

# Prisoners and Families: Parenting Issues During Incarceration

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This paper was produced for a conference funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on January 30-31, 2002. The views expressed herein are those of the authors, and should not be attributed to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

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The preservation and strengthening of families has a longstanding history as a United States public policy priority and as a major objective of governmental agencies and not for profit service organizations. Social welfare policies and programs that help families protect, nurture and care for their children and adult family members are recognized by the nation's political leaders as a social investment and many formal and informal efforts are directed toward that end. Notwithstanding the millions of families affected by incarceration on any given day, the well being of prisoners' families and children has not been an important part of this social policy agenda. Similarly, services and activities that assist prisoners in carrying out family roles and responsibilities have seldom been included in the strategic plans of social services agencies or corrections departments.

Several recent developments are challenging the historical treatment of prisoners' families in public policy discourse and decision making. Among these factors are a United States correctional population numbering over two million and growing, unprecedented increases in the number of women prisoners, disproportionate numbers of imprisoned African American males, high recidivism rates, and the community reentry of hundreds of thousands of prisoners annually. Also relevant are efforts to address the tremendous cost of maintaining large numbers of children in foster care placements and of providing welfare assistance to poor women and children. These pressing issues have led politicians and social scientists alike to examine more closely the consequences of the nation's war on drugs and, in so doing, to discover that incar-

ceration has an impact that extends far beyond the men and women who are imprisoned. Consequently, questions are now being raised about the impact of imprisonment on children and families and the extent to which prisoners' families might be resources and assets, rather than liabilities, in promoting safer, resourceful communities. Recognition that the majority of women and men in prison are parents of dependent children and concerns about intergenerational crime and children at risk have placed parenting issues at the center of these discussions.

This paper provides an overview of family matters during incarceration as one means of informing public debate and actions in this emerging area of social policy and practice. The problems that families face when a parent is incarcerated and the strategies they use to manage those problems are described. The relevance of the maintenance of prisoners' family and parental relationships to societal and family goals are discussed and the ways in which social policies and administrative practices hinder or support family maintenance are examined.

### **The Importance of Family Matters**

Social scientists and program providers define the significance of families and family ties to prisoners and to the achievement of social goals in numerous ways. The impact of incarceration on families has been conceptualized as a form of family crises (Fishman, 1990), loss and demoralization (Schneller, 1976) and victimization of children (Bloom and Steinhart,

1993). More recent work has focused on social capital and the impact of social disinvestment in prisoners' families and communities (Hagan and Coleman, 2001) and on the unintended and unintended consequences of social policy (Hairston, 1998; Hairston, in press).

Studies using theoretical perspectives which focus on the positive roles and functions that families serve as opposed to the problems that they experience indicate that families are important to prisoners and to the achievement of major social goals, including the prevention of recidivism and delinquency. Hairston's (1988; 1991a) review of research on prisoners' family relationships yielded two consistent findings; male prisoners who maintain strong family ties during imprisonment have higher rates of post release success than those who do not and men who assume responsible husband and parenting roles upon release have higher rates of success than those who do not. Dowden and Andrews' (1999) analysis of research on female offenders identified family process variables as the strongest predictors of female offenders' success and Slaght (1999) found family relationships to have a significant influence on relapse prevention among parolees. Social scientists and practitioners have used these findings to surmise that programs including family members in prisoners' treatment during incarceration and after their release can produce positive results for prisoners, families, institutions, and communities (Jeffries, Menghraj, and Hairston, 2001; Wright and Wright, 1992).

Practitioners providing or advocating for parenting programs in prison offer the perspective that incarcerated parents' involvement with, and attachment to, their children can prevent intergenerational crime and that parenting programs can teach and help parents become better parents. Although the effectiveness of these programs in achieving that objective has not been soundly demonstrated, the reasoning behind program intervention has a strong research and theoretical base. The importance of family

relationships and parenting practices in child development and the prevention of delinquency is a recurring finding in studies of delinquency (Tolan, Guerra, and Kendall, 1995) and the maintenance of family ties for incarcerated individuals has been found to be important for juveniles as well as adults (Borgman, 1985). The more nurturing aspects of parenting, or absence thereof, i.e., parental involvement, attachment and rejection have also consistently shown a strong association with delinquency (Larzelere and Patterson, 1990). Moreover, research indicates that the effects of parental criminality on delinquency are indirect and mediated by parental attachment and parental discipline style (Larzelere and Patterson, 1990).

