PARENTING FROM PRISON:
A Program Proposal for Families Affected by Incarceration

By

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Abstract:

Incarceration in the United States is one of the most significant social and institutional issues we are faced with today. With the largest incarcerated population as well as the highest rate of incarceration, the United States prison population requires special attention and resources. More specifically, children of incarcerated parents do not receive the attention they require throughout the criminal proceedings of their parents. These vulnerable children are placed at a disadvantage as they are faced with many risk factors including juvenile criminal involvement as well as mental health issues. This paper discusses the magnitude of parental incarceration in the United States, discusses the programs that are currently available, analyzes the success of progressive countries in dealing with parental incarceration, and finally, suggests programs in order to identify potential possibilities for improvement of our prison systems in relation to incarcerated parents and their families.


**Introduction**

As a nation, there have been various advances that have put us ahead of other countries when referring to development. Many countries tend to look to the United States in order to find best practices. While the United States may be progressive as a nation, we tend to fall behind when it comes to our justice system. Incarceration has been a growing issue within our country. Considering incarceration rates as well as number of incarcerated individuals, the United States surpasses other countries significantly. However, many would argue that the United States is much less progressive in dealing with such populations. The significance of the incarcerated population requires effective policy implementation. The policies and programs currently in place do not efficiently address the incarcerated population and our goals to rehabilitate such individuals. Incarceration of individuals comes along with greater consequences to the children of incarcerated parents. These children belong to a vulnerable population that requires a significant amount of resources. In order to address the consequences of parental incarceration, as a nation, the United States must take action to provide adequate resources to not only incarcerated individuals, but to their families as well.

The information contained in this thesis comes from exploratory research. The existing literature related to this topic is underdeveloped and incomplete. The issue of incarceration, especially of women, became prominent during the past few decades due to mandatory minimum sentencing and the War on Drugs. Although there may not have been a significant need for this research in the past, it is relevant and requires attention and action. This issue is especially important because it affects children, who are the future of our country, and their well-being.

**Bureau of Justice Statistics**
In the United States, there are more than 2 million people behind bars at a given time (Prison Policy Initiative, 2017). The United States has the highest rate of incarceration among all nations as well as the largest percentage of the population behind bars. The current incarceration rate in the United States is 698 out of 100,000 residents (Prison Policy Initiative, 2017).

According to the 2010 Bureau of Justice Statistics Report “Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children”, an estimated 809,800 prisoners of the total prison population of 1,518,535 are parents to children under the age of 18. The estimated total number of children with incarcerated parents in the 2007 report was 1,706,600 children. Recent estimates report around 2.7 million children affected. According to the report, 52 percent of state prison inmates and 63 percent of federal prison inmates are parents to minors. Because the rate of incarceration has increased significantly over the past decade, the families who are affected by incarceration are becoming more common. The most rapid growth in the number of incarcerated parents occurred between 1991 and 1997. During this time, the parents held in both state and federal prisons increased by 79 percent, while the children of incarcerated parents increased by 80 percent (Glaze, 2008). The number of parents incarcerated continues to grow today, but at a less rapid rate.

Maintaining contact between parents and their children is just one challenge associated with parental incarceration. Prisons do not always provide the means to allow inmates to communicate regularly. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Report, seventy percent of parents in state prisons report exchanging letters with their children. Fifty-three percent have spoken to their children over the telephone, and forty-two percent report having a personal visit since admission. The numbers are a bit higher for parents in federal prisons. The report also suggests that mothers are more likely to maintain contact with their children while incarcerated than fathers. More than three quarters of state prison inmates who were parents of minor children
report that they had some contact with their children since admission. The frequency of contact between parents and their children varied depending on the length of the prison sentence the parent is serving. Parents with less time to serve report more frequent contact with their children. Forty-seven percent of parents who were expected to be released from state prison within six months reported weekly contact with their children. On the other hand, among parents who did not expect to be released, only twenty-two percent report weekly contact with their children. Contact between incarcerated parents and their children can make a significant difference in the developmental trajectories of children. The resources available within our prison systems directly impact the connection between incarcerated parents and their children. Development of new prison programs and policies could allow families to stay in contact throughout the incarceration period.

