

Family and Reentry: Briefing Paper

The growth in incarceration over the past two decades means that more families are affected by the imprisonment and eventual return of a family member. In total, nearly 1.5 million children had a parent in prison in 1999, an increase of over a half-million children since 1991. Expanding this view to consider the 713,000 adult men and women currently on parole—and the ten million released from local jails each year—the number of families that have experienced the impact of incarceration is vastly greater. The consequences for these families can be substantial, ranging from the loss of financial and emotional support to the social stigma attached to having a family member in prison (Waul, Travis, and Solomon 2002).

To date, little research has been done on the impact of incarceration and reentry on the families left behind (Johnston 2001). One thing we do know is that strong family ties during imprisonment can have a positive impact on both returning prisoners and their children. Several studies have shown that continued contact with family members during and following incarceration can reduce recidivism and foster reintegration into the community, which has broad benefits for all involved (Hairston 2002).

Family connections can be severely tested during the period of incarceration when contact between a prisoner and his/her family may be sporadic (Hagan and Coleman 2001). Often, former prisoners return to strained relations with family members and limited employment prospects, ill health, the risk of homelessness, and a high likelihood of reoffending. In most cases, the criminal justice and health and human services systems offer little assistance to families in planning for and negotiating the reentry process. Furthermore, a number of policy barriers often make it difficult for families to maintain contact during incarceration and access services such as public health and housing benefits, which would help them establish stability upon release. All of these factors can make reconnecting with social support structures an onerous challenge.

In some cases, family members may have important reasons for not wanting to maintain contact or reconnect with a family member after s/he returns from prison. For families with histories of domestic violence, the incarceration of an abusive family member may offer some measure of safety and stability. Currently, few data document the incidence of domestic violence among families of returning prisoners.

However, incarceration typically prevents the prisoner from providing meaningful financial and emotional support to his or her family, so that those left behind may feel abandoned and resentful of the prisoner and the incarceration. Maintaining connections and bonds with family members during the prison term through visits, phone calls, and letters is challenging for a number of reasons. The average prisoner is incarcerated more than 100 miles from home (Mumola 2000). Prison visits can be unpleasant experiences for family members who may have to endure tight security procedures just to get into the facility (Hairston 2002). Visiting hours are often predicated on prison schedules rather than on the availability of public transportation or the convenience of family members. Also, phone calls can be financially prohibitive. In some institutions, weekly 30-minute telephone calls can total \$125 per month.

In addition to strained relationships, families may be hesitant to allow the former prisoner back into their household for health, financial, or legal reasons. They may be reluctant out of fear of the person's criminal behavior or substance abuse problem. An estimated 80 percent of prisoners have a history of alcohol or other drug abuse (Mumola 1999). Prisoners also experience higher rates of mental illness and poor physical health compared with the general population (Hammett et al. 2001). Prisoners may present a financial drain on the household if they are unable to work or may place their families at risk of losing their public housing or other benefits. Although many prisoners were employed prior to their incarceration, for a number of reasons, they typically face lower employment prospects and a reduction in earning potential upon return from prison (Western and Pettit 2000). If the family lives in public housing or receives a federal housing voucher, the presence of a former prisoner might make them ineligible for that benefit.

Being unable to find work can add significant financial difficulty to a household. Certain former prisoners are restricted from collecting cash welfare benefits, further adding to the financial strain.

While contact with family members may be beneficial for individuals returning from prison, former prisoners may be a destabilizing force on the family and a reason the family may be apprehensive about their return.

Policy Barriers to Reunification

In addition to the above reasons, public policies add to the challenge of returning prisoners reuniting with their families.

Employment. In addition to having limited education and employment skills, former prisoners may be barred from certain types of employment such as law, medicine, public employment, or real estate due to their former prisoner status (Hirsch et al. 2002). Such limited employment prospects could make it difficult for the former prisoner to make a financial contribution to the household.

Food Stamps and Cash Benefits. Food stamps and cash benefits through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are routinely denied to former prisoners with a felony drug conviction (Hirsch et al. 2002). Without these benefits, a prisoner can be a financial drain on a low-income household.

Housing. Another potential barrier for family reunification for returning prisoners is limited access to public housing benefits. Families in public housing or receiving federal vouchers for private housing are restricted from having people convicted of certain drug crimes in the household (Hirsch et al. 2002). The family of a returning prisoner may be forced to choose between welcoming the prisoner home and keeping their current housing situation.

Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA) of 1997. In 1997, a law was passed to make it easier for states to move children from foster care to permanent adoptive homes. AFSA allows states to seek termination of parental rights and concurrently secure a qualified adoptive family on behalf of a child who has been in foster care for 15 of the preceding 22 months (Hagan and Coleman 2001). While the purpose of the Act is to keep children from being shuffled from one home to another and speed the process of achieving a stable living environment, one potential consequence is that prisoners' parental rights can be terminated based solely on the length of their incarceration.

Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children

The cycle of incarceration and reentry affects an estimated 1.5 million children who have at least one parent in state or federal prison. This number translates to about 2 percent of all minor children in the United States and about 7 percent of all African-American children (Mumola 2000). Again, these numbers grow substantially when jail and parole are included. These young people are already at high risk on several fronts and tend to live in conditions characterized by poverty, instability, and diminished access to sources of support (Cadora 2002). Parental incarceration is generally not the cause of these precarious living conditions, but it certainly exacerbates the situation for many children and has been associated with a number of negative outcomes (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Reentry may present opportunities to reestablish the parent-child relationship, with the hope of mitigating any negative effects (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2002).

About half of male prisoners and two-thirds of female prisoners report having at least one minor child. Many of these families are characterized by somewhat complicated and fragmented relationships (Mumola 2000). Nearly three-quarters of incarcerated parents in state prisons have never been married or are currently divorced or separated. Less than half of parents in state prison reported living with their

children before prison. More women reported living with their children before prison than incarcerated fathers. The child's living arrangements after the arrest and incarceration of a parent is highly dependent on which parent is sent to prison. Children of incarcerated fathers are more likely to remain with their mothers, while the children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to end up living with a grandparent or other relative.

Incarcerated parents generally have limited contact with their children while incarcerated, whether through letters, phone calls, or personal visits. Not surprisingly, the percentage of prisoners who stay in touch with their children decreases with sentence length. Of those serving a sentence of one year or less, over half of incarcerated parents report weekly calls with their children. Only 39 percent of those serving five or more years report weekly calls with their children (Lynch and Sabol 2001).

Children whose parents have been incarcerated experience a range of negative outcomes. For instance, a few studies have found 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 (Johnston 1995). Some evidence suggests that children of incarcerated parents are at high risk of future delinquency and/or criminal behavior.

However, it is difficult to say the extent to which these consequences are a direct result of a parent being in prison or the nature of family life in that household (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2002). Understanding the impact of parental incarceration on children is complicated because negative outcomes may be the result of any number of conditions—parent-child separation; the crime and arrest that preceded incarceration; or general instability, poverty, or inadequate care at home. Further, the degree to which a child is affected by the incarceration and return of a parent rests on a number of variables, including the age at which the child is separated from his/her parent, length of the separation, the level of disruption, number and result of previous separation experiences, and the availability of family or community support (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2002).

Reentry and Domestic Violence

Reunification of families is further complicated when the former prisoner has a history of domestic violence. Although most inmates in state prison have been convicted of a violent crime (44 percent of parents and 51 percent of non-parents), we do not know the extent to which these crimes were against an intimate partner or a family member (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000). It is well documented that certain violent crimes such as assault or rape are most frequently committed by an intimate partner, relative, friend, or acquaintance (Herman and Wasserman 2001). However, little is known about the experiences of and consequences for these families.

There is little documented research about the risk of released prisoners perpetrating domestic violence upon their return to the community. It has historically been difficult to capture this information on family violence. Only about half of all intimate partner violence against women is ever reported to the police (Rennison and Welchans 2000). Even when domestic violence is reported, only about one in five incidents reported to the police result in the arrest of the abuser at the scene (Greenfeld et al. 1998). We know that a strong predictor of family violence is a history of violent or criminal behavior. Among jail inmates convicted of domestic violence, 78 percent had a prior conviction history (Greenfeld et al. 1998). Substance abuse also appears to play a role; those who perpetrate domestic abuse have a disproportionately high incidence of alcohol and cocaine abuse (Logan et al. 2001).

Researchers have also explored the role of prisoners as victims of domestic abuse. A history of being abused is associated with being convicted of a violent crime. Of men reporting a history of abuse, 19 percent were serving a sentence for sexual assault, as compared with 7 percent of men not reporting abuse. A higher percentage of those reporting abuse histories were convicted of homicide (16 percent of

men and 14 percent of women) than those who did not report abuse (13 percent of men and 7 percent of women) (Harlow 1999). Reports of abuse were especially high for prisoners who were reared in families that had either a parent who drank heavily or a family member who was incarcerated (Harlow 1999).

For families with a history of domestic violence, extra care and consideration are needed to help them heal during the prison term and plan for the release of a family member implicated in past violent behavior.

Reentry as an Opportunity for Intervention

Events in the hours and days following release can make the difference between successful reintegration and relapse, reoffense, and recidivism. Research indicates that former prisoners with access to supportive networks are more likely to make the transition successfully. Family and other close social connections are the most likely people to provide the needed emotional and financial support to a returning prisoner.

As stated earlier, the incarcerated population overall has very fragile connections to their family support structures. These family connections can be maintained and strengthened through programming during imprisonment and just before release (Gadsden 2003). Research has shown that both the prisoner and his or her family will benefit from maintaining family ties (Hairston 2002).

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