## Family Definitions

Most studies of prisoners' families define families as married couples and study the wives of incarcerated husbands and their children or define families as single mothers who are assumed to be the sole care givers for their children. Studies by Bakker, Morris and Janus, 1978; Carlson and Cervera, 1991; Daniel and Barrett, 1981; Fishman, 1990; Schneller 1976; and Swan, 1981 are examples of the former and Baunach, 1985; Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Hairston, 1991b and Hungerford, 1993 are examples of the latter. Fathers and their children (Hairston, 1989; 1995; Lanier, 1991, 1993; Martin 2001) and the caregivers of children of incarcerated mothers (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Poe, 1992) have also been studied but these are far less popular topics in prisoner family studies.

Surveys of prisoners indicate that prisoners' family networks are far more complex than these subgroups suggest. The majority of fathers and mothers in prison are not married (Mumola, 2000) and many have parented children with more than one partner (Hairston, 1995). Fathers' provider and nurturing roles differ for their different children. Some children lived with them at the time of arrest; others they saw regu-

larly and supported financially and others they neither saw nor supported. Children who lived with their fathers were the fathers' youngest child or children. Fathers supported these children financially and shared caregiving with the children's mothers who were also household members. Fathers consider their children to be family but do not regard the mothers of their children as such if they are not in a committed relationship with these mothers. (These mothers are not insignificant in family life, however, as they control fathers' access to their children before, during, and after imprisonment.) On the other hand, they may consider the children of women with whom they lived prior to incarceration and/or have a romantic attachment as family though they are not the biological fathers of those children.

Many mothers do not function in the single parent roles typically depicted in stories about single parent homes. Prior to incarceration, substantial numbers of mothers in prison shared caregiving responsibilities with children's fathers, other family members and/or close friends (Mumola, 2000). Forty percent of incarcerated mothers in a national survey had relinquished responsibility for the physical care of their children to others, usually kin or individuals who were the same as kin (Mumola, 2000). Some mothers had none of their children living with them at the time of arrest; some had all of them and some had some of their children living with them. Many mothers who do not have responsibility for the care of their children still see them regularly (Hairston, 1991b). Others do not see their children at all because the children are under the custody of the child welfare department and/or mothers' parental rights have been terminated.

Prisoners' mothers are the central family figure in prisoners' lives, a finding that is not surprising given the high percentage of African American prisoners in most studies and the central role of mothers depicted in sociological descriptions of African American families. (See,

for example, Martin and Martin, 1995.) Mothers are male and female prisoners' most important sources of support, their most frequent visitors and, in the case of incarcerated mothers, the caregivers for their children (Hairston, 1992, 1995). Yet, the impact of incarceration on these mothers and the mothers' influences on their grandchildren and incarcerated children have not been a research focus. Similarly, studies have looked only superficially at extended kinship networks though the social and behavioral sciences literature on African American families identifies these networks as crucial in understanding African American family structure, adaptability and functioning. (See, for example, Martin and Martin, 1996.)

### **Financial Difficulties**

Most families experience financial losses as a result of parental incarceration and the loss is greatest for those families who try to maintain the convicted individual as a family member. There are the costs of maintaining the household, the loss of income of the imprisoned parent who was contributing to the household, legal fees associated with criminal defense and appeals, the costs associated with maintaining contact during imprisonment and the costs of maintaining the prisoner while he is in prison. At first glance, it appears that since many prisoners were not employed and a high percentage had drug problems they were drains on family income rather than contributors and that their imprisonment places families in a better, rather than worse, financial position. This is no doubt the case in some situations.

Although there are no published research reports of the numbers of families who are in a worse, as opposed to better, financial position when a family member is incarcerated, there are several indicators that the majority of families are affected negatively. Surveys of wives whose husbands are in prison identify financial problems and the loss of spousal income as a major

problem (Daniel and Barrett, 1981; Fishman, 1990; King, 1993, Schneller, 1976). Some of the mothers of children to whom fathers in prison are not married, but were paying financial support or contributing in other ways such as providing child care, also experience financial losses as a result of the incarceration of those fathers. Parental incarceration probably has no, or very limited, financial impact on children and family members who were not a part of fathers' lives prior to their arrest.