**Child Development Risk Factors**

In our justice system, individuals who are incarcerated are serving sentences of imprisonment as punishment for crimes that they commit. However, the consequences that incarceration can have on the children and families as a whole can often be overlooked. Children of incarcerated parents are considered to be “hidden victims” of crime. Unlike the direct victims of crimes in our criminal justice system, the hidden victims do not have access to or receive the support that direct victims do. There is a lack of resources and mechanisms in our current justice system to appropriately provide support to these individuals. The amount of children affected by incarceration is larger than the number of parents affected by incarceration. Therefore, these threats to children’s development should be seriously considered when developing prison
programs. Research has found that parent’s incarceration poses threats to children’s emotional, physical, educational and financial well-being.

One of the major hidden consequences is the impact that incarceration of a parent has on child development. The National Institute of Justice analyzes the threats that children of incarcerated parents face. One major concern surrounding the incarceration of parents is the likelihood that their children will later become criminally-involved as well. This is referred to as a cycle of intergenerational criminal behavior. (NCJRS, 2017). Children of incarcerated parents are up to six times more likely to be incarcerated than children whose parents are not. These children are placed at an unfair disadvantage.

Children of incarcerated parents often have a number of stressful life events before parental incarceration. They can face a number of psychological problems including depression and antisocial behavior. Research has found that the most common consequence of parental incarceration is antisocial behavior of the child, which is described as behaviors that go against social norms. These behaviors can impact different aspects of the children’s’ lives and can carry into their adult lives such as in decreased educational attainment.

Aside from psychological difficulties associated with parental incarceration, children are often faced with restricted economic resources to support them. Many children must live with a caregiver or a grandparent who does not usually have to provide for dependents. This financial burden can have a host of disadvantages for the children. Children are also often placed into foster care following the incarceration of their parent. This has proven to have a whole list of risk factors including an increased risk of sexual and physical abuse. (Children of Prisoners Library, 2003)

**Paternal Incarceration**
Of the men who are currently incarcerated in the United States, 54 percent of them are fathers (Arditti, 2012). Compared to other incarcerated men, incarcerated fathers are more likely to be violent, African American, less educated, prone to drug and alcohol abuse, and have poor relationship skills (Carlson and McLanahan, 2002). Fathers who are incarcerated are less likely to report being the sole caregiver for their children prior to incarceration. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Eighty-eight percent of fathers reported that at least one of their children was in the care of the child’s mother. The absence of fathers as caregivers has negative implications of its own. When combined with parental incarceration, fathers’ absence contributes to the difficulty and disadvantage of families. The decreased physical presence of fathers in a household shifts enormous financial and child care responsibility onto mothers. This redefinition of men’s fathering identity has implication for his involvement with his children both during confinement and upon release.

**Maternal Incarceration**

Over the past few decades, the incarceration rates of women have risen significantly. Since 1990, the number of women convicted of felonies in state courts has grown at a rate of more than twice that of men (Arditti, 2012). This is the result of the war on drugs and mandatory minimum sentences. These sentencing guidelines have had many unintended consequences, especially for women. As the majority of female prisoners are mothers, incarceration has impacted more than a million American children (Arditti, 2012). Females are also more likely to report having multiple children as well as report their children residing with them prior to arrest. This produces difficulties for not only the children but for the mothers as well.
Incarceration contributes to women’s psychological, relational, and situational distress. Maternal distress is defined as a mother’s discomfort with her ability to protect her children from harm, prevent children’s adversity or promote children’s well-being (Arditti, 2012). This can have negative consequences for the children as maternal distress impacts the mothers’ parenting. For example, maternal distress can result in less effective parenting and inability to protect children from maltreatment by the mothers’ intimate partners. Maternal distress can also result in less empathetic parenting, harsh disciplinary practices and child abuse (Feshbach, 1986).

