

[Home](#)

Families and Children*

* This article is Chapter Six of *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, by Jeremy Travis (Washington DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2005). Reprinted with permission.

[Endnotes](#)

Jeremy Travis

President, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

[The “Gender Imbalance”](#)

[The Impact of Incarceration on Parent-Child Relationships](#)

[Impact of Parental Incarceration on Childhood Development](#)

[Impact by Children’s Age Group](#)

[Reconnecting with Family at the Time of Reentry](#)

[Looking Forward](#)

AS THE NATION debates the wisdom of a fourfold increase in our incarceration rate over the past generation, one fact is clear: Prisons separate prisoners from their families. Every individual sent to prison leaves behind a network of family relationships. Prisoners are the children, parents, siblings, and kin to untold numbers of relatives who are each affected differently by a family member’s arrest, incarceration, and ultimate homecoming.

Little is known about imprisonment’s impact on these family networks. Descriptive data about the children of incarcerated parents only begin to tell the story. During the 1990s, as the nation’s prison population increased by half, the number of children who had a parent in prison also increased by half—from 1 million to 1.5 million. By the end of 2002, 1 in 45 minor children had a parent in prison (Mumola 2004). ¹ These children represent 2 percent of all minor children in America, and a sobering 7 percent of all African-American children (Mumola 2000). With little if any public debate, we have extended prison’s reach to include hundreds of thousands of young people who were not the prime target of the criminal justice policies that put their parents behind bars.

In the simplest human terms, prison places an indescribable burden on the relationships between these parents and their children. Incarcerated fathers and mothers must learn to cope with the loss of normal contact with their children, infrequent visits in inhospitable surroundings, and lost opportunities to contribute to their children’s development. Their children must come to terms with the reality of an absent parent, the stigma of parental imprisonment, and an altered support system that may include grandparents, foster care, or a new adult in the home. In addition, in those communities where incarceration rates are high, the experience of having a mother or father in prison is now quite commonplace, with untold consequences for foster care systems, multigenerational households, social services delivery, community norms, childhood development, and parenting patterns.

Imprisonment profoundly affects families in another, less tangible way. When young men and women are sent to prison, they are removed from the traditional rhythms of dating, courtship, marriage, and family formation. Because far more men than women are sent to prison each year,

our criminal justice policies have created a “gender imbalance” (Braman 2002), a disparity in the number of available single men and women in many communities. In neighborhoods where incarceration and reentry have hit hardest, the gender imbalance is particularly striking. Young women complain about the shortage of men who are suitable marriage prospects because so many of the young men cycle in and out of the criminal justice system. The results are an increase in female-headed households and narrowed roles for fathers in the lives of their children and men in the lives of women and families in general. As more young men grow up with fewer stable attachments to girlfriends, spouses, and intimate partners, the masculine identity is redefined. The family is often depicted as the bedrock of American society. Over the years, we have witnessed wave after wave of social policy initiatives designed to strengthen, reunite, or simply create families. Liberals and conservatives have accused each other of espousing policies that undermine “family values.” In recent years, policymakers, foundation officers, and opinion leaders have also decried the absence of fathers from the lives of their children. These concerns have translated into a variety of programs, governmental initiatives, and foundation strategies that constitute a “fatherhood movement.” Given the iconic stature of the family in our vision of American life and the widespread consensus that the absence of father figures harms future generations, our national experiment with mass incarceration seems, at the very least, incongruent with the rhetoric behind prevailing social policies. At worst, the imprisonment of millions of individuals and the disruption of their family relationships has significantly undermined the role that families could play in promoting our social well-being. The institution of family plays a particularly important role in the crime policy arena. Families are an integral part of the mechanisms of informal social control that constrain antisocial behavior. The quality of family life (e.g., the presence of supportive parent-child relationships) is significant in predicting criminal delinquency (Loeber and Farrington 1998, 2001). Thus, if families suffer adverse effects from our incarceration policies, we would expect these harmful effects to be felt in the next generation, as children grow up at greater risk of engaging in delinquent and criminal behavior. The institution of marriage is another important link in the mechanism of informal social control. Marriage reduces the likelihood that ex-offenders will associate with peers involved in crime, and generally inhibits a return to crime (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). In fact, marriage is a stronger predictor of desistance from criminal activity than simple cohabitation, and a “quality” marriage—one based on a strong mutual commitment—is an even stronger predictor (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995). Thus, criminal justice policies that weaken marriage and inhibit spousal commitments are likely to undermine the natural processes of desistance, thereby causing more crime. In short, in developing crime policies, families matter. If our crime policies have harmful consequences for families, we risk undermining the role families can play in controlling criminal behavior.

This chapter examines the impact of incarceration and reentry on families. We begin by viewing the antecedents to the creation of families—the relationships between young men and young women—in communities where the rates of arrest, removal, incarceration, and reentry are particularly high. Then we discuss imprisonment’s impact on relationships between an incarcerated parent and his or her children. Next we examine the effects of parental incarceration on the early childhood and adolescent development of children left behind. We then observe the family’s role in reentry. We close with reflections on the impact of imprisonment on prisoners’ family life, ways to mitigate incarceration’s harmful effects, and ways to promote constructive connections between prisoners and their families.

[back to top](#)

The “Gender Imbalance”

To understand the magnitude of the criminal justice system’s impact on the establishment of intimate partner relationships, we draw upon the work of Donald Braman (2002, 2004), an anthropologist who conducted a three-year ethnographic study of incarceration’s impact on communities in Washington, D.C. In the District of Columbia, 7 percent of the adult African-American male population returns to the community from jail or prison each year. According to Braman’s estimates, more than 75 percent of African-American men in the District of Columbia can expect to be incarcerated at some point during their lifetime. One consequence of these high

rates of incarceration is what Braman calls a “gender imbalance,” meaning simply that there are fewer men than women in the hardest hit communities. Half of the women in the nation’s capital live in communities with low incarceration rates. In these communities, there are about 94 men for every 100 women. For the rest of the women in D.C.—whose neighborhoods have higher incarceration rates—the ratio is about 80 men for every 100 women. Furthermore, 10 percent of the District’s women live in neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates, where more than 12 percent of men are behind bars. In these neighborhoods, there are fewer than 62 men for every 100 women.

This gender imbalance translates into large numbers of fatherless families in communities with high rates of incarceration. In neighborhoods with a 2 percent male incarceration rate, Braman (2002) found that fathers were absent from more than one-half of the families. But in the communities with the highest male incarceration rates—about 12 percent—more than three-quarters of the families had a father absent. This phenomenon is not unique to Washington, D.C., however. In a national study, Sabol and Lynch (1998) also found larger numbers of female-headed families in counties receiving large numbers of returning prisoners.

Clearly, mass incarceration results in the substantial depletion in the sheer numbers of men in communities with high rates of imprisonment. For those men who are arrested, removed, and sent to prison, life in prison has profound and long-lasting consequences for their roles as intimate partners, spouses, and fathers. In the following sections, we will document those effects. Viewing this issue from a community perspective, however, reminds us that incarceration also alters the relationships between the men and women who are not incarcerated. In her research on the marriage patterns of low-income mothers, Edin (2000) found that the decision to marry (or remarry) depends, in part, on the economic prospects, social respectability, and reliability of potential husbands—attributes that are adversely affected by imprisonment. Low marriage rates, in turn, affect the life courses of men who have been imprisoned, reducing their likelihood of desistance from criminal activity. Thus, the communities with the highest rates of incarceration are caught in what Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan (2004, 21) call the “high-crime/low-marriage equilibrium.” In these communities, women “will be understandably averse to marriage because their potential partners bring few social or economic benefits to the table. Men, who remain unmarried or unattached to stable households, are likely to continue their criminal involvement.” Braman quotes two of his community informants to illustrate these ripple effects of the gender imbalance. “David” described how the shortage of men affected dating patterns: Oh, yeah, everybody is aware of [the male shortage]. . . . And the fact that [men] know the ratio, and they feel that the ratio allows them to take advantage of just that statistic. ‘Well, this woman I don’t want to deal with, really because there are six to seven women to every man.’ (2002, 166) The former wife of a prisoner commented that women were less discerning in their choices of partners because there were so few men: Women will settle for whatever it is that their man [wants], even though you know that man probably has about two or three women. Just to be wanted, or just to be held, or just to go out and have a date makes her feel good, so she’s willing to accept. I think now women accept a lot of things—the fact that he might have another woman or the fact that they can’t clearly get as much time as they want to. The person doesn’t spend as much time as you would [like] him to spend. The little bit of time that you get you cherish. (2002, 167)

The reach of our incarceration policies thus extends deep into community life. Even those men and women who are never arrested pay a price. As they are looking for potential partners in marriage and parenting, they find that the simple rituals of dating are darkened by the long shadow of imprisonment.

