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Children of Incarcerated Parents

Scope of the Problem

According to Christopher J. Mumola, a Policy Analyst for the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1999, an estimated 721,500 parents of minor children were incarcerated in State and Federal prisons (Mumola 2000). These prisoners were parents of an estimated 1,498,000 minor children, an increase of over 500,000 since 1991. In both State and Federal prisons, over 50% of inmates reported having a child under the age of 18 (55% in State prisons and 63% in Federal prisons).

Tara Graham of Burlington's Howard Center and Jill Evans of the Vermont Department of Corrections report that in Fiscal Year 2007, approximately 2,030 Vermont children were affected by the incarceration of a parent. In FY07, the total number of men and women incarcerated in VT was 7,190 – 1,015 are women. Out of that total, 80% of women incarcerated are mothers of young children – 75% of the young mothers were primary caregivers of their children at the time of their arrest. In Vermont, there are two women's facilities, one in Windsor and one in Waterbury. Most incarcerated Vermont males are held in Vermont State facilities, but there also are 3 out of state men's facilities in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Oklahoma totaling 515 Vermont males. There are currently no statistics on how many incarcerated males in Vermont are fathers (Evans and Graham 2008).

What if the Parents are sent out of State?

According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, most children experience a dramatic lack of physical contact from their imprisoned parents, and over 50% of incarcerated parents do not receive any visits from their children while in prison (54% for mothers, and 57% for fathers). Generally, it is up to the child's current caregiver to arrange visitation and transportation for the child to see their parent. There are fewer women's facilities than men's, so women are usually sent further away from their children than fathers. The Bureau of Justice Statistics also reports that a majority of inmates held in state (62%) and Federal (84%) facilities lived at least 100 miles away from their incarcerated parents (Mumola).

What Rights do the Children have?

In Vermont, House Bill (H.736, 2007-2008 Session) would require law enforcement officers to consider the needs of children when making an arrest of the parent. Officers would also be required to receive adequate training on working with children of arrested and incarcerated

parents. The bill would also create a committee to study the needs of children of incarcerated parents regarding contact with their parents. Hawaii has established a bill of rights for children of incarcerated parents (http://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2008/bills/SB2345_CD1_.htm). San Francisco has adopted the same list of rights. The bill of rights for children of incarcerated parents states that children have the right:

1. to be kept safe and informed at the time of the parents arrest;
2. to be heard when decisions are made about the child;
3. to be considered when decisions are made;
4. to be well cared for in the incarcerated parents absence;
5. to speak with, see, and touch their incarcerated parent;
6. to be supported as the child struggles with the parents incarceration;
7. to not be judged, blamed, or labeled because of the parents incarceration;
8. to have a lifelong relationship with the parent.

Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

According to a study by Charlene Wear Simmons, prepared at the request of California Assembly member Kerry Mazzoni, parental incarceration can lead to many behavioral and psychological consequences for the child. Psychological consequences include feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, and guilt, as well as trauma, shame, withdrawal, and low self-esteem. Behavioral consequences include failure in school, delinquency, drug use, and risk of intergenerational incarceration (Simmons 2000). Some places have adopted programs to help deal with these psychological and behavioral issues that may arise after the arrest of the parent. In 2006, Minnesota passed legislation that allocates \$250,000 to the development of a program that provides one-on-one mentors for children ages 7 to 13 with incarcerated parents.

What happens to the Child?

An officer's reaction to a child depends greatly on the child's presence at the time of the arrest. If a child is with the parent at the time of the arrest, the parent may be able to make temporary arrangements for the child's care. As quick decision-making occurs, this other living situation may include the child's other parent, a relative, or a friend. According to California law, if this is not the case, the child can also be transported to officer's headquarters, a detention center, or a children's shelter. Although it is not strictly dictated, the officer may choose to call a local child welfare agency to assist with placement (Nolan 2003). In a situation with a two-parent home, if the father is the one to be arrested, the mother is generally the caregiver who continues to be responsible for childcare; when mothers are incarcerated, grandmothers assume their responsibility (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001). The American Bar Association found that officers around the country rely on the person arrested to volunteer information about children and the potential caregiver, and there is infrequently formal screening and documentation. Figure 2 and Figure 3 are the results of a study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which show the child's caregiver post-parental incarceration.

