

## Research Brief

# Children, Families, and the Criminal Justice System

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Research

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## Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents: A View from the Ground

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*An estimated ten to twelve million children in the United States are currently affected by parental involvement in the correctional system, which includes having a parent currently or formerly incarcerated in jail or prison or under the supervision of parole or probation. Children of incarcerated parents are vulnerable to a variety of behavioral and psychological problems, and their families and caregivers subject to emotional, financial and physical stress.*

*In order to understand the issues, problems, concerns, and needs of children and families of incarcerated parents from the "inside," Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research convened day-long focus groups with young adults who were children when their parents were incarcerated, caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, and formerly incarcerated parents. After an orientation session, participants broke in three peer groups. Audio-recordings were made of each group's discussions and major points were recorded on flip-charts. In the afternoon the entire group met to share issues that emerged from the small group sessions. Following are the highlights of the discussions.*

This brief is one of a series developed to facilitate understanding and to inform public discourse about children, families, and the criminal justice system. The series is based on empirical research conducted by the Justice Group, a research consortium of faculty and staff at the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research.

### **Incarcerated parents come from a variety of backgrounds but many share similar drug-related lifestyles prior to incarceration.**

Some parents reported being raised in troubled families plagued by parental substance abuse, violence and criminality while others reported being raised in law abiding families void of substance abuse and violence. Prior to incarceration, most

parents lacked employment, job skills, education/training beyond high school, and stable housing. Although not in all cases, caregivers reported that prior to incarceration the parents led highly disorganized lives marked by drug addiction, irresponsible actions, and high-risk lifestyles. Several adult children reported that prior to their parent's incarceration their parent had been absent emotionally and/or physically due to drugs, criminal lifestyle, and previous

incarcerations.

**All three groups (children, caregivers, and formerly incarcerated parents) felt a mixture of shame, guilt, and anger due to the parents' incarceration.**

Adult children reported being given little or no information about where their parent was, how he or she was doing, or what to expect next. They indicated that their feelings alternated between feeling angry, resentful, and protective toward their parent and that they felt a sense of sadness and helplessness about the incarceration of their parent. Adult children also reported feeling uncomfortable during prison visits, and prison personnel treated them as if they had committed a crime. In some instances, adult children said that they felt like they didn't belong anywhere and sometimes acted out by exhibiting emotional and behavioral problems at home, school and in their neighborhood. At the same time, what helped many children through their parent's incarceration was the positive influence of at least one adult in their lives—the other parent, a grandparent, a family friend, or even a teacher. Caregivers were frequently angry or frustrated about how to handle children's behavioral and emotional problems, which included truancy, fighting with other children, throwing tantrums, and crying uncontrollably. Caregivers also indicated that they didn't always know how honest to be with children about the incarcerated parent's circumstances. Caregivers felt that most often they had no one to talk to about the experience of incarceration of a family member/loved one. All of the caregivers described the experience as embarrassing and shaming. Formerly incarcerated parents felt they were not informed about the types of problems their children were having and had little control over how their children were being raised.

**Family caregivers face numerous emotional, physical, legal and economic**

**difficulties.**

Caregivers experienced a lack of emotional and financial support. They also reported feeling overwhelmed by the needs of the children in their care and the "constant running back and forth to school" because of the children's behavioral problems. Most caregivers characterized their caregiving experience as an obligation that was taken on with much love for the children, but also one that was stressful and frequently caused problems at their places of employment when they had to take time off to attend to the children's problems. Many caregivers lacked supportive networks to share their experiences and worried about who would take care of the children if they got ill. Not only did caregivers have to feed, house and clothe the children without additional resources, but the cost of phone calls from the parent and travel expenses for prison visits were additional financial burdens.

**Post-incarceration, children and caregivers receive no support for dealing with the transition of the parent back to family and community life.**

Little attention is given to how parental return from prison affects the family and children. Sometimes parents resume criminal activities or substance use upon their return home. Adult children with this experience reported that they felt betrayed and eventually learned to not have any expectations of the parent. More often, however, the parent wants to "pick up where they left off," to make decisions for the child or "over parent" to make up for lost time, without realizing that the child has changed or has his or her own, often very different, set of expectations of the parent-child relationship. Post-incarceration, parents needed money, jobs, housing, substance abuse treatment and guidance in re-attaching to their children. These resources proved scarce or non-existent. Mothers and fathers often felt pressured to

resume providing for their families after incarceration--at a time when they themselves needed a lot of support in resuming former roles in the family and community. Mothers typically returned to the homes of their children's caregivers--usually the children's maternal grandparents. Mothers reported difficulties reintegrating into their children lives and in being respected and listened to as a parent by their children and caregivers. Although some fathers reported feeling conflicted about wanting a chance to be a father again versus turning away from children and family and just "moving on," other fathers refused to give up their role and wanted to make strides toward providing financial and emotional support for their children regardless of barriers to money, jobs, housing, substance abuse treatment, etc. Formerly incarcerated fathers reported that taking on the role of father post-incarceration proved to be quite difficult in a society in which fathering is so closely tied to providing financial support of the family and where employment is limited by the mark of incarceration.

### **Traditional social services delivered in a traditional manner were not used or considered a potential source of help .**

Participants indicated that departments of corrections, public aid, schools, and foster care had little understanding of their needs. Children of incarcerated parents relied on their "inner strength" to resolve problems related to their parent's incarceration. Most caregivers turned to religion and/or spiritual advisors to help deal with issues associated with the incarceration. Some caregivers reported that they "didn't know who to turn to" for help with emotional and financial problems. Parents and caregivers reported a mistrust of traditional social services and often didn't seek counseling for fear of being labeled "crazy." Shame and alienation from mainstream society precluded parents from seeking social services. Responses from

existing system services when they did use them ranged from indifference to disdain and frequently "made things worse."

### **Policy Implications**

Children, families, caregivers, and incarcerated parents face unique situations and have varying strengths and needs. Programs and services to meet these needs must be tailored to each family. The three groups came up with the following key principles that they thought would be helpful in guiding the development of policy, practice, and research initiatives directed at improving outcomes for children and families of incarcerated parents:

- < The needs of children, families and incarcerated parents are long-term. Service and resource needs preceded incarceration, are exacerbated during incarceration, and continue after the parent is released from prison or jail. Programs and policies must be designed to address family needs for each of these distinct phases.
- < Programs and policies aimed at helping children, families, and incarcerated parents must be based in the communities and neighborhoods in which they live, and built on existing social networks, community organizations and faith-based institutions. Church-based services within the community that include transportation to and from prisons, financial aid, and reintegration support for parents can help support families during and after incarceration.
- < Children, families and incarcerated parents have multiple service needs. Organizational efforts to meet these needs must be coordinated and integrated. Mentoring programs that pair formerly incarcerated parents with parents in prison, and older, experienced children of incarcerated parents with younger children might be

- an example of such an effort.
- < Persons whose lives are directly impacted by incarceration must be involved in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of programs, policies, and research efforts designed to meet their material, emotional, and informational needs.

## Resources

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