



Pittsburgh  
Child Guidance  
Foundation

# Children of Incarcerated Parents

(Full Report)

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# Children of Incarcerated Parents

## Executive Summary

Tens of thousands of children experience forced separation from their parents each year in the United States as an unintended consequence of the nation's effort to reduce crime and addiction through imprisonment. As incarceration rates have soared since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, millions of parents have been imprisoned and for longer periods of time. New prisons have been built, most in rural areas far distant from the families prisoners leave behind. The resulting stress on prisoners' families, and especially on their children, will influence our community and nation for generations to come.

Concerned about the impact parental incarceration was having on children in Allegheny County, the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation set out in early 2003 to learn more about what was happening to children in this community. The Foundation fielded a survey of parents in the Allegheny County Jail; sponsored focus groups of children of prisoners, their current caregivers, formerly incarcerated parents, and community- and faith-based providers of services; interviewed dozens of local criminal justice system, child welfare, and children's services representatives; sponsored a review of current research on children of prisoners; and gathered additional research from local and national experts.

The gathered testimony and data are voluminous. For this report, the Foundation Board has selected several concerns which are both critical for children's healthy development and capable of amelioration by an aware and aroused community.

### Children of prisoners are invisible.

1. The public systems designed to protect society in general and children in particular do not "see" children of arrestees and prisoners. These children's needs are seldom addressed; even their existence often goes unnoticed and usually unrecorded. The consequence can be, and sometimes has been, children left alone or with caregivers unprepared to keep them until their parents return.

### Families struggle to cope, without support.

2. Most of the burden of caring for children of arrestees and prisoners falls on prisoners' families. With little support, often without financial assistance, family members struggle "to do the right thing." Most families succeed in creating and maintaining some stability in children's lives. But financial and physical exhaustion impede family members' ability to foster children's development and protect children's attachments to their now-distant parents.

Children cannot build healthy lives on dishonest foundations.

3. Adults often do not know how to tell children the bad news that their parents have committed a crime and gone to jail. As a result children, confronted by the sudden loss of a parent, and without the facts about why, create their own frightening scenarios including those of self-blame. Without a factual foundation, delivered in age-appropriate and gentle ways, children cannot cope with potentially traumatic losses.

Children's need to grieve the loss of their parents is sometimes overlooked.

4. The grief that children feel at the forced separation from a parent is often not addressed. Incarcerated parents feel helpless to comfort their children; family members are often grieving – sad, angry, ashamed -- and usually overwhelmed by the incarceration of a loved one; arresting officers are focused on the parent; magistrates have no jurisdiction; criminal court judges do not respond to the needs of defendants' families; adult probation officers do not include children's needs in their work; most children of incarcerated parents do not come to the attention of County child welfare caseworkers, and those who do may not be identified as needing any special assistance. Some schools are unable to respond to the behavior children may exhibit out of grief and shame and to the teasing they may endure. As a consequence children must comfort themselves as best they can. Their emotional needs may not be addressed until the children get older and engage in anti-social behavior.

Lack of contact jeopardizes a child's emotional relationship with his incarcerated parent.

5. Staying in contact with an incarcerated parent is very hard for children. Most jails and prisons are hours away, phone calls are expensive. Family members, already overburdened, sometimes cannot or will not bring children to visit. The local County Jail forces most children to see their parents through thick glass and wire mesh while they talk on a telephone. Locally as well as nationally, the few programs that foster parent-child contact are mostly for incarcerated mothers even though almost 90 percent of incarcerated parents are male. Imprisonment often strains the bonds between the child's custodial parent and incarcerated parent; the resulting breach often means an end to the child's contact with the parent in jail. These losses of a child's relationships with mother or father – or both – may deprive children of their birthrights and histories for their lifetimes. Even when physical reunification with parents is impossible or unhealthy, children want and need emotional ties in real time.

# Children of Incarcerated Parents

## Introduction

Parents of one-seventh of the children in the United States have been imprisoned during some time of their children's lives.

*Currently more than two million children have at least one parent in jail or prison.*

*Ten million more children have experienced the incarceration of one or both parents during their childhoods.*

The number of children whose parents are incarcerated has increased steadily over the past several decades and continues to rise.

*The number of children with incarcerated mothers doubled between 1991 and 1999; children with fathers in jail or prison rose 55% in the same 10 years.*

*Counties, states, and the federal government imprisoned 2.9 percent more people in mid-2003 than in mid-2002 – an increase of 1,108 per week. Between 2001 and 2002, Pennsylvania's state prison population rose 5.5 percent and Allegheny County Jail admissions were up 2.3 percent.*

In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, 7000 children face each day with one or both parents in jail or prison. The children live in every part of the County, every zip code, every school district. Fifty percent of the children whose parents are in the Allegheny County Jail are Caucasian, 50 percent are African American. Three-quarters of the children are under 13; the average child of an incarcerated parent is eight years old.

