

## Supporting Families with Incarcerated Parents

Policy Brief No. 8

**Our nation's high rate of incarceration takes a heavy toll socially and economically on children, their families and communities. This brief examines risk and protective factors of children of incarcerated parents, intervention models, as well as state and federal initiatives to address this vulnerable and often invisible population.**

### Introduction

Consistent emotional bonds between families and adolescents have been found to be a significant protective factor for young people and a necessary component to achieve positive outcomes<sup>1</sup>. That being said, it is estimated that there are 2,473,300 children of male prisoners and 319,718 children of female prisoners in U.S. correctional facilities (Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2004). Our nation's high rate of incarceration takes a heavy toll socially and economically on children, their families and communities. Supports are needed because they make communities more resilient to the effects of incarceration and serve to prevent negative outcomes for prisoners and their children. According to Lalley (2003), communities with high rates of incarceration lose considerable social and financial resources. In addition, spouses and partners of inmates deal with emotional strain in their

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the work on youth assets and competencies, please visit the Search Institute website ([www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org))

### The consequences of parental imprisonment on children

*Travis, J., Cincotta, E., Solomon, A., 2003*

#### IMMEDIATE EFFECTS:

Feelings of shame, social stigma, loss of financial support, weakened ties to parent, changes in family composition, poor school performance, increased delinquency, and increased risk of abuse or neglect.

#### LONG-TERM EFFECTS:

Questioning of parental authority, negative perceptions of the legal system, impaired ability to cope with future stress or trauma and intergenerational patterns of criminal behavior.

relationship and stress from carrying more parental duties and expenses, not to mention the psychological trauma a child suffers from the lost bond with the parent (see **Appendix C**). This brief will examine risk and protective factors of children

of incarcerated parents; intervention models, as well as state and federal initiatives to address this vulnerable and often invisible population.

## The Facts

- Incarcerated parents as a percent of total prisoners: 63.4% males in federal prisons, 58.8% females in federal prisons. 54.7% males in state prisons and 65.3% females in state prisons (Mumola, 2000)
- Estimated number of children of incarcerated parents in 2004: 2,473,300 children of male prisoners and 319,718 children of female prisoners. (Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2004)
- According to the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, children of prisoners are 5 times more likely than other children to end up in prison.
- About 2.8% of all US children (one in forty) under the age of 18 have at least one parent in a local jail or in a state or federal prison (Adalist-Estrin & Mustin, 2003).
- In 1999 about 46% of parents in prison lived with their children prior to admission.
- According to a survey of inmates in State and Federal correctional facilities over 60% of parents in State prison reported being held over 100 miles from their last place of residence (Mumola, 2000)
- The loss of contact between children and their parents in prison is most often the outcome of complex family circumstances related to the causes of, but not caused by incarceration (Johnston & Carlin, 2004).

- The biggest factor in the loss of contact between incarcerated parents and their children is the character of the relationship between the parent and the children's caregiver.
- Research indicates that 75% of female prisoners and 55% of male prisoners have children under 18 (Lalley, 2003).
- Parke and Clark-Stewart (2002) estimated that 70% of young children with incarcerated mothers had emotional or psychological problems. These children may exhibit externalizing behaviors such as anger, aggression and hostility toward caregivers and siblings.

## What puts families at additional risk?

### Factors during incarceration

The major determinants of child adjustment during the period of parental incarceration are (1) the nature and quality of the alternative caregiving arrangements and (2) the opportunities to maintain contact with the absent parent. (Parke & Clark-Stewart, 2002). While prison limits the activities that a family member can perform, a prisoner can still fill an important role in family life as mother, father, spouse, partner, or sibling. Contact among family members has been shown to reduce the strain of separation and increase the likelihood of successful reunification (Travis, Cincotta, & Solomon, 2003). Also see **Appendix B**.

