Family Support during Incarceration & Reentry: A compendium of resources

Studies suggest that maintaining family ties and family support can be key factors in successful transition of returning inmates. The resources listed below share information, research and strategies to support individuals, families and children of incarcerated parents. Resources specific to jail populations and partners have been included.

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Research on Incarceration and its Impacts on Couples, Children and Families
This information may be helpful for writing impact reports, funding proposals and to solicit stakeholder support for policy, systems or environmental changes.

A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities (2016). This 16-page policy report offers proposals to address the increased poverty and stress that children of incarcerated parents experience.

Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry (October 2003, updated June 2005). A 12-page policy brief from the Urban Institute focuses on how communities, social service agencies, health care providers, and the criminal justice system can work collaboratively to better meet the needs of the families left behind.

Healthy Relationships, Employment, and Reentry (2013). National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. This research brief provides an overview of the evidence supporting the interrelatedness of employment, healthy relationships, family well-being, and recidivism.

Strategies for Building Healthy Relationship Skills Among Couples Affected by Incarceration (2012). Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This brief describes findings from federal grantees’ work to teach relationship skills among incarcerated and reentering fathers and their families.

Families and Reentry: Unpacking How Social Support Matters (2012). This study evaluated the family-inclusive case management component of the Chicago-based Safer Return program, which engages family members in service
provision to former prisoners.

Parental Incarceration: How to avoid a “death sentence” for families (2007). Published by the Clearinghouse Review Journal of Poverty Law and Policy, this paper highlights a number of promising services and supports for incarcerated parents and recommends what attorneys representing or working with incarcerated parents and their children can do to minimize harm to children.

Incarceration and the Family: A Review of Research and Promising Approaches for Serving Fathers and Families (2008). This publication was prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and provides chapters on the effects of incarceration and reentry on family members including partners and children. Family strengthening programs and the challenges implementing them are described.

Every Door Closed (2002). A report from the Center for Law and Social Policy and the Community Legal Services, Inc. that examines some of the barriers that, singly and in combination, create unemployment and homelessness, and increase failure among parents with criminal records. A fact sheet series summarizes the report.

The Impact of Marital and Relationship Status on Social Outcomes for Returning Prisoners (2009). A 9-page report from the Urban Institute’s Justice Policy Center that analyzes prisoner data for the short-term impact of marital and intimate partner status on recidivism, substance use, and employment.

MN Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Collaborative. This website is reflective of a collaborative effort that shares a range of resources to address the strengths and needs of families affected by incarceration.

Strengthening Families Impacted By Incarceration: A Review of Current Research and Practice (2009). This 28-page literature review prepared by Wilder Research is easy to read and contains many concrete strategies. A 4-page brief summarizes the full report.

Piloting a Tool for Reentry: A Promising Approach to Engaging Family Members (2011). A 16-page report that describes the Vera Institute of Justice Family Justice Program’s Reentry Is Relational project, which implemented the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT)—a series of questions designed to prompt conversations with incarcerated men and women about the supportive people in their lives.

Why Ask About Family? A guide for corrections (2011). This guide from the Vera Institute of Justice Family Justice Program describes the principles of a strength-based, family-focused approach in corrections practices, policy, and reentry planning that can make a difference. It was developed for correctional administrators, case managers, reentry and discharge planners, treatment-team members, institutional parole officers, and other personnel working in and around jails, prisons, and other corrections institutions.


The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated. This is a website of a national organization offering a variety of resources focused on families of the incarcerated.
National Reentry Resource Center. Provides information, training and technical assistance in the area of inmate and prisoner reentry.

Urban Institute’s Transition from Jail to Community (TJC) Initiative. A partnership between NIC and the Urban Institute to develop a model for jail-to-community transition. An online toolkit guides users through each component of the TJC model. Modules incorporate examples from across the country, tools developed to facilitate implementation, and links to additional resources.

Jail Reentry Roundtable Initiative. This partnership aims to fill the gap in knowledge via reports, commissioned papers (e.g., Reentry Programs and Rural Jails) presentations (e.g., Does it Pay to Invest in Reentry Programming for Jail Inmates?) and more. Urban Institute, John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Bureau of Justice Assistance.

Publications include:
- Evaluation of the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative Reentry Programs (2014)
- The Role of Screening and Assessment in Jail Reentry (2012)
- Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community (2008).

Improving Child and Family Outcomes
The resources below are a blend of best practices, toolkits and guides for supporting families with a loved one experiencing incarceration.


Toolkit for Developing Family-Focused Jail Programs: Children of Incarcerated Parents Project (2015). This toolkit details the key considerations for jail administrators and community-based organizations interested in developing a family-focused jail program.

