



**WELFARE PEER TA NETWORK**  
**Bringing Hope to Children of Incarcerated Parents**  
*Nashville, TN*  
*Short Report*



The number of parents in United States prisons is growing with the increasing use of incarceration as a criminal penalty. The Bureau of Justice Statistics noted that 1.5 million children had a parent in prison in 1999, and this number is up by more than 500,000 since 1991. Because most children reside with their mothers, the impact and disruption is increasing for these children as more mothers are incarcerated. While incarcerated, many parents do not have regular interaction with their children. Thus, when it is time for release, incarcerated parents do not know how to build, or rebuild meaningful relationships with their children. Incarceration can be a time for parents to learn skills and to develop bonds with their children. Many in-prison programs exist that specifically address these issues, including programs with parenting skills, relaxed visitation policies for children, and therapeutic interventions. Research has shown that positive involvement of parents in the lives of their children helps to stabilize and strengthen families, which in turn, may help to reduce recidivism, and promote self-sufficiency.

As the new millennium advances, the plight of children impacted by parental incarceration is among the most pervasive problems challenging modern corrections. Today, more than two million children in the U.S. have a parent in prison and many more minors have experienced a father or mother in jail. Research results show that when a parent is incarcerated, the lives of their children are disrupted by separation from parents, severance from siblings, and displacement to different caregivers. Other results show that children with a parent behind bars are more likely to endure poverty, parental substance abuse, and poor academic performance. Still other results show that these children disproportionately suffer aggression, anxiety, and depression. Moreover, the children of prisoners are at greater risk for alcohol and drug abuse, a variety of problem behaviors including delinquency and crime, and subsequent incarceration at some point in their lives. These findings demand that child welfare planners and policymakers rethink strategies to bring hope to children impacted by incarceration.

Mumola (2000) conducted a study that provides a snapshot of incarcerated parents and their children. Results show that State and Federal prisons held and estimated 721,500 parents of 1.5 million children in 1999. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) report highlights that 336,300 U.S. households with minor children were impacted by the parental imprisonment. Other results show that prior to admission, less than half of the parents in State prison reported living with their children-44% of fathers, 64% of mothers. A closer look reveals that nearly 2 in 3 State prisoners reported at least monthly contact with their children via phone, mail, or personal visits. While incarcerated fathers cite the child's mother as the current caregiver, mothers often refer to their parents as primary caregivers. Still other results show that over 75% of parents in State

prison reported a prior conviction-and 56% report having been previously incarcerated. The report concludes that a majority of parents in prison were violent offenders or drug traffickers-and that they expected to serve 6.5 years in State prison and 8.5 years in Federal prison.

Several States expressed a desire to explore successful in-prison programs that work to unite incarcerated parents and their families. Participants were interested in a program to address such issues as parenting, anger management, conflict resolution, job readiness, and relationship building, understanding that such services would benefit the children served by providing them the opportunity to rebuild and strengthen connections with their incarcerated parents, thus fostering a positive relationship that will continue following release from prison.

In response to these requests, the Welfare Peer TA network designed the *Bringing Hope to Children of Incarcerated Parents* Roundtable. The first Roundtable was held in Denver in November 2003. This second Roundtable showcased promising practices from around the country, and provided plenty of time for participants to think strategically about how to design and implement these programs as well as opportunities to learn about and discuss “what works” in serving this population. Participants included representatives from the States of Tennessee, Florida, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Roundtable speakers included State and local government agencies, service providers, practitioners, Federal personnel, and leaders of national organizations.

The full report will be available in early June 2004.