



National Center on Fathers and Families

**BRIEF**

*NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This Brief, **Fathers in Prison: A Review of the Data**, written by Eric Brenner, Senior Policy Analyst at the National Center on Fathers and Families, is one in a series of NCOFF's working papers designed to expand work in understudied areas. Copies of working papers or other NCOFF reports are available from NCOFF in paper form or on diskette.*

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## **Fathers in Prison: A Review of the Data**

By the end of 1998, the issue of promoting responsible fatherhood has become one of the top priorities for policymakers and elected officials, marking an almost unprecedented rise from obscurity as recently as five years ago. All fifty states now have responsible fatherhood programs in place and the recent welfare reform law was built on the premise that government policy should encourage the financial and emotional involvement of fathers in raising their children.

Responsible fatherhood is a hot issue. Advocates include both Republican and Democratic Governors, President Clinton, Vice President Gore, Colin Powell, mayors, Promise Keepers, the Nation of Islam; the list goes on and on. Some political issues start out as national priorities only to end up as passing fads, but the issue of responsible fatherhood may be different. The number of children growing up without their father present, either in their home or in their lives, has been increasing. A growing body of research has documented the effects of this change.

The two biggest reasons for father absence are divorce and children who are born to young, never-married mothers. Another less publicized reason for the increase in the number of children growing up without their fathers is the rapid increase in the number of men who are incarcerated in either prisons or jails. An estimated 1.5 million children have at least one parent in prison. In 94% of these cases that parent is the fathers.

Incarceration rates have been increasing at the same time as the number of children living in homes without their fathers has been increasing. While the two issues are related in many ways, it is important to be clear about the extent of the relationship as many of the prisoners were not living with their children at the time of their incarceration. It is equally important to be honest about the lack of research that has been conducted on this important, but little studied topic.

The potential benefits of increasing father involvement for fathers who are already in the criminal justice system are both exciting and relatively untested. In theory, if a father comes out of prison more committed to his children he may

choose not to commit more crimes since the possibility of incarceration would risk another separation from his children, not to mention setting a bad example for these children. Future crime rates could also decrease if more children grow up in homes with their fathers.

One emerging school of thought believes that recent policy changes in criminal justice which were intended to lower crime rates, may in fact have resulted in increased crime rates. In "The Unintended Consequences of Incarceration", Tod Clear describes how incarceration increases crime rates, by increasing social factors known to contribute to crime, such as broken families (Clear, 1996). Perhaps more disturbingly, Clear cites the recent changes in the drug laws as increasing the recruitment of younger people to replace the offenders who have been imprisoned. While the number of men imprisoned increases, Clear believes the impact on crime is minimal, but the increasing number of children whose fathers are imprisoned may actually increase the potential for crime over a longer period of time.

Fatherhood is one of the unintended consequences of incarceration. Adam Walinsky recently said that "No government or private agency has suggested any way to lighten the influence of paternal and sibling imprisonment on children, or how to balance the potential value of such an effort against the need to suppress violent crime. . . ." (Walinsky, 1995).

Many states feel they have enough information. They have chosen not to wait for more studies that link fathers in prison to the future prospects of their children. States are moving ahead with specific efforts to enhance the parenting skills of incarcerated men based upon the hope (and some evidence) that there are successful interventions that can be done for fathers who are in prison to increase their chances of not committing more crimes, and staying involved in the lives of their children.

What follows is a listing of some facts and research on this issue, limited as it is, followed by a description of some of the specific state activities that are taking place to promote responsible fatherhood among prisoners. While expectations

are high, the results of these programs are almost universally untested. Some are just getting started. The programs are not being tested for results on recidivism rates, on outcomes for children, for effects on future child support payments, or on the cost effectiveness for the governments involved. In some cases this lack of evaluation has made it easier to experiment (since intuition says these should work and nothing has been written that says otherwise) but this also reduces the chances for widespread duplication of programs in jurisdictions that have shown less of an inclination to experiment with prison-based fatherhood programs.

### Findings and Facts: A Partial Lens

More than five million people in the U.S. are under the supervision of the criminal justice system. More than 1.6 million of them are in prisons or jails; the rest are on probation or parole (DiMascio, 1997). Despite the fact that between 1980 and 1994, the number of women in prison grew by 386%, compared to "only" 214% for men, men still make up 94% of the prison population (DiMascio, 1994). The typical male inmate grew up in a single parent home and has at least one family member who has been incarcerated. More than two-thirds will be rearrested within three years of their release (Johnston, 1995).

Violent criminals are overwhelmingly males who grew up without fathers, which includes 60% of American rapists (Davidson, 1990), 72% of adolescent murderers (Cornell, 1987), and 70% of juveniles in state reform institutions (Matlock, 1994).

