Introduction

Imprisonment casts a wide net in the United States. Incarceration rates have grown substantially over the last three decades resulting in a fourfold increase since the early 1970’s. Currently, 1.2 million individuals are behind bars in America’s state and federal prisons and nearly 600,000 individuals—about 1,600 a day—will be released to return to their communities this year. These prisoners are parents and close relatives to 1.5 million children—an increase of over a half-million children over the last decade. Certainly, if we expand our view to include adults who have served a previous prison term and those on parole, the number of children and families affected by imprisonment escalates. Now more than ever before, there is a need for an intersection of systems—corrections, and health and human services—to serve the growing population of children, families and communities affected by the incarceration of a family member.

For policymakers, researchers, professionals and community leaders who are concerned about child development, foster care placement, family strengthening, individual post-prison adjustment and related community-based service delivery systems, the impacts of incarceration on a growing number of children and families clearly intersect both the criminal justice, and health and human services systems, but are not always recognized as related to the incarceration of a parent.

Moreover, an increasing number of prisoners are returning home, having spent longer terms behind bars, less prepared for life on the outside, with less assistance in their reintegration and, at best, strained connections to their families and communities. Often they will have difficulties reconnecting with jobs, housing, and perhaps their families when they return, and many remain plagued by substance abuse and health problems. Most will be rearrested and many will be returned to prison for new crimes or parole violations. And this cycle of removal and return of large numbers of individuals, mostly men (although the number of incarcerated women is growing exponentially), is increasingly concentrated in a relatively small number of communities that already encounter enormous social and economic disadvantages. The families in these neighborhoods are those most impacted.

In short, the children, families, and former prisoners impacted by incarceration may represent a group more at-risk than any other subculture in the country. The stakes are high in terms of addressing their needs and reducing the risk of recidivism, relapse and family violence. At the same time, the opportunities are also substantial and bear the promise of profound and far-reaching benefits for all involved. To date, however, there has been little attention focused on the repercussions of the annual removal and return of hundreds of thousands of adults—many of whom are parents—on the families and communities left behind, and how the needs of these populations can best be met collaboratively within the health and human services and criminal justice systems.

Purpose of this project

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services initiated this project to focus attention on these issues and to launch a new and important discussion on how to better address the needs of the growing population of families and individuals served by health and human services programs and under the supervision of the criminal justice system. The project will consist of three related activities:
• Commissioned research and policy papers by experts in the field;
• A state policy meeting in November 2001 to learn about innovative efforts at the state level; and
• A national policy conference in January 2002.

From these activities we will assess what we know from research and practice about the effects of incarceration and reentry on children, families, prisoners and communities, in order to identify health and human service policy and program opportunities at the federal, state and local level. Particular attention will be focused on the intersection of the human services and criminal justice systems in meeting the needs of children, families, former prisoners and the communities in which they reside.

This background paper is organized in the following four sections, each reflecting a different perspective on the impact of incarceration and reentry:

• **Individual prisoners as parents** face a number of challenges—including poverty, health problems, addiction, homelessness and strained connections to family—before, during and following a prison term—that translate into significant risks and needs for their children.

• **Children of incarcerated parents** typically live in circumstances characterized by poverty, diminished access to resources, parental substance abuse and/or mental illness—conditions only exacerbated by the arrest and incarceration of a parent.

• **Families of prisoners** must develop strategies for coping with the loss of financial and emotional support, and the continued care of children left behind. These families must also navigate the challenges of having a family member return home from prison, from a variety of perspectives.

• **Low-income communities** also struggle with the impact of high incarceration and return rates on the service systems and social capital of particular neighborhoods. These conditions have consequences for all residents and produce harmful outcomes for children and families.

For each of these perspectives, we have commissioned at least two papers from prominent researchers. These papers will briefly summarize what we currently know from research and practice, and highlight the opportunities for program and policy innovations. In the chapters that follow, we provide an overview of the issues and an abstract of the papers we have commissioned. A final report—accessible to a wide policy audience—will be published following the conference that will draw on this background paper, the commissioned papers and the conference sessions.

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**Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Individual Prisoners**

Over the past three decades, the United States has experienced remarkable growth in imprisonment rates. There are now more than a million people serving time in state and federal prisons—a fourfold increase since the early 1970’s. Nearly all of these people will return home to their families and communities after completing their prison term. This population of Americans is at high risk on a number of fronts due to high rates of infectious disease, substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness and unemployment. An examination of the impact of incarceration and reentry on children and families necessarily starts here because these conditions all translate into risks and needs for the family members, caregivers and children left behind. This first section will highlight the psychological consequences of a prison experience, the preparation for release and the characteristics of returning prisoners, particularly prisoners who are parents.

The per capita rate of imprisonment remained consistent at about 110 per 100,000 from 1925 to 1973. Since 1973, however, the rate of imprison-
ment has grown steadily. Currently, there are about 476 incarcerated individuals for every 100,000 residents. As a result state prisons now house 1.2 million inmates, and federal prisons house another 135,000 individuals. Yet as more people are sent to prison more people are released to return to their families and communities. In fact, more than 95 percent of the nation’s state prisoners will eventually be released and will have to find ways to effectively re-enter life in the community.

Complicating this transition is the fact that the population of returning offenders is generally at high risk along several critical dimensions. Most have not completed high school, have limited employment skills, and are struggling with substance abuse and various health problems. Many returning offenders also struggle with finding affordable housing, a basic, but often overlooked, prerequisite for establishing stability upon release. Further, returning prisoners today have generally served longer prison sentences (the average is 2.5 years, up from just under 2 years in 1990), meaning they may be less attached to the job market, their families, and the communities to which they return. The prison experience itself and the psychological consequences can often also impact an individual’s post prison adjustment. Taken together, the employment, health, mental health, substance abuse, education and housing issues of returning inmates present formidable challenges for successful reintegration and tax the strained resources of their families, children and communities.

What are the characteristics of prisoners with children?

A growing number of prison inmates are parents. The majority of state (55 percent) and federal (63 percent) inmates report having at least one minor child. The total number of parents in prison has increased sharply in the last decade—up 60 percent from 452,500 held in state and federal facilities in 1991 to 721,500 in 1997. These inmates are parents to an estimated 1.5 million children, an increase of over 500,000 since 1991. Although inmate parents struggle with a host of issues that generally mirror those of the general inmate population, their needs represent cause for particular attention due the potential consequences for their children. In comparing incarcerated mothers and fathers, there are a few key differences along such dimensions as the type of offense, sentence length and the prevalence of mental illness and substance abuse.

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**Figure 1.** Sentenced Prisoners Admitted and Released from State and Federal Prisons, 1977-1998.

Incarcerated parents are predominately male (93 percent) and housed in state prison facilities (89 percent). (However, it is worth noting that a greater number of women are custodial parents at the time of incarceration.) Nearly half of all parents in state prisons are African American, 29 percent are white and 19 percent are Hispanic. The median age of inmate parents was 32 years old and nearly half have never been married. The majority of parents in state prison (70 percent) do not have a high school diploma; although 31 percent of these inmates have completed their GED.

Overall, the majority of parents in prison were either serving time for drug offenses (24 percent) or violent offenses (44 percent). However, when looked at by gender, mothers and fathers were serving time for different types of offenses. (See Figures 3 and 4). Inmate fathers were more likely than mothers to be incarcerated for a violent offense (46 percent vs. 26 percent). Inmate mothers, on the other hand, were more likely than fathers to be serving time for drug crimes such as possession or trafficking (35 percent vs. 23 percent).

Parents in state prisons reported an average maximum sentence length of 12 years. Mothers, however, reported sentence lengths that averaged nearly 5 years less than fathers. Nearly half of mothers reported sentences of under 5 years compared to 15 percent of fathers. Overall, fathers reported that they expected to serve nearly seven years and mothers expected to serve four years until release. Sentence length has implications for parents and families in terms of maintaining connections during the prison term, and the legal and emotional consequences of parental absence for reunification.

Many incarcerated parents come to prison with a record of prior criminal activity. More than three-quarters of parents in state prison reported a prior conviction and, of those, over half had been previously incarcerated. During the time leading up to their most current arrest and incarceration, nearly half of incarcerated parents were on some type of conditional release, such as probation or parole. Fathers were more likely than mothers to be arrested while on parole from a previous prison term (25 percent vs. 19 percent).