### Obstacles to parent-child visits in prison

Relocation and placement with alternative caregivers are both major disruptions in the lives of children (Parke & Clark-Stewart, 2002). Correctional facilities are typically located in remote areas, often long distances from where children and caregivers live,

making visitation extremely difficult for families with limited resources (Parke & Clark-Stewart, 2002). Other obstacles include (Travis, Cincotta & Solomon, 2003):

- Inadequate information about visiting procedures
- Difficulty scheduling visits
- Geographic location of prison facilities
- Family's inability to afford transportation
- Visiting procedures that are uncomfortable or humiliating
- Visiting rooms that are inhospitable to children
- Foster parents or caregivers who are unwilling to facilitate visits

The following risk factors, when added to parental incarceration, increase stress and negative impact for children of prisoners:<sup>2</sup>

- Poverty and/or parental unemployment or under-employment.
- Substandard schooling/education for parent and/or child.
- Inferior medical care.
- Abuse: physical, sexual, emotional.
- Physically or emotionally unavailable parents.
- Deteriorating or uninhabitable housing
- Drug abuse/addiction (child's or parent's).
- Mental illness of child or parent.
- Insufficient community resources & lack of community support

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see The Families and Corrections Network [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)

## Protective Factors

Given the hurdles children and caregivers face, it is important for program staff, policymakers and families to be cognizant of *protective factors* that serve to buffer the child from risk and stress and promote coping and good adjustment in the face of adversity (see also **Appendix A**); among them:

- Positive individual attributes. Children who have easy temperaments and high self-esteem and who are intelligent and independent are more adaptable in the face of stressful life experience (Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1993).
- Supportive family environment. The presence of a supportive parent/caregiver can help buffer the adverse effects of incarceration (Luthar et al., 2000).
- Positive relationships with the extended family and non-family informal social networks (Parke, R. & Clark-Stewart, K.A., 2002).

## Program Models

People and programs can make a difference in the lives of children and families of prisoners. They can function as protective factors. Programs to aid incarcerated parents and their children take a variety of forms and are targeted at several different audiences—imprisoned parents, alternative caregivers, and the children themselves (Parke, R. & Clark-Stewart, K.A., 2002). As far as the goals of programming some aim to increase contact between incarcerated parents and their children; some attempt to improve the structure of visits and facilitate family interactions; others seek to improve parenting skills of incarcerated parents; still others have the goal of easing the inmate parents' reentry

into society and the parental role by offering post-incarceration training, job placement services, and housing assistance. Following are examples of approaches that seek to fulfill these ends:

### **The Center for Community Alternatives**

[www.communityalternatives.org](http://www.communityalternatives.org)

The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) is a leader in the field of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Through innovative and pioneering services as well as the research, public advocacy and training of its Justice Strategies division, CCA fosters individual transformation, reduces reliance on incarceration and advocates for more responsive juvenile and criminal justice policies.

### **The Attachments Project**

[www.e-ccip.org](http://www.e-ccip.org)

The Attachments Project of the **Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents** is focused on building the capacity for attachment—trusting, affectionate relationships with others—in children who have experienced multiple disruptions in their care. The project offers child developmental assessments, childcare services planning and attachment-building activities for children. These services are designed to address issues of mother-child separation and child attachment disorders, and to improve child functioning and the mother-child relationship.

### **Words Travel Program - Volunteers of America and Scholastic Inc.,**

[www.volunteersofamerica.org](http://www.volunteersofamerica.org)

This program for incarcerated parents gives them the opportunity to receive literacy training and learn about different genres of literature and particularly how best to read to a child. The inmates then record storybooks on tape for their children and send them

home to the kids. Through the program, the children receive a tape player and headphones to listen to their parent's read the books. The children are able to read and follow along with their own books.

### **Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program**

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/>

The purpose of the Mentoring Children of Prisoners program is to make competitive grants to applicants serving urban, suburban, rural, or tribal populations with substantial numbers of children of incarcerated parents and to support the establishment and operation of mentoring programs. Projects funded under this program must link children with mentors, incorporate the elements of Positive Youth Development, and partner with private business, nonprofit, community-based, State, and local entities to support and enhance mentoring programs. This may include connecting children and families to additional support services. Funding supports the recruitment, screening, and training of mentors, identification of children, matching children with suitable adult mentors, and supporting and monitoring the mentoring relationship.

Those eligible to apply for funding under this grant competition include faith- and community-based organizations, tribal governments or consortia (federally and non-federally recognized), and State or local governments, as well as nonprofit organizations in areas where substantial numbers of children of prisoners live.

