



Children of Incarcerated Parents LIBRARY

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For Health Care and other Service
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The Caregiver's Situation

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

When a child's becomes incarcerated, with rare exception, the child mourns. They may miss the parent that played with them or cooked for them or watched TV with them, and doing these things may increase their sadness. Or, if their incarcerated parent was not very available before imprisonment, the child may mourn the loss of the hope of what might have been if only Mom or Dad had not gone away.

Either way, the time when a parent is incarcerated is a time when children wait and often hope. They wait for Mom or Dad to come back to take care of them, the way they did before, or, they wait for the return of a parent who has been changed and "made better" by their time in prison. They also hope that this time Mom or Dad will stay.

The caregivers of children of incarcerated parents may have many things in common. They all cope with the criminal justice system, deal with the impact on the children, have to find ways to make ends meet, deal with their own feelings toward the child's parents, and struggle with how to answer children's questions. But each family and each care giving circumstance is also unique.



Most caregivers are expected to raise the children, keep them connected in some way to their imprisoned parent, earn a living, and care for other members of the family.

Caregivers could be the incarcerated parent's parent, another grandparent, an aunt, or older sibling. A caregiver might be a family friend, foster parent or group home staff member. Some caregivers took on the responsibility by default because there was no one else, while others were already the guardians of the children before the incarceration of the parent.

Some caregivers are unrelated to the child by blood but are the friends or girlfriends or boyfriends or partners of one of the child's parents. Some children are in foster care with adults that they did not know before their parent became incarcerated. In some cases, children moved far away from the homes they were living in prior to their parents arrest and incarceration and find themselves in new and unfamiliar environments.

Meanwhile, most caregivers are expected to raise the children, keep them connected in some way to their incarcerated parent, earn a living, and care for other members of the family. It may be difficult for caregivers to respond consistently to the feelings and behaviors of the children of incarcerated parents in their care.

Teachers, health care providers, social workers, clergy and those that work as coaches, librarians and recreation directors are not trained to help children or their caregivers to cope with this crisis.

In addition, there are limited data focusing on caregivers of children of the incarcerated. The few studies that are available indicate

that caregivers most often report that financial hardship, elevated levels of emotional stress, additional strains that are placed on interpersonal relationships and increased difficulty in monitoring and supervising children are constant realities for them.^{i ii}

These studies can shed light on their situation and should be used to train all those that work in systems that serve children of the incarcerated and their caregivers.

Influences on the Caregivers' Ability to Cope

- The degree of familiarity they have with the child
- The intensity of change and upheaval in the child's life
- Economic stress/stability or the oppression of poverty
- Degree of isolation, whether in urban, suburban, or rural settings.
- Caregiver's health and emotional well being
- Quality of the child's school
- Caregiver's job satisfaction
- Relevant community and professional resources
- Support of friends and family
- Family spirituality and faith
- The impact of racial and ethnic prejudices

Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of incarcerated parents and their families at the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL), www.nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu . See especially the CIPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.



About the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL)

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated current website:

nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu.

Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold. Sorry, the NRCCFI is not budgeted to mail free copies. Send comments to the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library at Rutgers University Camden, 405-7 Cooper Street, Room 103, Camden, NJ 08102-1521.

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The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, and was edited and published by Jim Mustin.



ⁱ Turanovic, Jillian J., Nancy Rodriguez, and Travis C. Pratt. 2012. "The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration Revisited: A Qualitative Analysis of the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents." *Criminology* 50:913-959.

ⁱⁱ Nesmith Ande, and Ebony Ruhland. 2011. "Caregivers of Children with Incarcerated Parents." *The Open Family Studies Journal*. 4(2):105.