Family Reunification Program of St. Rose Youth & Family Center, Inc. Milwaukee. FRP is a child welfare program that serves children affected by parental incarceration and the families who support them. This is an excellent resource to connect families of incarcerated folks to. They provide support BOTH during and after incarceration.


Children with Incarcerated Parents: A list of select resources (2008). Annie Casey Foundation publication of 36 resources to help parents, workers, policymakers and the kids themselves. Books, journals, websites, classes, programs and policies are included.

Fact Sheets for Caregivers of Young Children in Non-Parental Care (2003). A series of nine fact sheets designed to help grandparents raising grandchildren learn more about what to expect and where to turn for support.

Guide for Incarcerated Parents Who Have Children in the Child Welfare System. This 34-page handbook is designed to help parents involved in the criminal justice system work with the child welfare system to stay in touch with their children and stay involved in decisions about their children’s well-being. The guide also includes information on steps required by the child welfare system for reunification, or having children return home to their family after foster care.
Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights (2005). A 20-page publication outlining the 8 rights children of incarcerated parents have as defined by the San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents.

How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children: A Caregiver’s Guide. A 31-page workbook from the Initiative Foundation designed to help moms, dads and caregivers answer children’s questions about jail and prison.


Supporting Infants, Toddlers, and Families Impacted by Caregiver Mental Health Problems, Substance Abuse, and Trauma: A Community Action Guide (2012). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, DHHS. Uses a case study approach to present resources that service providers and practitioners can use to better understand and engage the community.

Toolkit for Developing Family Impact Statements: Children of Incarcerated Parents Project (2015). Urban Institute. Family impact statements help judges and probation officers develop tailored approaches to sentencing or to supervising parents so all are aware of the effects that parental justice involvement can have on children. This is a guide to drafting an effective statement to persuade the criminal justice personnel to consider the impacts that their decisions have on the families of returning citizens.

Wisconsin Department of Corrections, Reentry Unit. This website contains a number of documents designed to support community-partners, spouses and children of incarcerated parents both during incarceration and during the reentry process. Highlights include: re-entry information for offenders in English and Spanish, and a simple guide to health insurance upon reentry (also in both English and Spanish).

National Reentry Resource Center – Families. This website identifies key resources to help engage families and their communities in the reentry process.

Supporting Policy and System Change

The following resources support work that engages community partners in systems-level change that will impact child and family wellbeing.

Collaborative Justice Resource Center

This website is designed to provide the information, tools, and resources needed to establish, enhance, and sustain effective long-term collaborative partnerships among policymakers and other key stakeholders in your community. Given the importance of collaboration to the success of community corrections agencies, this website also offers a special section designed specifically for those community corrections professionals who are interested in building more effective partnerships.

Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community (2008). Urban Institute, John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Bureau of Justice Assistance. Life After Lockup synthesizes key findings from the Jail Reentry Roundtable and examines opportunities on the jail-to-community continuum where reentry-focused interventions can make a difference. See page 50 for recommendations for systems-level strategic planning.

Bringing Families In: Recommendations of the Incarceration, Reentry and the Family Roundtables (December 2006). A 20-page report from Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice & the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice offers central findings and recommendations specific to agencies, organizations and incarcerated individuals.
A Call to Action: Safeguarding New York’s Children of Incarcerated Parents. A Report of the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (2011). This report highlights recommendations for how the systems that touch the lives of children of incarcerated parents can minimize trauma and harm, and support their resiliency and success.

The Jail Administrator’s Toolkit for Reentry (2008). Geared toward jail practitioners who are working to improve reentry in their jurisdictions, this toolkit provides key elements of the reentry process from jail staff issues and assessment screens to identifying community resources and coordinating stakeholders.

The Elected Official’s Toolkit for Jail Reentry (2011). A 34-page guide that includes background information, tools and resources designed for elected officials and other policymakers looking to implement or build on a local jail reentry initiative.

Partnering with Jails to Improve Reentry: A Guidebook for Community-Based Organizations (2010). This guidebook provides community-based organizations with an overview of jail reentry and concrete steps to develop and sustain a reentry partnership with their local jail. It also addresses difficulties that might arise, and provides examples of strong partnerships between CBOs and jails that serve as models.

Developing Effective Collaborations to Support Prisoner Reentry Coaching Packet (includes Engaging Offenders’ Families in Reentry). As part of the Presidential Prisoner Reentry Initiative Program, this coaching packet explores the establishment of meaningful collaborative partnerships in order to achieve successful citizen reentry. A definition of collaboration and a tool for determining the effectiveness of case management teams are provided.

National Institute of Corrections. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) is an agency within the U.S. Department of Justice. NIC provides training, technical assistance, information services, and policy/program development assistance to federal, state, and local corrections agencies. (search on jail reentry)

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