### **Girl Scouts Beyond Bars**

[www.girlsscouts.org](http://www.girlsscouts.org)

By keeping incarcerated mothers and their daughters connected, the trauma and negative impacts of parental separation can be dramatically lessened. *Girl Scouts Beyond Bars* facilitates visits between mothers and daughters and engages them in social

and educational activities designed to foster positive familial and personal development.

### **National Fatherhood Initiative**

[www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)

Long Distance Dads is a character-based education and support program that assists incarcerated men in developing skills to become more involved and supportive fathers. The program focuses on universal aspects of fatherhood as well as the unique challenges faced by incarcerated fathers.

### **State/Federal Initiatives/Policy**

- *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families: The Faith Based and Community Initiative<sup>3</sup>*  
The Mentoring Children of Prisoners program, as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001, provides grants to applicants serving urban, suburban, rural, or tribal populations with substantial numbers of children of incarcerated parents and supports the establishment and operation of mentoring programs. Projects funded under this program must link children with mentors, incorporate the elements of Positive Youth Development, and partner with private business, nonprofit, community-based, State, and local entities to support and enhance mentoring programs. This may include connecting children and families to additional support services.
- In 2001 the Oregon Legislature passed SB 133. This bill requires agencies to work together to develop recommendations designed to improve outcomes for

children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system and to report those recommendations to the appropriate legislative committee (Children of Incarcerated Parents Project, 2003).

- The need for family-oriented programs for inmates is being recognized in correctional agencies nationwide. The National Institute of Corrections distributed a survey to state and federal departments of corrections in order to gather information for policy makers on the range of family-oriented programming. See **Appendix D** and **E** for survey results.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Unless a child is in an abusive or unsafe situation, it is more often than not in the best interest of the child to be kept out of the foster care and adoption system and placed instead with family members, so that parent-child relationships can be strengthened.
- Social service providers should define a service delivery model for the families of offenders which address the entire course of the criminal justice experience.
- Community alternatives to incarceration should be considered in the sentencing of primary caregiver parents of young children. Investment in community sentencing programs, instead of prison based incarceration has been shown to reduce recidivism and increase family preservation. These alternatives include house arrest, half-way houses where mother and children reside, and day programs in which mothers attend programs in a correctional institution during the day but are permitted to return home at night.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information check out [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fbci/progs/fbci\\_mcp.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fbci/progs/fbci_mcp.html)

- As stated previously strong prisoner-family ties reduce recidivism. Therefore, it is in the interest of the criminal justice system to maintain and strengthen family ties through the adoption of system-wide policies and programs. These policies and programs should include the following: a system of family support services, provision for information access by families, encouragement of family communication by letter and telephone, and special programs for incarcerated parents and their children.

## RESOURCES

### **Aid to Children of Imprisoned Mothers, Inc.**

[www.takingaim.net](http://www.takingaim.net)

AIM is a non-profit community-based organization that assists inmate mothers, their children and other family members in maintaining critically important family ties during the mother's incarceration.

### **American Correctional Association (ACA)**

[www.corrections.com/aca](http://www.corrections.com/aca)

ACA is an umbrella organization of professionals representing many areas of corrections and criminal justice, including federal, state, and military correctional facilities and prisons; county jails and detention centers; probation/parole agencies; and community corrections/halfway houses.

### **Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)**

[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs)

BJS is a primary source for criminal justice statistics in the United States. BJS analyzes, publishes and disseminates data on all aspects of our criminal justice system.

### **The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents**

[www.e-ccip.org](http://www.e-ccip.org)

CCIP's mission is the prevention of intergenerational crime and incarceration. Organizational goals are the production of high quality documentation on and the development of model services for children of criminal offenders and their families.

### **Child Welfare League of America, Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners**

[www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org)

Conducts research and evaluation, collects and disseminates information, provides training and technical assistance to improve the quality of information available about children with incarcerated parents. Provides information about children of incarcerated parents, including case law, a recommended reading list for kids and workbooks for incarcerated parents.