Grandparents and other relatives who take care of the children of incarcerated mothers, certainly incur additional financial expenses. The mothers are not able to provide financial support and if they were receiving welfare benefits prior to incarceration, those monies are not automatically awarded to the grandparents. If grandparents are eligible for welfare benefits, they still suffer a financial deficit because these benefits do not cover the full cost of providing care. Some caregivers must discontinue their paid employment in order to assume child care responsibilities, thereby resulting in further income losses. Studies of grandparents raising grandchildren affirm that financial problems are one of their main difficulties in caring for their grandchildren (Altschuler, 1999; Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Petras, 1999; Poe, 1992).

Relatives caring for the children of prisoners incur additional financial expenses if they promote the maintenance of parent-child relationships. Allowing children to converse with their incarcerated parents by phone is a very expensive endeavor. Depending on the prison, a thirty minute phone call once a week could put a \$125 or higher dent in the family's monthly budget. Prison visits are also not a cost free endeavor; monies must be budgeted to cover transportation, usually to geographically remote locations, meals and vending machine snacks during visits, and, sometimes, overnight lodging.

Relatives find that providing money and other items to their imprisoned relatives is a by-

product of maintaining family contact. Many basic items that prisoners need or want are not furnished by correctional institutions and pay for prison work is generally too meager to purchase them. Families either voluntarily, or by request, send money to the prisoner for toiletries, reading materials, stamps, food and clothing. They also pay involuntarily for prison medical visits and health care, institutional fines and child support when corrections departments collect money from prisoners for those services/items by placing a levy on all monies that are deposited in prisoners' financial accounts.

### **Parent-child Relationships and Children's Care**

The protection, care, and nurturance of prisoners' children is a primary concern of prisoners and their families. When parents go to prison, most children go, or continue, to live with relatives (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Mumola, 2000). Children's care arrangements provide love, connections to kin, and a sense of belonging, but they are not ideal. There is a marked physical absence of men and father figures in the daily lives of prisoners' children as women carry the primary, and often sole, responsibility for caregiving for the children of both imprisoned men and women (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Hairston, 1991, 1995; Mumola, 2000). In addition to having limited financial resources, many grandparent caregivers of the children of incarcerated mothers are elderly, have health problems, and were not planning to take on new child care responsibilities (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Petras, 1999).

Neither children's custodial nor imprisoned parents are adequately prepared to address children's needs arising from parental incarceration. Parents are ambivalent about children's visits with their incarcerated parents and about what to tell children about their parents' incarceration. Some children do not know that their father or mother is in jail because relatives have told them

the parent is away for other reasons such as the army, school or work. If the child did not live with the parent and their time together was sporadic, the child may not be told anything about the parent's absence (Hairston, 1991b).

Some parents do not want their children to visit them in prison and/or make no effort to contact their children. They do not believe children's custodial parents will welcome such contact, don't know where their children are, or think such visits will be too emotionally painful. Some parents in jail reason that they will be away only a short time and that there is no need for children to visit (Hairston, 1991b). Other parents mistakenly believe that there is little that they can do for their children from prison and that they can make it all up to them once they are released. Mothers and fathers in prison report that their children's "other" parents also limit or deny communication between them and their children and frequently cite conflict between the parents and/or with other family members and limited financial resources as major factors (Hairston, 1991; 1995; Nurse, 2001). Research providing the perspectives of children's other parents, namely the women to whom incarcerated fathers are not married, is not a part of the current knowledge base.

Children's custodial parents and other care givers are not the only ones opposed to children's communication with their incarcerated parents. Both corrections and social services professionals raise questions about the wisdom of children's visits to prison, citing concerns about the oppressive prison environment and children's acceptance of incarceration as normal. Others have questioned if contact between prisoners and their children should be encouraged for prisoners in general (given assumptions about their criminality, dangerousness, etc.) or for certain groups of criminals, namely fathers who have been violent with children's mothers. There is no body of theory or research that would support prohibiting prisoners' communication with their children as a matter of social

policy and practice; on the contrary scientific studies point to the positive aspects of children's ongoing involvement with and attachment to adults who care about them and to the negative effects of father absence and family disruption. There are well established practice principles to guide professional decisionmaking and protect children from individual situations that may be harmful to them and a professional obligation to remove prison visiting environments as obstacles to parent child relationships.

