One in twenty-eight children in the United States has a parent in prison.

Children of incarcerated parents are often present at their parent’s arrest. Many times, they are not told the truth about where their incarcerated parent is. This leaves children confused and questioning.

Children with parents in prison imagine all kinds of explanations and answers. They feel vulnerable, unprotected and at fault. When children blame themselves for the loss of a parent to jail or prison, they may rebel or withdraw. They are often afraid to talk to anyone about their situation, limiting the ability of others to understand and help.
While there are still no government agencies charged with specific responsibility for the impact of the criminal justice system on families and children, the last 2 years have brought a dramatic shift in the field. The impact of parental incarceration on children has been addressed by the White House, Sesame Street and a growing number of state agencies and community programs. The bulging prison walls have created collateral consequences previously unrecognized on a significant scale. (National Research Council 2014) These consequences are beginning to influence policies in child welfare, child support enforcement, correctional visitation practices, law enforcement protocols, and community programs and advocacy initiatives across the US.

This impact on families has long been seen as a series of crises: from arrest, to trial, incarceration, and re-entry (Fishman and Alissi, 1979). Each of these crises can diminish a family’s capacity to care for and support its members. The challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents have also been described as “ambiguous losses” creating "disenfranchised grief" (Arditti, 2012) and involvement of a family member in the criminal justice system is also now seen as an Adverse Childhood Experience and linked to both physical and emotional health problems.

To help, Family and Corrections Network created — the Children of Prisoners Library in 2003 and the 2nd edition Children of Incarcerated Parents Library in 2014. These Internet based resources are available at www.nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu. CIPL provides free information pamphlets for those who work with children and families of the incarcerated. CIPL pamphlets describe the challenges facing children of incarcerated parents, strategies for intervention, and tips for fostering trust. CIPL along with the rest of the NRCCFI website, provides additional resources: agencies serving children and families of prisoners, a list of books for children, a set of pamphlets especially for incarcerated fathers, topical reading and references, and a selected video list.

References and Resources


Little Children-Big Challenges: http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/apps/ Look at the tab labeled "Family Tool Kits" near the bottom you will find the interactive link for the Incarceration section.


In the Library

Facts and Issues

101: Introduction to Children of Incarcerated Parents
102: Why Maintain Relationships?
103: Conversations - Questions Children Ask
104: Risk and Protection
105: Visiting Mom or Dad
106: Jail and Prison Procedures
107: Communication Tips for Families

Materials For Caregivers

201: Caring for Children of Incarcerated Parents
202: Questions from Caregivers
203: What Do Children of Incarcerated Parents Need?
204: Tips from Caregivers for Caregivers

Materials for Health Care Providers

301: Impact of Parental Incarceration
302: Challenges for Health Care Providers
303: Common Stress Points
304: Different Children/ Different Behaviors
305: Strategies for Intervention
306: Tips for Fostering Trust & Safety
307: The Caregiver’s Situation

For more resources, please refer to: http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/
For related research, please see: http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/research-review/and http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/2014/10/05/an-annotated-bibliography-parental-incarceration-and-child-wellbeing-by-christopher-wildeman/
About CIPL’S Author and Publisher

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Ann Adalist-Estrin is Director of the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Rutgers University Camden, New Jersey where she also teaches in the department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice. Ann is an author, speaker and consultant to a wide variety of agencies serving children and families in the U.S. and abroad.

Ann is also a Child and Family Therapist in Jenkintown, PA and a trainer for the Healthy Steps for Young Children Pediatric Training Program at Boston University School of Medicine.

In 2013, she was honored at the White House as a "Champion of Change" for her work as an advocate for children and families of the incarcerated.

With Jim Mustin, Ann co-authored Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide. She authored the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library.

Jim Mustin

Jim was the executive director of Family and Corrections Network (FCN) since he founded it in 1983. FCN was the first national organization in the United States focused on children and families of the incarcerated. Jim retired in 2006 after helping to create the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated by merging FCN with the Federal Resource Center on Children of Prisoners.