Little is known about what happens to children and families when parents are arrested and jailed. The few studies that are available seem to indicate that children whose parents are incarcerated are more likely than other children to

- show developmental delays and gaps
- do poorly in school
- suffer emotional distress
- develop substance use disorders
- commit multiple serious delinquent acts
- be incarcerated themselves during their lifetimes.

But for the most part, children are ignored when their parents are arrested and incarcerated -- by all of the divisions of the criminal justice and child-serving systems. Little is know and even less is collected and recorded.

At the beginning of 2003, the Board of Directors of the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation (PCGF) decided to focus its resources and energies on helping the communities of Allegheny County Pennsylvania address the losses children experience when their parents are incarcerated.

### **Methodology**

Beginning in the Spring of 2003 PCGF set out to better understand what is happening to children of prisoners in Allegheny County. The Foundation

- fielded a survey of 186 randomly selected parents confined in the Allegheny County Jail;
- sponsored eight focus groups of children of prisoners, their current caregivers, formerly and currently incarcerated parents, and both community- and faith-based providers of services to offenders and their families;
- interviewed dozens of local criminal justice system, child welfare, and children's services representatives;
- sponsored a review of current research on children of prisoners; and
- gathered additional research from local and national experts.

The wisdom gathered from the children in this community and the adults who care deeply about their welfare creates a compelling picture of the deprivation children and families experience when a person they love is in prison. Much of what they said was corroborated by researchers across the country. The PCGF study is continuing. This paper presents a very small selection of what has been learned so far.

## Children are Invisible

### Police

More than half of all people behind bars are parents and their children are very young. Three-quarters of the children in the PCGF Allegheny County Jail study were 12 and under, and their average age was 8. Numbers are similar throughout the United States. Twenty-five percent of the women and 13 percent of the men interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail were single parents at the time of their arrests, the sole caretakers of children under 18. In a small California study, children were present at the time of an arrest 20 percent of the time, and most of those children were under 6.

What does a police officer do to protect children when making an arrest? The answer is: It depends – on the officer. Neither locally nor nationally do police departments have formal, written policies for the treatment of children of persons under arrest. In a small department within Allegheny County, police generally follow a series of steps if a child is present at the time of arrest. The officer might determine if the other parent or family members can care for the child while the parent is gone, or a neighbor or some other caregiver. If a child is present at the arrest, the parent is likely to identify a caregiver. After confirming that the potential caregiver is willing to accept financial and medical responsibility for the child as well as provide clothing and food for an unknown period of time, the officer might look into the house, if it is very close by, and run a criminal background check on the individual. County-wide social workers interviewed separately, however, indicated that officers might place a child without looking into the suitability of the caregiver. “Officers often have to rely on instinct to determine where the child will go,” according to a small-department Chief. There is no documentation of temporary custody, though the officer might record the caregiver’s name in his or her report. The only instance in which police would check up on a child who has been placed with a neighbor or relative is if the arresting officer decides to do so. This does not happen often.

If children are not present at the arrest, in school or out playing, an arresting officer will not necessarily know about children unless the person being arrested volunteers the information. Many parents do, but some, out of fear that “the system” will snatch their children or some other cause, do not reveal that they have children. After processing these parents might attempt to call a relative or friend.

If a child is present and no caregiver can be identified, the arresting officer is likely to call the Department of Human Services Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF).

Arresting officers are often in dangerous situations. The presence of children sometimes makes the situation worse. “There is obviously a great deal of psychological trauma in seeing a parent arrested, handcuffed, and taken away,” the Chief of a department within Allegheny County said. Officers would be more cautious in making arrests when teenage children are present. A Commander in the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police added that police will “take children’s needs into account as long as they don’t jeopardize the officer or public safety.”

## Magistrates

Magistrates set bond or order the arrested parent to be detained in Jail and determine whether there is enough evidence to continue legal proceedings.

According to one busy magistrate, “In the magistrates court there is a general lack of information about the entire family environment. . . Our jurisdiction doesn’t extend that far.” Magistrates interviewed for this study indicated that if the children are not involved in the crime, the magistrate’s decision does not consider the needs of the children in any way. Magistrates also described arrestees as bringing their children into the courtroom to play on the magistrate’s sympathy, thereby assuring that magistrates would disregard parental pleas for consideration of the impact of detention or a trial on the children.

## Allegheny County Jail

Some arrestees cannot make bond immediately and are held at the Jail until they do, and others are detained in the Jail for a variety of reasons. All admissions to the Jail, no matter the reason or duration, are screened by the Jail’s health service. All admittees are asked whether they have children and how many. This information will be forwarded to Jail caseworkers if the person is detained for more than a few hours. A review of the pilot screening program carried out in 2003 revealed that detainees’ self-reports immediately upon admission to the Jail were highly inconsistent and answers about children were filled with errors. Improvements in the screening since may have improved the data. But people coming into the Jail are often high, frightened and unlikely to reveal any information that might bring more public scrutiny of their lives and families.

## Probation Officers

There are 25,000 offenders on probation in Allegheny County. Probation officers monitor these individual’s behavior, take urine samples to make sure they are “clean,” and help individuals work toward paying restitution. The Adult Probation Department does not have data on how many of these individuals are parents, but estimates that “almost all” have children.

There is no policy that requires Adult Probation officers in Allegheny County to know or investigate the family status of an offender.

## CYF

CYF caseworkers interviewed for this study estimated that from 25 to 90 percent of the children in their caseloads had experienced parental arrest or incarceration at some point. These numbers are estimates because the CYF record-keeping system does not specifically identify children of prisoners.

Fewer than 1 in 20 of the children of parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail was in care under the supervision of CYF, according to the parents' reports. National data confirm these small numbers. Parents fear CYF's ability to remove their children and terminate their parental rights. Therefore, most parents seem to work to place their children with their own relatives. Parent Advocates indicated that, in fact, they counsel parents to place informally with relatives whenever possible in order to protect themselves from the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act. Both CYF caseworkers and police officers indicated that CYF is not informed about the children placed with neighbors or relatives at the time of arrest or incarceration.

Children play a role in keeping CYF out of families' lives. A teenage boy in a focus group described caring for his two young siblings while both of his parents were in jail. He urged the group facilitator to let people know that children, when they reach a certain age, should have a say in where they are placed rather than having the choice made by CYF. Other children in the group joined in, emphasizing the terrible results produced by separation from their siblings. The anger and hurt of not being able to live with siblings was echoed by an adult family member describing CYF and the Court refusing to place two sisters with their older brother at his grandmother's house.

Judges indicate that most children who are placed informally come to light when children need medical care or are enrolling in school for the first time and caregivers do not have the children's birth certificate or legal custody.

Some caseworkers cite the lack of information about a parent's criminal proceedings as a problem in setting a goal for a child. "We don't have much contact with the Criminal Division, and sometimes we can't find the probation officer," said one caseworker. Sometimes caseworkers have to go to the Jail to find out about the parent's status. It is still difficult for them to find out how long the parent is incarcerated for.

## **Implications**

The lack of consistent uniform policies for treatment of children at arrest exposes children to the dangers of being abandoned or placed with caregivers who do not have the resources to take care of them. It also assures that there will be little information available about children of parents who are arrested.

Absence of attention to children continues through the remaining stages of criminal justice processing. Some of the interviews with criminal justice representatives indicated that not only were children's needs not considered, but that children themselves were seen as an impediment to appropriate functioning of the criminal justice system.

The desire for informal placement of children, so understandable and laudable in many respects, is described by many people in both the criminal justice and child welfare systems as depriving children of access to services that children of incarcerated parents might need. Informal caregivers often cannot afford the services that children need. The

lack of demand for services specifically for children of prisoners has resulted in the absence of such specific services in Allegheny County.

### **Suggested Approaches**

1. Both policies and training for police officers in how to assist children of persons being arrested. These can be modified from policies in place in other jurisdictions.
2. Create a non-CYF, community-based resource to assist all components of the criminal justice system address children's immediate needs when parents are arrested and incarcerated. This resource can coordinate screening of potential caregivers, provide emergency assistance to caregivers, arrange for counseling and emergency assistance to children, follow up on children in caregivers' homes, keep children informed about what is happening to their parents (in an age-appropriate way), calm children's fears about what is happening to them, screen and provide substitute caregivers when the original caregivers decide they no longer want to care for the child.
3. Develop clear protocols between the agencies of the criminal justice system and CYF to assure that caseworkers get the information they need to develop service plans and implement them while parents are incarcerated.
4. Begin to keep uniform records about the children of prisoners that can be used to design services and at the same time protect children's confidentiality and privacy.

## **Family Struggles**

When parents go to jail in Allegheny County, their children are folded into their extended families. Few children here (less than 5%) and elsewhere in the country are reported by their incarcerated parents to be in formal placement under the supervision of child welfare agencies. Many children were already living with the other biological parent or relatives before this arrest. And others lived with either both parents or the now-incarcerated parent plus another family member.

Family members provide structure for children when the incarcerated parents do not. Only one-third of the children of parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail moved as a result of their parent's incarceration. Several parents said that their children were doing well . . . because their lives were stable now.

Many parents in the Jail talked about the economic hardships their family members faced in caring for their children and providing for the inmate's needs. The inability of family members to purchase beds for all of the children who now lived with them or to afford health insurance for themselves worried several inmates. Several custodial parents in focus groups described not knowing if they would be able to eat in a coming week.

Jail and prison phone bills are a drain on family resources. So is the outlay for clothes and sundries most families make for the incarcerated parent. Based upon information provided by parents and conservative estimates of charges for telephone calls, commissary items, and bus transportation, an average family spends \$54 a month maintaining communication between incarcerated parents and their children. In the first months of a parent's incarceration, when basic clothing items, such as thermal underwear are bought, the average monthly cost may rise to approximately \$70. These minimal costs do not include the costs of caring for the children or expenditures for the inmate's defense or court-related costs.

The burden that the incarceration of parents places on families is aggravated by harsh economic circumstances in which many families live. Though interviewed parents came from every area in the County, the most frequently identified zip codes of residence of inmates families are among the poorest communities in Pittsburgh and the Mon Valley. The majority of households in several of these communities earn less than \$15,000 per year.

Focus group members felt that caregivers were often over-extended and therefore unable or unwilling to bring children to visit their incarcerated parents. Elderly grandparents, biological parents and younger relatives who work full-time, caregivers with no access to a car, all may have less energy than is required to make high-stress visits with several children, often traveling long distances.

## **Implications**

By doing “the right thing” family members are often drained physically and economically. Their dilemma is wanting to care for their children without resorting to the County child welfare agency (CYF) with its capability of removing children for long periods of time. By refusing to tap into CYF’s wealth of resources – concrete aid, counseling, transportation, camps and afterschool activities – caregivers further burden themselves.

## **Suggested Approach**

Community-based services to caregivers have been tried successfully in other jurisdictions. Such services can offer as many or as few services as are needed, and can help tie together the various needs both caregivers and children of incarcerated parents have. Similar to A Second Chance, Inc., such a program would work for caregivers who do not wish to become as entangled in the system as ASCI’s kinship caregivers and would make available or arrange for the services caregivers, parents, and children need. Among the services may be transportation and visiting, emergency tangible aid, support groups, help with difficulties children are having, respite, and more.

## Family Secrecy and Children's Mental Health

“My daughter. . . she’s about 5 at the time. . . she’s like, ‘Where did my Dad go all of a sudden?’ He was here and he did come home every night and he’s just gone. And . . . it took me months, months, months. . .and I was waiting, and I was waiting. . . What am I going to tell her, what am I going to tell her. . .”

Children and their caregivers, incarcerated parents, and researchers identify the difficulties of telling young children that their parents are in prison as a major stumbling block to children's mental health.

In a focus group a young boy said that the hardest thing for him when his Dad went to jail was “that my Mom, she tried to keep something away from me. She should have told me before she waited so long to tell me and it was bad for me. . . “ Another child, whose mother was in and out of prison, said, “I thought my aunt was my Mom, but then they told me [years later.]”

Several mothers interviewed at the Allegheny County Jail described family secrecy about their whereabouts and the fictions their children were told. The very young children of one young mother were being told their mother was out of state caring for a sick relative. Another said her children were told she was ill and in the hospital.

The mystery about the disappearance and whereabouts of a parent can have both immediate and long-term negative impact on children. Noted researchers identify dishonesty about the actual whereabouts of the parent as one of the factors that predispose a child to psychiatric and behavior disorders.

A jailed mother told an interviewer that the last time she was imprisoned, her very young daughter was told that her mother was away at school. Now the child, approaching school-age, is terrified of going to school.

Honest, age-appropriate information about the parent's whereabouts is the critical first step in helping children deal with the emotional consequences of forced separation.

Researchers agree that when families are dishonest about where parents are, children cannot talk about their fears and are unable to either understand or receive comfort. Given children's egocentricity, a parent's leaving is most often experienced as a leaving of them. The lack of accurate information about where the parent is and why only serves to compound the problem of children blaming themselves. A mother who was back in the Allegheny County Jail for the second time summed it up: “My children are doing better and being more accepting because I prepared them and was honest with them this time.”

## **Suggested Approaches**

Many adults need help knowing how to say very hard things in ways that foster children's ability cope. From the offending parent, to the mother or father, aunt or uncle who is left to explain why a parent has disappeared, to the arresting officer who must find a place for a now-parentless child, adults can benefit from simple, easy to use assists that will help them speak the truth to children in ways that are age-appropriate and allow children to have and express their feelings.

### Support and Education

Caregivers, incarcerated parents, police officers who specialize in work with children, and children of incarcerated parents have wisdom to share. Their knowledge can be communicated in support groups, pamphlets, easy to carry "What to say when. . ." cards. Some already exist, created in other parts of the country, and others specific to Allegheny County can be developed.

A more ambitious effort might result in a series of TV or newspaper spots with vignettes that model appropriate honesty.

### Resources for Children

Several children's books about the incarceration of a parent are available for very young and elementary age children. In the recent past, PCGF helped to create "Parent Guides" for similar books for adopted children. These Guides help adults read the books to and with children and suggest ways to help the children explore their questions. These books and Guides have been distributed to every library in Allegheny County.

## **Grief, Loss, and Shame**

Grief with its array of intense feelings – sadness, anger, shame, confusion, blame, ambivalence – can be overwhelming for children. The impact of separation from their parents and the grief engendered by this loss is believed to be the greatest risk to the mental health of children of incarcerated parents.

Children in focus groups described themselves as “sad” when their parent was arrested. Many parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail said that their children were sad, depressed, crying all the time. One very young child looks for her mother’s car in the evening, expecting her to come home from work, and sets a place at the dinner table for her mother every night.

A child’s desire to hold on to and protect her parents can be very powerful. A police chief described officers’ fears that a child will grab the officer’s gun to try to prevent a parent’s arrest.

Children often blame themselves for the experiences occurring in their families. Children can feel they have caused the problems and tensions facing their significant adults. When children’s efforts to help, which they invariably attempt, do not resolve the problems, it often results in their lowered self-esteem. Children’s natural self-centeredness also leaves them feeling alone. The stigma society attaches to these experiences can further increase children’s isolation.

### Family

A child’s need to mourn the loss of a parent is sometimes overshadowed by the dramatic events surrounding the arrest and incarceration of her parent. Families are beset by the economic and physical drains on their energy of the legal and financial demands of arrest and imprisonment. The new caretaking arrangements require time, energy and money to care for additional children. Also, caregivers may be filled with grief themselves -- very angry at the offending parent or terribly ashamed -- and want to keep the incarceration secret. For all of these reasons, the child’s needs for succor may be unmet.

### School

Schools and day care programs, too, may overlook a child’s loss of a parent to prison.

In focus groups children told of being teased by classmates. One young man said that the teasing didn’t let up until he moved into a new neighborhood. A service provider told of an incarcerated mother who cried through an entire group session. Finally the mother revealed that her daughter had informed her classmates that her mother was dead. The group helped the mother understand that the child probably could not put up with any more questions and taunting from her peers. And the group leader helped the mother see that her daughter was likely in pain and needed her mother’s help.

One mother described the day she had to go to her daughter's school and bring her daughter home, sobbing and inconsolable. The school had announced a "Bring Your Dad to School Day," and the child's father was in prison for life. Another mother in the focus group, whose daughter goes to the same school, had not heard about the "Day." Her daughter, whose Dad is also in prison, had likely torn up the flyer she was supposed to bring home.

A child in day care went "berserk." Her foster mother was called in and tried to find out what happened, thinking that someone had hit the child. Finally, the mother discovered that the group was watching a "Barney" cartoon in which Barney was in jail and rattling the bars, trying to get out. The child's father was in prison.

## **Implications**

Children who have lost a parent need time, space, and help to grieve. Whether the child has been deprived of the primary person in his life, or the parent "who might have been," the loss is real. When the loss is a forced separation because the parent has been arrested and incarcerated, shame and stigma may further isolate the child. Like many children suffering loss and pain, a child may feel alone. A child whose parents are incarcerated said to her aunt: "Why is it different for me? . . . How come it didn't happen for me the same way . . . it happens for everybody else?"

A defense attorney indicated that he sees children change from the moment of a parent's arrest. "We could track when an individual begins acts of defiance – it is very close to when his or her parents have been taken away. They do poorly in school, seek out attention from the wrong individuals, have a high disregard for life," he said. "I believe it all stems from the parent not being around." A parent interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail said that her son went from honor roll to special education after her incarceration.

Children's physical health may suffer as a result of the forced separation from a loved parent. The young daughter of a focus group member developed excruciating stomach pains after her mother went to prison. When physical causes were ruled out, the child entered long-term counseling, which slowly eased her pain.

## **Suggested Approaches**

### Children's Support Groups

Children from Houston and New York City who participated in a panel on a nationally broadcast videoconference, "Children of Prisoners: Children of Promise," credited their daily or once a week support groups with helping them survive the incarceration of their parents. The daily group, facilitated by a community program, took place in school. The once a week group met on Saturday at the offices of an agency serving incarcerated parents and their children. A school group in California was developed by the Center for

Children of Incarcerated Parents when the Director invited the teachers in one school to send her all of their “troublemakers” for an after school program. Many of the children who were “referred” had currently or previously incarcerated parents. And when the group turned out to be fun, they invited their friends who also had parents in jail. The group soon was composed solely of children of incarcerated parents.

A member of a focus group lauded a program facilitated in schools in Pittsburgh in which groups of boys who were having difficulty met at lunch time with “mentors” to talk and set goals. PCGF supported such a program in the Pittsburgh Public Schools provided mostly by volunteers that showed good results. Other groups in churches, some previously supported by PCGF, meet on a once a week or once a month schedule. No regularly and frequently scheduled groups for children of incarcerated parents currently exist in the Pittsburgh area.

### Psychological Counseling for Children

Several members of focus groups advocated long-term counseling by very well-trained professionals to help children cope with grief and loss. One previously incarcerated parent credited both her own and her daughter’s recovery to years of work with a dedicated, effective psychologist. Two ministers in a providers’ focus group urged that the best professionals come to work in communities, in places where people are rather than in offices where people have to go to them.

### Helping Adults Help Children

#### 1. Incarcerated Parents

Nationally and locally incarcerated parents are often aware of the turbulence they have created in their children’s emotional lives. Parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail suggested:

- Visiting conditions that allow parents to physically comfort their children, especially their very young children;’
- Cheaper phone calls, so they could talk to their children more frequently and for longer time;
- Afterschool activities that engage their children and help them develop skills so the children had healthy options for working out their feelings that elderly or working caregivers could not provide;
- Counselors who help their children afterschool during the week, bring their children to the Jail for visits, and remain to provide a “bridge” between parent and child, helping the parent engage in “normal” activities with the child such as helping with homework.

Other jurisdictions have created ways to maintain involvement of parents in their children's lives thereby reducing the loss of a parent's role in supporting their children's development. New Jersey has created Parent-Teacher Organizations in 2 state prisons. Other states have invited "Girl Scouts Behind Bars" programs into their prisons, transporting daughters to their mothers and providing skill-based programming for both.

## 2. Family members.

A mother in the Allegheny County Jail said that what her daughter needed most was for her family members, who were stressed to the point of breaking, to stop arguing among themselves about what each should be doing for the child, and start concentrating on what the child needed. The mother suggested that family therapy – at least one session – might be able to bring them together and help them devise a reasonable plan.

In the midst of the chaos of incarceration, family members can be helped to keep children's feelings and needs on their radar screens. Successful programs to help divorcing families accomplish this have demonstrated how. Brief, educational group sessions followed by short- or long-term individual coaching have worked well. Simply distributing well-conceived literature to every family member in Court, waiting in the Jail, using agency transportation to prisons, and stocking every church and clinic might be a first step.

Caregivers need resources for tangible aid, legal help, transportation, and respite. Providing assistance with these life needs can convince caregivers to give some of their extremely limited time and energy to educational groups. An easier way may be similar to a brochure for caregivers provided by community-wide program for the children of incarcerated parents in Memphis Tennessee. This "Where to Turn" for needed resources could be expanded to include brief tips as well as resources for addressing children's emotional needs.

## 3. School Administrators and Teachers.

In both schools and child care programs, adults can be helped to understand the impact of parental incarceration on children and aided to design policies and practices that are sensitive to the emotional needs of children whose parents have been arrested and incarcerated. A program of Allegheny County Safe Start that sensitizes principals, teachers, and child care professionals to children's responses to violence, is a good model.

As described above, schools in other parts of the country have developed groups for children of incarcerated parents, sometimes using formats designed to reduce labeling and consequent shame.

## Relationships through the Bars

Among the parents interviewed at the Allegheny County Jail, slightly more than half of the mothers and 42 percent of the fathers lived with their children before the parents' arrests. Although it might seem that these statistics point to severed ties for a great number of the remaining children, a closer look at PCGF data proves otherwise. Almost half of the children who did not live with their parents before their parents were incarcerated remained in touch while their parents were in Jail. In all, two-thirds of the interviewed parents had some contact with their children during their current stay (averaging 3-6 months at the time of the interviews) in the Allegheny County Jail

During a focus group with 7 to 11 year old children who had at least one parent in prison, the facilitator asked the 13 participants what one thing would really make them feel happy. Here is what they said:

- For my Mom to be here.
- Go and see my Dad.
- To have my Dad back.
- If my Dad would get out of prison and come and live with me.
- Have my Dad again.
- To see my Dad and to see my uncle.

The same children responded to the question: What could someone do that would improve the way you are living now? by saying:

- My Mom to have a new life. Fresh life. Fresh new start.
- Someone who would take me to see my Dad.

### Visiting

Children often, though not always, express strong preferences to see and talk with their incarcerated parents. Researchers have concluded that visiting with biological parents is significantly associated with emotional adjustment and that visiting a parent in jail or prison may do much to alleviate a child's anguish. Solid research indicates that incarcerated parents, too, benefit from visiting with their children. Frequent visits are positively associated with reduced recidivism, improved mental health, diminished disciplinary problems, and the heightened likelihood of family reunification. These gains for parents also may improve their children's lives as well.

Despite the many benefits of frequent visiting, children are often unable to visit their incarcerated parents. Only 28 percent of the parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail had seen any of their children since their admission to the Jail.

Most visiting in the Allegheny County Jail occurs in hallways where children and the adults who bring them share two chairs in front of a small thick glass square backed by wire mesh. Their incarcerated parent sits on the other side of the wall and they communicate through a single telephone on the wall. Often children have waited an hour on hard plastic seats in the Jail's lobby with no distractions or play areas. A very few children -- those who have specific court orders or whose parents have earned worker

status – may sometimes have “contact” visits during which they can physically touch and be hugged by their parents. The contact visit area has a play corner which once was staffed by the community.

Parents in the Jail expressed great concern about the impact of visiting on their children. A mother cried as she spoke of having to stop visits because her six year old son just could not bear the glass between them. A father described his three year old child pounding on the glass and crying, so upset at seeing but not being able to touch her Dad. A mother said that she couldn’t allow her eight year old daughter to visit any more because the child thought her mother was in a “cage” behind the glass and wire mesh and she cried to the point of hyperventilating.

Visiting in state prisons poses different challenges. Most visits are contact visits. Therefore all visitors – including children -- must go through onerous, often embarrassing, searches. Some guards are extremely strict with children. Some prisons do not have play areas in which young children can take breaks during long visits. A custodial parent said in a focus group that visiting the state prison in which her husband was incarcerated was “nasty” and vowed never to go again and not to allow her children to return. Other custodial parents described the difficulties of transportation to far-distant prisons. Some did not know about low-cost transportation options, others did but could not tolerate the trips. The great effort required to visit prisons that are hours away from Pittsburgh wears some families down. And when the incarcerated parent is in for the second or third time, some caregivers will not or cannot take children to see their parents.

### Phone Calls

The majority of the contact between parents incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail and their children is by phone. Most children talk with their jailed parent at least once a week; one-third of the children who talk with their parents by phone, talk to them daily.

All phone calls are out-going; that is, they must be made by the incarcerated parent. Calls are made collect, a very expensive method, and then are further surcharged by the Jail. Incarcerated parents, custodial parents, other caregivers, all described the financial drain that these collect calls placed on family members. Often children will be out of touch with their parents because their family member with whom they are living cannot afford to pay the phone bills. Some relatives get 3-way calling so they can include the children, who may reside elsewhere, in conversations with their parents.

PCGF has estimated that, at a minimum, families spend \$25 a month on phone calls to be able to talk to the parent in Jail once a week. This is an extremely conservative estimate and probably is exceeded in most cases. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has ended the practice of surcharging phone calls, but surcharges continue at the Allegheny County Jail.

## **Implications**

Children in a focus group were very concrete about their losses when they are not able to see or talk with their incarcerated parents. Their parents don't look the same. One said that the last time she saw her Dad before his incarceration he had "a whole bunch of junk on his face [mustache and beard]." Then he came home and he was entirely different. Another child joined in: His Dad had braids when he left and much later, during a visit, his braids were gone. A 10 year old girl described a more subtle loss. She said "My Mom never told me about her childhood. . . What she did when she was a teenager. . . Like was she doing something bad. . . About her boyfriend. Her first date. Her first kiss... When she went on a date, and did she prop her foot up in the air when she got her first kiss."

Maintaining contact, especially through visiting, is the key to successful reunification of families. For families in which reunification is not feasible, contact permits children to have continuing and realistic interactions with their parents. Whatever other adults think about the behavior of an incarcerated parent, their children often have strong attachments to them and strong feelings about their absence. Respecting these attachments and helping children to see their parents realistically may protect children as they struggle with their own ambivalence and loss.

Obstacles to visiting and phone calls can seriously affect the legal status of parents in relation to their children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), passed in the late '90's, requires that the County child welfare agency – Department of Human Service Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) in Allegheny County -- petition to terminate parental rights if a child has been in placement under the supervision of CYF for 15 of the past 22 months. Many incarcerated parents exceed this 15-month limit because of delays in their hearings and trials and because of sentences that exceed ASFA limits. It is essential that parents be able to show CYF and the Court that they continue to be involved in and concerned about their children's progress. If children are living with relatives and the incarcerated parent demonstrates consistent involvement, CYF may decide not to press for termination. Long distances, unfriendly environments, expensive phone calls, caregivers who are reluctant or unable to bring children for visits or accept calls, all jeopardize the legal bonds between parents and children.

## **Suggested Approaches**

1. Improve visiting for children at the Allegheny County Jail.

### Contact visits linked to parent effectiveness training

Most incarcerated parents who commented about visiting thought that, especially for very young children, physical contact with their parents is essential for children's health. One mother suggested that contact visiting be part of a parenting program. Inmates would have to attend and participate in classes to earn contact visits. Several parents wished for

“bridges” to assist their children and themselves gain an understanding of what is going on in each other’s life or learn to do “normal” things together like helping with homework during visits. One older parent wanted coaching to learn to talk to his teenage children like a parent. The combination of these ideas creates a parent effectiveness program in which inmates can practice what they learn and their children learn alongside of them. Some of the tasks parents and caregivers suggested such a program could perform include providing safe and happy transportation to jails and prisons for children of prisoners, a writing project that helped children and parents develop the literacy skills they need to write to each other. It would not be necessary for all of the services and roles to be provided by the same agency. Some of these services already exist in the community and could be coordinated to better serve children. Similar programs exist and some are in place in prisons and jails in other jurisdictions.

#### Respite for children during visits

Children and parents need time to play together and children need supervision when adults want to spend time together. Several play areas for children of different ages can be created in the contact visiting room at the Jail, staffed by competent professionals and volunteers. These might be developed within the parenting program.

#### Preparation for visits and coping with emotions afterward

Family members and foster parents described the emotional turmoil children, incarcerated parents, and caregivers experience before and after visits and asked for interventions that would help each participant get through these transition times. They suggested several approaches including work with parents before visits, as well as training for caregivers and other family members to understand that strong emotions are likely to occur and are normal. Another approach takes advantage of the difficult waiting time children endure before visits. The Jail’s waiting area, currently so child-unfriendly, can be equipped to create a transition for children and adults who are anxious going in and stressed going out. With new interest in the children of incarcerated parents in churches participating in the Amachi program and other mentoring programs, agencies might benefit in recruitment at the same time as providing a real service to children who may be very vulnerable.

2. Reduce the cost of phone calls from parents in the Jail to their children.

Many prison systems, including Pennsylvania, have reduced the cost of phone calls by ending surcharges. The Allegheny County Jail should explore doing the same. If reducing the cost for all inmates is not possible, perhaps reduced cost phone cards could be earned as part of parenting programs at the Jail.

## Acknowledgements

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### Survey of Parents in the Allegheny County Jail

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Warden Calvin Lightfoot, Deputy William Emerick, Major James Donis, Lt. Mary Wilson, Officer Jace Younge, Planner Joan MacLennan of the Allegheny County Jail and Planner Deb Rock of the Jail Collaborative welcomed the survey team, met every need, and did all with great warmth and courtesy. **WE ESPECIALLY WANT TO THANK THE MEN AND WOMEN IN THE JAIL WHO TOLD US ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN AND GAVE US VERY GOOD IDEAS ABOUT WHAT MIGHT PROTECT THEIR CHILDREN FROM THE IMPACT OF THEIR PARENTS’ INCARCERATION.**

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### Interviews

Hundreds of individuals have been interviewed during the course of this data gathering. They represent both faith-based and secular providers of services to offenders, ex-offenders, and their families; police; magistrates; public defenders and advocates who provide legal services for dependent children; judges; probation officers for both adults and children; child welfare administrators and caseworkers. We thank each of them for their willingness to volunteer the time and talk honestly about the reality of the systems' responses to children whose parents are arrested and incarcerated.

Thanks to Alana Semuels who developed questionnaires and did most of the interviews of representatives of the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Claire Walker, Executive Director of the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, conducted interviews of providers and others.

### Review of the Literature

Gayle Mallinger, a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work produced a very thoughtful analysis of the national research relating to the issues of children of prisoners, which provided support for several of the conclusions in this report.