Information on the exact number of prisoners who are fathers is difficult to determine, in part due to the unreliability of prisoner surveys. A 1991 survey of men in prison estimated that 64% of incarcerated men were fathers, and 56% had children under the age of 18 (Beck, 1993). A 1995 study reported that 67.5% of the male felons in Tennessee prisons had children, and that each felon/father had an average of 2.4 children (Tennessee Department of Corrections, 1995). Another study estimated that of the 36,000 prisoners incarcerated in Georgia state prisons, 88% had at least one child (National Governors' Association, 1995).

While most incarcerated men are fathers, most are not married, and most did not live with their children at the time of their arrest (Hairston, 1995). In New Jersey it is estimated that over 50% of male inmates have children but only 10% of the inmates lived with their children prior to incarceration (National Center on Fathers and Families, 1998). This is related to the finding that approximately 75% of female state prisoners are mothers of children under 18, but in only 25% of these cases are the children cared for by the father (Snell & Morton, 1994).

One result of the 1.6 million people incarcerated in prisons and jails, is that an estimated 1.5 million children are left behind as a result of parental incarceration and the crimes that lead to the incarceration. These estimates are based on the most conservative of the estimates around the number

of fathers in prison. The 90,000 incarcerated women have 145,000 minor children. The 1.23 million incarcerated men have 1.38 million minor children (for a total of 1.53 million minor children of incarcerated parents) (Beatty, 1997). In addition to the estimated 1.5 million children who have a parent behind bars, 10 million more children have parents who have been imprisoned at some time in their lives (Jacobs, 1995).

The connection between parent criminality and youth criminality has long been recognized by researchers (Kordesh, 1995), but there are other effects of parent criminality that are just as dramatic for their children. Approximately 10% of the teenage children of offenders will be incarcerated as juveniles or adults (Johnston, 1991). A 1994 survey of children of offenders (Virginia Commission on Youth) found that 41% of the teenagers had been suspended from school and 31% had run-ins with the police. Children of offenders are six times more likely than their peers to end up in prison (Jacobs, 1995).

Despite the disturbing facts about the connection between parent and youth criminality there is reason to believe that family ties matter. The few studies that have been completed show that prisoners who maintain family ties have significantly greater success upon moving onto parole (Family and Corrections Network, 1994). Parole for male prisoners in New Zealand is more successful when inmates maintain strong family ties and receive frequent family visits. In the United Kingdom the lack of contact between prisoners and children has been shown to jeopardize the chances of families reuniting after prisoners are released (Hairston, 1990).

Does contact with families benefit children as well as prisoners? This is an area of controversy as some would argue that any contact between children and their parents while the parent is in prison is detrimental to the child. These same people may see this as weakening the punitive effect of prison (for example, if you want to stay united with your family, don't commit the crime). But others would say that when both parents agree on the value of contact with the children, the greater the level of visitation the better the chances of benefits for both prisoners and their children. While parents whose children visit them in prison are more likely to be motivated to improve parenting skills (Clark & Stephenson, 1993), only one-half of incarcerated parents receive visits from their children, and most who receive visits do not do so regularly (Johnston, 1995).

### State Efforts to Promote Responsible Fatherhood in the Prisons

In *Map & Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood*, eight states reported specific efforts to enhance the parenting skills of incarcerated men on a statewide basis (four states report similar strategies targeted to incarcerated juveniles) (Knitzer & Bernard, 1997). There is also reason to believe that other states are conducting similar activities in their prisons, but the central respondents to the survey were

usually in the Governor's office or the human services agency and may not have been aware of activities in the Corrections Department. The following descriptions appear in *Map & Track*.

**Arkansas** - The Department of Health's Division of Reproductive Health currently provides educational presentations to prerelease inmates at the Department of Corrections' Wrightsville and Benton units. Topics include: family planning and reproductive health, paternity and child support, family violence and abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS.

**Delaware** - The Department of Corrections has parenting classes which emphasize unique parent/child issues related to the incarcerated male. Prerelease information is available to inmates on developmental milestones and parenting techniques.

**Illinois** - The Life Skills Program operates in almost all correctional facilities. The multifaceted curriculum includes parenting, consumer education, finance management, and the importance of balancing home and work responsibilities. Parenting is taught in three courses: Parenting I focuses on relationships between fathers and their infants or toddlers, Parenting II highlights the needs of elementary school children, and Parenting III focuses on parenting adolescents. The core curriculum is the same for each institution although different parenting aspects may be highlighted, depending upon the needs of the inmate.

