their Incarcerated Parents.*

<sup>3</sup> La Vigne, N. et al., 2008. *Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents.* [The Urban Institute.](#)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Hairston, C F.2003 "Prisoners and Their Families: parenting issues during incarceration" [Prisoners Once Removed.](#) pp.259-79.

incarcerated parents often are located far away from their previous residence,<sup>6</sup> making in-person visits an expensive undertaking,<sup>7</sup> and most criminal justice institutions charge incarcerated individuals fees for telephone communication.

**Difficulties with Attachment and Relationship Skills.** According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 60 percent of mothers and 42.4 percent of fathers in state prisons reported living with their child prior to arrest.<sup>8</sup> Nineteen percent of these parents reported living in single-parent households.<sup>9</sup> Sudden separation from a primary caregiver predictably impacts a child's emotional well-being. The parent-child relationship, starting in infancy, forms the foundation for all subsequent relationships by giving children the tools to develop essential interpersonal skills. The difficulties associated with parental incarceration may vary depending on the age and developmental status of a child. For instance, when infants and toddlers are removed from their primary caregiver, they struggle with developing attachments with other caregivers.<sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> Young children, when separated, may struggle with behavioral issues that impede their success in school. During adolescence, young people are balancing their need for individuality and connectedness. Children of incarcerated parents who feel isolated by stigma may be particularly at risk for disconnecting from school and becoming involved with negative peer groups.<sup>12</sup>

**Stigma.** Crime and subsequent incarceration have a level of stigma within communities, and, as a result, children of incarcerated parents tend to experience stigma second hand. In some cases, this stigma can lead to isolation, peer hostility, and social rejection.<sup>13</sup> Parental incarceration also can cause individuals to make unwarranted assumptions about children based on the actions of their parents. One study examining teachers' expectations for children of incarcerated parents found that when teachers were given a scenario where a child had an incarcerated mother, they tended to rate the child as less competent than children who have an absent mother for other reasons.<sup>14</sup> This study demonstrates the potential harm of assumptions and either conscious or unconscious attitudes about children of incarcerated parents.

**Negative Behavioral Responses.** Having a parent in prison, and the related stress factors that often occur in the lives of children with a parent in the custody of the criminal justice system, are associated with negative externalizing behaviors, including rule breaking, displays of irritability, and difficulty with relationships. One study examining the relationship between parental incarceration and developmental outcomes for approximately 3,000 urban children found that

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<sup>6</sup> Mumola, C.J. (2000). Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Reports: Parents in prison and their children. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

<sup>7</sup> Arditti, J.A. Lambert-Shute, J. & Joest, K. (2003) *Saturday morning at the jail: Implications of incarceration for families and children*. *Family Relations*, Vol. 52. PP 195-204.

<sup>8</sup> Glaze, LE & Maruschak, LM. (2008). Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Reports: Parents in prison and their minor children. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Bowlby, J. (1973) *Attachment and loss. Separation*, Vol. 2. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>11</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics: Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care (2000). "Developmental Issues for Young Children in Foster Care." *Pediatrics*, 106 (5), pp. 1145-1150.

<sup>12</sup> Dallaire, D.H. (2007). Children with incarcerated mothers: Developmental outcomes, special challenges, and recommendations. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 28(1):15.

<sup>13</sup> Nesmith, A. & Ruhland, E. (2008). *Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words*. *Children and Youth Services Review*. Vol. 30. PP 1119-1130.

<sup>14</sup> Dallaire, D.H. Ciccone, A. & Wilson, L. C. (2010). *Teachers' experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents*. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. Vol. 31. PP. 281-290.

children with incarcerated fathers demonstrate more aggressive behaviors than children without an incarcerated parent. These children also show more aggressive behavior than children who had absent fathers for other reasons, indicating the unique role incarceration can play in a child's well-being.<sup>15</sup> The negative impact of having an incarcerated parent tends to be stronger among young children who had been living with the parent prior to arrest, but is still evident in children who did not live with the incarcerated parent beforehand.<sup>16</sup>

**Trauma.** Mounting evidence points to the influence of childhood trauma on the functioning and long-term well-being of children. There are several ways children of incarcerated parents may be vulnerable to trauma. Children may experience the trauma of seeing their parent arrested. In a survey of parents incarcerated in Arkansas, 40 percent reported that their children had been present at the time of arrest and 27 percent of those cases reported that a weapon had been drawn.<sup>17</sup> The sudden separation from a parent upon arrest and imprisonment also can be traumatic, particularly if the child and incarcerated parent lived together before the incarceration. While visiting with an incarcerated parent can ease this pain, it also can induce fear and amplify feelings of separation.<sup>18</sup> Service providers working with children of incarcerated parents, once aware of the potential for trauma, can implement appropriate-trauma-informed approaches and interventions.

**Compounding Risks.** Children who have an incarcerated parent often face a number of other related challenges. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study is a longitudinal examination of the health outcomes associated with ten negative events experienced early in life, one of which is growing up with a family member in prison.

