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Presentation/Discussion

Improving Outcomes for Children of the Incarcerated

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Summary
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Facts of Children with Incarcerated Parents

- Thirty percent of children in foster care have a parent in prison.
- Of the 7.3 million adults on parole, 3.7 million are parents.
- Between 2 and 3 million children in America have a parent incarcerated in prison.
- Most children live with parents prior to incarceration and will live with them after release.
- The need to protect children from the truth of their parent's incarceration is a myth.
- The most stressful phase for children of incarcerated parents is witnessing the arrest.
- When there is no risk to the child, frequent visitation at a correctional institution counteracts symptoms of fear associated with a parent's incarceration.
- In order to handle the effects of parental incarceration, children need: (1) to be informed about what is going on with the incarcerated parent, (2) to have support for their connection to the incarcerated parent, and (3) to live with a stable caregiver and have access to services.
- Family ties and frequent visitations are associated with lower recidivism.
- Inmates who maintain frequent outside contacts while in prison do better on parole.
- Parental incarceration may be a risk for child abuse and neglect.
- The child is more likely to move when a mother (rather than a father) is incarcerated.
- Strong family relationships have positive outcomes on rates of delinquency for children of incarcerated parents.

Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights

(Source: Booklet offered by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership)

- 1) I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
- 2) I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
- 3) I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
- 4) I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.
- 5) I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.
- 6) I have the right to support as I face my parent's incarceration.
- 7) I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
- 8) I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

Current Barriers to Visitation with Incarcerated Parents

- Children in foster care are least likely to visit their parents.
- Prisons are located at long distances away from children's homes. Some children lack transportation or family support for visiting their incarcerated parent.
- Caregivers fear that visits to incarcerated parents will negatively affect children.
- Failure to complete parenting classes or other treatment courses while incarcerated prevents the parent from receiving visits.

Systems Issues

- According to the American Bar Association Center on Children, only 29% of police officers ask an arrestee if they have minor children.
- Adults are distrustful of police and are reluctant to admit that they have minor children at home.
- The justice and welfare systems lack adequate tracking of incarcerated parents.

Suggested Solutions

- Collaboration between welfare systems and corrections departments is needed.
- Child welfare line staff and management, and corrections staff should be cross-trained about the needs of incarcerated parents and their children.
- Social workers should be trained about the impact of parental incarceration on children.
- Social workers need training about how to talk to caregivers about visitations.

Current Programs and Policies

- Girl Scouts Beyond Bars: <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/girlsct.pdf>
- Model program based in Oregon:
 - Transports girls to visit incarcerated mothers.
 - Has support group for daughters of incarcerated mothers.
 - Has support group for incarcerated mothers.
- San Francisco has a visitation policy for parent inmates.