



Children with Incarcerated Parents - Breaking Down Misconceptions and Understanding Needs

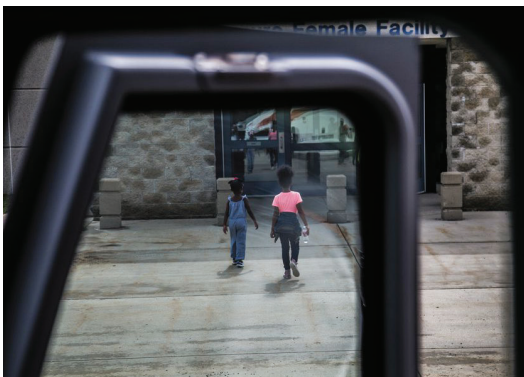
Background

In their report, “Collateral Costs: Incarceration’s Effects on Economic Mobility, Washington, D.C. 2010”, Pew Charitable Trusts states that more than 2.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent and even more will have an incarcerated parent at some time during their childhood.¹ In Connecticut in 2010, over 62,000 children had a caregiver arrested and over 19,000 had a caregiver incarcerated.² While there is a significant amount of research on the negative effects of parental incarceration, researchers have only begun understanding the full impact on children with an incarcerated parent.³ Some of the factors include witnessing the arrest of a parent, attending court dates, having appropriate caregiver arrangements, being the subject of stigmatization, receiving adequate supports, experiencing the separation from a parent, dealing with financial strain on the family, lacking emotional support, missing assistance with simple things such as help with homework, and much more. According to Vera Institute of Justice, 70% of children of incarcerated parents (CIP) suffer from emotional problems of anxiety, withdrawal, shame or depression. The experience of having a family member incarcerated has also been identified as an Adverse Childhood Experience by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, indicating its likelihood for causing serious negative health consequences for children throughout their lifetime.⁴ This brief will discuss the implications of these factors and what is known at this time about its affects and the needs of CIP.



The Hidden Victims

“For many children, a parent’s arrest is the moment when their invisibility is made visible; when it is made clear to them just how easily they may be overlooked within the systems and institutions that come to claim their parents.”⁵ Children and family members often feel they are victims of the criminal justice system and their needs are not acknowledged and they are not given a voice.

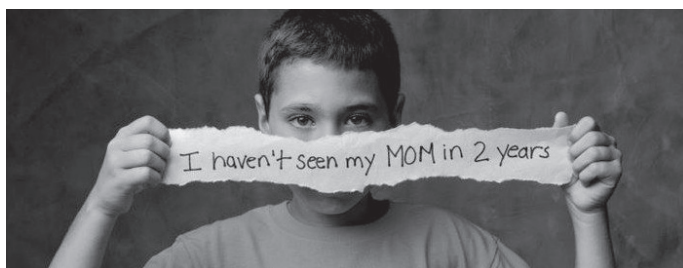


“The conspiracy of silence” can have significantly damaging effects on a child if they are kept unaware of why their parent is gone and can potentially be compounded if they are not allowed to tell others about their parent’s incarceration.⁶ Research shows that children need to talk about the trauma this has caused and without that opportunity, feel further isolated by silence.⁷ Without an understanding, CIP may feel a conflict in loyalty between their parent and their caregiver.⁸ “Though witnessing a parent’s arrest may appear to be a short, relatively quick life event, the trauma that it can create may be a compounding risk factor that ultimately has a detrimental impact on the child’s well-being and development.”⁹ Also damaging is the stigmatization and labeling often felt by children of incarcerated parents (CIP).¹⁰ CIP feel stigma from their peers and one study of teachers found that they tended to label children whose parents are incarcerated as being less competent than children whose parents are away for other reasons (Dallaire,

Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010).¹¹ Incarceration labeling can create negative attachments which can lead to devaluation of the CIP and their parent and family.¹² While it is difficult to predict the full impact of parental incarceration on a child, it is easy enough to attribute antisocial behavior, suspension or expulsion from school, economic hardship, and criminal activity to the psychological strain they experience.¹³

When fathers are incarcerated in state prisons, the vast majority of their children (88%) reside with their mothers.¹⁴ Research on paternal incarceration and the likelihood of experiencing a host of negative outcomes is typically conclusive. Children may show increases in both externalizing behavior problems (i.e., those that are directed outward, such as aggression, violence, or delinquency) and internalizing behavior problems (i.e., those that are directed inward, such as depression, anxiety, or difficulty paying attention).¹⁵

