

# Understanding Children and Families of the Incarcerated



*Dee Ann Newell, M.A.*

# Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind, Inc.

Founded  
1994

- Providing a **continuum of support services** from: pre-arrest to arrest, trial and sentencing, incarceration, and post-release
- Bearing **witness to the child's experience** along this continuum, with a **comprehensive view** of how multiple systems impact the child's experience.
- Participating as a member of a **14-state coalition**, and have witnessed the **positive role** state agencies can play during this challenging time in a child's life.

# Parental Incarceration

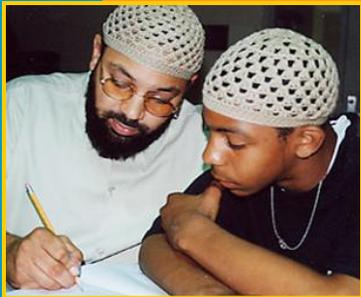
## *The Numbers*



- In Arkansas as of 2011:
  - 16,012 inmates in prisons
  - Estimated 21,439 children with a parent incarcerated
    - Under 1 year: 2% (*Average age: 5-6 years old*)
    - 1-4 years old: 20%
    - 5-9 years old: 36%
    - 10-14 years old: 28%
    - 15-17 years old: 14%
- 1990s: number of male inmates doubled & females tripled. *The majority were parents of minor children.*
- These children have been *invisible* & *unrecognized* in most state policy making and practice.

# What We Know about Parent-Child Separation

*American Academy of Pediatrics*



“Any intervention that separates a child from the primary caregiver who provides psychological support should be cautiously considered and treated as a **matter of urgency and profound importance.**”

- Child Abuse & Neglect
  - A Child Welfare Intervention
  - **Services are provided to support child**
- Parent Incarceration
  - A Criminal Justice System Intervention
  - **No services provided to support child**

# What We Know about the Children

*Health Risks* Center for Disease Control

Most children of incarcerated parents have **multiple ACEs**.

Their families are troubled prior to the incarceration.

Having an incarcerated parent is an “**Adverse Childhood Experience**” (ACE), contributing to long-term negative health outcomes.

- Abuse
- Neglect
- Household Dysfunction
  - Domestic Violence
  - Substance Abuse
  - Mental Illness
  - Parental Separation/Divorce
  - **Incarcerated Household Member**

# What We Know about the Children

## *The Impact of Stigma*

“Families selectively conceal or disclose based on an assessment of whether [they are at] risk for further shame.”

- Parental incarceration is distinguished from other ACEs by the unique combination of **trauma, shame and stigma**.
- **Stigma** around incarceration embedded in public systems and social institutions leads to shame and secret-keeping.
- We have a role to play in **reducing the stigma** in our systems and social institutions through:
  - Supportive interventions for children
  - Agency education and sensitivity training

*Families Shamed*, Rachel Condry, 2007

# What We Know about the Children

## *The Emotional Experience of Parental Incarceration*



Children with incarcerated parents experience:

**Fear, Worry, Confusion, Anger, Sadness,  
Guilt, Isolation, Embarrassment, Shame.**

Witnessing the arrest of a parent can intensify a child's loss and result in additional trauma.

The shame and silence of stigma can compound these feelings and leave a child isolated in distress.

If left unexplored and unsupported, these feelings can lead to ongoing problems...

# What We Know about the Children

## *Mental Health Risks*

- Attachment Disorders
- Developmental Problems/Delays
- Eating and Sleeping Disorders
- Depression and Anxiety Disorders
- Attention and Learning Disorders
- Conduct Disorders
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

**These problems often go undiagnosed, misdiagnosed or poorly treated.**

*Children with incarcerated parents are **more than twice as likely** to have clinically significant mental health problems compared to children in the general population.*

# What We Know about the Children

## *Behavioral and Educational Problems*

These behaviors are often **poorly understood expressions of feelings** and/or symptoms of trauma/distress.

Mental Health problems can manifest in behaviors:

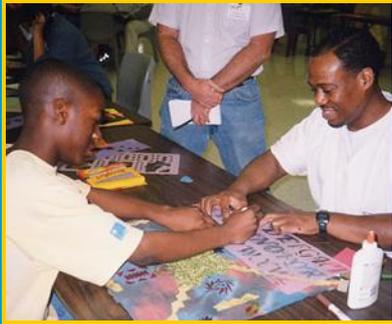
- Acting out inappropriately/disruptive behavior
- Physical aggression
- Anti-social behavior (conduct disorder)
- Violent or serious delinquent behavior

And impaired academic functioning:

- Attention difficulties and learning disabilities
- Diminished academic performance
- Behavior problems and truancy

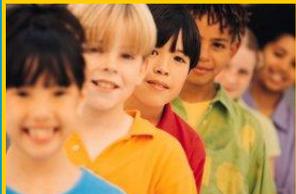
# What We Know about the Children

## *The Impact of Parental Incarceration*



- The impact ranges from **high to minimal** based on:
  - Child's knowledge of the incarceration
  - Nature of parent-child relationship
  - Risk factors & protective factors
- Many children have developed their own coping strategies and demonstrate **remarkable resiliency**. Others struggle tremendously.
- Nevertheless, all children need **some degree** of support to make sense of their experience.

# The Caregivers



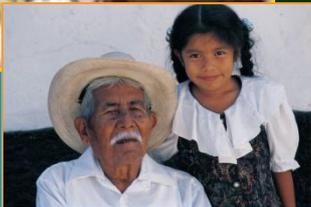
Of the children with an incarcerated parent:

- Majority of children live with their mothers (*father incarcerated*)
- Unknown number of children live with their fathers (*mother incarcerated*)
- Unknown number of children with incarcerated fathers live with relatives
- 2/3rds of children of incarcerated mothers live with relatives in the following percentage groups (*one or both parents incarcerated*)
  - 52% with a single grandmother
  - 24% with another relative or group of relatives
  - 3% with an adult sibling or half-sibling

Between 2-10% of children with an incarcerated parent are in State custody:

- 0% are placed in kinship foster care with relatives

# What We Know About Relative Caregivers



- They are glad to be able to keep their families together.
- They **save the state \$38M** in foster care costs.
- They need our support!
  - **2/3 live in poverty**, which deepens when they take in a child. Most live without family assistance.
  - They experience **high stress, chronic health problems** and **depression**.
  - The **stigma and shame** of incarceration and **fear of the child welfare system** often prevent them from seeking the support they need.

# What We Know About Incarcerated Parents



- Majority are **minorities** with **low-literacy** levels living in **poverty**, which deepens after release.
- Many are **at risk for recidivism**. Rates are **reduced by 6 times** if family ties are maintained.
- Many **do not disclose** information about children for fear of the child welfare system.
- Many will **resume parental role** & need support!
  - Understanding their children's developmental needs and how best to support them.
  - Repairing relationships and managing guilt and shame about their incarceration.
  - Resolving their own histories of trauma.

# Recommendations



- Understand the **needs** of children and families impacted by incarceration.
- **Identify** and effectively **support** children and families to improve outcomes
- Educate to **reduce stigma** and improve outreach and access to services