Although most mothers and a substantial number of fathers plan to reunify with their children upon their release, they worry that their children will be taken from them or that someone else will take their place in their children's lives (Hairston, 1991b, 1995; Koban, 1983; Lanier, 1991). The fear that children will be taken by the state or that their parent-child bonds will be legally severed is harbored by fathers and mothers (Baunach, 1985; Hairston, Wills and Wall, 1997).

Prisoners' personal situations and child welfare policies and practices indicate that these fears are not unfounded. Although visiting increases the prospects for reunification of separated families, most parents in prison never see their children. Each parental prison term reduces the likelihood that children will reside with their mothers upon release and recidivism is quite high (Hairston, 1991b). Most fathers do not have a legal or emotional bond with their children's mothers (Hairston, 1995; Mumola, 2000; Nurse, 2001) that might be expected to support reunification of households. In addition, communication between these mates or former partners is more often contentious than cordial (Hairston, 1995; Jeffries, Menghraj and Hairston, 2000; Nurse, 2001). Though one might expect married prisoners to be in a position that protects or supports their relationships with their children, many marital relationships are strained and end during imprisonment (Hairston, 1991; Lynch and Sabol, 2001; Sharp and Marcus-Mendoza, 1998).

Incarcerated parents whose children are under the custody of the state definitely have reasons to be concerned about the legal and permanent severance of parent-child bonds. Parental rights can be terminated in some states solely on the basis of criminal activity and incarceration. Termination can also occur if parents fail to communicate regularly with their children or fail to adhere to prescribed treatment program plans. Furthermore, a relative's ongoing contacts with an incarcerated parent has resulted in the state agency's disapproval of that relative as an acceptable foster and adoptive parent.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), enacted with the intent of achieving permanency for children, has the strong potential to lead to less, rather than more, stability in the lives of prisoners' children. There are no published research reports of the impact of the law on parents who are prisoners or reports of the analyses of the approaches states are using to apply the law to incarcerated parents. Johnston (2001) reports, however, that her preliminary analysis of data obtained in a study of children of prisoners in long term foster care shows increased parental rights terminations following passage of the legislation.

Theoretically, few prisoners are able to meet the requirements of the law. The average prison stay is longer than the period in which termination procedures are required to begin and it is very difficult for parents in prison to comply with child welfare mandates. Prisoners have little or no control over their contact with their children or over their ability to participate in treatment programs. In addition, correctional institutions and child welfare departments do not have a history of collaboration or systems in place to address prison parenting issues when parents are in prison and children are wards of the state.

Though parental concerns about parental rights are grave, there is perhaps an even more pressing social issue and concern about children's

futures. A fundamental question that remains to be answered is what will happen to these children once their parents' rights are terminated. If large numbers of parents will no longer be legally responsible for their children, then who will be their parents? Will prisoners' children become permanent wards of the state who then move from one foster care placement to another? Who and where are the families waiting in line to adopt prisoners' children, especially given the pervasiveness of a "like father, like son" public attitude and scholars' declarations that children of prisoners are five or six times more likely to become criminals themselves (Reed and Reed, 1997)? Is ASFA predicated on the assumption that it is better to have no one to call mom or dad than it is to have a parent who is a convicted criminal? Or have the implications of this law for prisoners' children simply been overlooked in the political debates.

## **Emotional and Social Issues**

Prisoners and their families experience a tremendous sense of loss when incarceration occurs and that loss is compounded when children are involved. Couples are usually denied sexual intimacy and are unable to engage in the day to day interactions, experiences and sharing which sustain marital and other intimate, adult relationships. Loneliness and missing each other and a host of other feelings about the separation, justice system, criminal activity, and each partner's honesty and faithfulness are common. Guilt and a sense of relief that a troublesome relative has finally been sent away are also among the emotions experienced by prisoners' kin. Difficulties in adjusting to separation and loss has led to depression and other mental health problems among prisoners and their families ( Daniel and Barrett, 1981; King 1993; Lanier, 1993).

