

Child Welfare Practice With Families Affected by Parental Incarceration

The intersection of child welfare and parental incarceration is a growing concern for child welfare caseworkers and related professionals, including those in the law enforcement, corrections, mental health, education, and legal and judicial fields. When children and youth are separated from their parents due to incarceration—and possibly placed in out-of-home care—they often experience a variety of negative outcomes. Caregivers for these children may also be adversely impacted by the stress of incarceration events.

Although working with incarcerated parents and their children poses a multitude of barriers for child welfare caseworkers, they can overcome challenges and enhance outcomes for these families by using the resources available in their communities and agencies. This bulletin provides an overview of the scope of the issue and highlights practices to involve parents in case planning and facilitate parent-child contact during incarceration. Resources designed to help caseworkers assist impacted families are presented throughout.

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This bulletin presents characteristics of parents incarcerated in the United States and their minor children; however, it is important to note that national estimates on the parental status of inmates were last collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2007. The resulting seminal [paper](#) by Glaze and Maruschak (2010) has served as a basis for research on parental incarceration for more than a decade. In the period since the study was conducted, the makeup of the overall U.S. prison population has decreased (Maruschak & Minton, 2020), which may impact the rates and experiences (e.g., living arrangements) of children with incarcerated parents. Where possible, more recent data sources were used to derive the statistics presented.

OVERVIEW

The United States had roughly 2.1 million adults residing in jail or prison in 2018 (Maruschak & Minton, 2020). This is the largest population of incarcerated people of any country in the world (Walmsley, 2018). Mass incarceration surged between 1980 and 2010, as did the number of American children growing up with imprisoned parents. Researchers estimate that more than 5 million children experienced parental incarceration in 2018 (National Survey of Children’s Health, 2018). While most of these children remain in their homes, some studies have presented evidence that higher incarceration rates in States are associated with higher foster care caseloads (Edwards, 2016; Swann & Sylvester, 2006).

Correctional System Basics

Much like the child welfare system, correctional system policies and protocols vary across jurisdictions and levels (i.e., local, State, and Federal). Correctional facilities—including jails and prisons—house people accused or convicted of crimes. Jails are locally operated and generally used for detaining those who are awaiting trial or serving short sentences. Prisons are operated by Federal or State governments and typically house people who are convicted of felonies and serving longer sentences—usually more than 1 year.

Most people awaiting trial in local jails have the option of being released on bail. However, some inmates cannot afford the cost of bail and are therefore required to remain imprisoned until their trial dates, which are often several months in the future. This additional time that parents spend in prison or jail can have significant implications for the living arrangements of their children in the short- and long-term as it may be considered in conjunction with any posttrial sentencing when the courts are determining whether to terminate parental rights.

For a more detailed explanation of the criminal justice system, including corrections, visit the U.S. Department of Justice’s [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) website.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

According to the most recent available data, more than half of the U.S. prison population are parents to minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). The following are some notable characteristics of incarcerated parents and their families:

- **Paternal and maternal incarceration.** Of the nearly 810,000 parents who were incarcerated in 2007, approximately 744,000 (92 percent) were fathers, and about 65,000 (8 percent) were mothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). (This breakdown mirrors the gender distribution in the overall prison population.) Although fathers in Federal and State prisons far outnumber mothers, between 1991 and 2007, maternal incarceration was increasing at a faster rate. During that time period, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122 percent, compared with a 76-percent increase in incarcerated fathers.
- **Racial disproportionality.** It is widely recognized that people of color are more likely to come to the attention of law enforcement, due in part to over-policing and implicit bias in discretionary practices (Hinton et al., 2018). They are, therefore, overrepresented in the U.S. prison population (Carson, 2020). By extension, children of color—particularly African-American children—are impacted by parental incarceration at disproportionate rates. A study using nationally representative data indicates that 11.5 percent of African-American children have experienced parental incarceration in their lifetime, which is nearly double that of White children (6.0 percent) (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). When examining older African-American children (ages 12 to 17), the percentage increases to 13.6 percent. This statistic is likely an underestimate since it only includes incidences of incarceration for residential parents.
- **Socioeconomic status and environment.** Children living in poverty are significantly more likely to experience parental incarceration than children living at least two times above the poverty level (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Additionally, children living in rural areas are more likely to have an incarcerated parent than those living in metropolitan areas.
- **Child living arrangements.** The majority of children with incarcerated parents live with the nonincarcerated parent or other relatives (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Living arrangements tend to vary depending on whether the child's mother or father is incarcerated. In one study, 88 percent of fathers incarcerated in State prisons said at least one of their children resided with their mother, but only 37 percent of mothers incarcerated in State prisons reported that their children resided with their father (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). When the mothers were in prison, living arrangements were more varied and more frequently included placements with grandparents and other relatives, friends, or in foster homes.