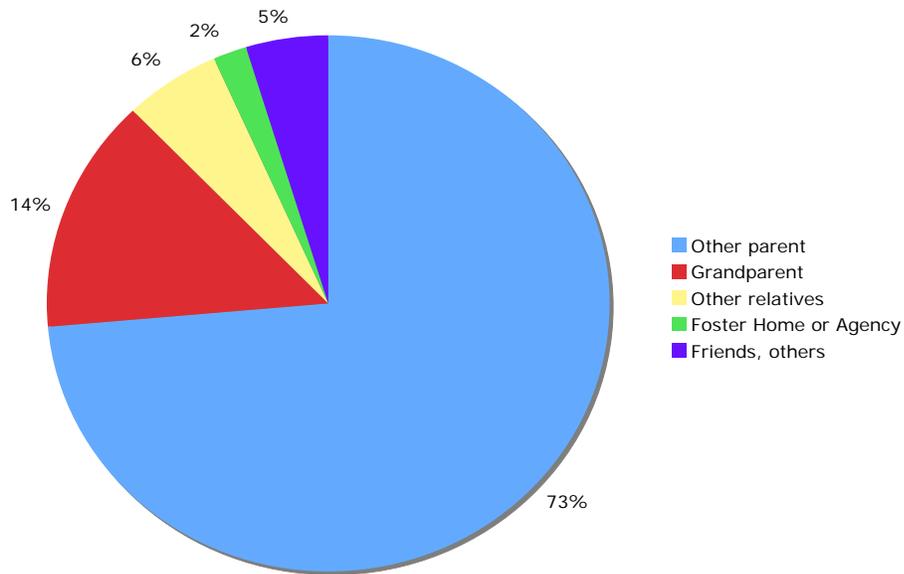


Figure 2: Childcare Post Parental Incarceration (State Prisoners)

Source: Ross D. Parke and Alison K. Clarke-Stewart, “Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children.” December 2001.

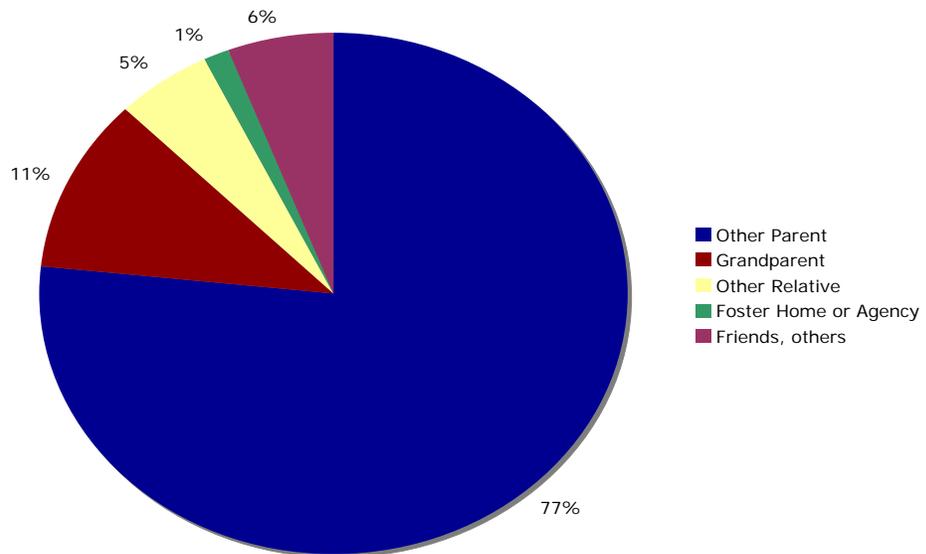


Figure 3: Childcare Post Parental Incarceration (Federal Prisoners)

Source: Same as Figure 2.

Parent Visitation

In all states, it is up to the caregiver to decide whether or not they want the child to visit the parent and to provide transportation. Table 1 shows how often a child visits their parent, depending on both gender and whether the institution is a state or federal prison (Parke and Stewart 2001).

Table 1: Frequency and Type of Contact with Children

Frequency and type of contact with children	State Prisons			Federal Prisons		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Any Type of Contact						
Daily or almost daily	10.1%	9.5%	17.8%	15.1%	14.6%	21.1%
At least once a week	31.2	30.3	42.2	43.37	43.3	48.5
At least once a month	22.2	22.6	18.0	23.8	23.9	22.0
Less than once a month	16.1	16.6	9.7	10.0	10.3	5.0
Never	20.4	21.1	12.2	7.5	7.8	3.3
Telephone						
Daily or almost daily	6.6%	6.2%	11.3%	13.0%	12.8%	15.0%
At least once a week	19.8	19.2	27.0	36.3	35.9	41.2
At least once a month	16.5	16.6	15.3	23.2	23.1	24.9
Less than once a month	15.4	15.5	13.8	11.3	11.4	9.2
Never	41.8	42.5	32.6	16.2	16.7	9.7
Mail						
Daily or almost daily	4.8%	4.4%	9.6%	4.3%	3.9%	9.5%
At least once a week	23.2	22.2	35.6	30.4	30.0	35.9
At least once a month	23.1	23.3	20.6	30.4	30.5	27.8
Less than once a month	18.2	18.6	13.2	18.9	19.2	14.5
Never	30.8	31.6	21.0	16.1	16.4	12.3
Personal Visits						
Daily or almost daily	0.8%	0.7%	1.1%	0.4%	0.3%	0.9%
At least once a week	6.6	6.5	8.0	7.1	7.1	6.6
At least once a month	13.9	13.8	14.7	15.1	15.3	12.0
Less than once a month	22.2	22.2	22.1	33.4	33.0	38.5
Never	56.6	56.8	54.1	44.1	44.2	42.0

Source: Ross D. Parke and Alison K. Clarke-Stewart, "Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children." December 2001.