Incarcerated mothers cite separation from their children as one of the most difficult aspects of imprisonment (Baunach, 1985; Hairston,

1991b) and incarcerated fathers and mothers worry about what is happening to their children during their absence (Hairston, 1991; Hairston, 1995; Lanier, 1993; Martin, 2001). Parents believe their children are in safe living situations and are not being abused or neglected; nevertheless, they worry about their children's well being and about their guidance and supervision (Hairston, 1992, 1995). Some worries may be attributed to the fact that parents in prison have limited contact with their children and rely on relatives and friends for information about their children.

Prisoners' children and families must also deal with feelings of shame and social stigma. Imprisonment is not a reason for celebration nor a reason to be proud. It is not the goal one seeks for oneself or one's children. Many family members do not tell even their closest friends about a relative's incarceration and go to great lengths to protect the prisoner's children from the consequences of revealing this family secret. Depending on the crime and the prevalence of imprisonment in the neighborhood in which they live, family members may not be the objects of social stigma or hostility in that neighborhood (Schneller, 1976). There is, nevertheless, a social stigma which families experience from other elements of society. The spouse, parent or child of a prisoner may not experience stigma directly until they reveal the incarcerated relative's status to a child's teacher or to a prospective landlord or until the family moves to a prison town (Fishman, 1990; Koenig, 1985).

### **Information Needs**

Families' lack of understanding, and access to information, about criminal justice processing provides yet another challenge to normal family functioning. Often close relatives' knowledge of the prisoner's crime and sentence amounts to little more than "She's doing time for drugs." Unless they are regular visitors to a correctional institution and/or have a lot of

savvy and connections with prison family support groups, their knowledge of correctional system policies and procedures is not that extensive either.

Information about prison operations is obtained primarily from other families and through frustrating experiences. The dissemination of formal policies and regulations to families is not a standard correctional practice. If rules governing family communication are posted at prison facilities, they are often outdated and/or may require considerable use of visiting time to read and digest. In addition, family members are generally not able to speak with anyone in authority who is either able or willing to provide information about the prisoner's status or to explain or provide a rationale for rules, their varying interpretations or the most recent changes in policy application. With few exceptions, useful information is not available to families via handbooks or public websites either. The absence of information dissemination is not one of capacity, however, since numerous departments of corrections use their public websites to provide registries of prisoners' and former prisoners' pictures and criminal histories.

Uncertainty about the prisoner's situation and questions about the corrections department's rules and policies that are intertwined with that uncertainty, are one of the greatest concerns of prisoners' families (Ferraro, Johnson, Jorgensen, and Bolton, 1983; Fishman, 1990). Families seeking benefits and services for children cite similar confusion and frustration in understanding child welfare rules and regulations and the eligibility requirements and operating procedures of other human service systems (Petras, 1999; Poe, 1992).

### **Prisoner-Family Communication**

Communication between prisoners and their families provides the most concrete and visible strategy that families and prisoners use to manage separation and maintain connections.



Families visit their imprisoned relatives at the institutions where they are held, talk with them by phone, and exchange cards and letters as a means of staying connected. These contacts allow adults and parents and children to share family experiences and participate in family rituals, e.g., birthday celebrations, religious observances, etc. and help them to remain emotionally attached. They help assure incarcerated parents that their children have not forgotten them and children that their parents love and care about them. They allow prisoners to see themselves, and to function, in socially acceptable roles rather than as prison numbers and institutionalized dependents.

Departments of corrections permit these type communications between prisoners and their kin and encourage the maintenance of family ties, in theory, as desirable correctional practices. In actuality, the support for prisoners' family relationships vary considerably from one jurisdiction to another and within jurisdictions from one facility to another. As a rule, prisons allow families and children to visit though prisoners in administrative segregation or super maximum prisons may be restricted to televideo and other types of noncontact visits. Some jails allow only non contact visits and/or prohibit children from visiting. Six states permit prisoners to have private family visits on prison grounds with their spouses and children; a few allow non violent women prisoners with infants to reside in alternative community residences. Most prisons for women, and a few for men, provide parent education courses and a few offer other parenting supports including counseling, parent support groups, and special visiting areas and programs for parents and their children. ( See Bates, 2001 and Jeffries, Menghraj, and Hairston, 2001 for descriptions of parenting programs).

