

New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents a special project of the Osborne Association

Fact Sheet: Parental Incarceration's Impact on Children's Health

More than 2.7 million children across the United States currently have an incarcerated parent, with an estimated 105,000 of these children living in New York State.¹ The number of children with a father in prison grew by 77% from 1991 through mid-2007, and the number with a mother in prison increased 131% during the same time.² Parental incarceration has long-range economic, emotional, and social consequences that affect children's wellbeing.³ To ensure children of incarcerated parents reach their full potential, it is critical to assess their needs, provide them with support services, and maintain their critical relationships, as well as better understand the various other factors which help or hinder their bright futures.

Parental incarceration's impact on children's well-being

Separation due to a parent's incarceration can be as traumatic as other forms of parental loss and can be even more complicated because of the stigma, ambiguity, and lack of social support and compassion that accompanies it. There is no single story that describes what it is like for a child to have a parent who is incarcerated. Children's experiences and responses differ depending on many factors including: when the separation occurs, the quality of the parent-child relationship before separation, and how the separation is handled, including whether contact is supported and maintained (when in the child's best interest).⁴ The majority of children of incarcerated parents do not enter the criminal justice system, but even those who go on to live healthy, happy and productive lives, still experience multiple stressors, which also make them susceptible to poor health and mental health outcomes. At the very least, all children of incarcerated parents experience the stigma of having a parent in jail or prison, and the loss of the parent they would like to have in their daily lives.

What does the research say?

Although more research is needed to help us understand the many and diverse ways that parental incarceration affects children, researchers agree that these children experience multiple risk factors.

- Parental incarceration is recognized as an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE), a measure of childhood trauma developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Exposure to multiple ACE's significantly increases the likelihood of long-term negative mental health and health outcomes (obesity, heart disease, diabetes, tobacco use, alcohol use, and asthma). Parental incarceration differs from other ACE's by the unique combination of trauma, shame, and stigma.⁵ Stigma can damage children's self-esteem, cause alienation, and distort children's sense of social-connectedness.⁶
- Children of incarcerated parents may "experience a two-fold increase in risk for mental health problems, and higher rates of major depression and attention disorders, than the general population of youth."⁷
- Children of incarcerated parents are potentially exposed to many risk factors, which may increase their risk for developing anti-social and aggressive behavior.⁸
- Traumatic events in childhood, including separation from a parent, may cause long-lasting changes in the brain, leading to adverse health and mental health outcomes.⁹
- Children's distress during a period of separation is experienced as anxiety and may lead to "failure-to-thrive, depression, delinquency, and academic problems."¹⁰

¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*. Washington, DC: Author; The Osborne Association (2010). New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet. Brooklyn, NY: Author.

² Christian, S. (2009). *Children of Incarcerated Parents*. Washington D.C.: Conference of State Legislatures, March 2009.

³ Hairston, C.F. (2007). *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents: An Overview of the Research Literature*. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

⁴ Katz, L. (2002). *Services for Children of Incarcerated Mothers with Co-occurring Disorders*. Delmar, New York: Gains Center Series. Policy Research Associates and; Christian, S. (2009).

⁵ Raimon, M., Lee, A., & Genty, P. (2009). Sometimes Good Intentions Yield Bad Results: ASFA's Effect on Incarcerated Parents and Their Children [cited by Urban Institute Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2009). *Intentions and results: A look back at the Adoption and Safe Families Act*]

⁶ Krupat, T., Gaynes, E., & Lincroft, Y. (2011). *A Call to Action: Safeguarding New York's Children of Incarcerated Parents*. New York, New York: New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, Osborne Association.

⁷ Murray & Farrington 2007; Phillips et al. 2002; Stanton 1980; Henriques 1980 and Sack et al.1997 as cited in La Vigne, N. G., Davies, E., & Brazzell, D. *Broken Bonds, Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents*. Washington DC: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, February 2008, p.8.

⁸ Murray, J., & Farrington, D. P. (2008). The effects of parental imprisonment on children. In M. Tonry (ed.), *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, Vol. 37, 133-206. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Center for Research on Child Well-Being Fragile Families Research Brief. *Parental Incarceration and Child Wellbeing in Fragile Families*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, April 2008.