When mothers are incarcerated in state prisons, their children's care tend to rest in one of a wide range of settings, including the other parent, grandparents, and other relatives. Children with mothers who are incarcerated in state prisons are more than five times more likely to reside in a foster home or agency than children with fathers who are incarcerated in state prisons.¹⁶



The impact of parental incarceration does not end with the child. Caring for children who are experiencing the stigma and shame associated with parental incarceration is particularly difficult for caregivers and may be taxing emotionally and physically. They are faced with numerous burdens including financial strain and lack of resources. More than half (54%) of parents incarcerated in prisons reported providing the primary financial support for their children prior to their incarceration.¹⁷ Relative caregivers indicate they need a wide variety of supports, including access

to medical and dental care for the children in their care, financial and food assistance, and general information and service referrals. Even when relative caregivers have the opportunity to receive formal support from child welfare or other agencies, they may not choose it if they are fearful of having the children in their care removed from their homes.¹⁸ "The foremost unmet need for relative caregivers is emergency funds".¹⁹ They also may face, or perceive that they are facing, social stigma due to their association with an incarcerated person, which may negatively affect the level of social support they receive.

Other significant challenges include fostering continued relationships between children and their parents in prison. Child-parent interactions can be inhibited by the lack of public transportation available to caregivers. In some cases this means children will never visit their parents. Collect phone calls from prisoners are extremely costly and many caregivers cannot manage financially.

The Importance of Planning Visits and New Approaches

During incarceration, children experience an extended separation from their parent with very limited access to meaningful interaction. New strategies to open child-incarcerated parent communications are being developed and it is important to prepare for visits and provide ample support for children, incarcerated parents, and family members during and after visits.

Video-visitation technology expands inmates' access to and frequency of visits with family during the incarceration period.²⁰ There have been both positive and negative aspects of this visitation type. Because video visits are often conducted in a non-secure part of the corrections facility, fewer security procedures are required and families have shorter wait times. Unfortunately, in many cases, the length of video visit is short and the visits "often ended abruptly, with the screen turning off without any warning to children".²¹

Incarcerated parents may also need to pay expensive fees for video visits, similar to phone calls, whereas in-person visits are free to the incarcerated parent (although costly to family members visiting). In addition, at some facilities, family members are still required to come to the correctional facility to participate in video visits, so the challenges of expensive and timely transportation to-and-from correctional facilities to visit with a loved one are not relieved when video visits are adopted in these institutions.



Furthermore, in many facilities, video visits have replaced the ability to visit with a loved one in-person, which makes them less desirable for family members wanting to visit with each other. However, in other jurisdictions, local non-profits are set-up to permit family members to participate in video visits with their loved one in a correctional facility. This alleviates the barriers that may exist to in-person visits for the family while allowing loved ones to receive the benefits of remaining in contact through visiting. This also may permit more frequent contact between parents and their children.

Experts believe, and a growing body of research supports, that contact visits conducted in supportive and child-friendly environments are likely the best option to help most families mitigate the harmful effects of parental incarceration.²² In-person visits help children feel more attached to their parents and benefit their well-being, emotional adjustment, self-esteem, and school behavior.²³ Visits are most beneficial for children when provided in a child-friendly environment with physical contact permitted.



The University of Wisconsin – Madison describes child-friendly visiting as “providing positive, safe, friendly environments for visits; fostering open communication among caregivers, children, incarcerated parents, and supportive professionals; adequately preparing children for visits; facilitating parent-child contact between visits; and supporting incarcerated parents during the process”. To prepare children for visiting with their parent at a correctional facility, information could be shared with them on what to expect at the facility in preparation for and during their visit.

