

When Parents Go to Prison, What Happens to their Children?

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The U.S. prison population

- Over 2.25 million in correctional institutions
- 1.5 million in state and federal prisons

- Most not high school graduates
- Most were poor
- Many were African American or Latino
- Most are coming home
- Many will return to prison
- Most were parents
 - Crimes committed by parents
 - Violent 44%
 - Drug 24%
 - Non-violent 32%

Family status of state and federal prisoners

| Family Status | State | Federal |
|--|-------|---------|
| Percentage of prisoners who are parents of children under age 18 | 55% | 63% |
| Percentage of women who are parents | 65% | 59% |
| Percentage of men who are parents | 55% | 63% |
| Percentage of incarcerated parents who are married | 23% | 36% |
| Percentage of incarcerated parents who are divorced/separated | 28% | 25% |
| Percentage of incarcerated parents who were never married | 48% | 38% |

Survey of State and Federal Prisoners, 1997

Children's living arrangements before parental incarceration

| Living Arrangements | State | Federal |
|---|-------|---------|
| Percentage of mothers who did not have children living with them before incarceration | 36% | 16% |
| Percentage of mothers who had at least one child living with them: | | |
| The month before their arrest | 58% | 73% |
| Percentage of fathers who did not have children living with them before incarceration | 56% | 45% |
| Percentage of fathers who had at least one child living with them: | | |
| The month before their arrest | 36% | 47% |

Survey of State and Federal Prisoners, 1997

Children's living arrangements after parents are incarcerated

| Incarcerated mothers report their children are living: | State | Federal | Incarcerated fathers report their children are living: | State | Federal |
|--|--------------|---------|--|-------|--------------|
| | With fathers | 28% | | 31% | With mothers |
| In foster care | 10% | 3% | In foster care | 2% | 1% |
| With grandparents | 53% | 45% | With grandparents | 13% | 10% |

Survey of State and Federal Prisoners, 1997

Parent-child ties during incarceration

- Letters predominate
- Visiting minimal for most
- Visiting frequent for a few
- Visiting conditions and arrangements vary
- Talk by phone common
- Differences by race and gender

- Public policies shape communications between parents and children
 - Visiting policies and practices
 - Prison location
 - Expensive telephone calls
 - Child welfare status

- Personal preferences and situations shape communications
 - Relationships between parents
 - Co-parenting issues
 - Resource constraints
 - Child protection concerns
 - Individual and family decisions

Family matters during incarceration

- Economic problems
- Emotional factors
- Social stigma
- Informal supports

Children's experiences with parental incarceration

- Family disruption
- Parental absence
- Secrecy and silence
- Mixed emotions
- Differing perceptions of parents

Children's adjustment and child development theories

- Bonding and attachment
- Separation anxiety and trauma
- Risks and protective factors

Research on children's adjustment

- Research overviews
 - Gabel, 1992
 - Parke & Clarke Stewart, 2003
 - Hairston, 2007

- Children's problems and needs
 - Emotional difficulties
 - School performance
 - Behavioral problems
 - Delinquency
 - Later life incarceration (?)
- What helps?
 - Caregivers' responses
 - Family communication
 - Usefulness and belonging
 - Involvement in age appropriate activities

When parents come home

- Preparation for the return home
- Whose home?
- Resuming a parenting role
- Old problems, new concerns

Program and service approaches

- Parent education
- Parent-child visiting
- Mentoring for children
- Counseling and support groups
- Advocacy for children and families

Child welfare matters

- The well-being of children in foster care
- Collaborations that bridge two systems of social control
- Special expertise and knowledge
 - Separation and family disruption
 - Family maintenance during separation
 - Parent-child reunification

References and resources

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References and resources

- Jeffries, J., Menghraj, S., & Hairston C.F. Serving incarcerated and ex-offender fathers and their families. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2001. (Available at: http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/fathers.pdf)
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- Family and Corrections Network Library (Available at: <http://www.fcnetwork.org/read.html#publications>)