Parent-Child Reunification Programs

A few states have developed programs for parents and children to extend visits, have more flexible scheduling, and for creating special housing to allow children to remain in the institution. An example of this type of program is the “Sesame Street Program,” which developed a playroom adjacent to the visitation room to allow children to play with their parent when they get restless. In addition to this, the program offers education and entertaining activities for the child to enjoy and participate in at the prison (Parke and Stewart 2001).

Vermont’s “First Call” Safety Net

Burlington’s Howard Center has created the “First Call” Safety Net program, which is available to respond to parents, caregivers, and children at the time of an arrest. Safety Net can assist in coordinating services and can provide therapeutic interventions if needed, and can make recommendations or referrals for the future needs of the child and family. Urgent responses will include services to stabilize immediate needs, brainstorming potential caregivers, helping share information between parents and caregivers, and crisis support for the child. Follow up responses provide: planning/support for the care of the children while the parent is incarcerated, coordination of services or referrals, doctor/dentist appointments, coordination of visits/contact with the parent, etc (Graham 2008).

Vermont Programs

This research found only one Vermont state-funded program that seeks to address the needs of children of incarcerated parents: the Community Justice Project (CJP), an outgrowth of the Lamoille County Court Diversion Restorative Justice Programs. It is a program that began seven years ago (2001). The project’s goal is to prevent children from repeating the cycle of corrections involvement as young adults. Those eligible for CJP services are children ages pre-birth to 12 who have a parent, step-parent, or guardian who has been or is currently incarcerated—those considered to be at-risk children.

The program asserts: “Research shows that children who have *strong and stable family connections, do well in school, and are connected with their communities* are more likely to be successful as adults. CJP uses a case management model to help children and families achieve their family, school, and community goals (Barr, 4/4/08).” CJP Family Support Specialists serve children and their parents or guardians through home visits and in school or community settings. All services are based on a case-management system, in which each child is a client. There are three case managers, one registered nurse, one specializing in mental health, and another with a B.A. in social work. They offer the tools and knowledge for families to make use of state programs and other services. Over time, the project has revealed that the most needed assistance has been in helping children receive preventive medical care. This aid has also proven to open up communication and trusting relationships between family members (who might be reluctant to allow another service worker into their private lives) and the project case workers. Another valued aspect is the project’s aim to pair each child with a mentor.

The project is the only project of its kind funded by the state, appropriated through the legislature's general fund dollars. This source of funding has been strongly advocated for by the Lamoille County legislators and thus appears to be quite secure for the years to come. Yet other counties and organizations looking to start up similar projects currently face difficulties accessing funds during tight budget years such as this 2008 year.

The Community Justice Project hopes to serve as a pilot program so that other projects may begin in the state of Vermont. They are currently in the process of completing a program evaluation in order to measure the effectiveness of their approach the positive impact it has had on the community and for these children. So far, the community has embraced the project as incredibly valuable and a practical approach to help prevent and minimize further trauma for these children who have already been through difficult experiences. At any one time, the project serves around fifty children. Project manager Rhonda Barr emphasizes that there are many more children in the community but that the project doesn't have the capacity to serve all of them (Barr, 4/11/08).

There are, however, charitable programs that focus certain energies on children of incarcerated parents. In Burlington, Vermont Works for Women works with children and their incarcerated mothers, and Mobius, a mentoring coordinator, has also placed efforts in working with families who have incarcerated family members.

The Kids-A-Part program based out of Chittenden County works in women's facilities to enhance visitation and address parenting needs. The program began in October of 2006 with private foundation money from the Carlisle Family Foundation and the Sills Family Foundation. Since then, Kids-A-Part have received funds from a variety of sources: The Permanent Fund for the Well-Being of Vermont Children, Vermont Women's Foundation, Vermont Community Foundation, Sills Family Foundation, Vermont Mentors!, and the Department of Corrections through a contract. The program has served over 700 service providers through consultation and training. Their services in the women's facilities serve over 250 women and their children per year. They have provided direct services to approximately 50 children and their caregivers each year. They hope to extend their services into the men's facilities as well. Tara Graham, director of the Kids-A-Part program, says, "There is an enormous need to begin addressing the needs of children whose parents are incarcerated" (Graham, 4/1/08).

Certain Community Justice Centers (CJCs) of Vermont, which work to help communities repair the damage caused by crime through restorative justice programs, have considered and strive to create programs to address the needs of the child. Yet funding for such programs has been limited and currently is nonexistent.

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