



## WELFARE PEER TA NETWORK

*BRINGING HOPE TO CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS*



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Among the most pervasive problems challenging modern corrections are record numbers of children with a parent in prison. Today, more than two million children in the U.S. have a parent in prison and many more minors have a parent in jail. When a parent is incarcerated, the lives of their children are disrupted by separation from fathers and mothers, severance from siblings, and displacement to different caregivers. Children with parents behind bars are more likely to experience poverty, parental substance abuse and mental illness, and other associated risk factors. These children also disproportionately suffer aggression, anxiety, and depression. In addition, the children of prisoners are at greater risk for alcohol and drug abuse, poor academic performance, and juvenile delinquency.<sup>i</sup>

Research findings also suggest that the 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. The U.S. Department of Justice reported that State and Federal prisons held and estimated 721,500 parents of 1.5 million children in 1999. 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. Nearly 2 in 3 State prisoners, however, reported at least monthly contact with their children by phone, mail, or personal visits. Other results show that incarcerated fathers typically cite the child's mother as the current caregiver. In contrast, incarcerated mothers cite the child's grandparents or other relatives as the current caregiver. Still other results show that over 75% of parents in State prison reported a prior conviction and 56% report having been previously incarcerated. A majority of parents in prison were violent offenders or drug traffickers—and expected to serve 6.5 years in State prison and 8.5 years in Federal prison.<sup>ii</sup>

Several states expressed a desire to identify promising programs to support the children of prisoners via the restoration of relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. In general, participants were interested in comprehensive programs to improve coping, job, and life skills among parents in prison. Specifically, participants were interested in programs that develop anger management, conflict resolution, job readiness, parenting, and relationship skills. Programs that provide such services improve outcomes for the children of prisoners via strengthening family ties and fostering relationships that persist 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 Roundtable showcased promising practices from around the country and provided an opportunity for participants to think strategically about how to design and implement these programs, as well as the occasion to learn about and discuss “what works” in serving this at-risk population. Participants included representatives from the States of Colorado, Virginia, and Wyoming. Roundtable speakers included State and local government agencies, service providers, practitioners, Federal personnel, and leaders of national organizations.

The full report on this event will be available in late December 2003.

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<sup>i</sup> Child Welfare League of America. Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners. See <http://www.cwla.org/>.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Special Report. *Incarcerated Parents and their Children, 2000*. Washington, DC.