

THE FEDERAL INTERAGENCY REENTRY COUNCIL

A Record of Progress and a Roadmap for the Future

Children of Incarcerated Parents



AUGUST 2016



To view the full report, visit:

<http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/FIRC-Reentry-Report.pdf>

Supporting children of incarcerated parents and their families

The Challenge. On any given day, as many as 2.7 million children – or one in 28 – have a parent in prison or jail. For African-American children, the rate is one in nine.⁹⁶ More than five million children, or seven percent of all children in the U.S., has had a parent who lived with them go to jail or prison.⁹⁷ The arrest and incarceration of a parent can have significant consequences for a child's well-being. Though each family's experience is unique, many families struggle with the sudden loss of the incarcerated parent's income and the costs related to incarceration.⁹⁸ Families may also be coping with trauma stemming from the parent's arrest or incarceration, as well as the disruption to family life.⁹⁹ Children of incarcerated parents may face increased risk of homelessness, financial instability, problems at school, and behavioral and mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety.¹⁰⁰ Despite the strength and resilience of many children, the shame and stigma associated with incarceration may cause children to feel isolated and may prevent parents from discussing their circumstances with others, causing many justice-involved families to go unidentified and unsupported.¹⁰¹

The Path Forward: Reentry Council agencies are putting strategies in place to ensure that children's chances for success are not negatively impacted by their parents' incarceration. Research shows that family engagement and support play an important role in promoting successful reentry. The Council will continue to take coordinated steps to raise awareness of – and provide resources to meet – the unique needs of children and youth who have incarcerated parents. Similarly, the Reentry Council will continue to find opportunities to improve the ability for incarcerated parents to maintain their relationship with their families – to improve opportunities for children to connect with incarcerated parents, and also to position the parents for successful reintegration to family life following release.

“Every day, millions of children face tremendous challenges due to the incarceration of a loved one, and this Administration is working to support these children as part of our commitment to make sure all children get the best possible start in life.”

**Cecilia Muñoz,
Blog Post on June 19, 2013.**

Johnisha has been incarcerated for the past ten years at the Secure Female Facility in Hazelton, West Virginia. Through the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency and Hope House, BOP has been able to implement a video conferencing program to support family communication between incarcerated mothers returning to the District of Columbia and their families. Because of this program, Johnisha has been able to keep in touch with her two children, ages 17 and 13. "My favorite is the Family Re-Unification Program. It allows me to be a mother to my children while incarcerated. They visit at least twice a year in-person, and once a month on video. I've been able to be a good parent and blessed to watch them grow up from the ages of 12 and 8 to now ages 17 and 13. This keeps me from being depressed and non-productive in my rehabilitation and recovery, because my children are my motivation. I want to be a great mom now and when I re-enter society."

Reentry Council Accomplishments:

» **Encouraged the justice system to implement child-friendly policy and procedures.**

DOJ worked with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to release [*Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents*](#), a model policy and training for police focused on protecting the physical and emotional well-being of children when their parents are arrested. NIC also partnered with the Urban Institute to develop toolkits for community providers on [parental arrest](#), [family-focused jail programs](#), and [family impact statements](#), as well as a [framework](#) summarizing promising practices.

» **Developed resources for service**

providers working with children of incarcerated parents. To raise awareness around the unique needs of children of incarcerated parents, Reentry Council agencies developed Tip Sheets for service providers, including [teachers](#), [mentors](#), and [correctional staff](#) who interact with these children. These materials are offered on a new federal [webpage](#), supported by HHS and DOJ, which offers resources for youth who have incarcerated parents, as well as materials for parents and service providers working with this population.



Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius talks with children before the White House Champions of Change event, June 12, 2013. "When these children are given the attention and love they need, these children will thrive," Secretary Sebelius said at the ceremony. (Photo: Department of Health and Human Services)

Terry was in a difficult situation when he approached the Iowa Department of Human Services Child Support Program for assistance. He had spent time in prison, was unemployed, and was behind on his child support payments. Fortunately, the Department and the Evelyn K. Davis Center run a program called Reliable Employment and Child Support Help, or REACH. The project aims to improve the financial well-being of children by increasing the engagement of noncustodial parents in Polk County through a variety of coordinated services offerings. REACH is just one site in the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement Office's National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) that provides employment, parenting, and child support services to noncustodial parents to help them overcome employment barriers so that they can pay their child support consistently and strengthen relationships with their children. Early findings show nearly 70 percent of parents participating in the program have been justice-involved. Through the REACH program Terry was able to get his commercial driver's license. "They taught me how to better manage difficult parenting situations as a separated couple and my finances once I got a job." Terry is now fully current in supporting his children and has cleared his state arrearages.

» **Improved video communication as a way to supplement in-person visitation between incarcerated parents and children.** NIC published [A Guide to Video Visiting in Corrections](#), to help correctional facilities incorporate a video visitation system as a way to enhance family communication. BOP also launched a video service in select female facilities to help incarcerated mothers connect with their children and social support networks. For some, this technology may give a way for children to interact with their incarcerated parents without experiencing the stigma and difficulties of visiting a parent in a correctional facility.

» **Funded new programs to support justice-involved families.** OJJDP funded three first-time solicitations to support incarcerated parents and children: the [first](#), *Strengthening Relationships between Young Fathers and Their Children*, funds mentoring services for incarcerated fathers who are returning to their families; the [second](#), *Strengthening Families*

"We've learned through our work and research that children need their parents, and parents need their children, whether or not a parent is incarcerated. Incarcerated parents often say that the one thing that helps them to turn their lives around, to hang on, to get up every morning, and to keep going – that one thing is their kids. And children say that they miss their parents deeply when their parents are in prison."

**Vicki Turetsky, Commissioner,
Office of Child Support
Enforcement, Administration
for Children and Families,
[HHS blog post](#)**

and Children of Incarcerated Parents, supports pilot programs that will strengthen the relationships between children and incarcerated parents confined in federal correctional facilities; and the [third, Strengthening Relationships Between Young Fathers, Young Mothers, and Their Children](#) seeks to improve outcomes for young fathers and mothers using evidence-based practices to reduce recidivism and support responsible parenting that leads to healthy child development, resiliency, and improved interactions among young fathers and mothers, their children, and family and community members. HHS also launched the [Responsible Fatherhood Opportunities for Reentry and Mobility](#) program to help formerly incarcerated individuals mend relationships with their families as they return to society.



White House Domestic Policy Council Director Cecilia Muñoz introduces Alex, a Sesame Street character with an incarcerated father, at an event focused on supporting children of incarcerated parents, June 12, 2013. (Photo: Department of Health and Human Services)

- » **Provided resources to help incarcerated and formerly incarcerated parents with child support orders get back on their feet.** HHS supported state and local [partnerships](#) between child support agencies and federal and state prisons to help children maintain contact with their parents, prevent the accumulation of debt, connect individuals with child support services, and reduce the use of incarceration for nonsupport. HHS also issued a proposed rule that includes provisions designed to increase the likelihood that children of incarcerated parents can count on regular child support payments when the parents are released from prison. These provisions require that states consider the parents' subsistence needs, actual income, and other evidence of ability to pay when setting or modifying child support amounts and prevent states from treating incarceration as "voluntary unemployment." In effect, the proposed rule would prohibit states from legally barring modification of support obligations during incarceration, and would fund employment services for noncustodial parents in difficult-to-collect child support cases, for example when the noncustodial parent has been incarcerated and employment opportunities are diminished as a result. Additionally, HHS created a dedicated [website](#) addressing child support issues, including state-specific [modules](#) on changing a child support order.