THE INTERSECTION OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION AND FOSTER CARE

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), parental incarceration was a reason for entry for 7 percent of children who entered foster care in 2019 (Children's Bureau, 2020). These data, however, likely underestimate the true extent of the overlap. Caseworkers will often only record one reason for entry, meaning that parental incarceration may

not show up as a reason for removal even if it was one of the contributing factors (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). One study estimated that 40 percent of children who have been in foster care have also experienced parental incarceration in their lifetime (Turney & Wildeman, 2017).

Researchers have identified four likely pathways to a family's simultaneous involvement with the child welfare and criminal justice systems (Phillips et al., 2010):

- A parental arrest coincides with child welfare system involvement, with either the arrest exposing maltreatment (more likely) or a maltreatment investigation resulting in a parental arrest (less likely).
- The criminal record of the parent has been found to compromise the child's safety.
- Relatives who are considered as placement possibilities are found to have criminal records.
- A child whose parent or parents are already incarcerated no longer has a safe living arrangement (e.g., a temporary caregiver has decided he or she is no longer willing or able to care for a child).

It is important to note that incarceration for child abuse or neglect is extremely rare and only occurs in roughly 3 percent of all referrals to child protective services, including cases against parents and others (Berger et al., 2016).

EFFECTS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN

Parental incarceration is identified as an [adverse childhood experience](#), along with other events such as parental death, divorce, or experiencing or witnessing violence. The negative effects of parental incarceration are typically felt by children throughout the process—from arrest through reentry. Children who are exposed to a parent's criminal activities, as well as those who witness the arrest or are questioned by prosecutors, may experience additional trauma (Peterson et al., 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017).

While a parent is incarcerated, a child may experience a range of emotions, including sadness; shame; isolation; concern for the parent's well-being; and anger toward the parent, the caregiver, or the system (Corinne Wolfe Children's Law Center et al., 2011). Parental incarceration may also have long-term impacts on child well-being outcomes, including higher risk for learning disabilities and developmental delays (Turney, 2014), antisocial behaviors (Murray et al., 2012), and problems with school performance and engagement (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Children's reactions to parental incarceration may vary, which makes it critical for caseworkers to consider each individual experience when delivering services and supports. For example, older children may have the cognitive capacity to understand and handle contact with incarcerated parents, whereas a younger child may not have that capacity and require more gatekeeping and supervision from their caregivers (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). However, although many studies show an association between parental incarceration and a host of negative outcomes for children, there is the possibility that these issues may be caused by risk factors predating their parents' incarceration, such as poverty, parental substance use, witnessing domestic violence, and parental mental health issues (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Wildeman & Turney, 2014).

A child's negative reactions to parental incarceration can be buffered by protective factors, including the personal characteristics and temperament of the child, the quality of his or her home environment, caregiver support following the incarceration, and frequent and meaningful opportunities to have contact with the incarcerated parent (Hairston, 2009). For information on building protective factors in children and families through casework practice, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare](#) issue brief and [Protective Factors to Promote Well-Being](#) web section.

WORKING WITH FAMILIES AFFECTED BY PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Many aspects of child welfare cases involving incarcerated parents are like those of other cases; however, there are some unique challenges to assisting this population. In general, Federal and State laws do not distinguish between the rights of incarcerated parents and other parents regarding regular visits and contact with their children, engagement in case planning and the court process, and reasonable efforts to support reunification. Even when reunification appears challenging due to the parent's length of incarceration, child welfare agencies are required to pursue reunification if there is no court order directing them otherwise.

Caseworkers should engage incarcerated parents early and often, from the time of arrest until release. Engaging incarcerated parents may be difficult for caseworkers due to a lack of clear agency policies and insufficient training on working with this population. Child welfare agencies and correctional facilities may not have formal policies on collaborating to support families involved with both the child welfare and criminal justice systems, and in cases where policies have been developed, agencies may not provide training on how to implement those policies. A [Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents](#), which was developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, provides a set of guiding principles for practitioners assisting children whose parents are imprisoned and may help guide caseworkers practice with these families.