### **Families and Corrections Network**

[www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)

FCN works alongside families of prisoners, program providers, policy makers, researchers, educators, correctional personnel and the public by: convening national meetings for mutually respectful learning; distributing information through FCN's publications, web site, and speakers' bureau; designing and supplying technical materials, tools and services; advocating criminal justice policy reform that upholds the value of families; encouraging networking among families of prisoners for mutual support and cooperative action; and creating opportunities for linking with and learning from families of prisoners.

Family and Corrections Network's Children of Prisoners Library (CPL) provides free information sheets designed for people serving children of prisoners and their caregivers. <http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/cplmain.html>

### **FamilyWorks**

<http://www.osborneny.org/FamilyWorks.htm>

FamilyWorks heals the trauma for children left behind through a prison-based parenting education program for incarcerated fathers; children's visiting centers for incarcerated fathers and their families at men's State prisons; and community-based services for families affected by incarceration.

### **Serving Children and Families of Adult Offenders: A Directory of Programs**

<http://www.nicic.org/pubs/2005/020200.pdf>

Published in 2005 by the U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Corrections

### **Legal Services for Prisoners with Children**

[www.prisonerswithchildren.org/](http://www.prisonerswithchildren.org/)

LSPC advocates for the human rights and empowerment of incarcerated parents, children, family members and people at risk for incarceration. We respond to requests for information, trainings, technical assistance, litigation, community activism and the development of more advocates. Our focus is on women prisoners and their families, and we emphasize that issues of race are central to any discussion of incarceration.

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## APPENDIX A

### Supports for Incarcerated Parents <sup>4</sup>

Practice	Principle
<b>Listen to families and prisoners</b> after visits, providing respectful counseling during this stressful time.	1. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
<b>Build parent-child bonds</b> by providing transportation to visits, subsidies for phone calls, and family visiting rooms with toys and play areas	2. Staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth, and children.
<b>Recognize strengths.</b> Use standardized measures to acknowledge all family members' strengths as well as to assess risks.	3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
<b>Understand the role of race</b> by researching whether certain groups in your community are over-represented in prison.	4. Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
<b>Make it consistent.</b> Make sure the goals and methods of prison-based parenting education, counseling, etc., don't conflict with those of services provided in the community.	5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
<b>Promote policies</b> that place prisoners near their families, provide phone service at-cost, and facilitate child visits.	6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
<b>Prepare families for prison visits</b> (for example, by giving them the prison's visiting regulations).	7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
<b>Build children's resilience</b> through: strong bonds with parents / mentors, activities to build competence and confidence, and spirituality / community of faith.	8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
<b>Provide child &amp; family development training</b> to correctional officers.	9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