Given the high level of drug offenses among this population, it is not surprising that a significant number of incarcerated parents struggle with substance abuse. Most parents in state facilities reported

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<th>Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Parents in State Prison, 1997</th>
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some level of drug use in the past (85 percent) and more than half (58 percent) reported using drugs in the month before their current arrest. Further, one-quarter of parents in state prison are believed to be alcohol dependent and more than one-third were under the influence of alcohol at the time of their current offense.

Incarcerated mothers reported more extensive and serious histories of drug use than fathers. Mothers in state prison were more likely than fathers to report drug use in the month before their arrest and also more likely to report that drugs were involved in the offense. Drug use among incarcerated mothers was also more likely to involve use of cocaine-based drugs or opiates as compared to fathers. Additionally, nearly one-third of mothers reported committing their crime to get drugs or money for drugs compared to 19 percent of fathers.

Although female prisoners make up only a small portion of the corrections population, they experience a host of risks and challenges that in some ways are more serious and widespread than their male counterparts. (Females accounted for 6 percent of the prison population and 12 percent of the parole population in 1998.) Sixty-five percent of female inmates have children. Women generally have fewer economic resources before entering prison. Thirty percent of incarcerated women were receiving welfare assistance prior to their arrest. This may be even higher among the subset of incarcerated mothers. Women in prison also typically have significant mental health needs. Among parents in state prison, mothers were more likely to report indications of mental illness (23 percent) than fathers (13 percent).

In considering the entire female prison population, nearly one-quarter of female prisoners receive medication for emotional disorders and over half (60 percent) report a history of physical or sexual abuse.

Among the total prison population, many inmates also live with chronic health problems or infectious diseases. In 1997, about one-quarter of the individuals living with HIV or AIDS in the U.S. had been released from a correctional facility (prison or jail) that year. In terms of the actual prevalence of infectious diseases among the prisoners, some two to three percent of the prison population are HIV positive or have AIDS; 18 percent are infected with hepatitis C, and 7 percent have a tuberculosis infection. These infection rates are five to ten times greater than those in the general U.S. population.

Taken together, the characteristics of parents in prison profoundly highlight the challenges these families confronted prior to incarceration and hint at the challenges they will continue to face when the parent returns.
Paper Topic:
Exploring the Needs and Risks of the Returning Prisoner Population
James Austin, George Washington University and
John Irwin, San Francisco State University

This paper will provide a snapshot of the returning prisoner population focusing on inmates with children. It will describe their demographics, criminal and substance abuse histories, and non-criminal justice barriers (such as physical health, mental illness, employment and housing) and, to the extent possible, discuss the issue of dual diagnoses. The paper will provide a snapshot of the population in terms of risk levels and needs. Important policy and practice questions to be addressed include the following:

- What are the prospects for stable living once released? For finding jobs and housing?
- How are these challenges experienced differently by returning male and female ex-prisoners?
- What are the major challenges and what, if anything, should the criminal justice and health and human service communities do about them?
- Which correctional systems are best addressing the risks and needs of the prisoner population with respect to custody, supervision and service delivery?
- How do needs and risks relate to one another? Does high risk signal high needs (or vice versa) for a prisoner and his/her family?

What are the psycho-social consequences of incarceration?

Prison is a difficult and unpleasant experience for many inmates, characterized by the loss of freedom, autonomy, connections to family and friends, and personal safety. As such, individual inmates, who enter prison from a variety of backgrounds, experience a range of reactions to their incarceration. Almost uniformly, inmates report that the most significant adjustment to prison life is coping with the lost connections to their children and families.

While most inmates are able to adjust to the rigors of prison life, many others experience their confinement as a daily struggle of survival. Entering prison and leaving prison are the two most stressful periods for inmates and require enormous adjustment to changing circumstances. Current research indicates that how well an inmate is able to make these transitions is related to a complex interaction between the personal characteristics the inmate brings to prison and the prison setting itself.

Many inmate problems are related to the conditions of their confinement or, in other words, the “pains of imprisonment,” referring to the daily deprivation of goods, services, security, liberty and contact with the outside world associated with imprisonment. Another environmental stressor is the pace of prison activity. For instance, in overcrowded prisons in particular, more inmates tend to have little activity. In fact, about one-quarter of state inmates are completely idle meaning they are not involved in any vocational or educational programs. This means less diversion from personal problems and less positive engagement, which has been found to reinforce negative feelings such as emptiness and despondency.

In terms of the impact of prison administration and organization on inmate adjustment, we know very little about how policies, procedures and interactions with prison staff help or hinder inmate transitions. Research on the psychological situation as a factor in behavioral outcomes provides some indication of the potential affects on individuals. As the Stanford Prison Experiment illustrated, when psychologically healthy students were randomly assigned to the roles of guards or inmates in a mock prison situation, confinement under supervision, and the supervisory role itself, were both found to dramatically affect the behavior of the participants, regardless of which role they were assigned.

Not surprisingly, inmates report a unique set of problems associated with their circumstances. Zamble and Porporino (1988) in a study of 133 inmates entering Canadian prisons found that the most fre-
quently cited issue of concern by inmates was being separated from friends and family (82 percent). Other problems included loss of freedom (44 percent), missing specific aspects of their lives prior to incarceration (35 percent), regrets about the past (31 percent), concerns about their life following release (31 percent), boredom (25 percent), cell conditions (18 percent), lack of prison staff support (14 percent), personal safety (12 percent) and lack of programs (11 percent). These rankings were fairly consistent across studies and over the duration of an individual’s sentence. One notable exception is that inmates expressed increased concern about the challenges of life on parole as they got closer to their release date. In general, the lost connections to family members and friends appears to be one of the most difficult aspects of prison life as reported by inmates.

Inmates cope with these stressful and challenging conditions in a variety of ways. Male inmates generally resort to coping strategies that emphasize self-reliance and personal strength, images found to be highly valued in prison culture. Female inmates, who typically feel enormous stress from the separation from their families, respond by being more expressive and forming relationships with their fellow inmates.

Researchers have found that inmates generally employ more reactive coping strategies that can often result in making the situation worse. They also found that the use of certain coping strategies was consistent over time. Inmates relied on the same coping strategies for dealing with situations at home and during their time in prison. The only significant difference between the coping strategies used at home and in prison was that inmates tended to rely more on alcohol and drugs on the streets as a potential coping mechanism.

Given the consistency of poor coping mechanisms between the community and prison, it is not surprising that inmates who had difficulty coping with life in their neighborhood have problems adjusting to prison life. Individuals who showed ineffective problem-solving ability on the street tended to be single, live in unstable housing situations, display a lack of planning, have a history of substance abuse and mental health problems and a more extensive criminal history. This general profile is also predictive of those who will have the most difficulty adjusting to prison life. In fact, inmates with the most chronic and complex histories of multiple problems including substance abuse, mental illness, and homelessness are the ones who struggle most with imprisonment.

Inmates bring a host of background characteristics to their prison experience that markedly influences how they adjust to prison life. We are still learning about how those experiences and characteristics interact with the nature of prison life to both help and hinder inmate adjustment in prison and following release. These questions have significant implications for how we think about the prison experience, how inmates should be prepared for release and reintegration and how families can stay connected during prison and reunite upon release.

**Paper Topic: The Impact of the Prison Experience on Inmates**

*Craig Haney, University of California-Santa Cruz*

This paper will explore the psychological impact of being incarcerated, particularly as it relates to post-prison adjustment. The paper will look at how prison is experienced by individual inmates, and the impact it has on his/her in-prison behavior and ability to function productively upon release. Important policy and practice questions include the following:

- How does the prison experience itself affect psychological functioning including adult development? What are the implications of these effects for family and community life? (What do inmates bring home from this experience? How might the prison experience affect a parent’s ability to remain emotionally connected with their while in prison?)
- To what extent can these effects be minimized by continuing contacts with persons on the outside or other factors?
• To what extent, if at all, is the issue of “prisonization”—the process of internalizing the prison culture—addressed by the criminal justice system, and health and human services systems? How should it be? Are there models to build on?
• What are the implications for policy and program development?

How are inmates prepared for release?

Given that nearly all prisoners will eventually return to their families and communities, prison could be viewed as an opportunity to improve inmates' skills, treat their addictions, and prepare them generally for life on the outside. As discussed above, many prisoners have histories of substance abuse and addiction, mental and physical health problems, and low levels of job skills and education. Importantly, these issues have consequences for the health and well-being of the families and communities to which inmates will return. There is some evidence that in-prison programs are cost-effective and beneficial in preparing inmates for life outside of prison. This is particularly true when in-prison programs are followed by services and treatment in the community. However, recent surveys indicate that relatively few inmates receive treatment or training while in prison, and even fewer receive coordinated services that continue through to their return to the community.

