

Children of incarcerated parents: fact sheet

- The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world. International human rights advocates have called parental incarceration "the greatest threat to child well-being in the U.S."
- More than 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent. That is 1 in 28 children. Approximately 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration during their lives.
- One in 9 African American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%), and 1 in 57 white children (1.8%) in the United States have an incarcerated parent.
- In Vermont, 1 in 17 children have an incarcerated parent. On any given day, there are over 1,600 children with a mom or dad in prison. Estimates suggest that over the course of a year 6,000 Vermont children will experience parental incarceration.
- In the past ten years, while the nation's incarceration rate decreased by 2.6%, Vermont's incarceration rate increased by 7.1% Just last year Vermont's rate increased by 1.6%.
- In the past 20 years, the number of women incarcerated in Vermont increased by 600% and only 3% of that increase was from violent crime. The majority of women (72%) are serving sentences of three months or less, many for technical violations, not new crimes.
- Roughly 80% of incarcerated adults in Vermont are charged or convicted for non-violent crimes. Of that 80%, the majority of convictions are for property crimes related to drug use and addiction.
- For children, separation due to a parent's incarceration can be even more painful than other forms of parental loss because of the complications, stigma, ambiguity, and lack of social support and compassion that accompanies it.
- Parental incarceration, now recognized as an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE); is distinguished from other adverse childhood experiences by the unique combination of trauma, shame, and stigma.
- Many of the risk factors that children of incarcerated parents experience may be related to parental substance abuse, mental health, inadequate education, or other challenges. Independent of these other problems though, parental incarceration itself will increase the risk of children living in poverty or experiencing household instability.
- If the incarcerated parent was the primary caregiver, there is an increased likelihood of children needing to enter into kinship or foster care.
- In many cases, children's visits with parents can help to heal the pain of the loss while strengthening parent-child attachment, and visits are critical to children's well-being. However, visiting opportunities are limited by distance and travel costs, as well as by prison policies and procedures.

Children of incarcerated parents: a bill of rights

In 2005, after studying the issues that affect children who experience parental incarceration, the *San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership* agreed that the children's perspective was the logical framework and starting point for providing support to this vulnerable, invisible population, and they developed the following Bill of Rights.

Children of Incarcerated Parents: A BILL OF RIGHTS

I have the right...

- 1) TO BE KEPT SAFE AND INFORMED AT THE TIME OF MY PARENT'S ARREST.
- 2) TO BE HEARD WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE ABOUT ME.
- 3) TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE ABOUT MY PARENT.
- 4) TO BE WELL CARED FOR IN MY PARENT'S ABSENCE.
- 5) TO SPEAK WITH, SEE AND TOUCH MY PARENT.
- 6) TO SUPPORT AS I FACE MY PARENT'S INCARCERATION.
- 7) NOT TO BE JUDGED, BLAMED OR LABELED BECAUSE MY PARENT IS INCARCERATED.
- 8) TO A LIFELONG RELATIONSHIP WITH MY PARENT.

If these rights were widely recognized and addressed, vulnerable children would be more likely to find protection and support in their struggle to succeed. In the past ten years, the Bill of Rights has been widely distributed and some states have enacted legislation around it.

In 2009, a bill was first introduced to the Vermont Legislature, and if passed we would have adopted the Bill of Rights, but it was not enacted. The Legislature recognizes that we have not yet developed the capacity in our state to implement all of these rights for children of incarcerated parents.

reflective exercise

Review the eight rights (above) and circle any that you believe you are in a position to effect with the children in your care.