ACEs are often co-occurring. Children who have an incarcerated parent may have been exposed to additional negative events that, cumulatively, put their future well-being at risk, regardless of whether those events are directly related to the incarceration. A recent review of existing research found that children with incarcerated parents may be more likely to have witnessed or experienced violence than their peers.<sup>19</sup> Many incarcerated parents report a history of drug use, alcohol dependence, or mental illness.<sup>20</sup> Children of incarcerated mothers may also be more likely to experience foster care at some point during their childhood. One study indicated that as many as 1 in 8 children who are subjects of reports of maltreatment and investigated by child welfare agencies has a parent who was recently arrested.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Geller et al. (2012). Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development. *Demography* 49(1): 49-76

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Harm, N.J. & Phillips, S.D. (1998), *Helping children cope with the trauma of parental arrest*. *Interdisciplinary Report on At-Risk Children and Families*. Vol. 1 PP 35-36.

<sup>18</sup> Arditti, J.A. (2003). *Locked doors and glass walls: Family visiting at a local jail*. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. Vol. 8. PP 115-138.

<sup>19</sup> Uchida, CD; Swatt, M; & Solomon, SE. (2012). Exposure to violence among children of inmates: A research agenda. Silver Spring, MD: Justice & Security Strategies.

<sup>20</sup> Mumola, C.J. (2000). Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Reports: Parents in prison and their children. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

<sup>21</sup> Phillips, Susan D. "Parental Arrest and Children Involved with Child Welfare Services Agencies." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Vol. 74, No. 2, April 2004. Accessible from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1037/0002-9432.74.2.174/abstract;jsessionid=C9C5D13170759FC2AC1A78E75823B301.d01t03>.

## Adverse Childhood Experiences

Emotional abuse  
Physical abuse  
Sexual abuse  
Emotional neglect  
Physical neglect  
Mother treated violently  
Household substance abuse  
Mentally ill person in the household  
Parental separation or divorce  
Incarcerated household member

Research has found that, when individuals have multiple ACEs in their backgrounds, they are far more likely to have significant health and mental health problems later in life. One study noted that people who experienced four or more ACEs were likely to die *twenty years* earlier than adults with no ACEs.<sup>22</sup>

Government programs, practitioners, and other social service providers working with this population can improve their services by being aware of the common co-occurring problems among this population and by aiming to mitigate them through multiple strategies including those outlined below.

### III. Strategies for Improving Outcomes of Children of Incarcerated Parents

Systems and communities can develop a trauma-informed approach to serving children of incarcerated parents and their families that promotes well-being and improves outcomes. In a trauma-informed approach, all components of the organization incorporate a thorough understanding of the prevalence and impact that trauma can have on the child, the role that trauma plays, and the complex and varied paths in which a child recovers and heals from trauma.<sup>23</sup> Effective approaches include anticipating the challenges that these young people face, rethinking how services and supports are delivered, and, where possible, using evidence-based interventions to meet the social and emotional needs of young people with incarcerated parents. Examples of a comprehensive, trauma-informed approach may include, but are not limited to:

- Ensuring jail and prison visiting conditions are sensitive to the needs of children;
- Offering opportunities for incarcerated parents to increase their parenting capacities to nurture and support their children;
- Promoting opportunities for positive communication between incarcerated parents and their children where appropriate; and
- Working to facilitate a parent's involvement in his/her child's schooling where appropriate, despite the obstacles inherent in incarceration.

<sup>22</sup> Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Nordenberg D, Williamson DF, Spitz AM, Edwards V, Koss MP, Marks JS. Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 1998;14:245–258.

<sup>23</sup> In draft: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2012). Working Definition of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

Focusing on the social and emotional well-being of children and youth with incarcerated parents requires a coordinated effort on behalf of those serving this population, both within and across systems. It entails (1) understanding and anticipating the challenges that children of prisoners face, (2) considering how services are structured and delivered for young people along a continuum of need, (3) building capacity to deliver evidence-based or otherwise promising interventions with demonstrated results, and (4) examining and reevaluating policies that may impact children of incarcerated parents.

**Understanding and Anticipating Challenges.** As discussed above, children of incarcerated parents face certain common challenges. They may have had multiple adverse experiences, such as exposure to violence or household drug use, and they often exhibit a similar array of social-emotional and behavioral symptoms that can impair functioning in relationships, in the home, in school, and in the community. Children of incarcerated parents may experience feelings of shame relating to having a parent in prison and may be subjected to societal stigma. There is also the danger that those in contact with the child, whether teachers, service providers, or family members, may make judgments about the child because of the actions of the child's parent. An understanding of the challenges these children face when they arrive in the classroom or interact with any number of other institutional stakeholders allows those working with these young people to be more effective and anticipate the services that the children may need. This capacity is necessary at the provider level, but also at the level of administrators who are making decisions about the array of services a system should provide to children, their caregivers, and their incarcerated parents.

**Responding Along a Continuum of Need.** While children of prisoners may face predictable challenges, they do not all face the same challenges. The degree to which parental incarceration will affect a child's well-being depends heavily on the presence or absence of other factors in his or her life. For example, it stands to reason that children who have high-quality caregiving and a stable home environment while their parent is in prison may struggle less. There are also cases where the incarceration of a parent may lead to improvements in the child's life. Understanding the factors that influence a child's well-being both positively and negatively during parental incarceration can help service providers intervene appropriately to build on strengths and mitigate risks.