Even when cases do not involve currently incarcerated parents, caseworkers should determine whether the parents have been previously incarcerated and regularly assess whether parents have any criminal justice involvement after the family's initial involvement with child welfare. Caseworkers should be prepared to offer services, referrals, and resources to families who indicate that incarceration is an issue for them.

Knowledge Check

- Do you have any opinions, biases, or discomfort about working with families affected by incarceration or visiting a correctional facility?
- Do you know your State's laws governing how incarceration affects the termination of parental rights or other aspects of casework with incarcerated parents?

How the Adoption and Safe Families Act Affects This Population

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (P.L. 105-89) was enacted in 1997 to address concerns about long-term foster care stays. The legislation calls for timely permanency planning for children and requires States to file for the termination of parental rights for any child who has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. With the average prison sentence spanning more than 1 year—attributed in part to lengthy mandatory minimum sentences for common, nonviolent offenses—this requirement can be a significant barrier to reunification for incarcerated parents.

ASFA outlines several exceptions to the timeline rule that States have the option of incorporating into their laws:

- The child is being cared for by a relative.
- The agency has documented a compelling reason for determining that the termination of parental rights is not in the child's best interests.
- The agency has not provided the family with services deemed necessary for the safe return of the child to the home.

While statutes vary, some States factor in incarceration for cases involving the termination of parental rights (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016a). The following are examples of the variables related to parental incarceration that might be considered in termination proceedings:

- The length of the sentence in relation to the child's age
- A parent's failure to arrange for child care
- The quality of the parent-child relationship
- The level of contact and support the parent had with the child prior to incarceration
- The occurrence of multiple incarcerations
- The nature of the crime committed

Some State statutes list parental incarceration as an exception to the enforcement of ASFA's timeline provisions, but all States permit the termination of parental rights when the parent is convicted of a felony for a crime of violence against a child or another family member (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016a).

The child welfare field has devoted significant attention to how ASFA may affect permanency outcomes in families with incarcerated parents. Due to the tension between ASFA's short timelines for termination of parental rights and the long duration of the average U.S. prison sentence, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to become legal orphans than other children in foster care (Raimon et al., 2009). According to one analysis, one out of every eight incarcerated parents loses their parental rights, regardless of the seriousness of the offenses (Hager & Flagg, 2018).

HOW TO LOCATE INCARCERATED PARENTS

Caseworkers may encounter situations in which a child's parent is incarcerated but the facility where the parent is being held is unknown. To find a parent in a Federal prison, as well as his or her expected date of release, visit the [Bureau of Prisons inmate locator](#), where you can search by name or a variety of identification numbers. To find inmates in State prisons or local jails, visit [VINELink](#). The database contains an inmate's current location and limited information about his or her case status (i.e., parole or probation). Users can register on the site to receive notifications by phone, text, or email when there is a change to an inmate's status. As of August 2020, VINELink was available in 48 States.

If caseworkers still cannot locate an inmate, they—or specialized diligent search staff from their agency—may need to conduct searches in a variety of corrections systems or facilities until the inmate's location is found. Some correctional facilities may have liaisons or other staff who can assist child welfare professionals in navigating the facility, including locating inmates (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011).

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

It is important for caseworkers to work with personnel from other agencies and community organizations, as interagency collaboration often leads to more tailored services for children impacted by parental incarceration and may increase the likelihood of family reunification (Nickel et al., 2009). It is especially important to have regular contact with corrections staff. There are several scenarios in which caseworkers may need to work directly with corrections officers to manage an inmate's child welfare case, including the following:

- Locating incarcerated parents, either for case-planning purposes or to seek out potential kinship care placements for children
- Finding information on services offered for parents at correctional facilities and adjusting case plans based on available programs
- Planning logistics and arranging authorizations for court hearings or parent-child visits and other communications
- Facilitating incarcerated parents' participation in court hearings related to their child welfare cases

Points of contact at corrections facilities may vary and can include case managers or, at select facilities, designated liaisons responsible for facilitating interagency communications. These specialized staff are familiar with the protocols and procedures for outside entities that work with correctional facilities, and they can help caseworkers navigate the prison system while also assisting inmates with enrolling in child welfare-related services.