[back to top](#)

The Impact of Incarceration on Parent-Child Relationships

The Family Profile of the Prisoner Population

Before turning to a closer examination of the effects of imprisonment on the relationships

between incarcerated parents and their children, we should first describe the family circumstances of the nation's prisoners. In 1997, about half (47 percent) of state prisoners reported they had never been married. Only 23 percent reported they were married at the time of their incarceration, while 28 percent said they were divorced or separated ([Figure 1](#)). Yet most prisoners are parents. More than half (55 percent) of all state prisoners reported having at least one minor child. Because the overwhelming majority of state prisoners are men, incarcerated parents are predominantly male (93 percent). The number of incarcerated mothers, however, has grown dramatically in the past decade. Between 1991 and 2000, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 87 percent, compared with a 60 percent increase in the number of incarcerated fathers. Of the men in state prison, 55 percent have children—a total of about 1.2 million—under the age of 18. About 65 percent of women in state prison are mothers to children younger than 18; their children number about 115,500 (Mumola 2000).

A mother's incarceration has a different impact on living arrangements than does that of a father. Close to two-thirds (64 percent) of mothers reported living with their children before incarceration, compared with slightly less than half (44 percent) of fathers in 1997. Therefore, as the percentage of women in prison increases, more children experience a more substantial disruption. We should not conclude, however, that the imprisonment of a nonresident father has little impact on his children. Research has shown that nonresident fathers can make considerable contributions to the development and well-being of their children (Amato and Rivera 1999; Furstenberg 1993). They contribute to their children's financial support, care, and social support even when they are not living in the children's home (Edin and Lein 1997; Hairston 1998; Western and McLanahan 2000). Therefore, a depiction of families' living arrangements only begins to describe the nature of the parenting roles played by fathers before they were sent to prison.

The national data on incarcerated parents also fail to capture the diversity of parent-child relationships. According to research conducted by Denise Johnston (2001) at the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, it is not uncommon for both incarcerated fathers and mothers to have children by more than one partner. Furthermore, these parents may have lived with some but not all of their children prior to their incarceration. This perspective leads to another conclusion: Individuals who are incarcerated may also have served as parent figures to children not their own—as stepparents or surrogate parents in families that blend children into one household.

We know little about the nature of these parent-child relationships. As was noted above, even absent fathers can provide emotional and financial support prior to their incarceration. However, the profiles of incarcerated parents also point to indicia of stress and dysfunction within these families. More than three-quarters of parents in state prison reported a prior conviction and, of those, more than half had been previously incarcerated. During the time leading up to their most current arrest and incarceration, nearly half were out of prison on some type of conditional release, such as probation or parole, in 1997. Nearly half (46 percent) of incarcerated fathers were imprisoned for a violent crime, as were one-quarter (26 percent) of the mothers. Mothers in prison were much more likely than fathers to be serving time for drug offenses (35 percent versus 23 percent). Nearly one-third of the mothers reported committing their crime to get either drugs or money for drugs, compared with 19 percent of fathers. More than half of all parents in prison reported using drugs in the month before they were arrested, and more than a third were under the influence of alcohol when they committed the crime. Nearly a quarter of incarcerated mothers (23 percent) and about a tenth (13 percent) of incarcerated fathers reported a history of mental illness (Mumola 2000). Clearly, these individuals were struggling with multiple stressors that, at a minimum, complicated their role as parents.

The portrait of prisoners' extended family networks is also sobering. According to findings from the Urban Institute's *Returning Home* (Visher, La Vigne, and Travis 2004) study in Maryland, these networks exhibit high rates of criminal involvement, substance abuse, and family violence (La Vigne, Kachnowski, et al. 2003). In interviews conducted with a sample of men and women just prior to their release from prison and return to homes in Baltimore, the Institute's researchers found that about 40 percent of the prisoners reported having at least one relative currently

serving a prison sentence. Nine percent of the women said they had been threatened, harassed, or physically hurt by their husband, and 65 percent of those who reported domestic violence also reported being victimized by a non-spouse intimate partner. No male respondents reported this kind of abuse. The women reported that, other than their partners, the highest level of abuse came from other women in their families—their mothers, stepmothers, or aunts. Nearly two-thirds of inmates (62 percent) reported at least one family member with a substance abuse or alcohol problem and more than 16 percent listed four or more family members with histories of substance abuse. These characteristics highlight the high levels of risks and challenges in the families prisoners leave behind.

The Strain of Incarceration on Families

We turn next to a discussion of the impact of parental incarceration on the families left behind. One obvious consequence is that the families have fewer financial resources. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1997 most parents in state prison (71 percent) reported either full-time or part-time employment in the month preceding their current arrest (Mumola 2002). Wages or salary was the most common source of income among incarcerated fathers before imprisonment, 60 percent of whom reported having a full-time job. Mothers, on the other hand, were less likely to have a full-time job (39 percent). For them, the most common sources of income were wages (44 percent) or public assistance (42 percent). Very few mothers reported receiving formal child support payments (6 percent) (Mumola 2000). During incarceration, the flow of financial support from the incarcerated parent's job stops, leaving the family to either make do with less or make up the difference, thereby placing added strains on the new caregivers. Eligibility for welfare payments under the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) program ceases as soon as an individual is no longer a custodial parent—i.e., upon incarceration. In some cases, a caregiver may continue to receive TANF payments when the incarcerated parent loses eligibility, but because these benefits are now “child-only,” they are lower than full TANF benefits. Food stamps are also unavailable to incarcerated individuals.

New caregivers often struggle to make ends meet during the period of parental incarceration. Bloom and Steinhart (1993) found that in 1992 nearly half (44 percent) of families caring for the children of an incarcerated parent were receiving welfare payments under TANF's predecessor program, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). Under the recent welfare reform laws, however, TANF support is more limited than in the past, as lifetime eligibility has been capped at 60 months, work requirements have been implemented, and restrictions have been placed on TANF funds for those who have violated probation or parole, or have been convicted of certain drug crimes (Phillips and Bloom 1998). Even under the old AFDC program, most caregivers reported that they did not have sufficient resources to meet basic needs (Bloom and Steinhart 1993). Moreover, these economic strains affect more than the family's budget. According to several studies, financial stress can produce negative consequences for caretakers' behavior, including harsh and inconsistent parenting patterns, which, in turn, cause emotional and behavioral problems for the children (McLoyd 1998).

Other adjustments are required as well. Because most prisoners are men, and 55 percent of them are fathers, the first wave of impact is felt by the mothers of their children. Some mothers struggle to maintain contact with the absent father, on behalf of their children as well as themselves. Others decide that the incarceration of their children's father is a turning point, enabling them to start a new life and cut off ties with the father. More fundamentally, Furstenberg (1995) found that a partner left behind often becomes more independent and self-sufficient during the period of incarceration, changes that may ultimately benefit the family unit or lead to the dissolution of the relationship. At a minimum, however, these changes augur a significant adjustment in roles when the incarcerated partner eventually returns home.