While the quality and quantity of the available evidence varies widely according to the type of intervention, it appears that certain treatment interventions—including cognitive skills, drug treatment, vocational training, educational, and other prison-based programs—can be effective in reducing recidivism. These interventions are most effective when programs are matched to prisoner risks and needs, when they are well-managed, and when the intervention is supported through post-release supervision. While current studies cite only modest reductions in recidivism rates for participants, these small reductions can have significant aggregate impacts on criminal behavior in communities with high concentrations of returning prisoners.26 Lower returns to crime also have clear and convincing benefits for families of former inmates.

However, most prisoners do not participate in prison programs and the rate of participation has dropped over the last decade. In fact, about one-third of “soon to be released” inmates reported they participated in vocational programs (27 percent) or educational programs (35 percent) in 1997, down from 31 percent and 43 percent, respectively, in 1991.27 These decreases in the participation rates are even steeper than they appear, because smaller shares of bigger populations are involved—meaning significantly larger numbers of prisoners are being released without vocational and educational preparation. In addition, an estimated 7 percent of the prison population report participating in prison industries, and 24 percent are altogether idle.28

Another notable finding illustrated in Figure 5, is that very few inmates participate in activities specifically labeled as pre-release preparation. The number participating in these programs has remained stable over the past decade hovering at about 12 percent of the state prison population.

Further, although the majority of prison inmates enter prison with substance abuse problems, only 10 percent of state inmates in 1997 reported receiving professional substance abuse treatment, down from 25 percent in 1991. Of the soon-to-be-released population, 18 percent of those with a substance abuse problem received treatment while incarcerated.29

The prevalence of major mental disorders and chronic and infectious disease is many times greater among the prison population than among the general population.30 A large number of people carrying communicable diseases pass through correctional facilities each year. During 1997, between 20 and 26 percent of the nation's individuals living with HIV or AIDS, 29 to 32 percent of the people with hepatitis C, and 38 percent of those with tuberculosis were released from a correctional facility (prison or jail). The extent of mental health disorders is also relatively high. While estimating the prevalence of mental illness among the inmate population is difficult, we know that serious mental health disorders such as
schizophrenia/psychosis, major depression, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder are more common among prisoners than the general population. Rates of mental illness among incarcerated individuals are at least twice (some estimates range as high as four times) as high as the rates in the overall U.S. population.

While most prisoners receive needed health care services while in prison, access to mental health services is more limited. Interestingly, a period of incarceration often has positive consequences for the physical health status of a prisoner—in part because they have access to better health care than what may have had in the community. A survey of state inmates found that 80 percent reported receiving a medical exam since they were admitted to prison and of those who reported a medical problem since admission, 91 percent reported visiting a health care professional about it. In terms of access to mental health services while in prison, more than half (60 percent) of mentally ill state inmates have reportedly received some form of mental health treatment during their period of incarceration. Of these, half said they had taken prescription medication and 44 percent had received counseling services. A key component to successful physical and mental health outcomes for both inmates and the families they return to is to link prison-based services with community-based services.

As detailed in the previous section, the profile of the prison population reveals significant deficiencies in human capital that reduces an individual's capacity to function and contribute to society. Many of these deficits are also associated with high rates of recidivism. The emerging research knowledge about effective prison programs suggests that targeted investments in these interventions could produce public safety benefits and increase social functioning overall—benefits that are equally important for returning prisoners, their families and communities. The research consensus on this point, however, comes at a time when a smaller share of prisoners seem to be receiving treatment and training than in the past.

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Figure 5. Percentage of Prisoners to be Released in the Next Twelve Months Participating in Prison Programs, 1991 and 1997

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1991 cohort</th>
<th>1997 cohort</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-release</td>
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This paper will focus on how prisoners are prepared for their release, both in terms of correctional interventions and the link to community aftercare. Given that this population enters and exits prison with high rates of substance abuse, mental illness, infectious disease, unemployment, and even homelessness, it is important to document the extent to which in-prison treatment and preparation mitigate these problems or has the opportunity to do so. Important policy and practice questions include the following:

- What types of in-prison programs currently exist? Are there any programs in prison focused on family reunification/reconciliation issues?
- What does research tell us about “what works” in treatment and intervention efforts to address these problems? What types of interventions have been shown to be cost-effective?
- What opportunities exist to maximize in-prison preparation by the health and human services, and criminal justice communities?
- How might/are states using TANF funds to link released prisoners and their families to services?
Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children

An increasing number of children in our society are impacted by the incarceration of a parent. Two percent of all minor children in the United States and about seven percent of all African-American children had a parent in state or federal prison in 1999—a total of more than 1.5 million children.36 Importantly, these young people are already at high risk along several fronts and tend to live in conditions characterized by poverty, instability and diminished access to sources of support. Parental incarceration is generally not the cause of these precarious living conditions (although the root causes may be similar, e.g., cycles of poverty and violence), but certainly exacerbates the situation for many children and has been associated with a number of negative outcomes. Yet, until recently, the issue of parental incarceration as a contributing factor to children’s service needs has remained relatively hidden from the health and human services and juvenile justice systems serving these children. This section will highlight what we know about the impact of parental incarceration on the children left behind and provide a context for the commissioned papers to consider how the child welfare and corrections systems can work together to better address the needs of these children.

In part because of the enactment of stricter sentencing guidelines over the past two decades, more children are affected by the incarceration of a parent than at any other time in our history. According to a recent U.S. Department of Justice report on incarcerated parents and their children, over half of all state prisoners reported having at least one minor child and about one-third reported having more than one child. According to these parents, the children they left behind tended to be young—the majority were under 10 years old, while the average age was 8 years old. (See Table 2.)

Many of these children were living with caregivers other than their parents prior to the incarceration of their mother or father. Less than half of parents in state prison reported living with their children prior to admission. (See Table 3.) Mothers were more likely than fathers to report having lived with at least one of their children prior to incarceration—two-thirds of mothers were the custodial parent prior to their incarceration. Importantly, the child’s living arrangements after the arrest and incarceration of a parent is highly dependent on which parent is sent to prison. Children of incarcerated fathers were more likely to remain with their mothers, while the children of incarcerated mothers were more likely to end up living with a grandparent.

How does parental incarceration affect these children and what are the long-term consequences?

| Table 2. Percent of Minor Children of Parents in State or Federal Prison, 1997 |
| Age | % |
| < 1 year | 2.1% |
| 1-4 years | 20.4 |
| 5-9 years | 35.1 |
| 10-14 years | 28.0 |
| 15-17 years | 14.5 |
| Mean | 8 years |

| Table 3. Living Arrangements of Minor Children of State Inmates Prior to and During Incarceration, 1997 |
| Child’s current caregiver* | Total | Male | Female |
| Lived with children at time of admission | | 45.3% | 43.8% | 64.3% |
| Other parent of child | 85.0 | 89.6 | 28.0 |
| Grandparent of child | 16.3 | 13.3 | 52.9 |
| Other relatives | 6.4 | 4.9 | 25.7 |
| Foster home or agency | 2.4 | 1.8 | 9.6 |
| Friends, others | 5.3 | 4.9 | 10.4 |

* Columns do not add to 100 because some prisoners reported children in different homes.
Children whose parents have been incarcerated experience a range of negative outcomes. However, it is difficult to say the extent to which these consequences are a direct result of a parent being in prison or the nature of family life in that household.37 For instance, a few studies have found that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem, depression, emotional withdrawal from friends and family, and inappropriate or disruptive behavior at home and in school. There is also some evidence to suggest that children of incarcerated parents are at high risk of future delinquency and/or criminal behavior.38

Understanding the impact of parental incarceration on children is complicated because these outcomes may be related to any number of conditions—the parent-child separation, the crime and arrest that preceded incarceration, or general instability, poverty and inadequate care at home. Further, the degree to which a child is impacted by incarceration of a parent rests on a number of variables including the age at which the child is separated from his/her parent, length of the separation, the level of disruption, number and result of previous separation experiences, and the availability of family or community support.39

Very few studies have been conducted that directly examine the lives and outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. Most studies have been methodologically limited in that they only looked at a small sample or used inadequate comparison groups so that it is difficult to make generalizations.40 There have been no longitudinal studies following children from a parent’s incarceration through release. A limited number of studies have employed standardized assessment tools and even fewer have relied on direct contact with these children.41 Most of the work to date on children of offenders has relied on self-reporting by an incarcerated parent or a caregiver and tended to focus on mothers.42 (Although there have been some attempts to document the impacts of having a father in prison and there clearly is a renewed interest in fatherhood.)43

Through the existing literature, however, we are able to conclude that parental incarceration does seem to have a range of negative effects on children. There are some general themes about how children experience loss of a parent the literature on child development and trauma allows us to draw.44

- **Children always experience the loss of a parent as a traumatic event** regardless of the circumstances surrounding the parent’s departure (death, divorce, moving away or incarceration). Parental absence affects children differently depending on age, but is well documented as an important life event in the child welfare and divorce literature. Reactions include inability to form attachments with others, numbing, anger, depression, regression and various antisocial behaviors.