The correctional policies and practices that govern contact between prisoners and their families often impede, rather than support, the maintenance of family ties. The security and safety

rationale that dominates the prison environment is obvious in some policies. The primary intent of others, e.g. the rate structure for prisoner telephone systems, seem to be to subsidize prison budgets and generate profits and /or to exert social control, not only over prisoners, but over their kin as well. Rules frequently bear little relevance to correctional goals and are insensitive to prisoners' family structures, cultural differences and children's needs. Many rules appear to be arbitrary; others are inconsistently interpreted and applied by different staff members and with different visitors (Fishman, 1990; Jeffries, Menghraj, and Hairston, 2001). Policy obstacles to the maintenance of parent-child relationships include policies requiring children's custodial parents to escort them on visits, limiting children visitors to those for whom birth certificates listing the prisoner as the biological parent are produced and placement of prisoners in locations hundreds or thousands of miles from their homes.

For many families and friends of prisoners, the visit to a prison is a lesson in humility, intimidation and frustration and a highly charged and anxiety producing event (Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996). It is not unusual for visitors, the majority of whom are women and children, to endure many indignities. Among the problems noted in the Florida Legislature's report of prison visiting in that state were long waits sometimes in facilities without seating, toilets and water; the lack of nutritious food in visiting room vending machines and the absence of activities for children (Taylor, 1999). Body frisks and intrusive searches, rude treatment by staff, and hot, dirty and crowded visiting rooms are the norm in many prisons. Visitors may be denied entry to the prison for diverse reasons including constantly changing dress codes, no identification for children, and ion drug scanners that inaccurately signal that a visitor is carrying drugs.

## Pitching in and Helping

Family members rely primarily on each other, rather than on formal organizations to maintain family connections and address children's and adult family members' problems related to parental incarceration. When the protection of children and the maintenance of parent-child relationships are involved, many incarcerated parents and their relatives are wary of formal organizations, avoid them when they can, and find them to be less than helpful (Beckerman, 1994; Hairston, Wills and Wall, 1997; Bates, 2001).

Families engage in a process of role change and adaptability that can be referred to as pitching in and helping out. Some relatives pitch in by taking full or major responsibility for something the prisoner used to do. The grandmothers, sisters, and aunts who take on child rearing responsibilities for dependent children of single mothers and fathers in prison are examples. The spouses of men and women in prison who take on new roles in financially supporting their children and new decisions making roles are other examples. Some relatives help out with new responsibilities that families acquire as a result of incarceration, e.g. negotiating with the prison system, accepting collect phone calls from the prisoner and then serving as an emissary between the prisoner and his/her children and other relatives or arranging for and paying the costs of prison visits.

Prisoners who maintain family connections also adapt to new family roles. Incarcerated parents are not in a position to make significant financial contributions to their family, no matter the presence of child support orders, nor are they able to physically take care of or protect their children. Family role expectations of prisoners, therefore, center on demonstrations of caring and concern for children or other family members or participation in decisionmaking about select family issues. Prisoners participate in family life by sending cards to acknowledge birthdays and other events of family relevance, calling home or the place where other family

members have gathered on holidays, writing letters to inquire about and encourage children's progress in school and giving advice on how to handle different problems.

Pitching in and helping out, like so many aspects of incarceration, are not without problems. Pitching in can raise feelings and family tensions among relative helpers who are concerned about "having to help out again" or having an unfair share of the burden. It can also be taxing and burdensome, especially when prisoners make selfish demands or when relatives feel the incarcerated individual had already "burned his/her bridges" before incarceration. Many prisoners also experience difficulties adjusting to new roles and expectations. Prisoners who were accustomed to being independent and the family provider, for example, express strong feelings about occupying a less central and more dependent role in the family pecking order (Fishman, 1990).

Some families do seek assistance--medicaid, relative foster care payments, or public assistance welfare benefits from human services organizations as an alternative or supplement to family help. They do so at great emotional and social costs as help seeking from organizations exposes the family to external scrutiny, raises the risk of children being removed from the homes of relatives or friends and placed in foster care, and exposes families to the shame and stigma that having a relative in prison can bring. When seeking help they may, therefore, choose not to reveal that parental incarceration is the precipitating factor. Some needy families do not seek help because they are not aware of their eligibility for benefits and do not have information that would help them access those resources (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993). Others see little reason to engage in organizational efforts that will be of little benefit to them and could exacerbate the prisoner's situation. It is hardly worth the effort to seek child support if the money will go to the state's coffers or the prisoner is not making any money.

