Improving Responses to Children of the Incarcerated:
Theory, Policy and Practice

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FCN

1 in 100
In Case You Hadn’t Heard!

# 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.

By The Numbers

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

By the Numbers

In 2007, there were 809,800 parents incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons, an increase of 79% since 1991.

In 2007, half (52%) of all incarcerated men and women were parents.
The Sentencing Project 2009

Concerned Responses

After many years of advocacy, it is finally registering to the American public that having a parent go to jail or prison effects a lot of children:

More Data

An estimated 7-10 million children have or have had a parent under some form of correctional supervision in their lifetime.
(BJS, 2007)
More Data

Eighty-six percent of prisoners’ minor children were under 10 years of age
22 percent were under five
Hairston (2008)

Pathways to Change: Policy Into Practice


Highlights

Research: The Need to Collect Data
Create incentives and guidelines to encourage effective information-sharing among agencies that may already collect relevant data on children of incarcerated parents

Implications to Program and Practice

Identifying children vs.
“If you build it well, they will identify themselves”

Invisible by Choice?

“Relatives … feel forced to hide from the shaming gaze of others … leading them to withhold information and avoid connections that may help them.”
Families Shamed by Rachel Condry 2007

Highlights

Research: The Need to Understand the Impact
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, children of different ages, variations in family and caregiver situations and supports
Implications to Program and Practice

A Broader Context

- Brain Development Research
- Trauma Research
- Attachment Theory

Children of the Incarcerated: A Continuum of Need?

Needs

- Layers of additional stress/risk factors
  - Few protections
  - Multiple needs
- Many protections OR Fewer risks
  - Moderate needs
- Few additional risk factors
  - Many protections
  - Limited/targeted needs

Highlights

Research: 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

The effects of unconscious bias and attitudes on policy and practice.


Focus Group Feedback

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

Focus Group Feedback

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?”
Focus Group Feedback

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.

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

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 navigator systems 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

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.

Implications to Program and Practice

Establish task forces at the state and federal levels
- Leverage the resources of state agencies already serving children and families of the incarcerated, to identify existing programs and services AND identify gaps in services, and devise strategies for improving coordination between agencies.

Highlights

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Highlights
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
Financial Barriers for Parents and Caregivers
State and Federal Benefits and Income
Evaluate the three main issues commonly affecting the availability of state and federal benefits and income support for incarcerated parents and their children:
1. Statutory bans that disqualify individuals with criminal records from eligibility
2. Restoration of eligibility upon release
3. Enrollment of individuals who did not previously receive benefits or income support;

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.

Focus Group Feedback
➢ 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.

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.
Focus Group Feedback

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

Defining “healthy” relationships
Consider:
- Caregivers who are angry at the incarcerated parent
- Service providers who are biased

Implications to Program and Practice: Model Programs

Difficulties with evidenced based practice limitations on model expansion and replication.
- Evidence of what?
  - Short term vs. long term outcomes
  - ACE Study
  - School bias
  - Focus on recidivism prevention
  - Structural racism

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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.

Policy into Practice Data Conflicts

- Eighty-six percent of prisoners’ minor children were under 10 years of age
- 22 percent were under five
  - Hairston (2008)
- Largest Federal Funding Initiative: Mentoring

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

Policy into Practice Data Conflicts

- 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

BUT

Gender Specific Initiatives vs.
“Low hanging fruit”
This is not just a maternal/child health issue

The Parent-Child Relationships

- **Making**: Parent-Child Relationships that begin during incarceration
- **Mending**: Parent-Child Relationships that need to heal during incarceration
- **Maintaining**: Parent-Child Relationships that support to keep the connection
- **Managing** in the Absence: Parent-Child relationships that cannot be

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

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Emerging Issues: Assumptions and Programming

- To date, funding initiatives focus on helping children to manage in the absence of a relationship with the parents. **CHALLENGE THIS**
- Mentoring is a popular program focus. **EVALUATE THIS**
- Mentoring best helps children 8-14 with moderate risks. **CONNECT THIS**

We must advocate for programs that strengthen families and make, mend or maintain parent-child relationships as well as those focused on managing in the absence.

Emerging Issues: Embedded Issues in Policy and Practice

These policy recommendations do not address the fundamental issues:

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

Emerging Issues: Caregiver Support

- Mothers are caregivers, too

Emerging Issues: Juvenile vs. Adult Corrections

Emerging Issues: Immigration and Corrections

Emerging Issues: Universal vs. Targeted Outreach
Emerging Issues

Runaway and Homeless

The Challenge of Advocacy

“...break the intergenerational cycle of crime and incarceration and give a forgotten (invisible) group of children the chance to reach their highest potential.”