When working with incarcerated parents who are nearing the end of their sentences, caseworkers may be asked to collaborate with reentry affairs coordinators. These staff work with programs based in inmates' communities to arrange skills-development opportunities related to reentry initiatives. Following the release of a parent from a correctional facility, caseworkers may find it helpful to communicate with the parent's parole officer about their progress with reentry efforts. To locate a parole officer, contact the parole office in the parent's home jurisdiction.

The U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Corrections offers a toolkit called [*Children in Foster Care With Parents in Federal Prison: A Toolkit for Child Welfare Agencies, Federal Prisons, and Residential Reentry Centers*](#), which was designed to facilitate collaboration between child welfare agencies and Federal prisons.

It is also critical for caseworkers to collaborate with the legal and judicial community—specifically the attorneys for the parent and agency and the child's guardian ad litem—in dependency cases involving incarcerated parents. Court cases in which children are represented by multidisciplinary legal teams that include both a caseworker and a lawyer result in better family connections and fewer petitions filed to terminate parental rights (Pott, 2016). The caseworker's role on these teams is to document and keep legal personnel informed of all attempts at service provision and to bring up any issues regarding adherence to case plans. Even though multidisciplinary teams may not be commonplace in many jurisdictions, elements of a successful multidisciplinary model can be applied to more traditional relationships between caseworkers and lawyers.

The Pennsylvania Office of Children and Families in the Courts has assembled a training video, [*"Dependent Children of Incarcerated Parents: An Educational Video for Judges and Legal Professionals,"*](#) which examines cases of children with incarcerated parents from a judicial perspective.

Knowledge Check

- Do you have contact information for the State and local correctional facilities in and around your community?
- Do the correctional facilities in your area have liaisons for working with child welfare professionals?

CASE PLANNING AND REUNIFICATION

Although there are extreme cases when family preservation is not in the child's best interests, it is ideal for children to be raised by their parents even in situations where a parent has a criminal record. Therefore, caseworkers must make every reasonable effort to reunite children with their incarcerated parents—just as they would for any other case—unless there is a court ruling releasing them from that obligation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). For more information on what constitutes reasonable efforts at reunification, see the Information Gateway's [Legal Issues Related to Permanency](#) web section and [Reasonable Efforts to Preserve or Reunify Families and Achieve Permanency for Children](#).

Caseworkers should attempt to make contact with an incarcerated parent as soon as possible after an arrest in order to explore kinship placement options in lieu of filing a dependency petition (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). This first step is time intensive and critical to the success of the overall case plan.

When selecting services for families impacted by parental incarceration, caseworkers should keep in mind that incarcerated parents face multiple, interrelated barriers when it comes to reunifying with their families and avoiding the termination of their parental rights, including the following:

- **Participating in case planning and hearings.** It may be difficult for incarcerated parents to attend and fully participate in case-planning meetings, dependency hearings, family group decision-making meetings, or other appointments. However, their attendance is important, as it allows them to contribute to the decision-making process for their children's cases and shows court officials that they are actively involved in their children's lives. In the case of dependency hearings, caseworkers and attorneys should work together to ensure that incarcerated parents can participate. Some courts are able to include parents via phone or videoconferencing.
- **Having regular contact with their children.** Incarcerated parents face multiple barriers to having regular contact with their children. Parent-child contact—whether through in-person visits, virtual visits, phone calls, or letter writing—is critical to helping maintain or strengthen parent-child relationships and showing the courts that parents are maintaining meaningful contact with their children, which can ultimately help prevent the termination of parental rights.
- **Accessing services.** Similar to nonincarcerated parents involved with the child welfare system, incarcerated parents often require a variety of services to assist them as they seek to reunify with their children. Obtaining services while incarcerated, however, may be difficult. Depending on the facility, programming can be limited and might not address the specific needs outlined in a parent's case plan.
- **Maintaining parental rights.** As mentioned above, incarcerated parents are often affected by ASFA's 15 of 22 months provision for the termination of parental rights. Although some States have their own laws to make special exemptions for incarcerated parents, incarceration can still affect parents' ability to take the necessary steps to successfully reunify with their children.

Incarcerated parents are less likely than other parents involved in the child welfare system to reunify with their families (D'Andrade, 2018). This can be partly explained by the lack of services available in prison, but family reunification in this population is strongly linked to service compliance. Caseworkers should coordinate with case attorneys and corrections staff or parole officers to identify programs that can assist parents in meeting child welfare requirements for reunification and adjust service plans accordingly. Many facilities offer programs geared toward parenting, mental health, and substance use as well as vocational classes and leisure time aimed at developing prosocial behaviors. Caseworkers can contact correctional facilities staff directly to get written confirmation of a parent's compliance with the programs in his or her case plan (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016b). Case plans should also encourage parent-child contact through letter writing, phone calls, and visits.