It is ludicrous to do so when family members are the primary contributors to the prisoners' trust account. Furthermore, most communities do not have services to help families address needs specific to incarceration (Bates, 2001; Jeffries, Menghraj, and Hairson, 2001).

## **Policy Directions and Strategies**

The preservation and strengthening of prisoners' family ties and parent-child relationships will require vision and direction from the highest levels of public policy decision making and a fundamental shift in the prevailing system responses to prisoners' children and families. It is not reasonable to place the responsibility for the creation of family oriented prison environments and system-wide change on individual prison administrators and directors of corrections departments. In the face of escalating prison budgets and priorities focused on safety and security, few will make family matters and post release success major goals or priorities.

The administrators who have maintained comprehensive parenting programs at New York's Sing Sing and Bedford Hills correctional institutions for several years are the exceptions rather than the rule.

Congressional bodies and state legislatures must take ownership of family related incarceration issues as a matter of national interest and make prisoners' family matters an integral part of the discussion on criminal justice and family policy. Sentencing policies, alternatives to corrections, prison locations and funding for family programs and services are legislative issues. It is equally important for legislators to exercise oversight over correctional policies and practices and to use the power of the law to remove obstacles to children's and families' well being. The correctional environment and what goes on in prison are not internal matters to be left to the discretion of prison administrators. They are instead public concerns with relevance to broad

social welfare goals and of importance to different community constituencies.

It is important for child welfare and correctional leaders and professional associations to develop principles and national standards covering parents in prison and their children and to adopt these standards as a part of the accreditation process for child welfare agencies and correctional institutions. When parents are in prison and their children are under the custody of the state, families and children experience unique problems and corrections and child welfare staff are faced with unique challenges. Most states do not have child welfare policies or procedures to address parenting issues during incarceration and workers are left, more or less, to their own problem solving initiative and ingenuity. Child welfare-corrections system partnership models, family oriented policy directives and agency protocols are necessary components of serious efforts to meet the best interests of the child.

New York has devoted resources to address criminal justice- child welfare collaborations and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has a staff liaison who handles situations involving children whose mothers are in prison. Development, replication and evaluation of approaches such as these and dissemination of products and program reports will prevent "reinvention of the wheel" and enhance agencies' ability to meet children's needs.

Research on prisoners' family roles and relationships and family matters in the criminal justice system must be conducted and the findings incorporated in policy and program development and implementation. No federal agency or foundation has provided funding to launch a comprehensive program of research on families and the correctional system or identified this topic as a research priority. Most research studies have been one shot efforts with few ongoing programs of research covering any aspect of prisoner family functioning. Consequently,

there are many unanswered questions and untested assumptions about the impact of parental criminality on children, the impact of parental attachments and responsibilities on adult recidivism, and other crucial areas. Knowledge of the impact of major human services and corrections policies, e.g., ASFA, community reentry legislation, and welfare reform, on prisoners' families is also limited and the true outcomes of policy directives and reforms for families and children must be inferred.

Information about and understanding of program processes and outcomes must also be among the objectives of a knowledge development agenda. It is important to assess the current state of the field. These type assessments enable program designers and practitioners to build on the pioneering research and program efforts that have already been undertaken and on the day-to-day work and experiences of program providers, families and children. The Vera Institute of Justice review of programs serving fathers in prison and the community (Jeffries, Menghraj, and Hairston, 2001) and the University of Illinois study of programs serving children and families of prisoners (Bates, 2001) provide examples of these type reviews.

## **Conclusions**

The ability and motivation to keep trying under the most difficult of circumstances that prisoners' families display and the sense of kinship and obligation that they have for a member who has been publicly sanctioned are solid strengths. These actions, and the nation's general interest in protecting children and strengthening families, provide sound reasons to promote and adopt policies which help prisoners maintain family ties and help families carry out their family obligations and responsibilities for their children. A social investment in prisoners' families and children will require the adoption of more positive views of prisoners' families and family relationships, better understanding of

family needs and societal responses, and dedicated attention to changing the prevailing system responses.

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