MCP program brochure 2009

The Challenge of Advocacy

“...distorted in the telling, buried in the un-telling.” Randall Robinson

BREAK THE CHAIN

Joe R. 58             Joe R. Jr. 36         Jimmy R. 16

Adapted from Mentoring program website-2009

“Their mothers are prostitutes and drug addicts but they want to do better.”
Troop 1500 Video

Implied Causal Patterns

“If we are at risk for following in our parents footsteps, perhaps it is because you say we are.”
S. 16 year old daughter of an incarcerated mother in Connecticut

• These are children that are better off without their parents
• These are children that lack affection and guidance
• Most of them didn’t even live with their parents

Facts: Pre Incarceration Relationships

• 44%/55% Percent of fathers had at least one minor child living with them before incarceration
• 64%/84% Percent of mothers had at least one minor child living with them before incarceration

State/Federal
Hairston (2008)
What We Know
Two-thirds of the incarcerated parent population is non-white.

The Sentencing Project 2009

Think About It
“Think of these children as you would your own, but never forget that they’re not...if they were yours, you would not...focus on the floor of crimelessness...as if it were the ceiling. And it is harder for some to think of them as our own when they are mostly black and brown.”

Vince Schiraldi, DCDJJ

7 to 10 times more likely?
We Need to Stop Saying This

- Children experience the stigma of having a parent in prison
- They experience this in the context of poverty, racism and trauma.
- Those in child and family serving systems are inadequately trained to provide support
- They are at risk for a cycle of trauma, addictions, rage & labeling, judgments and blaming
- They feel further stigmatized by this message
Could “we” be causing the intergenerational pattern?

Distorted in the Telling

“Those who say that the families of the incarcerated suffer no shame or stigma because they are used to it, have spent no time in the community with these families.”

“Doing Time On The Outside” Donald Bramen 2007

Buried in the Un-telling

“It’s a secret life you keep—every time I got a letter from my Dad I wanted to share it with my friends but couldn’t because I never told them he was locked up.” E. California

“I just told everyone she had died. It was what my grandma said was better and I cried about that all the time.” C. Florida

The Attachment Literature

Children with secure early attachments are more likely in later years to:
- be better problem-solvers
- form friendships and be leaders with peers
- be more empathetic and less aggressive
- engage their world with confidence
- have higher self-esteem
- be better at resolving conflict
- be more self-reliant and adaptable
Perspective is 9/10 of Reality

“Researchers and clinicians utilize attachment research to guide family strengthening program and policy development.” Zero To Three 2004

Examing the Cycle

Government Separation of Children and Parents: Attending to Attachment

Child Abuse and Neglect: Child Welfare Supports

Military Deployment: DOD Supports

Incarceration: No Supports

The Impact of Trauma

Trauma or perceived danger causes the excretion of adrenalin and cortisol in amounts that cause brain damage and death in laboratory animals.
( Perry 2004)

The Impact of Trauma

The presence of parents or other adult attachment figures lowers the dangerous levels of cortisol.
( Dozier, 2005)

The Positive Cycle

Resilience ➔ Trauma ➔ Reinforcement ➔ Cortisol ➔ Recovery ➔ Attachment ➔ Dopamine

Attachment & Trauma

Important Connections

- Primary attachment figures provide a buffer from the most damaging effects of trauma

- Separation from the primary attachment figures causes trauma
Attachment-Contemporary Perspective

Scientists now know that chronic, unrelenting stress in early childhood, caused by separation from caregivers, extreme poverty, or parental depression, for example, can be toxic to the developing brain in the same way as repeated abuse and witnessing violence changes brain architecture.


Toxic Stress

Strong & prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of buffering protection of adult support

Activated by:
- Recurrent abuse, neglect, care-giver depression, substance abuse, family violence or triggers for tolerable stress that are prolonged and without supports
- Increased susceptibility to cardiovascular disease, hypertension, obesity, diabetes and mental health problems (www.acestudy.com)

Impact on Brain Development

- Impulse Control
- Cause and Effect
- Predictability
- Emotional Regulation
- Reciprocal Engagement

The Negative Cycle

Advocacy that Heals

- Recognize that incarceration causes trauma and/or re-traumatizes those who have experienced trauma
- Adapting to trauma causes behaviors such as (disconnecting from family) that are misinterpreted by others and interfere with attachment.

See Freeing Tammy by Jody Raphael 2007

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The Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated: A Framework for Change

I have the right....

I Have the Right...

- To be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent’s arrest
- To be heard and considered when decisions are made about me or my parent
- To be well cared for in my parent’s absence.

I Have the Right...

- To speak with, see and touch my parent
- To support as I struggle with my parent’s incarceration
- Not to be blamed, judged or labeled because of my parent’s incarceration
- To a lifelong relationship with my parent.

Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated

- Focuses on the child
- In the context of family
- Honoring the significance of the incarcerated parent
- Respecting the needs of caregivers
- Advocacy for policy change
- Increased public awareness
- Impacting programs and practices

NRCCFI at FCN
www.fcnetwork.org

- 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
RESOURCES
National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at FCN
• New Web Site
• Directory of Programs
• Children of incarcerated parents Library
• Telephone Trainings, Conferences and Technical Assistance

www.fcnetwork.org

Closing Thought

“Silence and distance is uncomfortable mostly when there is too much to be said. Once we have learned to speak of what is important to us, we will find beauty in silence and growth in separations.”

Unknown origin-translated from the Chinese

Presenter Contact Information

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