When working with children impacted by parental incarceration, case plans should include services that address the trauma associated with this adverse childhood experience. Caseworkers can support opportunities for children to participate in therapeutic activities that promote academic achievement, socialization skills, self-confidence, and overall emotional and behavioral well-being. Mentoring programs may also have a positive impact on this population (Jarjoura et al., 2013). It is ideal to use programs designed for children impacted by incarceration rather than generic interventions for children suffering from other trauma. For more information on trauma-informed child welfare practice, see Information Gateway's [The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System](#).

Sesame Street developed the [Coping With Incarceration](#) toolkit, which offers activities, tip sheets, and videos for caregivers and professionals to help explain incarceration to children and facilitate communication about children's emotions.

Knowledge Check

- Does your agency have any specific protocols for working with incarcerated parents and their families?
- What trainings are available within your agency or State about working with incarcerated parents and their families?
- Are you aware of services in your agency, in the community, or in the nearby correctional facilities to support inmates in being involved parents? Fulfilling their case plans? Reentering the community?
- What programs and services are available in your community to help children who have experienced trauma?
- Does your community offer programs, such as support groups or recreation programs, specifically for children of incarcerated parents?
- Does your agency allow case-planning meetings to occur in a correctional facility or be conducted by phone or videoconference?
- Do the courts in your jurisdiction allow incarcerated parents to participate in hearings by phone or videoconference? If so, what is the process for setting that up?

VISITING AND OTHER CONTACT

Continuing contact during a parent's incarceration is critical for maintaining the parent-child relationship and has important implications for long-term child well-being. Visits can help children understand they are still loved and provide assurance that their parents are safe (Cramer et al., 2017). Spending time together as a family through play, conversation, or sharing a meal also encourages parents and children to form new bonds or repair strained relationships (Tasca et al., 2016).

Caseworkers play a key role in facilitating visits and other forms of contact, such as phone calls or letters, between incarcerated parents and their children. The level of contact specified in the case plan may be determined by a variety of factors, including the nature of the parent's crime, whether the incarcerated parent was custodial or noncustodial, advocacy from the parent's legal team, and the accommodations afforded by the correctional facility (i.e., no-contact booths versus contact-friendly visiting rooms). Prisons are more likely to offer contact visits because they have long-term populations and more rigorous security protocols in place, whereas jails are less likely to offer contact visits since they have more transient populations and fewer amenities.

More than half of parents (59 percent of fathers and 58 percent of mothers), however, report that they have never been visited by any of their minor or adult children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). There are several barriers that can make it difficult for caseworkers to facilitate contact and visits for families experiencing parental incarceration. In general, inmates cannot accept incoming calls, and they are responsible for covering the cost of their own long-distance calls, which can be prohibitively expensive. Most parents are imprisoned far from their communities—oftentimes more than 100 miles away—and are based in locations that are difficult to access via public transportation. The distance from home may be especially far for mothers, as there are fewer correctional facilities for women. Parents may also be transferred between facilities frequently, making it difficult for caseworkers to determine their whereabouts.

Visits that are low quality (e.g., too short or infrequent, long wait times) can be stressful for children (Arditti & Savla, 2015). A structured visit schedule (e.g., visiting the incarcerated parent on the same day and time each week or month) can help normalize the experience for children. To facilitate a smoother postvisit transition, caseworkers should give children advance warning when the visit is about to end and conduct a debrief afterward to help them process their emotions.

In some cases, children may not want to visit or have contact with their parents for reasons including strained relationships, discomfort in the corrections environment, shame, stress, or even boredom (Adalist-Estrin, 2014). Children also may not want to visit or have other contact with incarcerated parents who maltreated them. Caseworkers should recognize these circumstances and be sensitive to the children's desires. However, children's needs may fluctuate, so it is important to ask about their wishes for visits on a regular basis and to ensure them that visits are always an option. Caseworkers should provide children with opportunities to confer with their guardians ad litem or other representatives to ensure their wishes are properly considered by the court.

Scheduling visits. There are many rules and procedures associated with setting up and conducting visits in correctional facilities, and each facility may have its own requirements. (Visit the [Federal Bureau of Prisons](#) web section to view rules regarding visits to Federal prisons.) Child welfare professionals should familiarize themselves with the rules and procedures for the facilities relevant to their caseloads and remember that there are often long approval periods for visit requests—usually about 30 working days after the request submission.

Scheduling Checklist

Caseworkers should take the following steps when scheduling visits:

- Determine how visits are set up and who must initiate the process.
- Find out the visiting schedule and how much lead time is needed to schedule a visit.
- Check for any age minimums and ensure children meet the requirements.
- Confirm the type of visits allowed (i.e., contact versus no contact).
- Submit your visit request for approval through the corrections facility.
- Arrange any needed transportation and overnight accommodations.
- Seek out any facility or community programs that may be able to assist with the visit (e.g., travel or financial assistance).

Preparing for visits. Prior to visiting a correctional facility, caseworkers should talk with the child, the incarcerated parent, and the child's current caregiver about their expectations and preparations for the visit (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). If possible, caseworkers should visit alone first so they can give an accurate description of the facility and the visiting conditions. If they cannot visit ahead of time, they should ask the incarcerated parent about visiting conditions. Caseworkers should talk with children about possible changes to their parents' behavior or appearance (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, handcuffs, being behind a partition) and alert them to the potential for long waits and crowded waiting rooms as well as the security procedures they may need to go through. Caseworkers should also have discussions with the incarcerated parents about expectations for the visits, how to make them productive, and their children's possible reactions.

Many correctional facilities are located far away from children and their caregivers. Long distances can make visits difficult due to the extra time and expense they may require (e.g., transportation, lodging). Caseworkers should factor these variables into their planning and check whether their agencies have methods to support long-distance visits, such as chaperones to drive or accompany children. Caseworkers should also determine if an overnight stay will be required and make the necessary arrangements for children and chaperones in advance.

Preparation Checklist

To help prepare themselves, children, parents, and caregivers for visits, caseworkers should take the following steps:

- Review the correctional facility's visiting rules, regulations, and procedures.
- Gather required documents and identification.
- Ensure that children and chaperones are aware of visit dress codes and that they have comfortable shoes and clothing for the visit.
- Consult the visiting guidelines for permitted and nonpermitted items and pack supplies such as snacks, change for vending machines, toys, and books, when allowed.
- Let children know what they can expect at the visit (e.g., security protocols, visit setup).
- Arrive early and go over the visiting rules with children before the visit begins (or remind chaperones to do so).
- Contact staff at the corrections facility on the morning of the visit to ensure normal operations are in effect that day.

Virtual visits. Some correctional facilities may have videoconference capabilities that allow for virtual visits. Videoconferencing enables families to maintain their relationships when in-person visits are not possible. This method of communication has not been used extensively in the child welfare field in the past, but it is increasingly being employed by professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic as children become even more accustomed to virtual communication tools. Caseworkers who have used virtual family time to support reunification efforts said that it allowed families to bond and revitalized family members (Quinn et al., 2015). For families impacted by incarceration, meeting virtually can also help overcome barriers such as travel costs, potentially stressful facility environments, no-child visit policies, and limited in-person visiting hours (National Institute of Corrections, 2014).

Video visits may not be ideal in all situations. Correctional facilities or their service vendors often charge costly fees to the incarcerated parent or his or her family members to use videoconferencing services, and the technology and internet connections may be poor or unreliable. Some facilities require video visits to take place on premises, which means agencies and children must still devote time and resources to travel to the site without enjoying the benefits of a contact visit. Research has also shown that video visits are shorter on average than in-person visits and can end without warning (Poehlmann-Tynan, 2015). Therefore, while video visits can be a valuable supplement to in-person visits or serve as a substitute for connecting when visits are not possible, they should not replace in-person visits entirely. For more guidance on facilitating and supporting virtual visits, see Information Gateway's [Tips for Supporting Virtual Family Time](#).

Other contact. In between parent-child visits—or in cases where visits are not possible—caseworkers can encourage children to write letters or suggest that foster parents supervise the activity. Some children are able to express themselves through writing, but others may need help communicating through letters. Caseworkers can also help children get creative in their communications by sending things like newspaper clippings, photos, drawings, report cards, or certificates of achievement. However, it is important to check with the corrections facility to ensure that these additional items are permitted. Caseworkers or foster parents should review the contents of letters in cases where communication must be supervised. It is also important to remember that both incoming and outgoing letters may be reviewed by corrections staff and that mail from the incarcerated parent will be identified as coming from a correctional facility.

Talking on the phone is another option for keeping children in touch with their incarcerated parents, but opportunities for phone calls may be limited. Parents usually cannot accept calls at their correctional facilities. Caseworkers can arrange times for inmates to call their children for a scheduled phone session, but calls are expensive and often are collect or paid for with the incarcerated parent's phone card.

For additional tips on maintaining the bonds of families impacted by parental incarceration, consult the following National Child Abuse and Neglect Technical Assistance and Strategic Dissemination Center publications: [Supporting Communication for Families Impacted by Incarceration](#) and [Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Incarcerated Parents](#).

Knowledge Check

- What are the procedures for scheduling visits or having other contact with incarcerated parents at the correctional facilities in your area?
- Do the correctional facilities in your area have special procedures for child visits?
- Are the correctional facilities in your area set up for virtual visits?

Programs for Incarcerated Parents and Their Children

A range of national, State, and local programs are available to support incarcerated parents and their children. These programs may be offered to the incarcerated parent in the correctional facility, to the family in the community, or both. Child welfare and correctional facility staff should work together to ensure their agencies and the community have the proper resources to support these families.

The following resources provide information about programs for families affected by incarceration:

- [The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated](#) maintains a [directory of national and local programs designed for families with incarcerated parents](#). Caseworkers and caregivers can also search for mentoring programs, afterschool programs, and camps in their communities.
- The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released [a report](#) describing projects designed to provide parenting support to incarcerated fathers.
- Information Gateway has a webpage on [organizations that support the children and families of incarcerated individuals](#).

WORKING WITH CAREGIVERS

Caregivers for children of incarcerated parents face many challenges. In addition to the increased financial and emotional stress associated with having a new child in the home, there may be feelings of shame resulting from a perceived social stigma (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011). Many services available to these caregivers—whether they are relatives or nonrelatives—mirror those provided to other foster parents, such as direction on how to establish boundaries with birth parents or assist with reunification efforts. Caregivers for children of incarcerated parents may need additional guidance, including information on contacting and visiting a parent living in a correctional facility.

Kinship caregivers often indicate needing a variety of supports (e.g., financial and legal assistance, access to medical and dental care for the children). However, when given the opportunity to obtain them formally through the child welfare system, they may be reluctant to accept them, fearing that the children could be removed from their homes (Hairston, 2009). Many relatives with kinship caregiving arrangements often find it difficult to access benefits and services, while others are not aware of their eligibility for certain supports (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). For guidance on providing support to kinship caregivers, see Information Gateway's [Working With Kinship Caregivers](#) and [Partnering With Relatives to Promote Reunification](#).

Knowledge Check

- What services and supports are available in your agency or community for relatives caring for children of incarcerated parents? For foster parents? For other significant adults in the child's life?

INVOLVING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN REENTRY

Incarcerated parents face many challenges leading up to and following their release. They often need to secure jobs, housing, health care, and support services (e.g., substance use or mental health treatment); pay off any accrued debts, such as child support payments; and comply with their probation and supervision requirements (Christian, 2009). A deliberate, step-by-step approach is needed for successful reentry, and although concrete supports may be connected with child welfare service plans, parents may need to address hurdles such as housing and employment before attempting to fully reunify with family members (Freeberg, 2018). For this reason, some children may need to remain in foster care for a period of time following a parent's release. Parents may take smaller steps to maintain contact with their children in an effort to gradually strengthen the parent-child relationship after incarceration.

Parents who are or were incarcerated also may need to repair relationships with family members to address issues that preceded the imprisonment and to address the implications of reentry on family members (Mullins & Toner, 2008). Children may experience stress, among other feelings, when a parent is released from jail or prison (Christian, 2009). The nature of a child's relationship with the parent may have changed, or the child may have developed strong bonds with his or her caregiver. Additionally, caregivers may be reluctant to allow children to reestablish relationships with released parents, which can cause additional conflict. Caseworkers should address these issues with the parents and caregivers as well as with older children and youth, when appropriate. In some cases, children and other family members may need formal support—such as mental health services—when an incarcerated parent transitions back into the community (Nickel et al., 2009).