Maternal incarceration is often linked to child adjustment difficulties, as previously mentioned. These difficulties include school failure, antisocial and delinquent behavior, and higher rates of intergenerational incarceration (Arditti, 2012). Another consequence of maternal incarceration is that most mothers are the primary caregivers for their children. Mothers are also 2.5 times more likely to have been single parents than their male counterparts. This creates care discontinuities for their children. Incarceration creates an issue of who will care for the children during the mothers’ absence.

**Foster Care**

The United States is home to many vulnerable children and youth. One group that requires a great amount of our attention as a nation is the children who are not only affected by the foster care system, but also have a parent who is incarcerated. In addition to the challenges children of incarcerated parents, many children face additional challenges if placed into foster care. The foster care system in our country is imperfect and can have negative effects on children and their developmental trajectories. These developmental trajectories can be especially harsh on children of incarcerated parents. In addition to these challenges, many of these children also come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a policy brief titled, “Helping Children with Parents
in Prison and Children in Foster Care,” authors John H. Laub and Ron Haskins discuss the the issues surrounding parental incarceration and foster care and discuss programs to address these issues.

Foster care is often the only option for children with incarcerated parents due to the lack of a legal guardian able to step in and be the sole caregiver. A study by sociologists Kristin Turney and Christopher Wildeman found that 40 percent of children in foster care have been exposed to parental incarceration at some point in their lives (Laub and Raskins, 2018). The same study also found that maternal incarceration is linked to foster care and paternal incarceration is linked to homelessness. In addition, behavioral outcomes of these youth include aggression, educational outcomes such as grade retention, and health outcomes such as depression. The policy brief by John H. Laub and Ron Haskins suggests alternative policies that lead to better outcomes for the children.

The first suggestion is alternatives to incarceration. As parental incarceration can be detrimental to children and families, the authors suggest alternatives to arrest and prosecution in order to keep families in tact. This could consist of lesser sentences for minor offenses. The second suggestion is increased visitation. Visitation can be helpful in keeping family relationships strong. The last suggestion from the policy brief is school-based and community-based programs. These programs aim to assist children and families on the outside with everyday life. Providing resources for children and families can have many benefits. The government has a duty to step in and assist with development, safety, and wellbeing. In addition to these policy changes, improvements to the foster care system as well as reducing the number of children placed into foster care are approaches that can ensure the wellbeing of this vulnerable population.
**Effects on Incarcerated Parents**

Parental incarceration clearly has negative effects on the children and families. However, the negative effects are not limited to them. The parents who are facing incarceration also face a number of difficulties that come along with incarceration. 1 out of every 8 cases results in the parents losing their parental rights. Many times, the seriousness of the offense does not make a difference in whether or not the children are taken away. Any criminal involvement can result in losing parental rights. Female offenders have their rights taken more often than males. To many incarcerated parents, this is the worst consequence of criminal conviction, more than serving time behind bars.

More than 2.2 million individuals in our country’s prisons and jails are parents of minor children (Marshall Project, 2018). In order to address the consequences of this issue, legislators are taking action. Gwen Moore, a Democratic legislator from Wisconsin has plans to introduce an “incarcerated parents’ bill of rights.” The purpose of the legislation is to ensure that parents who maintain a role in their children’s’ lives do not have their rights taken away, as this can be detrimental to both the parents and the children. While the child-welfare system should find young children stable homes, it should also make a greater effort to keep the mothers and fathers in their lives in a productive way. Children are better off by many measures when they have relationships with their birth families.

**Rights of Children**

The rights of children can be easily overlooked when discussing incarceration. Justice Strategies, a research organization committed to campaigning against mass incarceration, have
advocated for children’s rights when it comes to policymaking. The organization is working to address the impact of parental incarceration as a human rights issue. Their concerns include the negative impact of incarceration on children. Justice Strategies called upon the United States government in order to promote the use of alternatives to prison when dealing with offenders who have minor children. The committee called about the government to make concrete and effective changes to the justice system by, “ensuring that the impact of incarceration on children and/or other dependents is taken into account when sentencing an individual convicted of a non-violent offence and promoting the use of alternatives to imprisonment” (Justice Strategies, 2017).