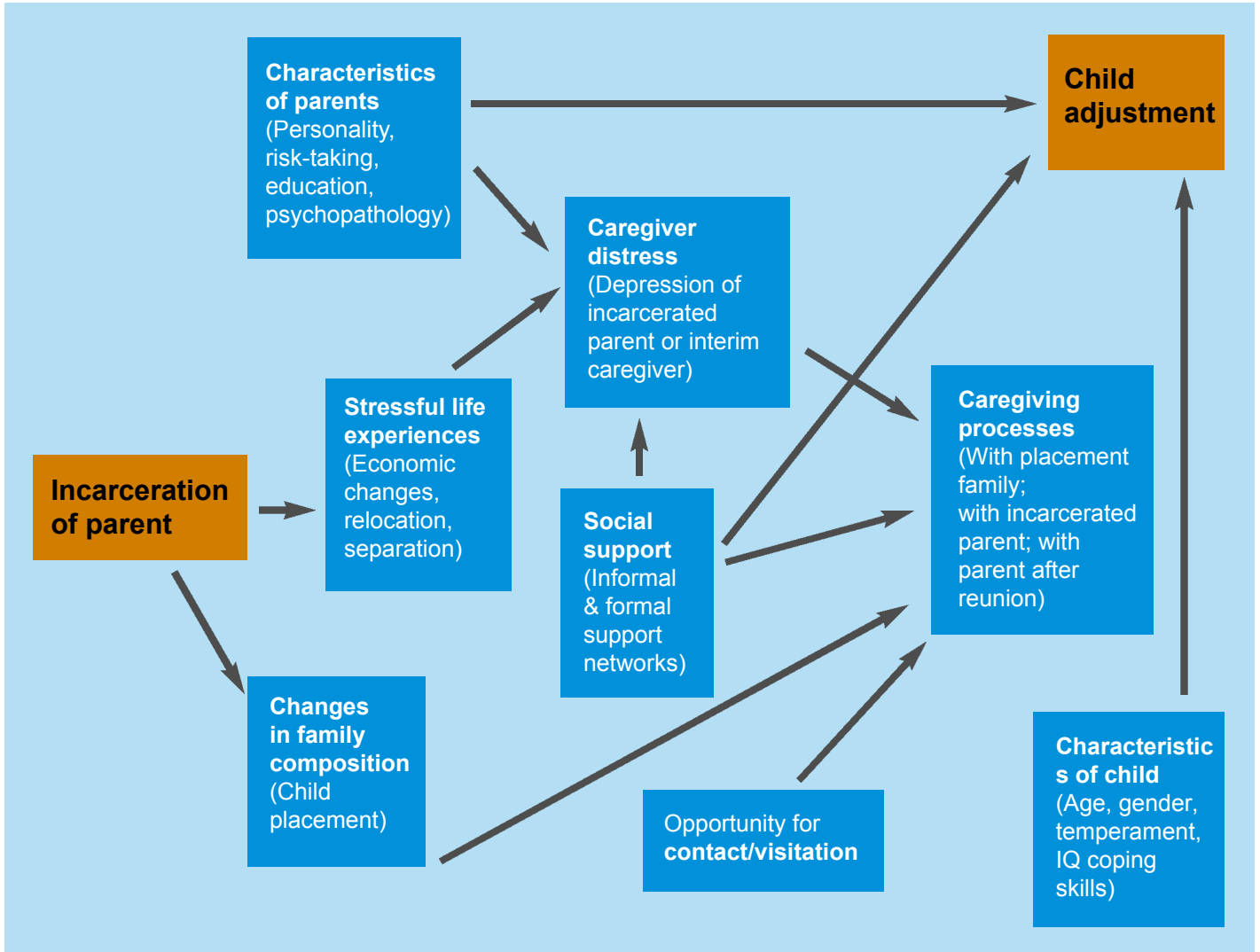
<sup>4</sup> Taken from Family Support in Practice: Supports for Incarcerated Parents [http://www.familysupportamerica.org/downloads/New\\_IP\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.familysupportamerica.org/downloads/New_IP_fact_sheet.pdf)



**APPENDIX B**

**A transactional model of the predictors of children's adjustment following parental incarceration and reunion**

(Parke, R. & Clarke-Stewart, K. A., 2002).



## APPENDIX C

### Possible developmental effects of parental arrest and incarceration on children<sup>5</sup>

Developmental state	Developmental characteristics	Developmental tasks	Effects of separation
Infancy (0–2 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited perception, mobility</li> <li>Total dependency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of trust and attachment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impaired parent-child bonding</li> </ul>
Early childhood (2–6 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased perception and mobility and improved memory</li> <li>Greater exposure to environment; ability to imagine</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of sense of autonomy, independence, and initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inappropriate separation anxiety</li> <li>Impaired socio-emotional development</li> <li>Acute traumatic stress reactions and survivor guilt</li> </ul>
Middle childhood (7–10 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased independence from caregivers and ability to reason</li> <li>Peers become important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sense of industry</li> <li>Ability to work productively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmental regressions</li> <li>Poor self-concept</li> <li>Acute traumatic stress reactions</li> <li>Impaired ability to overcome future trauma</li> </ul>
Early adolescence (11–14 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organization of behavior in pursuit of goals</li> <li>Increased abstract thinking</li> <li>Puberty-increased aggression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability to work productively with others</li> <li>Control expression of emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rejection of limits on behavior</li> <li>Trauma-reactive behaviors</li> </ul>
Late adolescence (15–18 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotional crisis and confusion</li> <li>Adult sexual development and sexuality</li> <li>Formal abstract thinking</li> <li>Increased independence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of cohesive identity</li> <li>Resolution of conflicts with family and society</li> <li>Ability to engage in adult work and relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Premature termination of dependency relationship with parent</li> <li>Intergenerational crime &amp; incarceration</li> </ul>

