



# background

Report # 128

Children of Incarcerated Parents

November 2011

## Children With A Parent In Prison

## Staying in touch

*Visits are important, but can be difficult*

**A**s America's prison population has increased so has the number of parents serving time, leaving behind a population of children to endure hardship and developmental risks as a result.

Studies suggest that for these children, having contact with their incarcerated parents can influence important developmental issues, such as secure attachments and relationships. Others are affected as well. Arranging and maintaining contact with inmates can, for example, be a source of stress for the child's caregiver. And contact with their children can affect inmates in positive ways as well as in ways that can make serving their sentences more difficult.

### A Growing Population

Judicial policies and attitudes regarding incarceration have undergone major changes over the last few decades, including mandatory minimum sentences applied to a range of felonies. These policies have had a number of consequences, not the least of which is a dramatic rise since the 1980s of incarcerated men and women who are parents.

More than 1.7 million children had a parent in state or federal prison in 2007, an increase of 80% since 1991.<sup>1</sup>

Several million more children are estimated to have a parent in local jails. The exact number of those children is unknown because many jails, corrections departments, child welfare departments and other systems do not systematically count them.

In Allegheny County, an estimated 7,000 children had at least one parent in jail or prison in 2005, according to a study by the Pittsburgh Child Guid-

ance Foundation. Among the children in the study, about half of them were white and half were African American and about 75% of them were under 13 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

### Risks To Children

Research suggests that having a parent in jail or prison increases the likelihood of children experiencing risks ranging from developing internalizing and externalizing behavior problems to school failure and higher rates of drug use and unemployment later in life.

More specifically, the adverse consequences of children having a parent in jail or prison include:

- Higher foster care caseloads. A study of states with the highest foster care caseloads reported a significant relationship between the rate of foster care caseloads and the rate of female incarcerations between 1985 and 2000. Researchers said that with each

*Studies suggest the outcomes of children having contact with an parent who is in jail or prison depend on several factors, such as the quality of their visits and the relationship between the child's caregiver and the incarcerated parent.*

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additional incarceration per 100 women foster care cases increased 12 percent.

- Developmental challenges. Studies have found that children face a high risk of developmental setbacks when a parent is incarcerated, including impaired parent-child bonding, anxiety, developmental regression and acute traumatic stress.
- Economic hardships. Children of incarcerated parents face economic hardships resulting from the loss of the parent's income, caregiver instability and parental substance abuse.
- Problems in school. Studies report that, as a group, children of incarcerated parents tend to show below average academic performance, even when compared to similarly disadvantaged children.

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- Incarceration later in life. Children with an incarcerated parent often serve time in jail or prison as adults. Two long-term studies in Europe report a strong connection between parent-child incarcerations with one of the studies suggesting that the number of times a parent was incarcerated predicted the number of offenses the child committed as an adult.

### Child-Parent Contact

Most parents serving sentences in state and federal prisons have some form of contact with their children. The most common is mail contact.

In a 2007 U.S. prison survey, 75% of state and federal prisoners said they had mail contact with their children. More than half reported having phone contact with their children, and 42% of state prisoners and 55% of federal prisoners said they had visits with their children during the time they were incarcerated.

Several factors influence contact between inmates and their children, such as the length of the parent's sentence, jail and prison policies, and the distance between the correctional facility and the child's home.

State prisons, for example, house inmates who sentences are longer than one year and are often located in remote areas farther from the child's home. Jails are often located closer to where children of inmates live. Jails mostly used for short-term incarceration before and after adjudication. Studies suggest that the longer parents are incarcerated the less likely they are to maintain at least weekly contact with their children.

### Visitation Policies

The quality and frequency of children's visits with their incarcerated

parents are influenced by the policies of the jail or prison in which parents are serving their sentences. And policies vary across correctional facilities, based on each facility's security and safety concerns and strategies.

Key policy questions included whether to allow "full" contact visits, which allows physical contact; "open" visits that don't allow contact, but do not involve separating parent and children with a physical barrier; and "barrier" visits, during which children and inmates are separated by a Plexiglass window or other type of barrier.

Most federal and state prisons permit some physical contact with children, such as an embrace, handshake or kiss before and after the visit. A survey of local jails in 10 states found those facilities were less likely to allow physical contact.

And some jails don't allow inmates and children to meet in person. Instead, visits take place on a closed-circuit television system.

Such policies have implications in terms of the quality of visits and their outcomes.

One study, for example, found higher levels of contact with their children were linked with lower levels of depression among incarcerated mothers.

Those mothers were in a single facility that provided child-friendly visitation opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Another study found more visits with incarcerated parents were associated with insecure attachment among children. But those visits took place through a Plexiglass window in a large, noisy room, and children and caregivers were frisked before entering.

Recognition of such issues led to recent initiatives at the Allegheny County Jail. For example, a family activity center in the jail lobby includes a craft area for children, video nook, book corner, slide and mock visiting booths to help them prepare for the visit with their jailed parent.

The jail also opened a family support center. The program assigns select inmates with children to a special pod where they, their spouses or partners and children work with specialists on issues critical to strengthening the family that were identified in personal assessments.

Reported outcomes of contact with incarcerated parents are mixed. However, studies suggest that quality matters – that the better the visit, the more likely a child will benefit from it in some way.



## references

*This report is largely based on the following publications.*

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<sup>1</sup> Glaze, L., & Maruschak, L. (2008). Parents in prison and their minor children. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (NCJ 22984), 1-25. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>

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