Research reveals a close connection between parental incarceration and adverse outcomes for children. Parental incarceration is considered an adverse childhood experience, often referred to as ACE. Parental incarceration also comes with significant social costs related to inequality. These costs include poverty, adverse neighborhood conditions, and violence exposure (Justice Strategies, 2017). In addition, our justice system often does not support family connections, but severs the ties and relationships between incarcerated individuals and their families. These issues are of great importance to the committee, and hence, they suggest alternatives to incarceration such as sentencing guidelines and diversion programs for parents.

**Penal Reform International**

The rates of imprisonment are significantly higher in the United States than in other countries around the world. However, other countries are taking action to address the rights of children of incarcerated parents. The Penal Reform International is a nonprofit organization registered in the Netherlands that focuses on the rights of children. The rights of children of incarcerated parents are often overlooked in the criminal justice system. The vulnerability of
these children is an issue that the organization aims to address. This organization advocates for the consideration of the rights of children throughout the criminal proceedings of their parents. Among the challenges children of incarcerated children face are alternative care, financial hardship, lack of access to health services and education, and discrimination. Penal Reform International promotes the existing standards protecting the children of incarcerated parents at the international, regional and national level. They help policy-makers and other stakeholders ensure that the rights of children are considered at every stage.

**Existing Federal Bureau of Prisons Programs**

There are programs that exist today in our prison system to assist families affected by incarceration. However, our justice system would benefit from taking a different approach to the programs currently offered. There are currently ways that families can stay in contact, but much of the contact is limited to letters and phone calls. The 2010 Bureau of Justice Statistics Report states that 70 percent of parents in state prisons report exchanging letters with their children, 53 percent report talking to their children over the telephone, and 42 percent had a personal visit since being incarcerated. The contact between parents in federal prisons and their children is higher than those in state prisons. 85 percent of parents in federal prisons report telephone contact with their children, 84 percent report having contact via letters and 55 percent have had a personal visit. There is an overwhelming need for resources for both the parents and the children affected by incarceration.

The Bureau of Prisons, the federal law enforcement agency, offers a number of programs across the United States. The central mission of the Bureau of Prisons is to support a successful transition to the community. The BOP has a booklet titled, “Making Changes,” showcasing some
of the programs at work. The booklet shows a number of programs that have been implemented within the prisons. The programs are designed to help inmates prepare for productive, crime-free lives after release. The programs that are offered are aimed at improving different aspects of the inmate’s life. For example, in Cumberland, Maryland, a group of inmate instructors to teach inmates the importance of living a healthy and active lifestyle. In this program, the inmates are taught ways to improve their overall nutritional health. At the Federal Corrections Institution in Phoenix, Arizona, allows inmates to enroll in a building trades program. This program allows the inmates to take a Vocational Training (VT) exam. The program allows the inmates to learn a variety of skills such as carpentry, electrical and plumbing. These skills allow the inmates to be prepared for jobs when they reenter the community. The Bureau of Prisons has also developed programs that allow the inmates to give back to their communities. For example, in Marion, Illinois, the inmates have helped to provide bicycles to children in the community by checking the bikes for safety and rebuilding them as needed. These programs have been a great success and have produced a reduction in the recidivism rates among federal offenders. However, many of the programs are focused solely on ensuring inmates are prepared for success upon release. There are not many programs that are specifically designed to keep strong relationships with family members and children while incarcerated.

A review of the Directory of National Programs by the Federal Bureau of Prisons reveals the reentry programs available in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Most of the programs focus on psychology services. The catalog listed one program designed for parents called The Parenting Program. According to the catalog, this program is available at all Bureau facilities. The program was designed to have a visitation component. However, the length, depth and content of the program varies depending on the institution as volunteers and community groups are often the
providers of the program (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2017). The Bureau of Prisons would benefit from adopting more family-oriented and children oriented programs that are consistent across institutions.