- **Trauma diverts a child’s energies from developmental tasks.** Children in stable environments use their emotional energy to master various age-specific developmental tasks. (See Tables 4 and 5.) However, if a child’s life circumstances overwhelm their capacity to cope, emotional survival begins to take precedence over developmental tasks resulting in delayed development, regression or other maladaptive coping strategies.

- **Children find it even more difficult to cope in situations characterized by uncertainty.** Children with a parent in prison often face a great deal of instability and uncertainty as questions about their continued care are being sorted out. Some well-meaning caregivers keep basic information from the children to protect them, but this often serves to only heighten the child’s feelings of stress and uncertainty.

- **Children’s reactions to a situation will vary over time.** Although there have not been any longitudinal studies of children of incarcerated parents, we do know that there are differences between a crisis reaction and a long-term response (adaptive or maladaptive) to trauma. Additionally, interventions may be more effective if offered before maladaptive coping behaviors become more routine.

- **Children experience the stigma of having a parent in prison.** For most children, the stigma of losing a parent to prison is felt in their neighbor-
hood, among their peers, from their teachers and family members often resulting in feelings of shame and low self-esteem. For other children who come from neighborhoods or families where incarceration is a more common event, the stigma may be less intense but the needs are not. Typically, there are no specific programs in schools or communities for this population of children to help them cope with the loss of a parent to prison.

Finally, it is important to note that these children are already at high risk. Their problems did not begin with parental incarceration. Rather, these children already live in circumstances that we would consider high risk for unhealthy development including poverty, diminished access to resources, parental substance abuse, mental illness among parents and/or caregivers, and a family history of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Certainly, parental incarceration will have a profound impact on the children left behind, particularly if the parent-child relationship was strong prior to incarceration. But the effects of these other circumstances are confounded and complicated by parental incarceration. To date there have been no research studies to parse out the effects of loss of a parent due to incarceration from the other stressful and traumatic circumstances that generally also characterize the lives of these children.

One way of developing an understanding of the complex factors that affect how a child experiences the incarceration of his/her parent is to think about parental incarceration and the associated trauma for children in terms of the potential impact of those events on the child’s development. The effects of traumatic events in a child’s life appear to be dependent on a number of factors including the developmental level of the child at the time of the experience, characteristics of the child and the social support available to the child. The next two sections briefly outline several conclusions we can draw about the impact of incarceration on children at various developmental stages.

**What is the impact of parental incarceration on young children?**

Early and middle childhood are critical periods of development. Separation of a young child from a parent can have a profound impact on that child’s ability to form attachments and develop a sense of trust with others. Further, young children can also be profoundly affected by fighting and violence around them. However, developing a loving and nurturing relationship with a dependable caregiver can provide an important means of protection against long-term negative outcomes and foster recovery from past traumatic events. According to a recent review of research on early childhood development by National Research Council Institute of Medicine, the nature of living conditions and relationships with caregivers can have significant developmental impacts on young children. Further, these questions of parent-child bonding and the nature of home life for these children prior to incarceration of a parent has important implications for resumption of a parenting role and reunification efforts once the mother or father is released.

**Infants (0-2 Years).** During the first two years of life, infants are learning to develop attachment to and trust in their caregiver. Attachment refers to a process of developing emotional closeness between the parent/caregiver and child over an extended period of time. Infants develop a sense of trust in their caregiver as their needs are met in a caring and consistent manner over time. These are critical aspects of long-term healthy development. Also, although infants are not yet aware of the activities in their parents lives that do not directly involve them, they are acutely aware of and can be profoundly affected by exposure to conflict or violence, inappropriate handling by adults and children in the household, and an unhealthy physical home environment (e.g. second hand smoke, lead paint).

A major effect of parental incarceration on children this young is likely to be a disruption of parental bonding, with the potential for later attachment difficulties, depending on the age of the child, the circumstances and the home environment. There is
some evidence to suggest that under the right circumstances infants of incarcerated parents may not experience delays in physical and intellectual development.49 According to a review of research on early childhood development, restoration of a nurturing care giving relationship after losing a parent and/or experiencing recurrent trauma can “foster remarkable recovery.”50 Presumably, young children may suffer the worst outcomes if they are subjected to multiple placements with multiple caregivers without an opportunity to develop a sense of attachment to any of them, but there is no research to date on this question.51 These questions of parent-child bonding have important implications for resuming parenting once the parent is released, as well as mother-infant prison programs.

**Early Childhood (2-6 years).** The first parental crime, arrest or incarceration experiences that children typically recall occur in early childhood (2-6 years). It is during this period that children are still very dependent on their parent or primary caregiver, but have begun to develop improved memory, increased awareness of their environment and greater mobility. Children at this age are also typically not in school yet and therefore may be spending more time at home with a parent. The nature of the events leading up to incarceration of a parent and the extent to which the parent is absent from the home, determines the impact on children of this age. Importantly, parental criminal behavior, arrest and incarceration impacts young children through parent-child separation and the trauma of the events surrounding the crime, whether witnessed or not.

Children at this age have a greater ability to perceive events, but have not yet developed the skills to process traumatic events. Experiencing a traumatic event that results in removal of a parent from the home may have long-term effects on a child’s ability to cope with future trauma.52 They also have not yet completely separated themselves from their parents so they tend to perceive threats or harm to their caregiver as personal threats or injuries. Several studies suggest that traumatic stress at this age may have profound long-term effects, particularly if there is no intervention to help the child sort through those experiences.53

**Middle Childhood (7-10 years).** School age children also experience the loss of a parent due to incarceration in profound ways. During this period of development, children are learning to work with others and develop a sense of independence and self-esteem as they begin school and develop social networks. Separation from a parent for children of this age has a greater impact on their development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Stage</th>
<th>Developmental Characteristics</th>
<th>Developmental Tasks</th>
<th>Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infancy (0-2 years)</td>
<td>Limited perception, mobility, and total dependency</td>
<td>Development of trust and attachment</td>
<td>Parent-child separation</td>
<td>Impaired parent-child bonding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood (2-6 years)</td>
<td>Increased perception, mobility and improved memory. Greater exposure to environment. Ability to imagine.</td>
<td>Development of sense of autonomy, independence and initiative.</td>
<td>Parent-child separation. Trauma</td>
<td>Inappropriate separation anxiety; Impaired socio-emotional development; Acute traumatic stress reactions and survivor guilt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Childhood (7-10 years)</td>
<td>Increased independence from caregivers and ability to reason. Peers become important.</td>
<td>Sense of industry. Ability to work productively.</td>
<td>Parent-child separation. Enduring trauma</td>
<td>Developmental regressions; Poor self-concept; Acute traumatic stress reactions; Impaired ability to overcome future trauma.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

age typically results in a sense of loss, multiple caregiving placements, and shifting or missing parental role model. Children often report missing their mothers and fathers despite the chaotic circumstances that may have preceded their incarceration. Research also indicates that a significant number of children of incarcerated parents may experience multiple placements following the departure of a parent, which only further contributes to their sense of disruption. Johnston and Carlin (1996) use the term “enduring trauma” to describe a situation where a child experiences several traumatic events with no time to recover and where the cumulative effects may overwhelm the child’s capacity to cope, similar to Terr’s (1991) “Type II” trauma category.

While many children of this age are typically able to recover from the immediate strain of losing a parent, children with poorly developed coping skills or in caregiving situations that are unable to provide the needed support find it more difficult to overcome continued stress and trauma. This is especially true in children who experience multiple placements. Inability to recover from on-going emotional strain manifests in various reactive behaviors including aggression, hypervigilence, anxiety and concentration problems and withdrawal. Importantly, a long-term impact of trauma associated with losing a parent may be an impaired ability to cope with future stress and trauma in a productive manner.

What is the impact of parental incarceration on adolescents?