In some cases, the incarceration period can have another, longer-lasting effect on the legal relationships between parents and children. In 1997, Congress enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) to improve the safety and well-being of children in the foster care system as well as to remove barriers to the permanent placement, particularly adoption, of these children. ² The ASFA stipulates that “permanency” decisions (determinations about a child's

ultimate placement) should be made within 12 months of the initial removal of the child from the home. With limited exceptions, foster care placements can last no longer than 15 months, and if a child has been in foster care for 15 out of the previous 22 months, petitions must be filed in court to terminate parental rights. At least half the states now include incarceration as a reason to terminate parental rights (Genty 2001).

This new legislation has far-reaching consequences for the children of incarcerated parents. According to BJS, 10 percent of mothers in prison, and 2 percent of fathers, have at least one child in foster care (Mumola 2000). Because the average length of time served for prisoners released in 1997 was 28 months (Sabol and Lynch 2001), the short timelines set forth in ASFA establish a legal predicate that could lead to increases in the termination of parental rights for parents in prison (Lynch and Sabol 2001). Philip Genty (2001), a professor at Columbia University Law School, made some rough calculations of ASFA's impact. Looking only at reported cases discoverable through a Lexis search, he found, in the five years following ASFA's enactment, a 250 percent increase in cases terminating parental rights due to parental incarceration, from 260 to 909 cases.

In addition to those legal burdens placed on incarcerated parents, the new family care-givers face challenges in forging relationships with the children left behind. Some of these new caregivers may not have had much contact with the children before the parent's incarceration, so they must establish themselves as de facto parents and develop relationships with the children. Contributing to the trauma of this changing family structure, prisoners' children are sometimes separated from their siblings during incarceration because the new network of caregivers cannot care for the entire sibling group (Hairston 1995).

In short, when the prison gates close and parents are separated from their children, the network of care undergoes a profound realignment. Even two-parent families experience the strain of lost income, feel the remaining parent's sudden sole responsibility for the children and the household, and suffer the stigma associated with imprisonment. However, prisoners' family structures rarely conform to the two-parent model and are more often characterized by nonresident fathers, children living with different parents, and female-headed households. In these circumstances, the ripple effects of a mother or father going to prison reach much farther, and grandparents, aunts and uncles, and the foster care system must step into the breach. In addition, these extended networks feel the financial, emotional, and familial weight of their new responsibilities.

Incarceration has yet one more effect on the structure of prisoners' families. One of the important functions that families perform is to create assets that are passed along to the next generation. These assets are sometimes quite tangible: Money is saved, real estate appreciates in value, and businesses are built. These tangible assets can typically be transferred to one's children. Sometimes the assets are intangible: Social status is achieved, professional networks are cultivated, and educational milestones are reached. These intangible assets can also translate into economic advantage by opening doors for the next generation. Braman asks whether the minimal intergenerational transfer of wealth in black families is related to the high rates of incarceration among black men. Taking a historical view, he concludes:

The disproportionate incarceration of black men...helps to explain why black families are less able to save money and why each successive generation inherits less wealth than their white counterparts. Incarceration acts like a hidden tax, one that is visited disproportionately on poor and minority families; and while its costs are most directly felt by the adults closest to the incarcerated family member, the full effect is eventually felt by the next generation as well. (2004, 156)

The ripple effects of incarceration on the family are far-reaching. The gender imbalance disturbs the development of intimate relationships that might support healthy families. Families' financial resources and relationship capabilities are strained at the same time they are scrambling for more assets to support their incarcerated loved one. Yet, despite the hardships of incarceration, families can play an important role in improving outcomes for prisoners and prisoners' children. Several

studies have shown that the “quality of care children receive following separation and their ongoing relationships with parents” are “instrumental forces in shaping outcomes for children” (Hairston 1999, 205). According to one study (Sack 1977), the behavioral problems displayed by children of incarcerated fathers diminished once the children got to spend time with their fathers.

On the other hand, in a small percentage of cases, continued parental involvement may not be in the child’s best interests. For example, BJS (Greenfeld et al. 1998) reports that 7 percent of prisoners convicted of violent crimes were convicted of intimate partner violence. Even more disturbing are those cases involving child abuse and neglect, where the child’s best interests argue against parental involvement. According to BJS, among inmates who were in prison for a sex crime against a child, the child was the prisoner’s own child or stepchild in a third of the cases (Langan, Schmitt, and Durose 2003). Yet there has been very little research on the nexus between this form of family violence, incarceration, and reentry.

Discussion of prisoners convicted of violence within the family only raises larger questions—questions not answered by current research—about whether some parent-child relationships are so troubled and so characterized by the patterns of parental substance abuse, criminal involvement, mental illness, and the intrusions of criminal justice supervision that parental removal is a net benefit for the child. It is undoubtedly true that removing a parent involved in certain types of child abuse is better for the child. But we know little about the critical characteristics of the pre-prison relationships between children and their incarcerated parents, especially as to what kind of parents they were, and how their removal affects their children.

Even without a deeper understanding of the parenting roles played by America’s prisoners, we still must face several incontrovertible, troubling facts. First, expanding the use of prison to respond to crime has put more parents in prison. Between 1991 and 1999, a short eight-year period, the number of parents in state and federal prisons increased by 60 percent, from 452,500 to 721,500 (Mumola 2000). By the end of 2002, 3.7 million parents were under some form of correctional supervision (Mumola 2004). Second, many children are left behind when parents are incarcerated. By 1999, 2 percent of all minor children in the United States—about 1.5 million—had a parent in state or federal prison. (If we include parents who are in jail, on probation or parole, or recently released from prison, the estimate of children with a parent involved in the criminal justice system reaches 7 million, or nearly 10 percent of all minor children in America [Mumola 2000].) Third, the racial disparities in America’s prison population translate into substantial, disturbing racial inequities in the population of children affected by our current levels of imprisonment. About 7 percent of all African-American minor children and nearly 3 percent of all Hispanic minor children in America have a parent in prison. In comparison, barely 1 percent of all Caucasian minor children have a parent in prison (Mumola 2000). Finally, most of the children left behind are quite young. Sixty percent are under age 10, while the average child left behind is 8 years old.

In this era of mass incarceration, our criminal justice system casts a wide net that has altered the lives of millions of children, disrupting their relationships with their parents, altering the networks of familial support, and placing new burdens on such governmental services as schools, foster care, adoption agencies, and youth-serving organizations. As Phillips and Bloom succinctly concluded, “by getting tough on crime, the United States has gotten tough on children” (1998, 539). These costs are rarely included in our calculations of the costs of justice.

Parent-Child Relationships during Imprisonment

When a parent is arrested and later incarcerated, the child’s world undergoes significant, sometimes traumatic, disruption. Most children are not present at the time of their parent’s arrest, and arrested parents typically do not tell the police that they have minor children (ABA 1993). Family members are often reluctant to tell the children that their parent has been incarcerated because of social stigma (Braman 2003). Therefore, the immediate impact of an arrest can be quite traumatizing—a child is abruptly separated from his or her parent, with little information about what happened, why it happened, or what to expect.

The arrest and subsequent imprisonment of a parent frequently results in a significant realignment of the family's arrangements for caring for the child, depicted in [Figure 2](#). Not surprisingly, the nature of the new living arrangements depends heavily on which parent is sent to prison. Recall that about two-thirds of incarcerated mothers in state prison lived with their children before they were imprisoned. Following the mother's incarceration, about a quarter (28 percent) of their children remain with their fathers. Most children of incarcerated mothers, however, are cared for by an extended family that is suddenly responsible for another mouth to feed and child to raise. More than half of these children (53 percent) will live with a grandparent, adding burdens to a generation that supposedly has already completed its child-rearing responsibilities. Another quarter of these children (26 percent) will live with another relative, placing new duties on the extended family. Some children have no familial safety net: almost 10 percent of incarcerated mothers reported that their child was placed in foster care (Mumola 2000). ³

The story for incarcerated fathers is quite different. Less than half (44 percent) lived with their children before prison; once they are sent to prison, most of their children (85 percent) will live with the children's mother. Grandparents (16 percent) and other relatives (6 percent) play a much smaller role in assuming child care responsibilities when a father is incarcerated. Only 2 percent of the children of incarcerated men enter the foster care system. In sum, a child whose father is sent to prison is significantly less likely to experience a life disruption, such as moving in with another family member or placement in a foster home.