5 Travis, J., Cincotta, E.M. & Solomon, A. (2003). Families left behind: The hidden costs of incarceration and reentry. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

**APPENDIX D**

**Corrections Agency Initiatives Related to Families of Inmates<sup>6</sup>**

<i>Impetus for Initiatives</i>			<i>Initiatives with Specific Focus on Supportive Family Relationships</i>		<i>Initiatives with Specific Focus On Benefiting Children of Inmates</i>	
Statute	Litigation	Other	Agency-wide Policy	Program	Agency-wide Policy	Program
Alabama						
Alaska						
Arizona						
Arkansas						
California						
Colorado						
Connecticut						
Delaware						
D.C.	Agency has not formally considered new initiatives					
Florida						
Georgia						
Hawaii						
Idaho	Agency has not formally considered new initiatives					
Illinois						
Indiana						
Iowa						
Kansas						
Kentucky	Agency has not formally considered new initiatives					
Louisiana						
Maine			For women			
Maryland						
Massachusetts						
Michigan	Agency has not formally considered new initiatives					
Minnesota			For women			
Mississippi						
Missouri						
Montana	Agency has not formally considered new initiatives					
Nebraska	Agency is considering new initiatives					
Nevada	Agency is considering new initiatives					
New Hampshire						
New Jersey						
New Mexico						

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. (2002). Services for families. Retrieved on July 8, 2005 from <http://www.nicic.org/pubs/2002/017272.pdf>

**APPENDIX D** (Continued)

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<i>Impetus for Initiatives</i>			<i>Initiatives with Specific Focus on Supportive Family Relationships</i>		<i>Initiatives with Specific Focus On Benefiting Children of Inmates</i>	
Statute	Litigation	Other	Agency-wide Policy	Program	Agency-wide Policy	Program
New York						
North Carolina						
North Dakota						
Ohio						
Oklahoma						
Oregon						
Pennsylvania						
Rhode Island						
South Carolina						
South Dakota						
Tennessee						
Texas						
Utah	No survey response					
Vermont						
Virginia	No survey response					
Washington						
West Virginia	Agency has not formally considered new initiatives					
Wisconsin	Agency is considering new initiatives					
Wyoming	Agency is considering new initiatives					

**APPENDIX E**

**Provision of Parenting and Parent-Child Programs in Men’s and Women’s Prisons<sup>7</sup>**

	Parenting Classes Without Children Present		Parenting Classes With Children Present		In-Facility Programs, Outside Providers		Out-of-Facility Programs, Outside Providers	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Alabama								
Alaska								
Arizona								
Arkansas								
California								
Colorado								
Connecticut								
Delaware								
D.C.								
Florida								
Georgia								
Hawaii								
Idaho								
Illinois								
Indiana								
Iowa								
Kansas								
Kentucky								
Louisiana								
Maine								
Maryland								
Massachusetts								
Michigan								
Minnesota								
Mississippi								
Missouri								
Montana								
Nebraska								
Nevada								
New Hampshire								
New Jersey								
New Mexico								

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. (2002). Services for families. Retrieved on July 8, 2005 from <http://www.nicic.org/pubs/2002/017272.pdf>

**APPENDIX E** (Continued)

**Provision of Parenting and Parent-Child Programs in Men’s and Women’s Prisons**

	Parenting Classes Without Children Present		Parenting Classes With Children Present		In-Facility Programs, Outside Providers		Out-of-Facility Programs, Outside Providers	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
New York								
North Carolina								
North Dakota								
Ohio								
Oklahoma								
Oregon								
Pennsylvania								
Rhode Island								
South Carolina								
South Dakota								
Tennessee								
Texas								
Utah	No survey response							
Vermont								
Virginia	No survey response							
Washington								
West Virginia								
Wisconsin								
Wyoming								

**This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC)** seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of “family strengthening” in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children and their families.

The Family Strengthening Policy Center is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is an initiative of the National Human Services Assembly, an association of the nation’s leading national nonprofits in the fields of health, human and community development, and human services.

This brief reflects the findings and views of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, which is solely responsible for its content. Additional policy briefs are available at [www.nassembly.org/fspc](http://www.nassembly.org/fspc).