IMPRISONED SPIRITS:  
THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN

Parental Incarceration impacts millions of U.S. children. 2.4 million children in the United States have a mother or father in prison.¹ 7 million, or one in 10, U.S. children have a parent under some form of criminal justice supervision — in jail, prison, on probation, or on parole.² There are unique problems and stressors created by parental incarceration. Children often face a form of imprisonment of their own when a parent is taken away. Children of incarcerated parents are often difficult to identify because of the shame and social stigma associated with incarceration.

Disproportionate Impact on Ethnic Minorities  
Although only 12 percent of the U.S. population is Black, over half of the prison population is Black. Black children are nearly nine times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison and Hispanic children are nearly three times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison.³

Witnessing the Arrest of a Parent  
70 percent of children who witnessed their parent’s arrest saw their parents being handcuffed and nearly 30 percent were confronted with drawn weapons.⁴

Unreachable Parents  
Parents are often unreachable to children emotionally as well as physically. More than 60 percent of parents in prison are held more than one hundred miles away from their home.⁵ In addition to lack of contact with parents, children of incarcerated parents often experience instability, financial difficulties, lower quality of living and care.⁶

At Risk for a Myriad of Problems  
Children of incarcerated parents are at risk for academic and problems, behavioral issues, emotional issues, substance abuse, delinquency and future incarceration. Children can also experience stress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, separation anxiety, and attachment difficulties. The importance of visitation and contact with the incarcerated parent cannot be stressed enough. Visitations and contact with parents can have a positive effect on children, families and their incarcerated parents.⁷

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5 WAYS HELPING PROFESSIONALS CAN ASSIST CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

- Form support groups for children whose parents have been arrested or imprisoned.
- Help children become comfortable talking about their feelings by acknowledging pain and conflict.
- Educate parents and guardians about the dangers of deceiving children about their parent’s whereabouts, and support parents and guardians in telling children the truth.
- Promote inclusion of books about parental incarceration, such as Visiting Day, by Jacqueline Woodson, for children in libraries.
- Help children find a positive role model or mentor by utilizing agencies such as Big Brothers Big Sisters.

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For More Information
Amachi Mentoring Program - http://www.amachimentoring.org/
The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents - http://www.e-ccip.org/
Family and Corrections Network – http://www.fcnetwork.org/

Local Organizations with Programs Focused on Children of the Incarcerated
Capital Area Big Brother’s Big Sisters – Brighter Futures – http://www.capbigs.org/

Recommended Reading
All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated by Nell Bernstein
My Daddy is in Jail: Story, Discussion Guide and Small Group Activities for Grades K-5 by Janet M. Bender
Visiting Day by Jacqueline Woodson

More than 60 percent of parents in prison are held more than 100 miles away from their home.⁵

Bill of Rights for Children with an Incarcerated Parent⁹
1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent’s arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent’s absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I struggle with my parent’s incarceration.
7. I have the right to not be judged, blamed or labeled because of my parent’s incarceration.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

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