**Washington State Parenting Sentencing Alternatives**

In 2010, Washington State created two Parenting Sentencing Alternatives to prison. Maintaining the family bond is an important aspect of the sentencing alternatives in order to stop the cycle of criminal activity among families. The first alternative implemented was the Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative (FOSA). This alternative is a judicial sentencing option created for nonviolent offenders with minor children. FOSA allows judges to waive a sentence for eligible individuals. Instead of a sentence, individuals are given twelve months of community supervision along with conditions for treatment and programming for people facing prison sentences (Washington State Department of Corrections, 2010). Judges play an important role in this alternative as they can modify the conditions and revoke the alternative sentence. Progress reports are utilized in order to monitor the participants of the Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative.

The second alternative created as a part of the Parenting Sentencing Alternatives to prison is the Community Parenting Alternative (CPA). This is a partial confinement program where participants are able to reside in the community, but under surveillance by an electronic monitoring system. Participants are supervised by a Community Corrections Officer. As a condition of the program, individuals must reside at an approved address in the community. The program also provides support for the sponsors in understanding the importance of their role in the program. There are specific guidelines that participants are expected to follow, and they can
be terminated from the program if the guidelines are not followed. Washington State’s Parenting Sentencing Alternatives are designed to minimize the impact of incarceration. The focus of the legislation is the children, the families, and maintaining the family bond in order to allow participants to be productive and contributing members of their families and communities. Such legislation could benefit states across the United States if implemented.

**Parenting Behind Bars**

The majority of children born to incarcerated mothers are separated from them immediately after birth. Some countries have federal laws allowing babies to live in prisons with their mothers, the United States does have legislation allowing this at the federal level. However, there are eleven states in the United States who have allowed babies to live with their mothers behind bars (Caniglia, 2018). After the birth of the child, these facilities allow the mothers to spend the first several months with their babies as this is a crucial time period for attachment. These nursery programs seek to help the mother and child bond. Many states do not have specific policies to address what happens after an incarcerated mother gives birth. Of the eleven states allowing prison nurseries, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York has a successful program for incarcerated mothers that addresses this issue.

The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York has implemented a program designed to keep the connection between the mothers in the facility and their children. This nursery program is the oldest in the country as it began in 1901. The program was designed with the importance of relationships at the core. In order for the women to be eligible for the program, the medical and mental health staff of the prison must assess them to determine if the woman is a good fit. The mother must go through an eight-week prenatal class and a nine-week parenting
program (Caniglia, 2018). Several aspects of the woman’s past are also considered before she can participate in the nursery program. The staff look into who is going to have custody of the child, whether the mother has been involved in the child-welfare system, the length of incarceration, past incarceration and the nature of her crime (Mothers, Infants and Imprisonment: A National Look at Prison Nurseries and Community based Alternatives). Only women who give birth while in custody qualify for this program. The children are allowed to stay in the facility from 12 to 18 months. The mother must be released from prison during within that time.

The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility has experienced much success with their nursery program as it has continued to benefit mothers and their children since its implementation in 1901. The program has proven to reduce the recidivism rates among its participants. The average recidivism rate for women in the state of New York is around 30 percent. The individuals who participate in the nursery program at Bedford Hills have a recidivism rate of only 3 percent (Caniglia, 2018). Their program as well as the other nursery programs work to make the reentry process of women easier and prevent them from getting back into a cycle of crime.

The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility offers another program to assist mothers in keeping their relationships with children. The belief that strong family connection maximizes a child’s stability and a woman’s chances of success upon reentry are built into the program. The program, Hour Children’s Centers, allows the children and family members to visit the mothers who are incarcerated at Bedford Hills. The program provides free transportation to and from areas of New York State so that the families can visit. The program also allows mothers to be connected with their children as well as the entities they are involved in. Mothers can reach out to the guardians, schools, hospitals, social workers, family courts, and foster care agencies
The Children’s Center also provides parental education classes to mothers that provide practical parenting skills. Some of the programs include Parenting from a Distance, Mothers of Adolescents and Prenatal Education. Their Teen/Preteen Program allows mothers to work closely with children and their guardians to provide special support during the challenging adolescent years. The progressive approach of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility is commendable and has proven to be successful in assisting incarcerated mothers and their children throughout incarceration.

