

## PARENTAL INCARCERATION AND CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

Children of incarcerated parents are considered one of the World's most vulnerable populations. These children are at risk for destabilized relationships, academic challenges, insecure relationships, and behavioral issues. They may also "act out" in anger, grief, shame, withdrawal, and internalize feelings of blame; responding to parental incarceration. Parental incarceration plays a significant role in child development and given the previous concerns, it may position the child as a future risk for incarceration<sup>i</sup>. Preserving parent-child bonds are essential to healthy familial relationships when the parent is absent from the home. Children have a right to be parented even if their parent is in prison<sup>ii</sup>. Determining what is in the best interest of the child should be paramount considering the importance of maintaining child-parent relationships and age appropriate communication in reducing childhood trauma related to parental incarceration.



### WHAT WE KNOW

Minor children of incarcerated parents represent 2.7 million of the United States population<sup>iii</sup>. Children of color are nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent in comparison to Caucasian children. According to researchers (Sanders and Dunifon, 2011), Sixty-three percent of federal prisoners and over half of the state prisoners have minor children (under 18 yrs.). The surge of incarceration rates occurring between 1995 and subsequent decades following have resulted in trends in women's incarceration rates (57% increase) surpassing men's incarceration rates (34% increase) [Kampfner & Johnston, 1995]. Three-quarters of these women have children. Children with

incarcerated mothers are at greater risk to be cared for by extended relatives or even foster parents than custodial fathers (Kampfner & Johnston 1995).



### THE COMMUNITY IMPACT

Parental incarceration plays a significant role in communities. Strong and vibrant communities are characterized by healthy families, economically sound neighborhoods, and thriving children with a bright future. Parental incarceration can instantly disrupt and possibly breaks family bonds, making children vulnerable to several noted risk factors thereby, increasing their chances of developing social-emotional problems (Sanders & Dunifon, 2011). Hence, children can experience alienation and isolation due to the nature of a parent's incarcerated status, placing them at risk for anti-social behavior.



### WHY WE CARE?

Parental incarceration can be burdensome to caregivers and family members faced with the responsibility of caring for children left behind. Preserving opportunities for parent-child bonding for the duration of imprisonment can be beneficial for children, incarcerated parents, and caretakers. Children with incarcerated parents are considered victims of family disruption. When a child's parent goes to jail, the child too faces collateral consequences and may be exposed to carceral spaces or prison environments by default. Despite these circumstances, researchers report that consistent family visitations are believed to have a positive influence on incarcerated parents' emotional state as well as their children and reunification efforts (Christian, 2009). Parental involvement in their children's lives can help these young people to cope with their parent's incarceration, reduce shame, and moderate their feelings of loss.



### THE COST OF DOING NOTHING

The long-term implications of not understanding and addressing the needs of children of incarcerated parents is unclear. There are several assumptions made by current researchers, that if true, is alarming and can have a devastating impact on youth this [continued next page]

## 1.3 Million Children are affected by parental incarceration



Sixty-three percent of parents in federal prison and over 50% of those in state prisons have minor children.

## 2.3 % of the Total Child Population have parents in prison



Between 1991 and 2007 the surge of parental incarceration for fathers increased from 800,00 to over 1.5 million; for mothers, the population expanded from 63,000 to 147,000.

The average age of child with an incarcerated parent is 8 years old.

Of the mothers incarcerated, 42% were single, heads of household, thereby increasing the likelihood that children are with other caregivers such as grandparents, relative, or in foster care.

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not addressed, including: Affected children's risk of future incarceration in adulthood is increased six times than their counterparts; their academic challenges and behavioral issues are a concern. However, these claims are not entirely empirically supported. Therefore, rather than to label these children an imminent risk for future failure, we must focus on generating quality research to better understand these issues.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

1. Educate yourself on the matter
2. Inform stakeholders who engage with and interact with children to increase empathy and responsiveness to all vulnerable children's needs
3. Provide resources for caregivers and non-incarcerated parents to help children with trauma, grief, and social stigma.
4. Support community organizations whose work is focused on vulnerable children
5. Ensure that legislatures understand the needs of children maintaining bonds with incarcerated parents
6. Fight for the rights of the child

Vulnerable children from all at-risk populations need your support through community programs, afterschool programs, and mental health and other interventions that contribute to healthy development and wellbeing. If a child is at risk of emotional harm, academic failure, societal stigma, or familial instability, their needs should be addressed regardless of a parent's incarceration status. It is difficult to determine if a child's preexisting vulnerabilities all contribute to their future risk of the adverse impacts of incarceration. Steve Christian, indicated that it is challenging to

"...[disentangle] the effects of parental incarceration from the effects of other factors that could have existed long before incarceration, such as child maltreatment, parental use of alcohol or drugs, parental mental illness and domestic violence. Because many studies fail to account for these background risk factors and include other methodological flaws, some claims about how parental incarceration affects children that appear in the research, advocacy and policy literature might not be supported by empirical evidence. The research is unclear and inconsistent in its findings regarding the profile of children with incarcerated parents. (2009, p. 2)

For more information, see [www.prisonerfamilyconference...etc](http://www.prisonerfamilyconference...etc).

Reference:

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<sup>i</sup> Academic failure and future unemployment has been found to be high risks of future incarceration for adolescents.

<sup>ii</sup> Hart-Johnson, A. (2017). Advocacy for children's rights: Physical contact during prison visits. (Liz Gordon, Ed). In Contemporary Research and Analysis on Children of Prisoners. Invisible Children

<sup>iii</sup> Sullivan, Megan. (2017). Children of incarcerated parents in the United States: What we know and what we still need to learn. Retrieved from <https://www.justicestrategies.net/coip/blog/2017/05/children-incarcerated-parents-united-states-what-we-know-and-what-we-still-need-learn>

Learn more about the Advocacy in Action Coalition by visiting prisoner family conference: [www. Prisonerfamilyconference.org](http://www.Prisonerfamilyconference.org)

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