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For Health Care Providers: CPL 301

Impact of Parental Incarceration

Adapted from Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003, used with permission.

About Prisoners and Their Children

When parents go to prison or jail, their children suffer. The loss of a parent to incarceration can precipitate trauma and disruption that few experience without serious consequences. This loss often compounds or exacerbates existing environmental stress such as poverty, poor schools and violent neighborhoods.

Incarcerated parents were often themselves raised by adults who were chemically dependant, abusive or both. They are likely to have learned to cope and adapt to trauma and distress by lashing out at others and by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. They can lack the ability to attach to others and may not have internalized adequate or healthy models of child rearing. For many prisoner parents, rage, depression and addiction is and has been a part of life followed by the criminal activity that addiction can require and rage often causes.



Indeed, some prisoners are incarcerated because of crimes against other family members, including parents imprisoned for domestic or sexual violence or homicides involving their own children or their children's other parent. *However, these are relatively rare occurrences—not typical of incarcerated parents and their children.*

The ideas in the Children of Prisoners Library that relate to contact and relationships between imprisoned parent and child may not be appropriate in cases where the child or a parent were victims of the crime. Such cases require intense interventions for everyone involved. Contact in those cases must be handled in a therapeutic environment and with the advice

of professionals in mental health and child welfare.

Always remember that every family and every circumstance is different. The impact of parental incarceration on the children and the family will vary with these differing circumstances. There are, however, some common themes and consistent realities that emerge in the stories of prisoners' children.

Children of prisoners will experience loss of the parent that cared for them—or of the possibility of a nurturing parent. This loss may include relief that a parent is no longer able to hurt themselves or others. Perhaps the loss is accompanied by satisfaction that the parent will be punished or hope that they will change. But loss remains a consistent reaction to the incarceration of a parent.

When children are present at the arrest of their parent, the loss of separation can be compounded by powerlessness, and violence. In some cases, the child may see police indifference or brutality.

Many children of incarcerated parents exhibit symptoms

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of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without hyperactivity) and Attachment Disorders.

Most children of prisoners are cared for by family members. Some remain in stable environments while others are moved to new communities or schools. Many children are plunged into economic hardship or deeper poverty as a result of the incarceration of a family member.

As their caregivers struggle to cope, some children will be exposed to the new or continued substance abuse of family members. They may also experience sexual or physical abuse. Children, who are placed in foster care, often endure multiple placements and are at increased risk for physical and sexual abuse.

Children with parents in jail or prison feel stigmatized even when they live in communities where many people have family and friends who are incarcerated. Some children even appear to be boastful as they defend against the pain and embarrassment.

Children of prisoners, who live with any or all of these conditions and risk factors, have difficulty in school and experience both academic and social failure.

Remember

Children of prisoners are rarely helped by not having their parent in their lives in some way. Without that parent, children mourn. Some mourn the loss of the parent that was available to

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care for them. Others mourn the loss of what “could have been.” (For a more in-depth discussion, see CPL 304: Different Children/Different Emotions.) While caregivers of children of prisoners are often unsure about what to tell them and whether or not to take them to visit, most children adjust better when they are told the truth about their parents whereabouts and when contact between parents and children is maintained.

Visits to a parent in prison or jail are usually helpful in keeping children connected to their parents. There are often however behavioral reactions (increased aggression or anxiety) after visits as children adapt or re-adapt to their loss. These behaviors are difficult and can cause adults to recommend against visiting the incarcerated parent. Studies do show that most

children manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit their parents. But it usually takes time for children and families to cope with the feelings that the visits raise. While not visiting is sometimes easier on the emotions in the short run, out of sight, is not out of mind. Distance leaves a lot of confusion, questions, imagined dangers and fears for kids to deal with. These feelings may show up in problem behaviors at home, school or both and can be harmful to the child over time. (For a more in-depth look at visitation issues see CPL 105: Visiting Mom or Dad.)

Public reaction often dismisses the experiences of children of prisoners as so typical of a group or community as not to need intervention, or as so complicated as to be beyond help. This poses obstacles to the families as they seek services. It also, directly or indirectly, influences policies and practices in many community programs.

Incarcerated parents, their children, families and communities are disproportionately African American or Hispanic. Racial discrimination can lead people to dismiss a group or community’s situation as hopeless or to view valuable programs and interventions as a waste of resources.

Concepts such as “environmental modeling” or “genetic and cultural predisposition” sometimes provide intellectual cover for giving up on this group of high-risk families and on their

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communities.

Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of prisoners and their families at the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), www.fcnetwork.org. See especially the CPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.



About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

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The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from *How Can I Help* and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.