**Progressive Approaches in Scandinavian Countries**

The Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway have identified the same issue of parental imprisonment within their justice system and are taking a more progressive approach. A Norwegian study estimated that over half of the prisoners in Norway are parents, and they have an average of two kids each (Scharff-Smith, 2010). The scope of the parental imprisonment issue is not as large in the Scandinavian countries. In fact, Scandinavian countries have some of the lowest rates of incarceration in comparison to other countries. However, they have taken unique approaches such as initiatives and reforms that are being introduced. Their progressive model should be used as an example of how the United States can change our approach and benefit parents and their families.

According to research, the problems that children of incarcerated parents face in the Scandinavian countries are similar to those of children in other countries. For example, the children are negatively affected emotionally and can develop different problems such as depression. Therefore, the initiatives and reforms that are being applied in the Scandinavian countries could be applied in the United States.
One initiative that is being employed in Scandinavian countries is non-custodial sanctions such as community service or electronic tagging which enables them to be monitored without being behind bars. The goal of this initiative is to alleviate the hardship of imprisonment for the children. This allows the parents to continue contact with their children.

Another accommodation that Scandinavian countries have implemented are conjugal visits. These visits allow for parents and their children to interact in an intimate setting. This often means private rooms where they are able to play, read, play board games etc. The liberality of these visits depends on the type of prison. Some only allow indoor visits in small rooms, other prisons are more flexible on what the visitation can look like. Over recent years, there have been many efforts to improve the visiting conditions in order to make them more child friendly. There are still facilities that are not considered child friendly, but there have been efforts to make them comfortable and well equipped.

One initiative that has been implemented in Danish prisons is the ability for children to live inside the prison with their mother or father. This is not an initiative that allows all children to live with their parents. The children may only stay if the conditions of the institution are suitable for children. This initiative has not yet been applied to prisons in Norway, so children are never allowed to live with an imprisoned parent.

In an effort to allow the parents to reintegrate into their communities and their families more easily, Scandinavian prisons have allowed home leave. This system allows parents to leave the facility in order to maintain contact with their families and enables them to gradually return to society. The Prison and Probation Service in Denmark granted 15,341 home leaves for prisoners to see family members. They also granted 16,959 leaves in connection with education or work. This practice was implemented mainly by the open prisons, which are more liberal.
Home leave arrangements do not play a major role in many of the penal systems around the world. However, their implementation in the United States could allow inmates to maintain normal contact with their families as well as create a more gradual return to society, in turn reducing the recidivism rates.

Criminologists have argued that the penal culture of the Scandinavian countries is humane. The low rates of imprisonment and humane prison conditions are related to the cultures of equality that exists in the countries. The culture of the United States plays into the way our prison system is structured as well. While the mass imprisonment in the United States affects a larger scope of individuals, some of these initiatives, if implemented correctly, could help keep parents connected to their children and families.

**ASU Center for Child Well-Being**

Arizona has the fourth highest incarceration rate out of all the United States. 62,000 people from Arizona are behind bars today (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). Rates of incarceration in Arizona are higher than the United States rates of incarceration. As a result, more children are being impacted by parental incarceration. The significance of this issue has attracted the attention of many within the state. Arizona State University’s Center for Child Well-Being has organized an annual conference dedicated to children of incarcerated parents. The Center’s mission is “to advance child and family well-being.” The National Children of Incarcerated Parents Conference was created to have a unique way to bring individuals together to engage in action planning. Scholars, attorneys, social workers, Department of Corrections workers, professors, pediatricians, and many more came from all across the country to participate in the conference and share their knowledge. The conference consisted of presentations, panels
and workshops to address the incarceration of parents and the effects it has on children. The conference addressed connecting children and incarcerated parents through family supportive visits and communication.

The conference utilized documentaries and films to reveal the struggles of parental incarceration. A film called *Tre Mason Desean* directed by Denali Tiller was showcased as it highlighted many of the struggles associated parental incarceration. The film shows a young boy, whose father is in prison, get involved in drugs and the juvenile justice system. It also shows another young boy having to live with his grandmother as the sole caregiver when his father goes to prison. The short film was played on the first night of the conference in order to highlight the issues they wished to address. The conference was a place to share ideas and come together in order to address parental incarceration. As a society, we can collectively overcome challenges and make a difference by ensuring health and well-being of its children.

