

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Judith O. Wagner

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Children of incarcerated parents are one of the targeted populations identified in the New Strategic Vision for the Delivery of Youth Services under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). There is no WIA definition of children of incarcerated parents, but the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines children of prisoners as children one or both of whose parents are incarcerated in a federal, state, or local correctional facility. The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice, defines children of incarcerated parents as juveniles who have a parent or legal guardian who is or was incarcerated in a correctional facility or who is otherwise under the jurisdiction of a federal, state, or local criminal justice system.

Children of incarcerated parents are not documented; they are invisible, and no government entity is responsible for them. Most states have no procedure to identify and coordinate what happens to dependent children; often, no one asks arrestees or prisoners if they have minor children. Even if asked, they often distrust government and may withhold information because they are afraid they might lose their parental rights and they don't know what will happen to their children.

Some Nationwide Statistics

A 2000 report by Mumola for the U.S. Department of Justice estimated that inmates in state and federal prisons had 1,498,800 minor children.

Report Highlights	
Parents in prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between 1991 and 1999, the number of minor children with a parent in a state or federal prison rose from 936,500 to 1,498,800. • 22% of minor children with a parent in prison were under 5 years old. • Over 50% of prisoners reported having a child under the age of 18. • 48% of incarcerated parents said they had never been married.

Report Highlights (continued)	
Children's living arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> About 90% of fathers in state prisons said their children lived with their mother. 28% of mothers said the father was the children's caregiver. 20% cited grandparents and other relatives as caregivers. Only 2% had a child in foster care.
Contact with parents in prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40% of fathers and 60% of mothers reported weekly contact with children. Over 50% reported no personal visits with their children. Over 60% were incarcerated over 100 miles from their last place of residence.
Parents' offenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most parents in federal prisons were sentenced for violent crimes or drug trafficking. Those in state prisons were less likely to be violent offenders and more likely to serve a sentence for drug offenses.
Parents' sentences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 80 months in a state prison, 103 months in a federal prison. Fathers reported sentences 5 years longer than mothers.

Characteristics of Children of Incarcerated Parents

Children of incarcerated parents face many problems typical to at-risk youth (e.g., lack of positive role models, unstable home life, poverty, poor school performance and participation). In addition, however, children of incarcerated parents face a unique set of challenges.

Challenges for Children of Incarcerated Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five to six times more likely than their peers to be incarcerated themselves. More likely to abuse substances and engage in antisocial behaviors. Likely to drop out of school, run away, and become homeless. Suffer from a negative self-image, fear, anxiety, anger, resentment, and sadness. High levels of truancy, physical aggression, and disruptive behavior. Traumatized by separation, stigmatized by shame of having a parent in prison.

Networking to Identify Children of Incarcerated Parents

Presumably, many children of incarcerated parents need and are eligible for WIA youth services; the problem is to identify them and make them aware of services available. Youth services professionals can network with other agencies and programs to identify children:

- Most children live with the other parent, grandmother, or other relative, they may have been in the child welfare or foster care system temporarily.
- State department of corrections programs may encourage relationships between incarcerated parents and children.
- Homeless or runaway shelters have contact with children.

Girl Scouts Beyond Bars

The Allen Correctional Institution in Lima, Ohio, hosts the Daddies and Daughters chapter of Girl Scouts Beyond Bars. Funded by the Justice Department, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars is the only scout troop that unites fathers and daughters. All others bring mothers and daughters together. The goal of the 14-year-old program is to establish a relationship between parent and child, in some cases where none existed before.

- Groups may conduct activities in prisons that involve children (e.g., advocate groups, community organizations, service or faith-based organizations) may operate visitation programs, scout groups, Bible studies; they can serve as referrals to children who are not otherwise involved.
- Groups may offer programs for incarcerated parents that do not involve children (e.g., parenting education or foster grandparenting); those groups may identify children through their contact with parents.

Networking to Serve Children of Incarcerated Parents

Networking not only helps identify children of incarcerated parents; it also helps ensure that children get the services they need to meet their individual needs. Youth services professionals can:

- Identify local agencies that serve children of incarcerated parents.
- Share information about services available, youth served, and processes and procedures.
- Establish working relationships with agency staff to ensure coordination and cooperation.
- Refer children from one agency to another based on the child's needs.

The Real Challenge – Invisible Children

Unfortunately, networking has its limitations; the children that can be identified by networking are those who are already being served in some way or other. There still remains the problem that many children of incarcerated parents are invisible – because children may not be identified at the time of arrest; because parents withhold information about children or have no contact with them; because responsible agencies lose contact with children after services are terminated. Perhaps the greatest challenge for WIA and other youth services professionals is to find a way to find those invisible children of incarcerated parents.

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