This information could be provided in a visual format or written in a simple, child-friendly way and posted at the entry to the prison or on the prison’s website. Visual descriptions could include drawings showing the visiting area and how a handheld listening device works. In Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a family activity center, including crafts, videos and books, is in the lobby. Corrections officers can take a child friendly approach by greeting children in a child-friendly manner, and speaking to them in a warm tone. Corrections officers could also offer kind gestures such as giving a fun sticker to a child, or a high five, when they come through security. Children are often intimidated by the uniform that officers wear and by their traditionally stern demeanor. Attempts to soften an officers’ presentation to children could help to reduce the stress children may be feeling when entering a correctional facility. The dominant authoritarian approach many officers demonstrate in front of children also makes youth worry about how their parent is being cared for by these officers. Efforts



to reduce those fears may help to reduce children’s frequent worry over their parent’s safety and general wellbeing.²³ “Sesame Street recently developed materials for young children and their families including an animated depiction of a child’s visit to a corrections facility, a story book, videos, and a caregiver guide”, and Connecticut’s Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative has developed a children’s website filled with hand-drawn images to communicate information about having a parent in prison to children in an easy-to-understand and child-friendly manner. That website may be found by going to <http://ctcip.org/main-childrens-page>.



In addition to supporting the child, research shows that contact visits also benefit the incarcerated parent. Research shows that visits by family and loved ones reduce recidivism among incarcerated individuals and that “strong family support is one of the biggest factors in a successful re-entry experience”.²⁴ The Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh also has a family support center, and incarcerated parents may have the opportunity to work with professionals on parenting issues, if needed. Some prisons offer child-friendly visits as part of their rehabilitation or parenting programs.²⁵



The first point of intervention in the process of a parent’s incarceration is arrest. The arrest leads to the initial separation from the child which causes the onset of negative consequences resulting from that sudden separation. To the extent possible, trauma-informed police processing would allow for the parent to stay with the child until a caregiver is present. The arrestee will be able to reassure the child, ensure placement is with a responsible adult that the child, ideally, has an existing positive relationship with, and guarantee that follow-up with the child is in place. When the parent’s children are not present during the arrest, arrangements would be made to ensure children will be with caring adults following the arrest, as opposed to potentially returning to an empty home. “Treating a child with compassion and thoughtfulness is not only the proper thing to do, it is also a hallmark of good policing that can have long-term positive benefits for the child and the community.”

A next, important step, is to gain an understanding of how the CIP feels²⁶ and a process that assesses what support the child may need.²⁷ This includes building the CIP’s interpersonal and

emotional strengths that help them cope with their circumstances. Research suggests the “strength or weakness of the parent-child bond and the quality of the child and family’s social support system play significant roles in the child’s ability to overcome challenges and succeed in life”.²⁸ One way to gain that understanding is to determine what preconceived ideas the CIP might have and what meaning they attribute to their parents’ incarceration.²⁹

Conclusion and Next Steps

Children with incarcerated parents are a vulnerable population that faces at risk for enduring serious, long-term negative consequences due to circumstances beyond their control. Although all CIP are impacted by the experience differently, most CIP love their parent, want their parent home and worry about their parent's wellbeing. While many in society view the CIPs' parent as a criminal worthy of removal from the community, the children think of their parent as just that – their parent.

As we interact with CIP, it is important to listen to them, take them where they are at in their coping process, try to be conscious of and control any biases we may hold against incarcerated individuals and those that love them, and simply be there for them. Although there is a lack of adequate supportive services for CIP, in Connecticut, we are fortunate to have a few. It may be helpful to inform families dealing with the incarceration of a parent of these programs should they choose to connect with them.

Connecticut Appleseed runs CLICC – Connecting through Literacy: Incarcerated Parents, their Children, and Caregivers. CLICC is a statewide, literacy-based program that provides mentorship to children and their incarcerated parent during reentry (beginning while the parent is still incarcerated and continuing after the parent's return to the community). The program “aims to reduce recidivism and facilitate reentry by reconnecting incarcerated parents and their children using a family literacy curriculum, providing supportive mentors, and offering transitional services” (<http://www.ctappleseed.org/project/literacy-connects-inmates-their-children/>).