**Prison Programs in Arizona**

The Bureau of Prisons currently offers some programs that assist incarcerated parents. Many of the programs are offered by organizations that are separate from the federal prisons. The programs that are offered at certain correctional facilities often depend on the community in which the prison is located. For example, the Girl Scouts are an organization that has provided services and programs for the community to help incarcerated individuals. Because the programs vary across the country depending on location, incarcerated parents can have very different experiences when it comes to keeping in contact with their families and being able to support them while they are incarcerated.
In order to better understand the programs that are available to inmates, a review of the programs in Arizona was conducted and reveals a number of programs that inmates can participate in. The Federal Corrections Complex in Tucson, Arizona has a program called “Inside Out Dad.” This is a parenting program that is regularly offered for fathers incarcerated in the facility. The Federal Corrections Complex has mainly male inmates. The “Inside Out Dad” program focuses on preparing the families for release. This includes weekly meetings where fathers work through core education and reentry sessions that focus on fathering knowledge, skills and behaviors. The potential benefits of the program are reduced recidivism rates. Improved family functioning, improved parenting and improved parent-child interaction. This program has been implemented in many states across the United States, and 20 states have selected it as the preferred parenting program for male correctional facilities. Although this program has gained popularity among the male correctional facilities, there is little evidence to support that the program actually reduces recidivism or strengthens families.

Beginning in 2013, The Bureau of Prisons participates in Universal Children’s Day. This is a visiting event for inmates and their families. A number of workshops and activities allow the inmates to enhance their relationships with their families. Arizona prisons have participated in the Universal Children’s Day activities, allowing families to visit the facility. As aforementioned, local communities play a role in the success of these programs. Therefore, inmates across the country may have different experiences. Universal Children’s Day is a great way for families to connect and enhance their relationships. However, if substantial benefits to children and families are to be made, the Bureau of Prisons will need to implement more programs such as this in order to keep families in contact more than just one day of the year.
Aside from programs offered by the Bureau of Prisons, there is a program called the Arizona Kinship Program for Incarcerated Parents. This program was created due to the great need for support for caregivers in Arizona. In Arizona, there are 96,444 children with at least one parent who is incarcerated. Of those children, only ten percent are in state custody (ArizonaKinship.org). This means that the majority of children are taken care of by a relative or family member. The Arizona Kinship Program was designed to provide support, resources and guidance to these individuals. The program provides support for not only the caregivers but for teens and youth as well. It also provides parenting education and guardian support. They also provide support to encourage visitation of the incarcerated parent. The program also helps the caregivers connect with food, housing, and clothing resources in order to relieve some of the hardship that comes along with caring for children. In addition to these services they also provide assistance with government agencies such as the Arizona Department of Corrections.

An interview with a program coordinator within the Arizona Department of Corrections revealed to me that many of the inmates do not end up participating in certain programs, because they are unaware of what programs are available to them. The program coordinator suggested that the best way to make programs successful is to make inmates aware of their resources. Additionally, the program coordinator revealed that the most frustrating aspect of incarceration and maintaining relationships with families is when the inmates cannot reach them. For instance, if the inmate makes multiple attempts to contact their families and are unsuccessful, they may give up entirely. The program coordinator expressed that programs to keep families connected would be beneficial if implemented.

**Recommendations**
Considering the scope of the problem, there is no all encompassing policy that can solve all the issues that come along with parental incarceration. In order to make changes, as a country, we must first be educated. Spreading awareness about the harmful effects that our justice system can have on children of incarcerated parents would be a great first step to eliminating this problem within our country. In addition to awareness and education, changes within our justice system will need to be made. Criminal justice reforms and national support systems might be needed to prevent the harmful consequences of parental incarceration for children. In order to accomplish our criminal justice policy goals, as a nation, we must ensure that the interests of children are taken into consideration during each stage of criminal proceedings. These are very general umbrella topics that must be implemented at the core of our policy decisions moving forward. Based on the existing research and existing programs, the following recommendations, if implemented, would help eliminate the negative consequences associated with parental incarceration.