By the time children of incarcerated parents reach adolescence, many have already had multiple experiences with parental crime, arrest and incarceration. As with younger children, these experiences impact preteens and adolescents through separation from a parent and the resulting stress and trauma of their life circumstances.

Early adolescence is typically focused on the developmental task of formulating and pursuing long term goals, which involves a series of cognitive tasks including abstract thinking, delayed gratification, and an ability to work productively with others. During this period, young adolescents are learning to pattern their behavior in ways that will allow them to achieve set goals. Parental involvement in crime and subsequent incarceration can disrupt the development of these skills and lead to maladaptive behaviors. As with other children with an absent parent, it has been argued that children with a parent in prison will often attempt to assume the parenting role within a family. This outcome has not been demonstrated in this population specifically; in fact some studies have actually documented increased dependency and/or regression among children of incarcer-
ated parents. These responses may depend on such factors as the child’s temperament, age and position in the family (e.g., eldest child).

Another outcome associated with young adolescents with absent parents is the rejection of limit setting by adults. This age is a time of boundary testing. Older children begin to recognize that an incarcerated parent voluntarily engaged in an activity that resulted in their incarceration, which leads them to question their parent’s authority over and concern for them. Therefore it is not uncommon for children in this age group to begin rejecting limits on their own behavior set by their parents and other adults. This has implications both for the period during incarceration and for the return of the parent who must then attempt to reassert their parental role.

The important developmental tasks of late adolescence involve developing the social and emotional skills to navigate the adult world including work and relationships. Teenage children of prisoners have typically endured many years of disruption due to family involvement with the criminal justice system. In fact, older children who have experienced multiple disruptions in their family life over time are less likely to be reunited with their parents upon release. The cumulative effect of these circumstances over the years can manifest in a variety of ways including poor school performance, increased delinquency, intergenerational crime and negative perceptions of the police. Inability of children to adopt productive coping mechanisms over time typically results in delinquency and adult criminal behavior. Two separate studies have found that children who experienced having a parent in prison are more likely to have future involvement in the criminal justice system.

Another potential outcome of losing a parent to prison, unique to this population, is the effect of parental incarceration on a child’s perceptions of the legal system. This is particularly apparent among adolescent children who may know more about the circumstances of their parent’s arrest and incarceration, and are beginning to test boundaries. One study of the legal socialization of children of jailed mothers found older children had more negative perceptions of the police and as a result said they would be less likely to call them for help regardless of the situation. A recent study in California of adolescent girls in detention centers in Los Angeles, San Diego, Alameda and Marin Counties found that 54 percent of their mothers and 46 percent of their fathers had spent time in prison.

Table 5. Possible Developmental Effects of Parental Arrest and Incarceration on Adolescent Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Stage</th>
<th>Developmental Characteristics</th>
<th>Developmental Tasks</th>
<th>Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Adolescence (11-14 years)</td>
<td>Organization of behavior in pursuit of goals</td>
<td>Ability to work productively with others</td>
<td>Parent-child separation.</td>
<td>Rejection of limits on behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased abstract thinking</td>
<td>Control expression of emotions.</td>
<td>Enduring trauma.</td>
<td>trauma-reactive behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Puberty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased aggression.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Adolescence (15-18 years)</td>
<td>Emotional crisis and confusion</td>
<td>Development of cohesive identity</td>
<td>Parent-child separation.</td>
<td>Premature termination of dependency relationship with parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult sexual development and sexuality</td>
<td>Resolution of conflicts with family and society</td>
<td>Enduring trauma.</td>
<td>Intergenerational crime and incarceration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal abstract thinking</td>
<td>Ability to engage in adult work and relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased independence.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Paper Topic: Developmental Effects of Parental Incarceration on Adolescents (over age 11)

John Reid and Mark Eddy, Oregon Social Learning Center

This paper will focus on the consequences of parental incarceration on child development, foster care and custody prior to, during and following incarceration. Specifically, the paper will address the following issues:

- What are the short and long-term developmental effects of parental incarceration on adolescents? How might this vary depending on the age of the child, the relationship with the parent and the caregiving arrangements during incarceration?
- Does imprisonment compound or mitigate problems caused by a dysfunctional parent? How does incarceration of a parent predict future behavioral problems?
- How are the consequences for child development different depending on whether the father or mother is incarcerated?
- What are the custody and living arrangements of adolescents prior to, during and following incarceration of a parent? How might these arrangements impact child development?
- How are children reunited with their parents following incarceration? How should they be? Are there models in place to learn from?
Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Families

The growth in incarceration over the past two decades means more families are impacted by the imprisonment and eventual return of a family member. In total, nearly 1.5 million children had a parent in prison in 1999, an increase of over a half-million children since 1991. Expanding this view to consider the 713,000 adult men and women currently on parole after serving a minimum of one-year in prison, the number of families who have experienced the impact of incarceration is even greater.66 The consequences for these families can be substantial, ranging from the loss of financial and emotional support to the social stigma attached to having a family member in prison. This section explores the consequences of incarceration on family functioning during a period of imprisonment and how families are affected by the return of an incarcerated parent.

Since men account for the vast share of state inmates (94 percent), it is not surprising that the great majority of parents in state prisons are men—nearly 93 percent of all incarcerated parents are fathers.67 However, the female prison population has more than doubled since 1990, significantly contributing to the number of children impacted by incarceration.68 In fact, the number of children with an incarcerated mother has nearly doubled in the last decade (from 63,700 in 1991 to 126,100 in 1999). (See Figures 6 and 7.) Yet of all the children reported by parents in prison, most (1.3 million or 92 percent) experienced the absence of a father. This is an important distinction because incarcerated mothers and fathers typically have a different level of involvement with their children prior to incarceration, which affects the subsequent care-giving arrangement, on-going contact during imprisonment and reunification upon release.

To date there has been little research on the impact of incarceration on the families left behind.69 One thing we do know is that strong family ties during imprisonment can have a positive impact on both returning prisoners and their children. Several studies have shown that continued contact with family members during and following incarceration can reduce recidivism and foster reintegration into the community, which has broad benefits for all involved.70

The role parents play in the development of their children’s lives and the potential impact of a parent-child separation due to incarceration also highlights a need to find ways to help families stay in touch during incarceration and reunite upon release, where appropriate. One researcher has concluded that in some cases, visitation can be beneficial for children trying to cope with the loss of a parent to prison.71

![Figure 6. Number of Incarcerated Fathers and Children of Incarcerated Fathers in State and Federal Prisons, 1991 and 1999](image)

![Figure 7. Number of Incarcerated Mothers and Children of Incarcerated Mothers in State and Federal Prisons, 1991 and 1999](image)

However, maintaining these relationships—between the parents (or other caregivers) and between the parent and child—during a period of incarceration can be difficult.

Life for families during and following incarceration is further complicated by the fact that these are not typically traditional family configurations. Hairston’s study of incarcerated fathers (1995) found that half of her sample had children with multiple women and were therefore not living with all of their children. 72 Incarcerated mothers also may not have been living with all of their children prior to incarceration. Several studies have concluded that anywhere from 26-44 percent of children of incarcerated mothers were living with a caregiver other than their mother prior to the mother’s incarceration. 73 This is particularly true among women who have been incarcerated more than once. 74 Recent data from the U.S. Department of Justice found that 64 percent of women and 44 percent of men in state prisons reported living with at least one of their children before their admission to prison. Furthermore, less than one in five of these families had both parents living with the children before incarceration. In general, these are very fragile and fragmented families, a finding with important implications for how they function both during and following a period of incarceration.

How is family functioning impacted during incarceration?

Incarceration has substantial impacts on a large and growing number of families—ranging from the structural changes within a family that result from having a parent incarcerated, to the loss of financial and emotional support. These complex relationships are further strained by the fact that families of prisoners are typically poor, live in disadvantaged communities, and are often a great distance from the facility where the incarcerated parent is being housed. 75

**Structural Changes.** One of the most immediate changes experienced by the family of an incarcerated parent is a change in family composition and in child care arrangements. Most children are not present at the time of their parent’s arrest and parents typically do not volunteer that they have minor children to the police. 76 The result is that many children are informally placed with other family members and do not enter the foster care system following the arrest of a parent. However, placement of a child varies depending on whether the father or mother is arrested and incarcerated. Children of incarcerated fathers typically reside with their mothers (90 percent), while children of incarcerated mothers are often placed with other family members (79 percent). 77 Children are more likely to be placed in foster care (10 percent) if their mother is sentenced to prison as compared to their father (2 percent).

