

Tip Sheets

Understanding Parental Incarceration

Parental incarceration refers to a parent's imprisonment, which disrupts children's emotional, social, and cognitive development and increases their risks of trauma and instability. Because of these factors, it is classified as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE).

Distinct attachment disruptions can arise from the stigma, uncertainty, and lack of closure that incarceration creates, making this type of family separation more complex than other forms of loss.

Key Statistics and Facts:

Parental Incarceration Rates:

- The National Institute of Justice notes that over 5.7 million children in the U.S. have faced parental incarceration.
- This large number underscores the necessity for support systems and interventions for children.

Geographic and Racial Disparities:

- The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice reports that children in rural areas experience higher rates of parental incarceration compared to those in urban and suburban areas.
- Black, Latinx, Native, and multiracial children are disproportionately impacted by parental incarceration.
- The incidence and duration of family separation resulting from parental incarceration are more pronounced within these groups.

Trauma and Its Effects:

- Studies show that 27% of children witness their parents' crimes, and 22% witness arrests, leading to distress, fear, and attachment insecurity.
- Parental incarceration can impact family stability, cause economic hardship, housing instability, food insecurity, and create limited educational opportunities, negatively impacting a child's development.
- Parental incarceration is a deeply personal and often hidden trauma, but its impact on young children is profound.
- Unsupported, the trauma of parental incarceration can persist well into adulthood.
- Silence around parental incarceration can leave children confused or anxious about a parent's absence.
- Daily routines are disrupted, leading to instability in daily routines and habits.
- Emotional distress can manifest as anxiety, sadness, or behavioral changes.
- Trauma-informed care helps children cope with the emotional effects of parental incarceration.
- Safe environments, reliable routines, and emotional support improve children's ability to process trauma and build resilience.

Legal & Systemic Factors:

Educational Effects:

- The social stigma associated with parental incarceration can result in social isolation, bullying, and difficulty forming peer relationships, harming a child's development.
- Caregivers and teachers may unintentionally reinforce negative views, which can affect a child's sense of security.
- Schools can help provide stability for children, providing structured learning, counseling, and trauma-informed interventions to help children feel safe and secure.
- A supportive environment with open conversations and inclusive play helps children feel accepted and valued.
- Mentorship programs that offer emotional guidance and social support help children flourish.
- Active skill-building can foster resilience, helping children process adversity and develop emotional resilience.

Intergenerational Effects:

- Parental incarceration can alter family roles, create emotional stress between family members, and shift responsibility between siblings.
- Incarcerated parents experience guilt, grief, and emotional isolation, which can impact their ability to maintain strong communication with a child during their absence.
- The emotional challenges children and other family members feel can affect the parent-child bond and require intentional support for family reintegration.
- Maintaining connections between children and their parents through letters, drawings, and

visual interactions helps children feel connected and strengthens the relationship.

Criminal Justice Policies:

- Almost half of incarcerated people are parents, yet sentencing often overlooks family responsibilities, leading to prolonged separations that impact child development.
- Community-based rehabilitation, reduced sentencing, and in-home monitoring offer ways to maintain family unity while maintaining accountability.
- Reimagining Child Welfare advocates for family-based care, fewer foster placements, and policy changes to build sturdy environments for children, minimizing disruptions.
- The National Institute of Justice emphasizes the vital role caregivers play in a child's life.

Additional Resources

Who does incarceration impact?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxPMKofucAo>

Mindcast: Healthy Mind, Healthy Child – Children of Incarcerated Parents, with Marge Paccione

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1j8VByJ3p4>

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