⁹ Tough, Paul. "The Poverty Clinic." *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2011, and; Shore, A. N. (2001). The effects of early relational trauma on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 22 (1-2), 201-269.

¹⁰ Bowlby, J. (1980) as cited in Katz, L. (2002). *Services for Children of Incarcerated Mothers with Co-occurring Disorders*. Delmar, New York: Gains Center Series. Policy Research Associates.

Why help children maintain relationships with incarcerated parents?

Children show resilience if provided with proper supports, and most children benefit from maintaining healthy relationships with their incarcerated parents.¹¹ This can be through phone calls, letters, face-to-face visits, and more recently, through tele-visits. Although in-person visits can support positive outcomes, children face numerous barriers to visiting, such as: visiting policies that are neither child-sensitive nor child-friendly, lengthy distances between prison and a child's home, and burdensome costs associated with visiting.¹² Nationally, approximately 21% of parents in prison have no form of contact with their children while incarcerated, and relatively few incarcerated parents have at least monthly in-person visits.¹³ Supporting visits with an incarcerated parent is beneficial in the following ways:

- Visiting and contact can be beneficial to children's psychological well-being. Benefits may include decreased emotional distress and fewer problematic behaviors.¹⁴
- Parents can talk with children during visits in ways that can reduce children's feelings of guilt, responsibility, and concern for their parent's safety.¹⁵
- For children with strong attachments to their parent prior to incarceration, visiting may provide the forum to process the trauma surrounding the separation.
- Visiting is a positive predictor for a parent's attachment with a child post-release.¹⁶
- Children want and need to see their incarcerated parents, and most of their families support visiting.¹⁷

Assessing need and providing support services

Each child of an incarcerated parent is unique and requires individualized assessment and support. Parental incarceration can be as painful as other forms of parental loss and is more complicated by the lack of social support and compassion. Services that provide or strengthen a child's support system (including positive peer networks), and that foster connectedness and family stability, can help promote positive outcomes for children:

- Health, mental health, educational, and psycho-social assessments are useful for identifying areas of need, strengths, and mitigating factors.
- Young children exposed to multiple risk factors may benefit from early intervention services, which are identified through an early intervention screening. Enrollment in an early education program can be particularly beneficial for children exposed to risk factors and trauma.
- Services should address the myriad of issues facing children and families, provide support, and work towards reducing associated stigma.¹⁸
- Peer support groups help youth process separation, overcome stigma, and develop positive identities.
- Family stability is a protective factor from trauma, thus family support services are critical.
- Support services should be extended to all members of a child's support system, including alternative caregivers, who are susceptible to "psychological risk and parenting stress,"¹⁹ and the incarcerated parent, when in the child's best interest.
- Children should be prepared before visits and debriefed afterward.²⁰ Attention should be paid to the visit logistics (which can be upsetting to the child) such as who accompanies the child, travel time, and the quality of the visit. Children benefit from consistency, and attention should be paid to visit frequency and predictability.

¹¹ Nesmith, A. & Ruhland, E. (2008). Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1119-1130, and: La Vigne et al. (2008).

¹² Christian, J. (2005). Riding the bus: Barriers to prison visitation and family management strategies. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21 (1), 31-48.

¹³ Glaze, L. & Maruschak, L. (2010). *Parents in prison and their children* (Publication No. NCJ 222984). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

¹⁴ La Vigne et al. (2008).

¹⁵ Krupal, T., Gaynes, E., & Lincroft, Y. (2011). *A Call to Action: Safeguarding New York's Children of Incarcerated Parents*. New York, New York: New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, Osborne Association.

¹⁶ LaVigne, N. G., Naser, R. L., Brooks, L. E. & Castro, J. L. (2005). Examining the effect of incarceration and in-prison family contact on prisoners' family relationships. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21, 314.

¹⁷ Hairston, C.F. (2007). Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

¹⁸ Hairston, C.F. (2007). Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

¹⁹ Katz, L. (2002).

²⁰ Hairston, C.F. (2007), p. 25.