The nation's foster care system has become a child care system of last resort for many children with parents in prison. Research by the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents (Johnston 1999) found that, at any given time, 10 percent of children in foster care currently have a mother—and 33 percent have a father—behind bars. Even more striking, 70 percent of foster children have had a parent incarcerated at one time or another during their time in foster care.

When a parent goes to prison, the separation between parent and child is experienced at many levels. First, there is the simple fact of distance. The majority of state prisoners (62 percent) are held in facilities located more than 100 miles from their homes (Mumola 2000). Because prison facilities for women are scarce, mothers are incarcerated an average of 160 miles away from their children (Hagan and Coleman 2001). The distance between prisoners and their families is most pronounced for District of Columbia residents. As a result of the federal takeover of the District's prison system, defendants sentenced to serve felony time are now housed in facilities that are part of the far-flung network of federal prisons. In 2000, 12 percent of the District's inmates were held in federal prisons more than 500 miles from Washington. By 2002, that proportion had risen to 30 percent. Nineteen percent are in prisons as far away as Texas and California (Santana 2003). Not surprisingly, in an analysis of BJS data, Hairston and Rollin (2003, 68) found a relationship between this distance and family visits: "The distance prisoners were from their homes influenced the extent to which they saw families and friends. The farther prisoners were from their homes, the higher the percentage of prisoners who had no visitors in the month preceding the survey....Those whose homes were closest to the prison had the most visits."

Geographic distance inhibits families from making visits and, for those who make the effort, imposes an additional financial burden on already strained family budgets. Donald Braman tells the story of Lilly, a District resident whose son Anthony is incarcerated in Ohio (Braman 2002). When Anthony was held in Lorton, a prison in Virginia that formerly housed prisoners from the District, she visited him once a week. Since the federal takeover, she manages to make only monthly visits, bringing her daughter, Anthony's sister. For each two-day trip, she spends between \$150 and \$200 for car rental, food, and a motel. Added to these costs are her money orders to supplement his inmate account and the care packages that she is allowed to send twice a year. She also pays about \$100 a month for the collect calls he places. She lives on a fixed income of \$530 a month.

Given these realities, the extent of parent-child contact during incarceration is noteworthy. Mothers in prison stay in closer contact with their children than do fathers. According to BJS,

nearly 80 percent of mothers have monthly contact and 60 percent have at least weekly contact. Roughly 60 percent of fathers, by contrast, have monthly contact, and 40 percent have weekly contact with their children (Mumola 2000). These contacts take the form of letters, phone calls, and prison visits. Yet, a large percentage of prisoners serve their entire prison sentence without ever seeing their children. More than half of all mothers, and 57 percent of all fathers, never receive a personal visit from their children while in prison.

Particularly disturbing is Lynch and Sabol's finding (2001) that the frequency of contact decreases as prison terms get longer. Between 1991 and 1997, as the length of prison sentences increased, the level of contact of all kinds—calls, letters, and visits—decreased (Figure 3). This is especially troubling in light of research showing that the average length of prison sentences is increasing in America, reflecting more stringent sentencing policies. Thus, prisoners coming home in the future are likely to have had fewer interactions with their children, a situation that further weakens family ties and makes family reunification even more difficult.

In addition to the significant burden imposed by the great distances between prisoners and their families, corrections policies often hamper efforts to maintain family ties across the prison walls. The Women's Prison Association (1996) has identified several obstacles to constructive family contacts, some of which could easily be solved. The association found that it is difficult to get simple information on visiting procedures, and correctional administrators provide little help in making visiting arrangements. The visiting procedures themselves are often uncomfortable or humiliating. Furthermore, little attention is paid to mitigating the impact on the children of visiting a parent in prison.

Elizabeth Gaynes, director of the Osborne Association in New York City, tells a story that captures the emotional and psychological impact of a particular correctional policy upon a young girl who had come to visit her father. Because inmates were not allowed to handle money, the prison had drawn a yellow line three feet in front of the soda vending machines. Only visitors could cross that line. The father could not perform the simple act of getting his daughter a soda. If he wanted one, he had to ask his daughter to get it. According to Ms. Gaynes, this interaction represented an unnecessary and damaging role transformation; the child had become the provider, the parent had become the child. ⁴

Family Contact during Imprisonment: Obstacles and Opportunities

For a number of reasons, it is difficult to maintain parent-child contact during a period of incarceration. For one thing, many prisons narrowly define the family members who are granted visiting privileges. The State of Michigan's corrections department, for example, promulgated regulations in 1995 restricting the categories of individuals who are allowed to visit a prisoner. The approved visiting list may include minor children under the age of 18, but only if they are the prisoner's children, stepchildren, grandchildren, or siblings. Prisoners who are neither the biological parents nor legal stepparents of the children they were raising do not have this privilege. Finally, a child authorized to visit must be accompanied by either an adult who is an immediate family member of the child or of the inmate, or who is the child's legal guardian. ⁵ Many prisoners' extended family networks, including girlfriends and boyfriends who are raising prisoners' children, are not recognized in these narrow definitions of "family." ⁶ Limitations on visiting privileges are commonly justified on security or management grounds, but fail to recognize the complexity of the prisoner's familial networks. Rather than allowing the prisoner to define the "family" relationships that matter most, the arbitrary distinctions of biology or legal status are superimposed on the reality of familial networks, limiting meaningful contact that could make a difference to both prisoner and child.

Telephone contact is also burdened by prison regulations and by controversial relationships between phone companies and corrections departments. Prisoners are typically limited in the number of calls they can make. Their calls can also be monitored. The California Department of Corrections interrupts each call every 20 seconds with a recorded message: "This is a call from a California prison inmate." Most prisons allow prisoners to make only collect calls, and those calls typically cost between \$1 and \$3 per minute, even though most phone companies now

charge less than 10 cents per minute for phone calls in the free society (Petersilia 2003). Telephone companies also charge between \$1.50 and \$4 just to place the collect call, while a fee is not charged for collect calls outside of prison.

The high price of collect calls reflects sweetheart arrangements between the phone companies and corrections agencies, under which the prisons receive kickbacks for every collect call, about 40 to 60 cents of every dollar. This arrangement translates into a substantial revenue source for corrections budgets. In 2001, for example, California garnered \$35 million, based on \$85 million of total revenue generated from prison calls. Some states require, by statute or policy, that these revenues pay for programs for inmates. Most states simply deposit this money into the general budget for their department of corrections.

Yet who bears these additional costs for maintaining phone contact with prisoners? The families of prisoners do, of course. In a study conducted by the Florida House of Representatives Corrections Committee (1998), family members reported spending an average amount of \$69.19 per month accepting collect phone calls. According to this report, “Several family members surveyed stated that, although they wanted to continue to maintain contact with the inmate, they were forced to remove their names from the inmate’s approved calling list because they simply could not afford to accept the calls” (1998, 23).