The composition and childcare responsibilities prior to incarceration influence the extent to which incarceration has a dramatic effect on these arrangements during the prison term. Although incarcerated fathers were less likely to have been living with at least one of their children prior to their admission, in most cases they were involved in their children’s lives to some extent. Hairston reports that many fathers in her study provided regular financial support and/or regularly visited their children even though they did not live with them. 78 Yet, because mothers are typically the primary caregiver of a child, her imprisonment will likely have a greater effect on family structure.

Because most incarcerated parents are fathers, the most common living arrangement for children with an incarcerated parent is living with the mother. When the father was not present in the home, his incarceration may have no affect on family structure but may, because of the elimination of financial support and other care for the children, create a disruption in the mothers’ ability to care for the child. When the father was present in the home, his removal will place an even greater financial and care burden on the remaining parent. When only one parent was present in the family and that parent is subsequently incarcerated, children are most likely to be placed with a related caregiver—a grandparent or other family member. For these families, adjust-
ment to the new caregiving arrangements may be relatively minimal.

However, for “family” caregivers who did not have much contact with the children prior to incarceration, they will have to establish themselves as the de facto parent and develop a relationship with the child. This can be even more challenging for unrelated caregivers who do not share a sense of history with the child. Contributing to the trauma of this changing family structure, the children of both male and female prisoners are sometimes separated from their siblings during incarceration because caregivers may not be able to care for the entire sibling group.\(^7\)

The caregiver-parent relationship is also important during incarceration and has implications for reunification efforts following release. A lack of participation in decision-making about their children contributes to a sense of powerlessness among incarcerated parents. Less than half of incarcerated parents report regular communication with the caregivers of their children.\(^8\)

**Loss of Financial Support.** Incarceration disproportionately affects families living in poverty and contributes to further financial strain among the families and caregivers left behind.\(^9\) Many caregivers rely on child support payments, their own income, and public assistance for support.\(^10\) Regardless of the source, most caregivers report that they do not have sufficient resources to meet basic needs.\(^11\)

Many parents were economically viable prior to being incarcerated. Parents in state prison were more likely to be employed either full or part-time (71 percent) as compared to non-parents (65 percent) in the month preceding their current arrest.\(^12\) Wages or salary were the most common source of income among incarcerated fathers prior to imprisonment and 60 percent reported having a full-time job. Mothers, on the other hand, were less likely to have a full-time job (39 percent); the most common sources of income were either wages (44 percent) or transfer payments (42 percent). Although very few mothers reported receiving formal child support payments (6 percent), they reported receiving other forms of support from the fathers of their children including some level of financial support other than formal support payments.\(^13\) If a parent did provide some support to his/her family prior to incarceration, the family must adjust to the loss of that income during the prison term.

During imprisonment, most parents are not able to provide financial support to their families. A small minority of inmates (7 percent total) are employed in prison industries that pay a nominal wage, but it is typically not enough to provide meaningful financial support (cite monograph). Inmates typically receive money from their families, not the other way around.

Caregivers often struggle to make ends meet during the period of incarceration. In many cases, they rely on public assistance. Two studies found a similar level of reliance on AFDC payments (now TANF) to meet basic needs: 44 percent of families caring for children of an incarcerated parent reported receiving AFDC.\(^14\) However, recent welfare reform legislation may severely limit public assistance (i.e., TANF) as a form of support for families both during and following incarceration by capping lifetime eligibility at 60 months, instituting work requirements, and placing restrictions on those who have violated probation or parole and those who have been convicted of certain drug crimes.\(^15\)

Another potential source of support for caregivers is the formal kinship foster care system. Although the average monthly foster care payment is greater than the average TANF child-only payment in nearly all states, very few families of an incarcerated parent choose to access the foster care system.\(^16\) Only 10 percent of incarcerated mothers and less than 2 percent of incarcerated fathers reported having a child in foster care.\(^17\)

**Maintaining Ties with Family.** Maintaining ties with family members—between the parents (or other caregivers) and between the parent and child—during the prison term can be difficult. Obstacles identified by the Women’s Prison Association include inadequate information on visiting procedures, little help from correctional facilities about visiting
arrangements, the time involved in traveling great distances to get to the correctional facility, visiting procedures that are uncomfortable or humiliating, and concerns about children's reactions to in-prison visits. These circumstances can easily strain family relationships and continued connections with children. Further, procedures for communicating with families—via phone, mail or personal visits—are highly regulated by correctional facilities with the primary concern focused on security issues. This translates into policies that do not necessarily promote or facilitate maintaining connections with family.

Mothers tend to stay in closer contact with their children while in prison than do fathers. Nearly 80 percent of mothers reported monthly contact and 60 percent reported at least weekly contact. However, as with fathers, more than half of all mothers report never receiving a personal visit from their children. Visits can be even more difficult for incarcerated mothers who, because of the scarcity of female prison facilities, tend to be an average of 160 miles farther away from their children than are incarcerated fathers. Despite this separation, most mothers expect to be reunited with their children upon release.

Only 40 percent of incarcerated fathers report having weekly contact with their children, mostly by mail or phone. And the frequency of contact decreases as the length of time served in prison increases. Given that the majority of state prisoners (60 percent) are held in facilities more than 100 miles from their homes, it is not surprising that most fathers (57 percent) also report never receiving a personal visit from their children after admission to prison. A primary source of depression among both incarcerated mothers and fathers is the lost connections to family—particularly their children.

Prison also creates enormous strain on intimate relationships—whether or not children are involved. It is not uncommon for marital relationships to end in divorce during a prison term. Only half of married inmates in Hairston’s study reported that their primary source of emotional support was their wife. Hairston reported that for many male prisoners, family stability and connections were maintained by their mothers (1995b).

A prisoner’s success in maintaining ties with his/her children also often depends on the quality of their relationship with the caregiver of their children. There is a body of research reported by Anne Nurse that suggests that the quality of interaction among juvenile and adult fathers is highly dependent on their relationship with the child’s mother. Frank Furstenberg’s (1995) work with young fragile families suggests that fathers typically do not view the relationship with their children as separate from their relationship with the mother—they see it as a “package deal.” The result is when the bond between the couple begins to falter, the father-child relationship becomes more tenuous. This is also true for kinship caregivers who may harbor negative feelings against the incarcerated parent and believe that allowing a child to visit his/her parent in prison will have a negative impact on the child. Further, caregivers also may not have adequate resources at their disposal—time, money and transportation—to make the often long and expensive trips to a prison facility for a visit.

Although removing specific family members can clearly be beneficial for some families—resulting in more attention to children, more resources available, fewer distractions from home life, and less fear or actual violence in the home—there is considerable evidence that many children and families suffer when a parent is removed from the home. Likewise, there are many indications that it is also beneficial for both incarcerated parents and their children to maintain ties with one another, and that these ties may aid adjustment to the loss of a parent and ease the process of return.

Paper Topic: Impact of Incarceration on Families During Incarceration
Creasie Finney Hairston, University of Illinois

This paper will focus on developing an understanding of the impact of incarceration on family functioning, including barriers to family interaction
and strategies to help families stay connected while a parent is incarcerated. In most cases, incarceration is a traumatic event for family members, with profound consequences for family functioning during the period of incarceration. Important policy and practice questions include the following:

- What is the impact of incarceration on family functioning (including the impact on relationships between mothers and fathers, parents and children)?
- How do families cope with incarceration? How do they stay connected with one another?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages for children of staying connected with family members during incarceration? For the offenders? Are there models in place to learn from?
- What is the financial impact of incarceration on the family members left behind?
- How do these issues differ among incarcerated mothers and fathers?
- What is the impact of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act on children whose parents are incarcerated?

How are families effected by the return of an incarcerated parent?

Returning prisoners face a host of challenges upon release from prison and return to the community that translate into important issues for the well-being of their children and families. Many returning prisoners had substance abuse problems prior to incarceration that may still need treatment. Others face the prospect of homelessness without help from family members and the challenge of finding a stable job to support themselves and their children. And for many, access to public assistance will be limited based on their criminal record. In most cases, the criminal justice system does not help families plan for and negotiate the process of returning home. Further, the child welfare system only becomes involved in those cases where they have formally been involved in the placement and on-going care of children of incarcerated parents. The result is that returning prisoners and their families typically are on their own in navigating the challenges of having a family member return home from prison.

Reestablishing Relationships. The months leading up to release are a particularly stressful time for both the inmate and his/her family. Each have developed expectations for what their lives will be like after the prison term. Male inmates report returning to their partners with the expectation that nothing will have changed between them. Literature on spouses of inmates indicates that the most significant change is that the partner left behind becomes more independent and self-sufficient. The family has changed in the inmate’s absence so they are often unable to resume the role they had before they left which causes stress and tension.

Inmates must also confront a process of reestablishing bonds and authority with children with whom they have had little contact while in prison. In many cases, other adults have stepped in to fill the role of the inmate parent while he/she was in prison. Family members may play a gatekeeping function in terms of limiting or discouraging contact with the former inmate. Research on the African American community, for example, has found that maternal grandmothers and other female family members will sometimes try to limit an unemployed father’s access to his children.

New relationships that developed during the period of incarceration may also contribute to stress and strained connections upon release, and may result in diminished involvement between returning inmates and their children. Some studies indicate that inmates will start to back off from active involvement in their children’s lives when they discover their former partner has started a new relationship.

All of these issues relating to reunification of families are further complicated when the home life of a former prisoner involves a history of domestic violence. Although most inmates in state prison have been convicted of a violent crime (44 percent of parents and 51 percent of non-parents), we do not know
the extent to which these were crimes against an intimate partner or a family member. It is well-documented that certain violent crimes such as assault or rape, are most frequently committed by an intimate partner, relative, friend or acquaintance. For families with a history of domestic violence, extra care and consideration is needed in helping them heal during the prison term and plan for the release of a family member implicated in past violent behavior. To date, we know very little about the experiences of and consequences for these families.

Housing and Employment. The ability to find a stable and adequate source of income and a place to live upon release from prison is an important factor in an individual’s transition back to the community and the process of reestablishing relationships with family members.

One of the first tasks a returning prisoner must take on following release from prison is to find a place to stay. The challenge of finding stable and affordable housing for one’s family are only compounded by time spent in prison. Returning prisoners rarely have the financial resources or personal references needed to secure housing in the private market. Most individuals leave prison without enough money for a security deposit on an apartment. Another potential obstacle is the fact that landlords typically require potential tenants to list employment and housing references and to disclose financial and criminal history information.

Public housing also may not be an option for returning prisoners. Federal housing policies permit—and in some cases require—public housing authorities, Section 8 providers, and other federally assisted housing programs to deny housing to individuals who have engaged in certain criminal activities. The guidelines for denying housing are fairly broad and may encompass those who have, at any point in the past, engaged in drug-related activity, violent criminal activity, or other criminal activity that would negatively affect the health and safety of other residents. (Housing authorities have the right to obtain criminal records on tenants and applicants.) Housing providers do have some discretion to make exceptions to the federal restrictions for individuals who show that they are getting help through participation in a treatment or rehabilitation program.

Another important aspect of making a successful transition back into the community and the lives of loved ones left behind is finding a job. Unemployment rates before admission to prison are high among incarcerated parents. In the month prior to the arrest that led to their admission to prison, nearly 30 percent of fathers and 50 percent of mothers were unemployed. Having a legitimate job not only lowers the likelihood that a former prisoner will reoffend, but also provides an important means of stable support for their family. An important consequence of losing a parent to prison is the lost financial support that can place a child—typically already living in poverty—in even more dire circumstances.

Finding a job is particularly important for parents who were subject to a formal child support agreement during their prison term. In some cases, if an inmate is not able to amend the court ordered child support arrangement during his/her prison term, child support obligations continue to accumulate. These unpaid child support obligations may have legal and financial implications for inmates once they are released.

Access to Public Assistance. Recent changes to welfare legislation could also make it very difficult for parents to rebuild a life with their children. Former inmates are often at a disadvantage for finding a job for various reasons. Access to public benefits that could help these families find stable footing following parental incarceration has been limited under certain conditions. Individuals in violation of a condition of their parole or probation can be barred from receiving federal welfare benefits (TANF), food stamps, Supplemental Security Income, and access to public housing. Further, individuals convicted of a drug felony can be permanently banned from receiving TANF or food stamps. States can opt out of this ban and about half have instituted some type of exception to this rule. In 1997, 35 percent of incarcerated mothers and 23 percent of incarcerated...
fathers were serving time for some type of drug offense.109

Navigating the Corrections & Child Welfare Systems. Families with children who were formally placed in foster care or some other out-of-home care may confront several additional barriers to reunification with their children upon release. First, it is difficult for prisoners to access the services required by the child welfare system for reunification while they are in prison. Additionally, communication between inmates and caseworkers regarding permanency planning and other important issues for reunification is hampered by the fact that prisoners are typically housed in facilities many miles from their community. Finally, it is also difficult for inmates to remain in touch with their children while in prison, which is the most basic requirement for reunification (CWLA brief 1997). Most correctional facilities do little to facilitate on-going contact between inmates and family members. In fact, most correctional facility policies are focused on inmate management and security concerns, which often result in creating obstacles for prisoners and their families staying connected.110

Although children may be better off without a neglectful and abusive parent in their lives, there are many caring and committed incarcerated mothers and fathers who expect to resume their parenting role upon release. Recent legislative initiatives, however, have made it more difficult for incarcerated parents—particularly mothers—to reunite with their children upon release. For example, the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, replacing the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, mandates termination of parental rights once a child has been in foster care for 15 or more of the past 22 months. Incarcerated women serve an average of 18 months in prison.111 The result is that the average woman sentenced to prison whose children are placed in foster care could lose the right to reunite with her children upon release.

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Paper Topic: Parenting Issues Following Incarceration

John Jeffries, Vera Institute of Justice

This paper will explore what happens to families after a parent is released from prison focusing on understanding the impact of return and reintegration on family functioning. Important policy and practice questions include the following:

- How do parents reconnect with one another following incarceration? How do parents reestablish authority with their children upon release from prison?
- How does a family’s financial status change with return of a former prisoner? For instance, are returning prisoners able to find jobs, employment and housing? What is the impact of accumulation of child support arrearages on families following release from prison? Does public assistance eligibility change and how does this impact the family?
- How do families with a history of family violence cope with the return of an incarcerated parent? Do the criminal justice or health and human services systems address this issue? Are there models in place we can learn from?
- How do these issues differ among released mothers and fathers?
- What is the impact of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act on parents who are trying to reestablish relationships after incarceration?
Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Communities

The imprisonment and return of a large number of adults—many of whom are parents—has resulted in a legacy of disrupted families that is of great concern in many communities. The majority of former prisoners return, in relatively high concentrations, to a small number of low income, high crime communities that they called home before their incarceration. These communities are typically characterized by significant disadvantage. This section will examine the how incarceration of large numbers of adults, particularly parents, impacts the functioning of communities. It will also consider how communities respond to these circumstances and the unique needs of a high population of people impacted by incarceration.

Some researchers believe that high concentrations of prisoner removal and return can further destabilize communities already in distress, and that high incarceration rates can, under certain conditions, lead to even higher crime rates. At the same time, there are a number of efforts underway that leverage these concentrations—where community, corrections, service providers and the private sector are creating partnerships to anticipate and address the needs of family members impacted by incarceration and former inmates, who return to the community to rebuild their lives.

How is social capital impacted by incarceration and reentry?

The removal and return of offenders is highly concentrated among distinct urban neighborhoods and racial groups that reside in these mostly poor, inner-city communities.

For example, in some Brooklyn neighborhoods, one out of eight parenting age males is admitted to jail or prison in a single year.\textsuperscript{112} Further, these people typically return to the communities they came from. Again, in Brooklyn, one finds that 11 percent of the block groups (small areas within census tracks) account for 20 percent of the total population in Brooklyn, yet are home to 50 percent of the parolees.

While there is a growing body of research documenting the concentrations of incarceration (and eventual return) within urban communities, there is little research on the impact this may have on community life.\textsuperscript{113} Specifically, how do high rates of removal and return of offenders help or hinder residents in facilitating community-level social control. For example, supervising young people and providing models of shared normative expectations for behavior are ways in which a community can exert social control.

One way of thinking about this concept of collective life within a community is to consider the level of social capital. According to Clear and Rose (2000), social capital is comprised of two concepts: human capital and social networks.\textsuperscript{114} Human capital refers to individual capacity to navigate basic life problems, take steps to improve their lives, and form and maintain relationships with others. Social capital also involves social networks—the array of friends, family, neighbors and other acquaintances that provide support and a means for the exchange of support.

Clearly, the human capital and social networks of an individual can be both positively and negatively affected by incarceration. For example, as discussed in an earlier section, incarceration results in a wage penalty for most returned prisoners for a number of reasons including the loss of time in the labor market during imprisonment. Yet prison may also provide the needed motivation for an individual to turn his or life around upon release. The natural extension of this question is to consider the aggregate impact of high rates of incarceration and return on the social capital of communities. Communities hardest hit by the high levels of imprisonment are also those most depleted of community resources. If we assume that offenders are not just a drain on a community—that they can offer positive contributions in the form of financial support and parenting to their children—
then their removal also carries negative consequences for those left behind.

Further, Clear and Rose suggest that high rates of removal and return of offenders may further destabilize disadvantaged neighborhoods and negatively impact a community’s capacity to exert social control. In fact, high incarceration rates may disrupt a community’s social network, affecting family formation, reducing informal control of children, diminishing the income and other resources available for the families left behind, and weakening ties among residents. The researchers posit that when removal and return rates hit a certain tipping point, they may actually result in higher crime rates, as the neighborhood becomes increasingly unstable and less coercive means of social control are undermined.\(^{115}\)

**Paper Topic: Social Capital**

*Dina Rose and Todd Clear, John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

This paper will consider the impact of incarceration and reentry on communities, with a particular focus on the issue of social capital. This paper will explore the impact of the removal and return of large numbers of offenders on stability in these “high rate” neighborhoods, focusing on the impact on social networks. Important policy and practice questions include the following:

- What is the impact of incarceration and reentry on social networks and social capital in these neighborhoods?
- How are children affected by diminished social capital as more adults are removed from and subsequently return to communities?
- How do strong social networks and other environmental factors affect the post-prison adjustment of individuals returning to these communities? For example, when offenders return to their old neighborhoods, do their networks tend to offer more protective factors or negative influences?
- How are individual families (i.e., children and caregivers) affected by this phenomenon?
- What are some examples of health and human service and criminal justice policy interventions that help strengthen community cohesion and increase the odds of successful reentry and outcomes for families?

**How are the service needs of prisoners and their families addressed?**

Families of prisoners are often in need of services that cross the criminal justice, health and human services systems. These families generally struggle with a host of problems—including poverty and housing issues, mental illness, health problems and substance abuse—that are only exacerbated by the arrest and imprisonment of a family member. Until recently, children and families of prison inmates have not been a focus of corrections and issues related to incarceration have been overlooked by health and human services. This has meant that families may be receiving services from multiple agencies and systems with little recognition of how their service needs are related. There is renewed focus on this population with an emphasis on intersystem collaboration and the provision of comprehensive services that connect the prison experience with life in the community.

A recent survey of state welfare agencies by the Child Welfare League of America found that most agencies did not systematically collect data on parental incarceration.\(^{116}\) Likewise, correctional institutions have been slow to recognize the child and family issues of the inmate population. There are several reasons why these systems, with significantly overlapping populations, have not focused on coordinating efforts. Corrections has typically emphasized the inmate and related security issues, and has placed less emphasis on the children and families of inmates. This often translates into visiting procedures difficult for families to negotiate and little planning with families on reunification issues. For the child welfare system and other human services agencies,
working with corrections means increasing caseloads and navigating the criminal justice system. On a more logistical level, the lack of common data systems and communication between corrections, health and human services systems also poses significant coordination barriers.

Integration of and collaboration among community services (housing, substance abuse treatment, health, employment, child care, welfare, etc.) for returning ex-offenders and their families is vital for successful outcomes for these families. For instance, we know that aftercare is a key component to continuing any progress made in prison and perhaps mitigating negative effects of prison experience. For this we need to think about reintegration as a process that involves the community. However, very little research to date exists on the service needs of families while a parent is incarcerated or on the services that families need in order to aid an offenders successful reintegration into the family and community.117

Issues that confront all service delivery systems: 1) comprehensiveness meaning the array of services available in a community represent the full range of services that meet the needs of the target population; 2) service levels refers to capacity of the service system to provide the appropriate level of service to all those who need it; 3) service integration refers to the degree to which agencies collaborate to assure access to all needed services.

In general, elements of an effective service integration model at the community level would include: 1) a holistic approach that addresses individual issues of all family members including the returning offender and addresses those individual needs in the context of the larger social network of family and community; 2) comprehensive assessment of offender and family needs ideally at the point of intake at the prison and as part of any re-entry assessment; 3) a coordinated service plan that draws on needed services in the community (ideally beginning during the period of incarceration and continued upon release); 4) institutionalized inter-agency linkages that ensure service referrals result in service delivery; 5) follow up on service referrals to ensure services are being provided and the program coordination is functioning; and 6) the ability to fill the gaps in service that are not being met by the service network.

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**Paper Topic: Service Integration**

*Shelli Rossman, The Urban Institute*

This paper will focus on the integration of services that target the prisoner, his family and children during incarceration and upon release. This paper will explore two major issues: the coordination of service delivery across the criminal justice and health and human services systems, and the coordination between in-prison service delivery and aftercare in the community. Important policy and practice questions include the following:

- How do service providers within both the criminal justice and health and human services systems address the service needs of returning prisoners and their families? How well are services integrated? Do both "systems" work collaboratively with the needs of a prisoners' family, or in isolation from each other? Could better coordination and collaboration achieve better results?
- What are the barriers to coordinating treatment and services delivery that begin in-prison and continue in the community?
- In what substantive areas are appropriate treatment and interventions most lacking (e.g. in-prison substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment in the community, family therapy, groups sessions for couples)?
- What are the barriers to integrated service delivery systems at the local level? Are there effective models (for families that include offenders, children and partners) that exist?
Endnotes


7 Ibid.


9 Ibid.


11 See Richie, “Issues Incarcerated Women Face When They Return to Their Communities.”


15 See Austin, Bruce, Carroll, McCall and Richards, “The Use of Incarceration in the United States.”


17 See Adams, “Adjusting to Prison Life.”


24 See Zamble and Porporino, Coping Behavior and Adaptation in Prison Inmates.

25 See Adams, “Adjusting to Prison Life.”


29 See Beck, 2000 “State and Federal Prisoners Returning to the Community: Findings from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.”


31 Ibid.


33 Medical problems were more prevalent among inmates who had been homeless or unemployed prior to incarceration. Of the state inmates who reported that they had been homeless for some period of time in the year before incarceration, nearly half reported a physical impairment or mental condition and one-third said they had a medical problem. See Maruschak and Beck, 2001, “Medical Problems of Inmates, 1997.”


35 See Ditton, 1999, “Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers.”


37 See Johnston and Gabel, "Incarcerated Parents."

38 Ibid.


46 See Johnston, “Incarceration of Women and Effects on Parenting.”


50 See Shonkoff and Phillips (Eds.), p. 6, From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development.


53 See Johnston, “Incarceration of Women and Effects on Parenting.”
58 See Johnston, “Incarceration of Women and Effects on Parenting.”
60 See The Osborne Association, “How can I help? Working with children of incarcerated parents.”
62 See Gabel and Johnston (Eds.), Children of incarcerated parents.
63 See Johnston, Children of offenders and Johnston, Children of the Therapeutic Intervention Project.
67 See Mumola, "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children."
68 See Beck, "Prisoners in 1999."
74 McGowan & Blumenthal 1978.
75 Carlson & Cervera 1991.
77 See Mumola, "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children."
78 See Hairston, “Fathers in prison.”
79 See Hairston, “Fathers in prison.”
81 See Johnston and Carlin, “Enduring trauma among children of incarcerated criminal offenders.”
82 CWLA brief 1997.

84 See Mumola, 2000, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children.”

85 See Hairston, “The Forgotten Parent: Understanding the Forces that Influence Incarcerated Father’s Relationships with their Children.”


88 Ibid.

89 See Mumola, 2000, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children.”


94 Ibid.

95 See Mumola, 2000, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children.”

96 See Lynch and Sabol, 2001, “Prisoner Reentry in Perspective.”

97 See Mumola, 2000, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children.”

98 See Adams, “Adjusting to Prison Life.”


101 Ibid.


104 See Furstenberg, “Fathering in the inner-city: Paternal participation and public policy” and Nurse, “Coming home to strangers.”


106 See Legal Action Center, “Housing Laws Affecting Individuals with Criminal Convictions.” Washington, D.C.: Legal Action Center. For more information, see http://www.lac.org/.

107 See Mumola, 2000, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children.”


109 See Mumola, 2000, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children.”

110 See Hairston, “The forgotten parent: Understanding the forces that influence incarcerated fathers’ relationships with their children.”


112 Analysis by E. Cadora and C. Swartz for the Community Justice Project at the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), 2001. Based on data from the New York State Division of Parole. For more information see http://www.communityjusticeproject.org/


