

## Research Brief

# Children, Families, and the Criminal Justice System

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Research

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## Family Connections During Imprisonment and Prisoners' Community Reentry

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*The large numbers of former prisoners residing in some urban communities, the expected return home of thousands of individuals annually to these same communities, and high rates of criminal recidivism are at the center of contemporary criminal justice discussions. Policymakers are actively exploring how community institutions, along with criminal justice sanctions or the threat thereof, can be used to reduce recidivism and lessen the negative impact of returning prisoners on their communities. Although most reentry policies and programs focus on the roles and functions of formal organizations, there is an underlying assumption that prisoners' families and friends, not the state, will be the major sources of concrete aid and social and emotional support. Family ties and commitments do not begin, however, when a prisoner steps off the bus that returns him or her to the old neighborhood. They are, instead, embedded in relationships held prior to and during incarceration. Programs designed to facilitate reentry and enhance community reintegration must, therefore, be informed by the realities of prisoners' family relationships. With this goal in mind, the research presented here focused on understanding prisoners' family connections during imprisonment.*

*Data for the study were obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' most recent national survey of State prisoners. The survey was conducted during the months of June through October 1997 and consisted of personal interviews with a representative sample of prisoners housed in State correctional facilities. Prisoners provided information about their criminal history, family background, prior drug and alcohol use and treatment, participation in prison activities, and contacts with children and other individuals external to the prison. The analysis here is confined to black, white, and Hispanic respondents. This sample included 12,663 individuals, 80% of whom were male and 20% female. Almost half (49%) were black; about a third (35%) were white, and 17% were Hispanic. Fifty-five percent were single and had never been married. Only 17% were currently married. Three percent were widowed; 6% were separated for reasons other than incarceration, and 19% were divorced. Close to three-fifths (57%) had at least one minor child with a higher percentage of women (65%) than men (56%) with a minor child.*

This brief is one of a series developed to facilitate understanding and to inform public discourse about children, families, and the criminal justice system. The series is based on empirical research conducted by the Justice Group, a research consortium of faculty and staff at the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research.

## Visiting Connections

Among prisoners who were allowed to have visits, most did not see their families and friends on a regular basis. Men fared worse than women and whites were better off than other racial groups. When asked how many visits other than with attorneys they had in the past month, about two-thirds indicated that no one had visited them. Sixty-five percent of males and 62% of females did not have a visit in the past month. Fifty-nine percent of whites, 67% of Hispanics and 68% of blacks did not have a visit in the past month. White women (52%) were the group with the lowest percentage of individuals who did not have any visitors.

In sharp contrast to the large number of prisoners who had no in-person contact at all with individuals from the “free world” is a small number of individuals who had frequent visits. About 9% percent reported four or more visits (an average of one a week) in the past month. The percentage was lowest for Hispanic women (6%) and highest for white women (13%). The percentage for white men was 10; Hispanic men, 8; black men, 7 and black women, 7.

Visitation is related to prisoners' parental status: 37% of prisoners with minor children had at least one visit, compared to 33% of prisoners with no minor children. With the exception of white women, prisoners with minor children in all categories of race and gender had the highest percentage of individuals who had received at least one visit in the past thirty days. A lower percentage of white women with children (47%) than those with no minor or adult children (53%) had at least one visitor.

The distance prisoners were from their homes influenced the extent to which they saw families and friends. The farther prisoners were from their homes, the higher the percentage of prisoners who had no visitors in the month preceding the survey. Of the prisoners whose homes at the time of

their arrest were within 50 miles of the prison where they were placed, 46% did not have any visitors compared with 56% who lived from 50 to 100 miles, 70% who lived 101 to 500 miles and 84% who lived over 500 miles away. Those whose homes were closest to the prison had the most visits. Of the prisoners who lived within 50 miles of the prison, 20% reported having four or more visits compared with 12% for those living 50 to 100 miles, 5% for those living 101 to 500 miles and 2% percent for those living more than 500 miles. The negative association between miles from home and number of visits held for men and women as well as for all racial groups.

## Contacts with Children

More than half of parents with minor children (54%) had never seen any of their children since they had been incarcerated. Females reported slightly higher contact with their minor children via visits than males. Fifty-five percent of females, compared with 58% of males, indicated they had not seen their children since admission to prison. In contrast with no visits, 25% of females and 22% of males had visits at least monthly. Blacks had visits more regularly with their children than the other groups. Fewer blacks than the other racial groups reported never having had a visit with their children since admission. The percentages of individuals reporting no visits were 55% for blacks, 60% for whites, and 61% for Hispanics. Among blacks, 24% had at least monthly visits. The numbers were 21% for Hispanics and 20% for whites. The highest percentage of prisoners with at least monthly visits with their minor children was black females (28%) and the lowest was Hispanic females (18%).

Although prisoners must usually make collect telephone calls to the receiving party and the calls are very expensive, many families communicate regularly by phone. The majority of prisoners with minor children had been in contact with their children at

least once by telephone since they had been committed to prison. Women talked with their children more than men and blacks talked with their children more than the other racial groups. Fifty-four percent of females and 42% of males had contact by telephone at least monthly. A little over one half (53%) of blacks, 40% of whites, and 36% of Hispanics talked with their children at least monthly. Twenty-six percent of males and 38% of females had weekly phone calls, as was the case with 33% of blacks, 26% of whites and 22% of Hispanics. In contrast is the substantial number of parents of minor children who had never spoken with their children by telephone since being committed to prison. This number includes a higher percentage of males (42%) than females (31%) and a much higher percentage of Hispanics (50%) than whites (45%) or blacks (33%).

Communication by letter is the predominant mode of communication for many prisoners with two-thirds (68%) of females and 51% of males sending mail to and/or receiving it from their children at least monthly. There are slight differences among racial groups with 57% of blacks, 52% of whites, and 53% of Hispanics reporting at least monthly mail contact with children.

### **Policy and Program Implications**

Family roles and relationships are important in reentry planning, whether or not they are explicitly articulated in formal policies and program documents. Family connections and other social networks impact not only families' and children's well-being but also the achievement of social goals such as the reduction of crime and the building of vibrant communities. If the maintenance of family connections and parenting roles is of social value, this study's findings indicate that only a few families are successful in achieving that state of affairs during periods of imprisonment. Policy and program options that can make a difference are noted here.

- Make prisoners' home towns one of the factors considered in determining where prisoners will be placed. Place individuals in appropriate facilities closest to their homes and select sites for correctional facilities that are close to the major urban centers from which large portions of the prison population come. Geographical distance determines both the frequency and regularity of prison visitation and the relative ease with which community agencies can make transitional services available to returning prisoners.
- Make prisoners' telephone access to families and friends a basic prison program that is run with attention to the same cost efficiency and cost containment rules that are used for other prison operations. The rates which families pay to receive collect phone calls from their imprisoned relatives are often as much as 200 times the going rates for phone calls made outside the institution. These government sanctioned telephone rates are abusive and take advantage of families' reliance on telephones as a primary means of communication during incarceration.
- Design reentry programs that address the realities of prisoners' family roles and obligations and their family and friendship networks. Prisoners who have no family contact during imprisonment can be expected to have a different base of informal support upon leaving prison than those who had frequent visits and/or telephone contact. On the other hand, prisoners whose families and friends invested significant resources in them by visiting and accepting telephone calls frequently may have obligations and commitments that exceed their ability to deliver.

## Resources

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