

Children of Incarcerated Parents Series

MYTH: When parents are incarcerated, their children lose eligibility for Medicaid.

FACT: Many children remain eligible or gain eligibility for Medicaid coverage while their parents are incarcerated.

When parents go to prison, their children's living situations may change. The children may move in with family or friends, or they may enter foster care. As children change living situations, their Medicaid eligibility may change, but parents' incarceration does not itself make children ineligible for federal or state health insurance programs. Many children with incarcerated parents remain eligible for Medicaid, and, in fact, some children who were previously ineligible for Medicaid may become eligible in their new living situations.

Many different factors determine children's eligibility for Medicaid, including the income of the parents and siblings with whom they live, their ages, the states where they live, and whether they are under state guardianship.

If children with one incarcerated parent live with another parent, it is the income of the parent with whom they live that determines their eligibility for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Starting in 2014, children may become eligible for subsidies for private health insurance purchased through the Health Insurance Marketplace. Eligibility for such subsidies is based on who claims the children as tax dependents. Children in foster or guardianship care and receiving Title IV-E payments are automatically eligible for Medicaid.

If children live with friends, or relatives other than their parents, while their parents are incarcerated, the children's caretaker's income is not counted towards determining eligibility for Medicaid or CHIP.

Rules for eligibility and coverage vary among the states, but every state allows caregivers to apply for Medicaid or CHIP on behalf of children who live with them. Family member caregivers may also be eligible for Medicaid coverage of their own healthcare needs.

For More Information:

Kinship Caregivers and the Child Welfare System:
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_kinshi/f_kinshi.pdf

Medicaid/CHIP Eligibility for Children:
<http://www.medicaid.gov/Medicaid-CHIP-Program-Information/By-Topics/Eligibility/Eligibility.html>

What is the Reentry Myth Buster/Children of Incarcerated Parents Series?

This Reentry Myth Buster is one in a series of fact sheets intended to clarify federal policies that affect formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. On any given day, nearly two million children under 18 have a parent in prison – and many more have had an incarcerated parent at some point during their childhood. Children of incarcerated parents often face financial instability, changes in family structure, and social stigma from their community. This series is designed to help these children, their caregivers, and the service providers who work with them.