This monopolistic arrangement between phone companies and prisons makes families the unwitting funders of the prisons holding their loved ones. In essence, the states have off-loaded upwards of hundreds of millions of dollars of prison costs on to prisoners’ families. Subsequently, families are placed in the unacceptable position of either agreeing to accept the calls, thereby making contributions to prison budgets, or ceasing phone contact with their loved ones. Of course, there are other, deeper costs attached to this practice. If a family chooses to limit (or stop) these phone calls, then familial ties are weakened and the support system that could sustain the prisoner’s reintegration is damaged. If the family chooses to pay the phone charges, then those financial resources are not available for other purposes, thereby adding to the strain the household experiences. In recent years, efforts to reform prison telephone policies have been successful in several states. ⁷ Yet, while these reform efforts are under way, tens of thousands of families are setting aside large portions of their budgets to pay inflated phone bills to stay in touch with their imprisoned family members.

Fortunately, a number of communities have implemented programs designed to overcome the barriers of distance, cost, and correctional practices that reduce contact between prisoners and their families. For example, Hope House, an organization in Washington, D.C., that connects incarcerated fathers with their children in the District, hosts summer camps at federal prisons in North Carolina and Maryland where children spend several hours a day for a week visiting with their fathers in prison. Hope House has also created a teleconference hookup with federal prisons in North Carolina, Ohio, and New Mexico so that children can go to a neighborhood site to talk to their fathers in prison. In another instance, a Florida program called “Reading and Family Ties—Face to Face” also uses technology to overcome distance. Incarcerated mothers and their children transmit live video recordings via the Internet. These sessions occur each week, last an hour, and are available at no cost to the families. In addition, the U.S. Department of Justice in 1992 initiated the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program, the first mother-daughter visitation program of its kind. Twice a month, more than 500 girls across the country, much like other girls their age, participate in Girl Scout programs, but in this program these Girl Scouts meet their mothers in prison. Finally, in Washington State, the McNeil Island Correction Center has launched a program that teaches incarcerated fathers the skills of active and involved parenting, encourages them to provide financial support for their children, and facilitates events to bring prisoners together with their families.

These programs—and many others like them—demonstrate that, with a little creativity and a fair amount of commitment, corrections agencies can find ways to foster ongoing, constructive relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. It seems particularly appropriate, in an era when technology has overcome geographical boundaries, to harness the Internet to bridge the divide between prisons and families. Yet the precondition for undertaking such initiatives is

the recognition that corrections agencies must acknowledge responsibility for maintaining their prisoners' familial relationships. If these agencies embraced this challenge for all inmates—and were held accountable to the public and elected officials for the results of these efforts—the quality of family life for prisoners and their extended family networks would be demonstrably improved.

[back to top](#)

Impact of Parental Incarceration on Childhood Development

Limits of Existing Research

Having examined the impact of incarceration on the institution of family and the relationships of incarcerated parents with their children, we turn next to an assessment of incarceration's impact on the children involved. Given the current state of research, it is very difficult to measure the consequences for children when a mother or father is arrested, convicted, sent to prison, and returned home. Very few studies have been conducted that directly examine the lives of the children of incarcerated parents. Most of these studies suffer from methodological limitations in that they examine only a small sample of children or fail to use appropriate comparison groups. Few studies use standardized assessment tools to measure the emotional and psychological well-being of these children. Few researchers talk to the children themselves, relying instead on parental or caregiver opinions to construct a picture of the child's changing world. Ideally, we could draw upon one or more longitudinal studies that assessed the children's well-being, the nature of the parent-child relationships, and the changing family environment beginning at the parent's arrest and continuing through the trial (when the parent may be in jail or may be released on bond), to the point of sentencing, throughout the period of incarceration (including the moment of the parent's release from prison), ending with the dynamics of post-prison adjustment. Unfortunately, no such study exists.

The extant sparse research literature only underscores the importance of more research in this area. These studies suggest that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem, depression, emotional withdrawal from friends and family, and inappropriate or disruptive behavior at home and in school. Two studies, each with a very small sample size, suggested that children of incarcerated parents may be more likely than their counterparts to enter the criminal justice system (Johnston 1991, 1993). ^[8]

One way of assessing the impact of incarceration on children is to draw connections between other research and our general understanding of the collateral costs of imprisonment. For example, several studies have found that children of young and unmarried parents experience behavioral problems, unstable family relationships, and diminished economic support (Amato and Rivera 1999; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Kandel, Rosenbaum, and Chen 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Michael and Tuma 1985; Thornberry, Smith, and Howard 1997; Wu and Martinson 1993). Similarly, economic strain can lead to harsh and inconsistent parenting, which can lead to behavioral problems in the children in the household (McLoyd 1998). Reduced financial resources can also lead to increased exposure to abuse in the family (International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies 2003). ^[9] Finally, children in single-parent households, particularly those born to single mothers, have higher rates of incarceration as they grow up. Indeed, as Harper and McLanahan (1999) have found, children growing up with stepparents have still higher rates of incarceration. So, to the extent that incarceration increases economic strain, the number of single-parent households, and absent fathers, then our imprisonment policies are likely to result in more developmental challenges and criminal justice involvement for the children left behind.

Understanding Parental Loss

We can also draw upon the general literature exploring how parental loss affects child development to create some hypotheses about the impact of parental incarceration. According to this literature, children always experience the loss of a parent as a traumatic event. Whether the

loss is due to death, divorce, moving away, or incarceration, this event has negative consequences, including attachment difficulties, anger, depression, regression, and other antisocial behaviors. Similarly, a traumatic event in a child's life diverts energy from the developmental work that child is normally performing. When life becomes overwhelming for a child, emotional survival may take precedence over developmental tasks, resulting in delayed development, regression, or other maladaptive coping strategies (Wright and Seymour 2000). Given these general principles of child development, parental incarceration should be viewed as a traumatic event, limiting the child's emotional growth, producing stress and anger, and isolating the child from needed social supports.

It is also well documented in the child development literature that children have difficulty coping with uncertainty. The criminal justice process is filled with uncertainty. A child might have to live with such questions as, "Will Mom be arrested again?" "Will Dad be convicted and, if so, sent to prison? If so, how long will he be there?" "Will Mom get released on parole? If so, will she be sent back to prison if she uses drugs again, or if she is in the wrong place at the wrong time?" This uncertainty, which is inherent in the workings of our criminal justice system, is often compounded by the family's reluctance to tell children exactly what is happening to their parents. In his ethnographic study in Washington, D.C., Braman (2002) found that most family members rarely discuss their relative's incarceration at all outside the immediate family, even in neighborhoods where incarceration rates are high. Most family members explained that their silence stemmed from concerns about the stigma associated with incarceration. Although well-intentioned as a protective response, withholding basic information about a parent's status may only heighten children's feelings of stress and uncertainty.

Finally, the children themselves must deal with the issue of stigma. When a mother or father is imprisoned, a child may experience the disapproval of his or her peers, teachers, or other family members, resulting in feelings of shame and low self-esteem. Perhaps in neighborhoods of a high concentration of incarceration among the adults, losing one's parent to prison is so common that the social stigma is diminished, but the experience still requires the child to work through a complex set of feelings about the actions of the parent in prison. In addition, even those children who are coping well with parental incarceration may have the added challenge of overcoming the stereotype that they are destined for a life of behavioral problems and failure.

[back to top](#)

Impact by Children's Age Group

The child development literature also provides a framework for assessing the differential impact of parental incarceration on children of various ages. The chart developed by Gabel and Johnston (1995) clarifies the intersection between developmental markers and the removal of a parent to prison ([Table 1](#)). For example, among infants (0–2 years), parental incarceration's major effect is likely a disruption of parental bonding, with the potential for later attachment difficulties. Research on this age group also shows, however, that infants can recover quickly from the loss of a parent if they experience a new, nurturing, care-giving relationship (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). During the early childhood years (2–6 years), children have a greater ability to perceive events around them, but have not yet developed the skills to process traumatic occurrences. Children at this age have not yet completely separated themselves from their parents, so they tend to perceive threats or harm to their parents or caregivers as directed at themselves. Several studies suggest that traumatic stress at this age may have profound long-term effects, particularly if there is no intervention to help the child sort through those experiences (Furman 1983).

In the middle childhood years (7–10 years), when children are developing their social skills and a sense of independence, separation from a parent creates a sense of loss because a role model is taken away. If a child has poor coping skills to begin with, and particularly if he or she moves from home to home following the parent's departure, such disruptions may accelerate a spiral of strain in the child's life. Johnston and Carlin (1996) use the term "enduring trauma" to describe a situation where a child experiences several traumatic events with no time to recover and where the cumulative effect may overwhelm the child's ability to cope. A child experiencing this level

of trauma may display aggression, hypervigilance, anxiety, concentration problems, and withdrawal.

The impact of incarceration on adolescents (11 to 18 years) is likely quite different. Adolescence is a time when young people test boundaries, begin to navigate the world of romantic relationships, exercise more independence, explore the adult world of work, and develop a sense of self. The arrest and incarceration of an adolescent's parent can derail those transitions to adulthood. These children may question the authority of the incarcerated parent and doubt the parent's concern for them. They may take on new roles as parent figures to fill the void left by the incarcerated parent. Some studies have shown an increase in dependence and developmental regression among adolescents of incarcerated parents (Johnston 1992).

About 1.5 million minor children have a parent in prison, most frequently a father. In many ways, these children are no different from others of their age group, but they are experiencing a distinctive disruption in their lives. They have the same emotional needs to bond with a parent or other caregiver, to establish themselves as unique individuals in a social context, and to test their independence from the adults in their lives. All these development processes are made more complicated by the loss of a parent to prison, and more complicated still if the parent was arrested for behavior involving harm to the family or child.

[back to top](#)

Reconnecting with Family at the Time of Reentry

In this section, we shift our focus from an inquiry into the impact of incarceration on parent-child relationships and child development to ask what role prisoners expect their families to play in the reentry process, what role families actually play, and what consequences befall families during this critical period.

When prisoners return home, they face multiple hurdles, many of which relate directly to the functioning of their families. They need to find housing, which may be with their relatives or immediate families. They need to find employment, which could add income to family budgets. Some have health concerns and may need to receive care for an HIV infection, secure medication for mental illness, or find substance abuse treatment to reduce the risk of relapse, all of which, if successful, would avert additional burdens and risks for their families. Many will owe the state child support payments, which, according to an extensive analysis in Colorado and Massachusetts, averaged more than \$16,000 (Thoennes 2003). ^[10] Most prisoners will be under legal supervision, bringing a state parole agency into their homes and lives.

The Returning Home Study

In its *Returning Home* study in Maryland, the Urban Institute provides the first empirical look at the complex issues of family support for returning prisoners (La Vigne, Kachnowski, et al. 2003). The research team constructed a "Family Relationship Quality Scale" to assess the quality of familial connections. ^[11] This scale was repeated four times over the continuum of the project—twice in the pre-release interview (first regarding family relationships before prison and again regarding prisoners' expectations for these relationships after release) and once in each of the two post-release interviews conducted about one and four months after release. *The Returning Home* study reveals interesting dynamics in the prisoners' perceptions, expectations, and experiences of family support. Prisoners characterized their family relationships as more close than distant. This conclusion is based on respondents' scores on the scale, with mean values that range from one to four, one representing distant family relationships and four representing close family relationships (Visher et al. 2004, 110). During every stage of data collection, respondents provided mean scores that exceeded three, indicating that these family relationships were considered close. They were also optimistic about renewing those relationships after their release; more than three-quarters expected this would be "very easy" or "pretty easy" to do. Interestingly, the prisoners expected their families to be more supportive after their release from prison than they had been before their incarceration. This finding is subject to a number of possible

interpretations. Perhaps these families were undergoing strain at the time of the arrest. Perhaps there had been an improvement in family support during the prison sentence. More likely, the prisoners—all of whom were near release at the time of the interview—were projecting their hopes that their families would be supportive during the reentry phase.

The returning prisoners had very concrete expectations of the kinds of support their families would provide. Half of the women and 39 percent of the men expected their families would provide financial support. Well over half of the women (61 percent) and about half of the men (52 percent) planned on talking to a relative about getting a job. At least two-thirds of them (75 percent of women, 63 percent of men) expected to live with family members after their release from prison, including about one-third with their mothers or stepmothers, and less than a quarter with an intimate partner. Importantly, they viewed family support as more than just providing money, jobs, or housing: Half of the inmates surveyed said that this support would be an important factor in keeping them out of prison.

These expectations were generally realized. Nearly half of the released prisoners slept at a family member's home the first night they were back in the community. Nearly half sought assistance from relatives in finding a job. As a general matter, more than 80 percent of the sample interviewed about a month after release "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that their families had been supportive. In fact, when these ex-prisoners were interviewed again a few months later, these percentages increased to about 90 percent. Furthermore, the share that believed family support was important to staying out of prison also increased. It seems plausible that, as other challenges to successful reentry proved more difficult to overcome, the relative value of family support was enhanced.

These findings from *Returning Home* underscore the importance of family in the reentry process. When facing the prospects of succeeding in the outside world, prisoners place a high value on the support that their families will provide. Moreover, families generally keep their end of the bargain, becoming even more important with the passage of time. Future analysis of the *Returning Home* project will shed even more light on the dynamics of these familial relationships.

La Bodega de la Familia

Other research suggests that, as critical as family support may be to successful reentry, it often comes with a price. The most insightful research on this issue comes from *La Bodega de la Familia*, a demonstration project launched on New York City's Lower East Side in 1996 by the Vera Institute of Justice (Sullivan et al. 2002). *La Bodega's* mission was to test the proposition that support provided to families of offenders with histories of drug abuse could reduce their drug use and their criminal activity. The intervention was called "family case management," a novel approach to the problems of drug use and crime that utilizes the strengths of families to influence the behavior of a family member who is under criminal justice supervision. Although the overarching goal was to reduce the drug use and criminal activity of the family member under supervision, the immediate goal was to strengthen families so they could, in turn, support the drug user during treatment (Sullivan et al. 2002).

In *La Bodega*, the case manager spends considerable time with the offender's family. Together, they construct an "ecomap," which illustrates the public and community agencies on which the family relies, in order to find ways to coordinate existing services in the family's best interest. They construct a "genogram," a map of the family network that allows the drug offender to identify potential sources of support within the family. With these two analyses in hand, the family case manager, the offender, and the probation or parole officer construct a "family action plan," which might include drug treatment for the offender, a support group for the family members, or counseling for a child in the family who faces difficulties in school. Based on this plan, *La Bodega* staff members become advocates for the family in approaching social service agencies and provide 24-hour crisis interventions when an arrest, relapse, or potential eviction occurs.

An evaluation of La Bodega found that the program did result in improvements in family members' lives: they were receiving more medical and social services and their health had improved. The evaluation also found that drug use in the target population declined, just as the program designers had hoped. While 86 percent of the participants had used at least one substance during the month prior to joining the program, this proportion declined to 50 percent after six months in the program—a statistically significant reduction greater than that found in a comparison group. The participants' overall physical health also improved. Finally, program participants were also about half as likely to be arrested and convicted for a new offense than members of the comparison group, but the numbers were too small to draw statistically sound conclusions.

There were two surprises in the evaluation, however. First, there had been no increase in the proportion of La Bodega participants who received drug treatment, nor in the amount of time spent in treatment. So, these impressive declines in drug use came about without greater reliance on traditional treatment programs. Family support apparently can make a difference in and of itself. But the research also found that, notwithstanding improvements in their services, support networks, and health status, the families participating in the La Bodega program reported higher rates of emotional problems and stress than at the beginning of the program, and higher than in the comparison group. The evaluator suggested a possible explanation: "Perhaps as a consequence of having the issues surrounding drug abuse out on the table and having to deal with them openly, the La Bodega users and their family members experienced increased conflict in their relationships" (Sullivan 1993, 51). For program participants, the average overall "support index"—the measure of family support as experienced by the drug-using member—actually dropped during the six-month study, while it increased in the comparison group. As the evaluation concluded, "These unexpected results may point to the emotional burdens that La Bodega placed on the families and drug users with whom it worked" (Sullivan 1993, 51).

The story of La Bodega carries two important lessons pertaining to families' role at the point of reentry. First, families matter. They provide the innermost concentric circle of support for returning prisoners. ¹² Providing support for families can translate into behavioral changes for the individual coming out of prison. Drug use can be reduced without increased reliance on traditional treatment, an important reminder in these times of fiscal constraints. Second, this is hard work for families. Even with a dedicated family case manager, a crisis intervention team available around the clock, and improvements in service coordination and health care, the family still feels the stress of helping a family member in need. If we are to design policies that support families, we must remember to pay attention to the family's emotional needs. The experience of La Bodega, now incorporated into the work of a new national nonprofit called Family Justice, points the way toward a new form of service delivery for returning prisoners that strengthens the ability of families to provide support.

In sum, this recent research from Maryland and New York City underscores the centrality of family in the reentry process. Prisoners have high expectations of family support that are often met. However, when families play a more active role in supporting the ex-offender's transformation toward pro-social behavior—particularly moving away from substance abuse—they pay a price. Our challenge is to work with prisoners and their families to maximize the support they can provide to each other, giving families the tools necessary for the hard work of family interventions, and providing the family network with external sources of emotional and other sustenance. This research suggests that, if done properly, this form of intervention might effectively ease the transition from prison, reduce substance abuse, and reduce crime.

[back to top](#)

Looking Forward

Imprisonment causes ripple effects that are felt throughout a prisoner's family network. The policies that have resulted in the imprisonment of well over a million people have magnified those effects in a strong undercurrent that is eroding the familial infrastructure of America's poorest communities. Virtually every social institution that deals with children—including

families, schools, child welfare agencies, foster care, and kinship care systems—is touched by the high rates of parental imprisonment. At the center of these community institutions are children—1.5 million of them—who are buffeted about between prison visits, time with foster parents, and life with grandparents and other new adults in their lives. These children are likely to grow up in families that have been weakened, increasing the challenges they face in staying out of the criminal justice system and leading productive lives. As they reach early adulthood, they will find that their choices of life partners are more limited than a generation ago, and their family structures will be quite different.

In view of the negative effects stemming from current imprisonment policies, we must ask whether society has an obligation to mitigate these harms. The research literature provides some limited guidance as we consider the efficacy of policies that would reflect such a social commitment. Keeping families strong would reduce future criminality, enhance child development, reduce child and family trauma and stress, and increase the likelihood that the children left behind would lead productive lives. Beyond these calculations of preventable harm, the next question pertains to who would be responsible for carrying out policies that would produce these results. Certainly there is much more that corrections agencies could do, but they would first have to see family strengthening as part of their mission. This, in turn, would require governors and state legislatures to lead efforts to expand both the mission statements and the financial support of state departments of corrections. With this support, corrections agencies could improve their visitation policies, encourage rather than discourage phone calls, provide video links between prisons and community centers, find secure means for Internet communications between prisoners and families, bring families to their prisons, create family advocate positions within their organizations, eliminate the imposition of child support payments during the incarceration period, offer classes in parenting skills, and assist prisoners in asserting their rights in custody proceedings. We have no shortage of ideas, just a lack of mandate and the needed resources to carry out the new mandate.

Yet even if corrections agencies were provided adequate resources to implement a new mission to support families, they would need substantial assistance from the community. The existing network of agencies that serve children would need to recognize that these children need special attention when their parents go to prison. If communities embraced a mandate to support the families of incarcerated community members, a broad consortium of agencies would be called upon to meet the mandate. Schools would need to offer counseling to children at critical stages in the criminal justice process. Foster care agencies would have to ascertain whether a parent in prison would serve as a suitable parent upon release before moving for the termination of parental rights. Youth-serving organizations would need to help young people with family members in the justice system work through their feelings of shame, anger, confusion, and denial. Government would have to fund a network of nonprofit agencies, such as Hope House, to provide the supportive environment where children could talk to their parents over video links or Internet connections. In addition, at the point of reentry, organizations similar to La Bodega de la Familia would need to be deployed to support the family networks that struggle to absorb the reality of a family member's return. Organizing this effort would require a community-wide coalition, with strong support from local government, and partnerships with a state corrections agency committed to the same goals—to recognize the important role that families can play in successful reintegration, to minimize harm experienced by the children of incarcerated parents, and to promote strong and healthy families for each prisoner.

[back to top](#)

[Endnotes](#)

Figure 1

Marital Status of Parents in State Prison, 1997

(Source: Mumola, 2000)

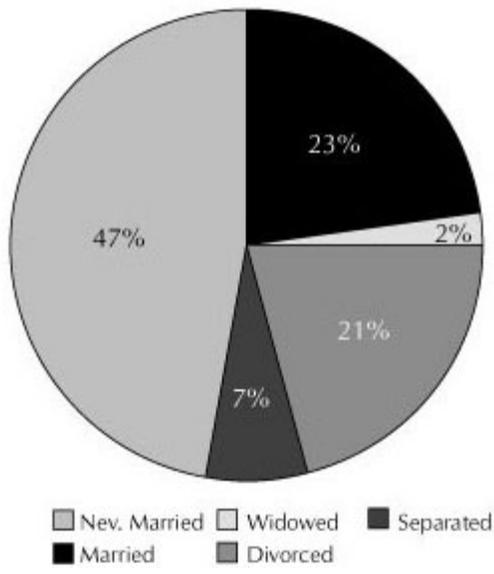
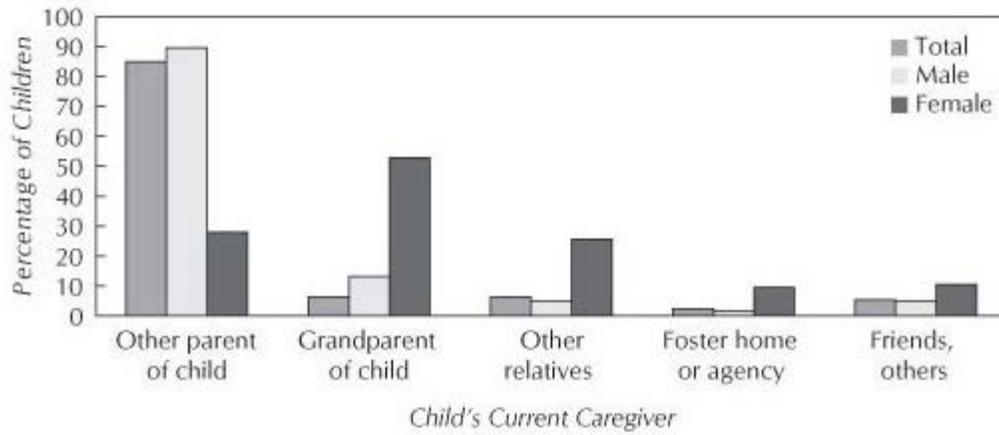


Figure 2

Living Arrangements of Minor Children of State Inmates Prior to Incarceration

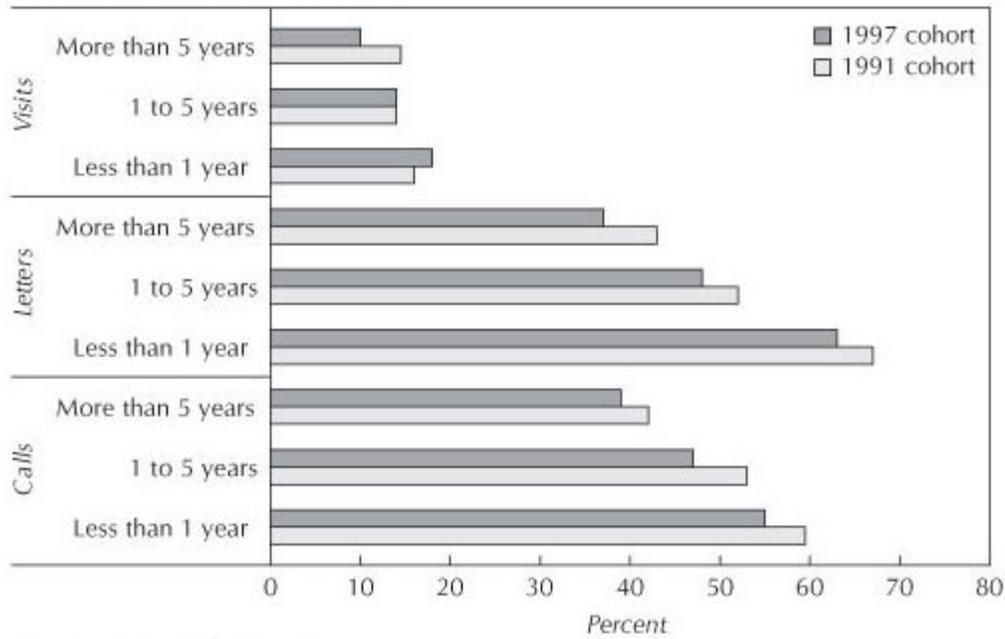


Source: Mumola (2000).

Note: Figures do not total 100 percent because some prisoners had children living with multiple caregivers.

Figure 3

Level of Prisoners' Weekly Contact with Children, by Method and Length of Stay, 1991 and 1997



Source: Lynch and Sabol (2001).

Note: Prisoners to be released in the next 12 months.

Table 1: Possible Effects of Parental Arrest and Incarceration on Young Children's Development

| Developmental state | Developmental characteristics | Developmental tasks | Influencing factors | Effects of separation |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| Infancy (0-2 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited perception, mobility • Total dependency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of trust and attachment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-child separation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impaired parent-child bonding |
| Early childhood (2-6 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased perception, mobility, & improved memory • Greater exposure to environment. Ability to imagine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of sense of autonomy, independence, and initiative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-child separation • Trauma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate separation anxiety • Impaired socio-emotional development • Acute traumatic stress reactions & survivor guilt |
| Middle childhood (7-10 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased independence from caregivers and ability to reason • Peers become important | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of industry • Ability to work productively | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-child separation • Trauma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental regressions • Poor self-concept • Acute traumatic stress reactions • Impaired ability to over-come future trauma |
| Early adolescence (11-14 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of behavior in pursuit of goals • Increased abstract thinking • Puberty • Increased aggression | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to work productively • Controlled expression of emotions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-child separation • Enduring trauma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of limits on behavior • Trauma-reactive behaviors |
| Late adolescence (15-18 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional crisis and confusion • Adult sexual development and sexuality • Formal abstract thinking • Increased independence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of cohesive identity • Resolution of conflicts with family & society • Ability to engage in adult work and relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-child separation • Enduring trauma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Premature termination of dependency relationship with parent • Intergenerational crime and incarceration |

Endnotes

[Electronic Monitoring: Positive Intervention Strategies](#)

[Families and Children](#)

Electronic Monitoring: Positive Intervention Strategies

- ¹ Family name, “Schwitzgebel,” legally changed to “Gable” in 1982.
- ² The licensed radio system (KA2XYS-Los Angeles) had two 12-watt base stations operating at a frequency of 165.395 MHz and four 1-watt belt units operating at 164.980 MHz. A 6x3x2-inch transceiver was housed in a leather belt that also contained an antenna and a 3.4-inch vibrating coil.

[back to top](#)

Families and Children

An earlier version of sections of this chapter appeared in the introductory essay of Travis and Waul (2003).

- ¹ This is a single-day prevalence and does not take into account minor children whose parents were previously incarcerated; it accounts only for those who are currently incarcerated in state and federal prisons in 2002.
- ² Public Law 105-89.
- ³ Figures do not total 100 percent because some prisoners had children living with multiple care-givers.
- ⁴ Elizabeth Gaynes, conversation with the author, June 22, 2004. Cited with permission.
- ⁵ The Michigan restrictions were challenged in court as unconstitutional because they violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantee of due process, the First Amendment’s guarantee of free association, and the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. The Supreme Court upheld the regulations, finding that the restrictions “bear a rational relation to the [department of correction’s] valid interests in maintaining internal security and protecting child visitors from exposure to sexual or other misconduct or from accidental injury.... To reduce the number of child visitors, a line must be drawn, and the categories set out by these regulations are reasonable” (Overton v. Bazzetta, 539 U.S. 94 [2003]).
- ⁶ The definition of who can visit or take children to visit is an even bigger problem in light of cultural traditions, i.e., the extended family network and fictive kin arrangements that exist in many African-American families. Family duties and responsibilities are shared among a group of

individuals; e.g., a young uncle may be expected to take on the father's role and do things such as take the child to a game or on a prison visit while the grand-mother provides day-to-day care and an aunt with a "good" job provides financial subsidies. Apparently this perspective was either not presented or ignored as unimportant in the Michigan case (Personal communication with Creasia Finney Hairston, January 6, 2004).

⁷ Missouri has announced that its next contract with prison telephone systems will not include a commission for the state. The Ohio prison system entered into a contract that will reduce the cost of prison phone calls by 15 percent. California will reduce most prisoner phone calls by 25 percent. In 2001, the Georgia Public Service Commission ordered telephone providers to reduce the rates for prisoner calls from a \$3.95 connection fee and a rate of \$0.69 per minute to a \$2.20 connection fee and a rate of \$0.35 per minute. The new telephone contract for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections will reduce the average cost of a 15-minute telephone call by 30 percent. And litigation has been initiated in a number of states—including Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, South Dakota, Washington, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia—to reduce the cost of prison phone calls and kick-backs to the state (eTc Campaign 2003).

⁸ The Children of Offenders study and the Jailed Mothers study both had small sample sizes and were not randomized, making it difficult to conclude a causal link between parental incarceration and children's involvement in the criminal justice system. In the Children of Offenders study (Johnston 1992, 1993), the sample (N = 56, N = 202) target-ed children of offenders who already demonstrated disciplinary problems in school or delinquent behaviors, presenting the highest likelihood of second-generation incarceration (Johnston 1995). In the Jailed Mothers study, Johnston (1991) relied on self-reported data from the surveys of 100 jailed mothers on their children's living arrangements, risk factors, and problem behaviors.

⁹ The report indicates that "generally, persons with fewer economic, tangible, social, physical and other personal resources may be more vulnerable to the threat of violence or abuse posed by an intimate partner."

¹⁰ This figure represents both pre-prison and during-prison nonpayment. Depending on the law of the state, prisoners may continue to accrue child support arrears while incarcerated. According to Thoennes (2003), Massachusetts prisoners accrued on average \$5,000 in arrears while behind bars.

¹¹ The study defined "family member" as "a blood or legal relative, someone with whom the prisoner has a child in common, or a significant other or guardian our respondent lived with prior to his or her incarceration or plans to live with after he or she is released from prison" (Visher et al. 2004, 31).

¹² See chapter 10 of the book this selection is taken from, *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, for a discussion of the concept of concentric circles of support.

[back to top](#)

[References](#)

The articles and reviews that appear in *Federal Probation* express the points of view of the persons who wrote them and not necessarily the points of view of the agencies and organizations with which these persons are affiliated. Moreover, *Federal Probation's* publication of the articles and review is not to be taken as an endorsement of the material by the editors, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, or the Federal Probation and Pretrial Services System.

Published by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts www.uscourts.gov
[Publishing Information](#)