**Maryland** - Presentations are organized by the state Department of Human Resources and local coordinators for incarcerated males and females on fatherhood skills and the important role fathers play in the development of their children. The goal is to promise family involvement and to increase the financial and emotional responsibility of fathers. Training is provided in basic child care, child development, discipline of children, decisionmaking, money management, job preparation, sexual awareness, stress management, conflict resolution, anger management, and effective communication.

**Missouri** - The Division of Probation and Parole will present parenting classes for fathers on child rearing and how to cooperate with custodial parents on shared parenting responsibilities (project also will include men in prerelease status). PAPA (Parenting and Partnership Alliance) will provide 6-8 week parenting education via maximum security prison's in-house television. The focus will be on how to stay involved while in prison (that is, writing, telephone calls, prison visits), and they also televise sessions on parenting/child development, using child development experts, teachers and prisoners.

**New Jersey** - The Department of Corrections provides parenting classes to discuss responsible parenting and family relationships. The programs involve groups of 10-15 inmates meeting once per week (1 1/2 hour meetings) for 12 weeks. Topics include fathering from prison, what children need, and mending broken relationships. The Fathering Group has

the goals of improving inmates' parenting skills, reducing recidivism by increasing commitment to family and increasing the ability of inmates to be responsible fathers. The Planned Parent prerelease program focuses mainly on sexual education and is conducted by staff from the organization. Topics also include communications in marriage and parenting (offered monthly for inmates prior to being released).

**Oklahoma** - The Office of Juvenile Affairs works with the statewide Association of Youth Service Agencies (numbering 41 statewide) to provide programs and training for fathers. These are intended to provide guidance in parenting and family relationships in order to prevent their children from penetrating further into the juvenile justice system. The Corrections Department sponsors a course on parenting and family values directed primarily at male inmates.

**Vermont** - The Department of Corrections and North East Kingdom Community Action, Inc. provide a playgroup for incarcerated men and their children. The playgroup also includes the mothers or grandparents so the fathers can also build better family relationships. In order to participate, men must agree to focus their attention on the children, be involved with the child for the full duration of the playgroup time, and put aside differences with the child's mother to better meet the needs of the child. The group meets two hours per week for up to eight weeks.

### **Fathers in Prison: Links to Welfare Reform and Child Support Enforcement**

The recent changes related to welfare reform, which include efforts to increase child support payments, also present opportunities to do more work with fathers in prison. Traditionally, fathers are less likely than mothers to see themselves as part of their children's future and less likely to plan on reuniting with their children after release (Johnston, 1995). Using prison-based fatherhood programs to shift attitudes in this area can have the effect of increasing the incentives for fathers to find and maintain employment upon their return to the community. The desire to keep a job could be enhanced by the desire to become more involved in the lives of their children, which in turn can lead to more voluntary payment of child support. The more ex-offenders work and pay child support, the lower the welfare caseloads. Government should have multiple incentives to assist with these efforts.

Current child support enforcement law rests on the principle that parents have an obligation to support their children. When a father goes to prison the ability to meet this obligation is greatly diminished. Many states require a portion of any money earned in prison to go towards child support payments, but child support enforcement orders are often not modified when the father goes to prison, despite the obvious reduction in earnings ability. When the father leaves prison he has often built up a large arrearage, increasing the difficulty in finding a job (he no longer is just an ex-con, but an ex-con with a large financial obligation)

and in some cases increasing legal barriers to having contact with his children.

This also hurts the state in trying to reduce the gap between child support payments owed and child support paid. Even though the father may have no reasonable way to earn the money to pay off the arrearage, the state appears to be lax in its enforcement procedures. Making sure that child support orders are modified for fathers in prison can reflect changes in earnings accurately, while not adding another barrier to increased father involvement upon release.

With all of the diverse efforts states are making to promote responsible fatherhood, the efforts made around inmates, usually around the time of their release, have the potential to have the dual benefit of increasing positive outcomes for children while reducing the recidivism rates for the adults. This can reduce welfare caseloads and increase child support payments. Preparing soon to be released men for the world of work through job training and skills development should be just as important as preparing them for the world of being a father.

The long term preventive aspect of crime is clear; lowering the number of children who grow up in single parent households should reduce long term crime rates. What is less clear, or what remains to be tested, is the relationship between ex-offenders committing future crimes and their becoming successfully reunited with their children (or in many cases, living with, or being around, their children for the first time).

Developing and implementing policies that can demonstrate measurable improvements related to prison-based fatherhood programs remains the challenge for everyone in this field.

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- Strengthening the Role of Fathers in Families (Report on a Federal Conference hosted by the National Center on Fathers and Families, Domestic Policy Council, National Performance Review, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; May 3, 1996). (1997).

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### NCOFF BRIEF: FATHERS IN PRISON

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