As incarcerated parents near their release dates, caseworkers can initiate discussions with them regarding how they can continue to work on their service plans, including requirements for reunification (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). A parent's release from jail or prison is a natural time to revise case and visit plans. Shortly before or immediately following the parent's return to the community or transfer to transitional housing, caseworkers may want to employ family group decision-making, which uses a trained facilitator to guide parents and children through a structured case-planning process. This approach gives each member of the family a voice and a greater sense of ownership over the decision-making process, which can result in more engagement with their service plan and ultimately better outcomes. To learn more, visit the [Family Group Decision-Making](#) section of the Information Gateway website.

Reentry Resources

The [National Reentry Resource Center](#), funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, provides research and resources on reducing recidivism and improving outcomes for people who have been incarcerated, including a [Reentry Services Directory](#), which shows the reentry services available in each State.

The 2008 [Second Chance Act](#) (P.L. 110-199) authorizes Federal grants to government and nonprofit agencies to support people released from jails and prisons. Grants may be authorized for a wide range of services, including family-based programs for parents, substance use treatment, employment and housing assistance, and more. To view lists of funded programs by State, visit the [Second Chance Act grantee map](#) on the National Reentry Resource Center website.

The Council of State Government Justice Center sponsors the [What Works in Reentry Clearinghouse](#), which rates the effectiveness of reentry programs and practices, including some family-based programs.

Knowledge Check

- What protocols does your agency have in place for adjusting the case plan of a parent who has recently been released from jail or prison?
- What reentry services are available in your agency or community?

When Parents Are Detained or Deported for Immigration Issues

Although there are no official nationwide statistics, one study conducted in 2011 estimated that more than 5,000 children were in foster care because their parents had been detained or deported for immigration issues (Wessler, 2011). Despite the unique barriers to working with this population, child welfare caseworkers must follow best-practice guidelines, including prioritizing kinship care options, involving parents in case planning, and ensuring that family reunification is the case plan goal whenever possible.

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) issued the [Detention and Removal of Alien Parents or Legal Guardians](#) directive, which contains provisions ensuring that detained parents are able to participate in child welfare proceedings, visit with their children, and comply with reunification services, with the ultimate goal of keeping families intact. Caseworkers should familiarize themselves with this directive to help inform their work with detained parents.

Parents detained by ICE may be placed in detention centers far from their families and transferred often, making communications with them very difficult. To locate a detained parent, use the [ICE Online Detainee Locator System](#), which requires the detainee's full name, date, country of birth, and alien registration number, which can be found on most immigration papers. Agency diligent search staff, where available, can also assist in this process. If the parent has already been deported, child welfare caseworkers should work with the applicable foreign consulate to locate the parent, provide case plan services, and help reunify the family. In the absence of formal agency policies regarding deportation cases, child welfare caseworkers should work with their colleagues and case attorneys to ensure there is clear, written guidance on how to proceed.

Much like incarcerated parents, detained parents must cover the cost of their own mail postage and outgoing phone calls, and they cannot accept incoming phone calls. Regardless of communication barriers, these parents have the right to visits with their children, if their case plans allow for it. Caseworkers should contact a parent's detention center to learn about the facility's specific procedures for scheduling and conducting visits and coordinate with immigration officials on service provision.

For detailed guidance on casework practice with immigrant families, see [Immigrant Families and Child Welfare Systems: Emerging Needs and Promising Practices](#) by the Migration Policy Institute.

For more information about how immigration issues affect child welfare cases, refer to [Shattered Families: The Perilous Intersection of Immigration Enforcement and the Child Welfare System](#) on the Race Forward website and the American Bar Association's [Child Welfare and Immigration Project](#). Additionally, Information Gateway offers [Immigration and Child Welfare](#), an issue brief on the intersection of the immigration and child welfare systems.

CONCLUSION

Children with incarcerated parents are an especially vulnerable population, often facing a number of challenges (e.g., poverty, domestic violence) in addition to their parent's incarceration. To remain fully involved in their children's lives and the case-planning process, incarcerated parents must navigate multiple, interrelated barriers to reunification, including the AFSA-mandated timelines that can lead to aggressive termination of parents' parental rights. Although incarceration is a barrier to parent-child contact and family reunification, it is not insurmountable. Child welfare caseworkers can support and strengthen these families by being aware of the unique issues faced by parents, children, and caregivers and familiarizing themselves with the services available to this population in their communities and in correctional facilities.

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