Given that children's level of need will vary, screening and assessment for social and emotional risks or impairments is a necessary first and on-going step to match them with appropriate services. Not all children will require a high-intensity, evidence-based intervention; for those who do, it is important to ensure that what is provided meets the identified needs of the children.

**Providing Services That Work.** Funding for social programs is scarce; therefore it is important for programs and policymakers to demonstrate that limited resources will yield positive results. The array of evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions that address the social and emotional needs of children is growing, and, more than ever, it is possible to develop a range of services that can improve outcomes for children and families.

There are many interventions that have been rigorously tested and shown to address effectively many of the needs that may occur among children of incarcerated parents, including reducing trauma symptoms and externalizing behaviors while increasing self-regulation and coping skills.<sup>24</sup> Several federal databases currently allow users to search for information about these evidence-based interventions, narrowing results to target particular groups or specific outcomes. Public systems, such as child welfare, juvenile justice, education, correctional, and mental health agencies, as well as private programs, can develop the capacity to install, implement, and sustain these evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions by using research to identify effective and promising interventions that meet the needs of the specific population to be served; making needed adaptations to bring the interventions to scale; developing an awareness of principles of evidence-based practices among staff at all levels; and reorganizing infrastructure to support implementation fidelity and further evaluations of these practices and interventions.

FEDERAL DATABASES OF EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS	
Database	Description
National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) <a href="http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov">http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov</a>	NREPP is a searchable online registry of mental health and substance abuse interventions for use in a variety of settings. It is a product of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP) Model Programs Guide (MPG) <a href="http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/">http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/</a>	The MPG lists programs covering the continuum of youth services connected to juvenile justice, from prevention of criminal activity through sanctions to reentry.
What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) <a href="http://ies.ed.gov">http://ies.ed.gov</a>	The WWC is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education designed to catalog the evidence about research interventions for use in educational settings that help students and schools meet high standards.

In addition to these databases, several compilations of interventions address specific concerns. For instance, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a review of evidence-based practices for children exposed to violence in 2011 ([http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix\\_2011.pdf](http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix_2011.pdf)).<sup>25</sup>

Many, if not most, of the promising interventions for children and youth require that parents or caregivers be engaged. The parent-child relationship has a significant impact on the behavior and mental health of children, so many interventions aim to improve parenting practices as a way to support positive child outcomes. Using such interventions to improve the well-being of children can be a challenge for systems working with incarcerated parents, whose participation in their children’s upbringing is either severely limited or nonexistent. However, the role of parents in promoting children’s well-being should not be understated, even when they are incarcerated. Especially, but not only, in those cases where individuals are expected to be released and resume

<sup>24</sup> Evidence-based and evidence-informed practices such as Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy are examples. There are also evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions geared toward improving outcomes related to youth skill development, education, and employment.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of Justice; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2011). Evidence-Based Practices for Children Exposed to Violence: A Selection from Federal Databases. Washington, D.C.: Author.

parenting (whether in a custodial context or not), interventions that build parenting skills and strengthen the parent-child bond should be considered wherever possible and appropriate.

Engaging and supporting the adult who is providing day-to-day care and supervision for a young person whose parent is incarcerated is critical as well. A survey of incarcerated parents found that 9 out of 10 children whose fathers are in prison are living with their mothers, while almost half of the children whose mothers are incarcerated are living with a grandparent.<sup>26</sup> According to the same survey, about 10 percent of children with mothers in state prison are in foster care. These caregivers are critical figures in the lives of these children and should be fully engaged in interventions to promote social and emotional well-being. Much can be learned from the use of evidence-based interventions provided for children in foster care, many of which engage substitute caregivers (foster parents or kinship caregivers) in treatment or skill-building.

Caregivers of children with incarcerated parents may face many of their own challenges related to raising a child whose mother or father is in prison. Kin caregivers also might be struggling with the loss of a family member, the child's parent, to incarceration and coping with similar feelings of separation and grief. Having to make decisions on behalf of the incarcerated parent can create additional stress for a caregiver, even if he/she is unrelated to the parent. Those working with children of incarcerated parents should consider these potential stresses when developing strategies to promote social and emotional well-being for this vulnerable population.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Children of incarcerated parents are a vulnerable group, not solely because their parents are incarcerated, but also because they often face multiple, compounding risks in conjunction with parental incarceration. Research has provided strategies that can help children and youth with social and emotional needs get back on track developmentally. There are also many promising practices occurring in the field that have yet to be studied. Additional research identifying the positive influences that enhance children of incarcerated parents' ability to be successful could further improve service delivery. Promoting well-being for this group requires the coordinated effort of multiple government and social service entities to integrate this information and implement collaborative approaches. These efforts have the potential to substantially improve outcomes for children of incarcerated parents and their families, helping them advance to healthy, happy futures.

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<sup>26</sup> Glaze, LE & Maruschak, LM. (2008). Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Reports: Parents in prison and their minor children. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.