- » **Clarified available sources of public assistance and federal law affecting justice-involved families.** Reentry Council agencies released Myth Busters on policies and programs related to children

Aubrey was in 7th grade when her mother was first incarcerated. At a July 2016 listening session with federal government officials, Aubrey recalled the humiliation she felt when being called out of class after her mother was arrested and the shame of having teachers and classmates look at her differently. "My mom's arrest consumed me. She was always on my mind, which made it difficult to do homework and live life like before." Aubrey is grateful for federally-funded Northwest Family Services for providing her with two incredible mentors, Marilyn and Marianne, who helped support her during this difficult time. "They were there for me, and only me. They had only my best interests in mind." Aubrey's mentors helped her by showing her what she could do stay off the path her parents took. Aubrey also says it was her mentors who convinced her to apply for college. "They wouldn't shut up about it," Aubrey joked. Aubrey worked with her mentors to apply for and tour colleges until she eventually decided on Western Oregon University in Monmouth, OR. She will be a freshman there this fall.



Aubrey, who begins college in fall 2016. (Photo: Department of Health and Human Services)

of incarcerated parents, including on child welfare, Medicaid, parental arrests, Social Security, TANF, and SNAP.

» **Raised awareness around the unique needs of children of incarcerated parents and their families.** The White

House held a Champions of Change event to honor 12 individuals who have devoted their careers to helping children who have incarcerated parents. The event also introduced new research-based

public education materials, developed by Sesame Street as part of their Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration campaign to help parents, caregivers, and service providers navigate the challenges that a parent's incarceration can bring. The White House, the American Bar Foundation, and the National Science Foundation also hosted a research workshop that brought together leading scholars, policy makers, and practitioners to discuss available research on the effects of parental incarceration on children. DOJ and the White House hosted a listening session to solicit input from mentoring organizations, service providers, mentors, and youth on the keys to a successful mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents. And during National Reentry Week, Education Secretary John King hosted a



Education Secretary John King and Assistant Attorney General Karol Mason with attendees of roundtable at Benjamin Banneker High School in Washington, DC, April 25, 2016. (Photo: Department of Education)

roundtable at Benjamin Banneker High School in Washington, D.C., hearing from students, educators, and other stakeholders to discuss how reentry affects families and a child's education.

- » **Launched new research to identify promising practices for mentoring children and youth who have incarcerated parents.** DOJ initiated a [Practitioner-Researcher Partnership Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Demonstration Program](#) to develop and evaluate new mentoring practices to serve the needs of youth whose parents are incarcerated. Additionally, DOJ's National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC) hosts a Research Board that is responsible for assessing and reporting on the effectiveness of different mentoring programs, practices and resources intended to promote positive youth outcomes. Its new review, [Mentoring for Children of Incarcerated Parents](#), explores the demonstrated effectiveness of current mentoring programs for this population; the factors that condition or shape the effectiveness of mentoring for these children; the intervening processes most important in linking mentoring to outcomes for children of incarcerated parents; and the extent to which efforts to provide mentoring to this population have reached targeted youth, been effectively implemented, and been adopted and sustained by host organizations and settings.

Upcoming Actions:

- » **Providing training and technical assistance to program office staff to increase awareness of the unique needs of children and youth who have incarcerated parents.** Reentry Council agencies are committed to developing materials designed to improve services offered to children of incarcerated parents and their families. For example, the Children's Bureau at HHS plans to produce a podcast for social workers about strategies for communicating with incarcerated parents, and BJA has released a training video in collaboration with the IACP to introduce law enforcement agencies to their model policy, Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents. The Office of Child Support Enforcement also plans to provide extensive training and technical assistance to state child support agencies following the publication of their final rule.
- » **Providing relevant and meaningful resources for youth, informed by youth.** Reentry Council agencies hosted a listening session with 20 youth from across the country who have or have had incarcerated parents to learn directly from them about the challenges they face, the supports they need, and their recommendations for strengthening the federal government's system of supports for them and their families. Youth from around the country shared their experiences and the Council will use this information to shape future policy, programs, and resources.
- » **Improving the ability for incarcerated parents to maintain their relationship with their family.** The BOP will expand its video service to facilitate face-to-face visits for families, even when they are unable to travel to the facility. BOP is also providing guidance and training opportunities to help BOP staff make visitation spaces more child-friendly and interact with children in a developmentally appropriate way. In addition, DOJ and HHS are partnering to support a \$1 million effort to develop, pilot and evaluate family-strengthening policies that will help state and local correctional facilities reduce the traumatic impact of parental incarceration on children.