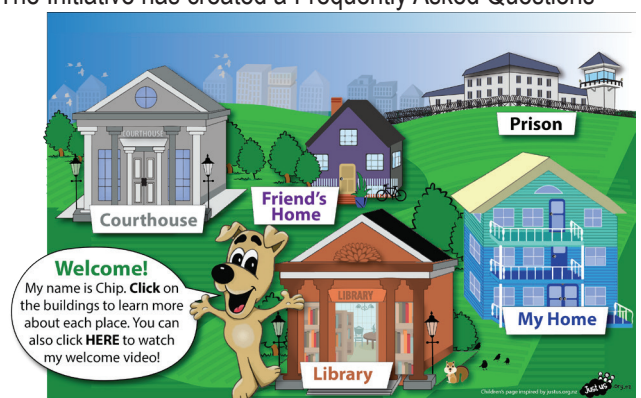


In New Haven, Newhallville's Believe in Me Empowerment Corporation (BIMEC) operates the SHINE! program for CIP. SHINE! is open to elementary and middle school aged children in the Greater New Haven area. During the school year, the program runs after school, and in the summer, SHINE! provides a day camp opportunity for CIP. The program has a literacy focus with youth reading books and other short pieces of literature that help the youth to explore life experiences they may be facing through the characters in their readings. “Skilled facilitators then engage the children in discussion around their own feelings to address the impact of trauma, build productive relationships, improve communication skills and build a supportive and safe environment for them to express themselves” (<https://bimecnewhaven.com/project/project-05/>).

Another program for CIP is Judy Dworin Performance Project's Bridging Boundaries Arts Intervention Program. Bridging Boundaries is predicated on the restorative capacity of movement, narrative, song, visual imagery and performance, woven with the necessary supports of social services thus creating unprecedented opportunities for self-discovery, community building, and pro-social life skills (<https://judydworin.org/programming>). The program works with incarcerated and recently released women, incarcerated moms and their children, youth in the Greater Hartford area with an incarcerated parent, and dads incarcerated at Cybulski Reintegration Center. Bridging Boundaries offers an in-school program for CIP, and a York Moms and Kids program bringing CIP from across the state to York for a special weekend visit which includes an extended, full contact, visit with arts activities, a shared meal, a talent show, family photo, and an overnight at a local campground for the children and their caregiver.

The Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) has Connecticut's Children with Incarcerated Parents (CIP) Initiative. The Initiative provides funding for services that seek to benefit CIP, offers training and technical assistance on the impact of parental incarceration on children and how best to support them, works with policymakers and practitioners to promote sound policy for CIP, and is the state's resource for information on CIP. The Initiative has created a Frequently Asked Questions booklet to provide families with information that may be helpful to them as they go through the incarceration process – it is available upon request at CTCIP@ccsu.edu. Answers to common questions are also provided on the Initiative's website, (www.CTCIP.org) and a special children's website has been created which provides information on incarceration to children in a child-friendly, age appropriate manner. The images on the pages are hand drawn with a cartoon dog named Chip guiding children through the site. That website may be found at <http://ctcip.org/main-childrens-page/>.

The CIP Initiative also offers scholarship opportunities for students of CCSU who are experiencing, or have experienced, the incarceration of a close family member. Another resource for CIP that is available upon request at the IMRP's CIP Initiative is the Sesame Street toolkit mentioned earlier. To request a toolkit, receive announcements on public hearings regarding legislation that, if passed, may impact CIP, as well as of local events about CIP, and/or to join its listserv, please e-mail the Initiative at CTCIP@ccsu.edu.

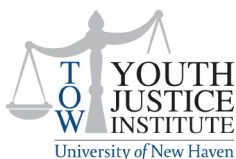


Footnotes

- 1.Children's Contact with Incarcerated Parents, Poehlmann-Tynan and O'Brien, University of Wisconsin – Madison Fall/Winter 2015 – 2016 Focus Vol. 32
- 2.Needs Created in Children's Daily Lives by the Arrest of a Caregiver, Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, Central Connecticut State University, Conway, Provencher, Keays, 2016
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6. Seven Out of Ten? Not Even Close. A Review of Research on the Likelihood of Children with Incarcerated Parents Becoming Justice-Involved, Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, Central Connecticut State University, The Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative, Conway and Jones, April 2015
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- 11 Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau, Bulletin for Professionals, October 2015
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13. Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children, National Institute of Justice, NIJ Journal/Issue No. 278, May 2017
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- 25.Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children, National Institute of Justice, NIJ Journal/Issue No. 278, May 2017
- 26.Needs Created in Children's Daily Lives by the Arrest of a Caregiver, Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, Central Connecticut State University, Conway, Provencher, Keays, 2016
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28. Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children, National Institute of Justice, NIJ Journal/Issue No. 278, May 2017
- 29.Seven Out of Ten? Not Even Close. A Review of Research on the Likelihood of Children with Incarcerated Parents Becoming Justice-Involved, Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, Central Connecticut State University, The Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative, Conway and Jones, April 2015



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