1. **Alternatives to incarceration:** Changes in mandatory sentencing guidelines enacted in the mid 1970s have led to a significant shift in public policy favoring punishment over rehabilitation (Reed and Reed, 1997). In addition to mandatory sentencing, the Three Strikes rule in the early 1990s played a role in making rehabilitation obsolete (Reed and Reed). In order to reduce the negative consequences of parental incarceration, one potential approach is to decrease the amount of parents who are sentenced to prison. Within our country, Washington State and it’s Parenting Sentencing Alternatives would be a great example of how alternatives to incarceration can help to stop the cycle of crime throughout generations. Alternatives to incarceration have also been successful in
Scandinavian countries where they have utilized non-custodial sanctions to limit the impact of incarceration and rehabilitate individuals.

2. **Increased visitation:** The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over three-fourths of incarcerated parents have had some contact with their minor children. Although this may seem like a convincing statistic because it means the majority of parents have contacted their children, there are still many improvements that could be made in order to increase contact between incarcerated parents and their children. Strong family ties have been proven to prevent delinquent behaviors in children. Family relationships also give children the resilience needed to overcome the trauma of parental incarceration. Increased visitation would benefit both incarcerated parents as well as their children and families by keeping them connected. In order to increase visitation, prisons could adopt more lenient visitation policies. In addition to adopting visitation policies, it would be beneficial to improve the existing conditions of visitation rooms in prisons. Many report that the visiting conditions are not inviting for children and families. It would be beneficial to make visitation rooms more family friendly in order to make improve the quality of in-person visits. This could be done by putting materials such as coloring books or activities for the visitors to complete during their visitation. The Department of Corrections in Oregon adopted family-friendly visitation rooms in 2011 as an incentive program for inmates to encourage good institutional conduct. Prisons across the United States could implement similar programs in order to increase visitation.

3. **School-based and community-based programs:** Schools and communities should improve their ability to support children of incarcerated parents as well as their caregivers.
4. **Case workers in prisons:** Special attention should be given to issues related to parenting, parent-child relationship, parental mental health. This assessment will help guide the development of a tailored intervention strategy that builds on strengths while targeting challenges (Kjellstrand, 2018).

5. **Home visits:** The implementation of home visits would not only benefit the incarcerated parents and their families due to the relationship, but because inmates can more easily reintegrate into society. They can also slowly start taking back the responsibilities of parenting such as participating in parent-teacher conferences at school. The gradual reintegration to society will allow the parents to be successful and in turn, reduce the high recidivism rates that are often seen in our justice system.

**Policy Implications**

Research shows that children who are able to be resilient despite their parent’s incarceration have a strong social support system. The programs that our prisons provide should focus on keeping the relationship between incarcerated parents and their families strong. This should be at the core of policy decisions when referring to incarcerated parents. If the United States were to take a more progressive approach and look to the Scandinavian model for best practices, the children of incarcerated parents would have a better chance at gaining resilience.

**Conclusion**

Incarceration in the United States is one of the most significant social and institutional issues we are faced with today. The United States prison system requires a great deal of change in order to properly support incarcerated parents and their children. However, by listening to the
needs of families as well as referring to the best practices both within our country and countries across the world, the United States can make improvements to better support incarcerated individuals as well as their families. There are many different approaches to address parental incarceration within our country. The approaches that could be taken include sentencing guidelines, programs that support the caregivers and children, more programs that implement visitation, and programs that support families after the release of the parent back into the community.

In order to address the programs for parental incarceration, we must begin to study the programs’ effectiveness. The existing literature does not contain an evaluation system for determining whether the programs we currently offer are effective. This is an important step in continuing to learn about parental incarceration and how we can allocate the necessary attention to this issue in the future. It will be difficult to adopt new programs as well as continue the existing programs without a system of evaluation.
References:


