

Incarceration and Family Relationships: A Fact Sheet

Examining the nature of family involvement among inmates

Background/Importance

Men and women who are incarcerated face substantial challenges to maintaining their family relationships, both intimate and parenting. These difficulties continue as they reenter into society after their incarceration. Absence from or low levels of contact between partners due to incarceration places strain on marriages and serious romantic relationships. Parental absence due to incarceration can also imperil the well-being of children (if the parent-child relationship was not abusive). Studies show that incarcerated individuals with closer family relationships have lower recidivism rates, exhibit better behavior while in prison, are more likely to work, and are less likely to use drugs after release.¹

This Fact Sheet provides data on the nature of family involvement among inmates. It presents research on factors that strain family relationships (in both the

context of romantic relationships and parenting) when one partner is incarcerated. It also describes some of the efforts underway to maintain marriages and parent-child relationships during incarceration.

Headlines/Trends

In 2004, there were about 1.5 million inmates in federal and state prisons across the country; about 95% of them will be released at some point in time.² Ninety percent of the incarcerated population is male, although the rate of female incarceration is rapidly rising.

Some 26% of prisoners in federal penitentiaries and 16% of inmates in state prisons reported being married—many more reported being involved in intimate relationships.³ In 2007, over half of the 1.5 million incarcerated adults were parents of minor children, leaving about 1.7 million—or 2.3% of the nation's children under age 18—with a parent in prison.⁴

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A recent report estimated that the percent of incarcerated parents in state and federal prisons increased 79% from 1991 to 2007.⁵ The number of children with incarcerated parents has nearly doubled since 1991.⁶ While imprisoned parents are predominantly male (93%), the rate of incarcerated females has risen dramatically since 1990.⁷ As a result, the number of incarcerated mothers has increased significantly.⁸ In 1999, there were 53,600 mothers of minor children in state and federal prisons.⁹ By 2007, the number had risen to 65,500.¹⁰

Definitions

Recidivism is defined as the tendency to slip back into a previous criminal behavior pattern, commonly used to describe people who re-offend. Some states count such things as failure to report to the parole officer at specified times as recidivism while others do not. Further, some states include new offenses (including misdemeanors) for which the offender is sentenced to serve local time even though he or she does not return to state correctional supervision; other states do not. State prison systems either do not count or do not track parolees who commit new offenses in another state and are incarcerated.¹¹

Incarceration is the state of being imprisoned or confined. In the United States, various types of institutions are used to incarcerate persons convicted of crime. There are state prisons and local jails for adults convicted in state courts and federal prisons for persons convicted in federal courts.¹² The definition also may include the detention of adults in a psychiatric hospital.¹³

Data – Incarceration and Romantic Relationships

There is limited research on the impact of incarceration on relationships. Some report that marital relationships are strained and often end

during imprisonment, while others find that a relatively small number of divorces were reported post-incarceration. Nevertheless, incarcerated men who are married are about three times more likely to have their marriages fail than those who are not incarcerated, with the probability of divorce increasing with time served.¹⁴ Men behind bars are 70% less likely to marry than non-incarcerated men.¹⁵ This could be due, in part, to a lack of social skills or the stigma related to incarcerated individuals.¹⁶ This is especially true for African-American men.¹⁷ A 2001 study of incarcerated men conducted by Edin, et al. found that serving time severed any pre-existing romantic relationship of every incarcerated member of their sample.¹⁸ More research is needed on the percentage of marriages that break up when one partner is incarcerated, and specifically, the differences by gender of these statistics.¹⁹

Recent research summarizes the stressors related to incarceration on romantic relationships. Lack of day-to-day interaction and sexual intimacy, the often long travel times to visit partners in correctional facilities, and the high cost of collect calls fuel feelings of loneliness. Non-incarcerated partners may feel shame and anger which may reduce their willingness to be emotionally supportive. In addition, the harsh living conditions that inmates experience, including fear for their safety, can lead them to become distrustful and psychologically distant. The behaviors they adopt to survive in prison are the very ones that can destroy an intimate relationship. These behaviors compound other characteristics of the inmate population that place them at risk for poor quality marriages, such as disproportionate rates of poverty, low educational attainment, and joblessness.²⁰

Being married or in a committed relationship has been associated with lower levels of criminal activity

and re-incarceration. One study that followed 652 formerly incarcerated men found that those who were married or in committed cohabiting relationships were half as likely to report committing a new crime eight months after release than those who were not involved in such relationships. Research suggests that the quality of the relationship, and not just the arrangement, is responsible for future avoidance of criminal activity.²¹ Further, the married men experienced more successful transitions out of prison.²² Some studies suggest that the decrease in recidivism rates are due either directly to the fact that a significant other discourages men from acting on criminal tendencies²³ or more indirectly by changing their everyday routines and patterns of association with deviant peer groups.²⁴

Data – Incarcerated Parents

The incarceration of adults who have children under age 18 has significant economic, social, and emotional ramifications on their families and can have a profound impact on the well-being of their children.²⁵ In general, stronger parent-child relations (where appropriate) can have positive effects for children, improving a child's behavior, mental health, and academic success.^{26 27} Still, for some children, the incarceration of an abusive parent may be positive.

A parent who is incarcerated can no longer contribute to the family financially nor fully participate in his or her role as parent, wife/husband, or significant other. In 2007, more than half of the parents in state prison provided primary financial support for their children prior to incarceration.²⁸ Of incarcerated parents in state prison, 77% of mothers and 26% of fathers—before entering prison—had provided most of their child's daily care.²⁹

Fathers who maintained contact with their child and child's mother prior to incarceration experience diminished bonds between their child and their child's mother, and often, mothers find a new romantic relationship.³⁰ Typically, fathers must rely on the child's mother or other caretaker to maintain contact with their child.³¹ Lack of parent-child contact during incarceration jeopardizes the chances of families reuniting after the inmate's release.^{32 33 34} Most incarcerated parents reported having some type of contact with their children since their admission to prison, either by phone, mail, or personal visits. However, more than half of incarcerated parents reported never having a personal visit from their child since admission.^{35 36}

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month prior to their arrest, 35% of male state inmate parents and 47% of male federal inmate parents claimed they lived with their children. For women, these percentages were 58% of state female inmate parents and 73% of federal female inmate parents. About 19% of state inmate parents and 32% of federal inmate parents lived with their children in a two-parent household. The study assessed the extent to which inmate parents remained in contact with their children during their period of incarceration. Overall, 10% of the incarcerated parents said they kept in contact with their children on a daily basis. Mothers were more likely to keep in contact than fathers.³⁷

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Services

Given the seeming dampening effect of marriage on the criminal behavior of inmates upon release and recidivism rates, the federal government has invested in marriage education programs for those who are incarcerated. In 2006, the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) announced that it would spend about \$4 million of Responsible Fatherhood funding on grants to organizations that serve incarcerated and newly released fathers and their partners. These programs

were designed to promote and sustain healthy marriages, strengthen parenting skills, and promote economic stability.³⁸ Other efforts are also underway. In 2002, Oklahoma, which had the third highest incarceration rate in the nation, formed a collaborative between the state Department of Corrections and the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative to implement a marriage education pilot program in prisons. The goal was to explore whether relationship and marriage education might improve inmates' ability to sustain successful marriages upon release. The initiative has since been implemented in all state prisons that have a full-time chaplain.³⁹

Because many incarcerated fathers are nonviolent offenders who will return to society within a few years,⁴⁰ public policy has focused attention on fostering positive parent-child relations within the prison system. In 2001, the Child Welfare League of America, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Justice, created the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated. The Center works to increase public awareness of the needs of prisoners' families and provides information and resources to those who help families of prisoners.⁴¹ In 2003, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services established the Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program to fund mentoring programs in regions with significant numbers of children of incarcerated parents.⁴² In addition, several states have created programs to strengthen healthy relationships between incarcerated parents and children. For example, the Kansas Department of Corrections offers parenting classes to incarcerated mothers in their women-only facility and an all-day visit with their children following its successful completion. Through a collaborative state government initiative, Ohio formed The Children of Incarcerated Parents Program in 2004 to provide support and services to nearly 600 families of incarcerated parents.⁴³

Incarceration has been shown to create challenges in maintaining healthy family relationships. Many intimate relationships are strained during imprisonment and often end as a result. Incarceration has negative ramifications against children of a non-abusive, incarcerated parent including economic, social and emotional issues. A variety of programs are now available to serve the prison population and their families in an effort to help inmates sustain their marriages and repair the bonds with their children.

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