

**Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation**

**PARENTS BEHIND BARS TALK ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN:  
From A Survey of Allegheny County Jail Inmates, April 2003**

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FROM A SURVEY OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL INMATES, APRIL 2003**

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**A father worries about his nine year-old son starting to have troubles in school. His son is blaming his grandmother and takes things out on her. The father wonders how much harder it must be on children than on the people in jail.** *-39 year-old white father from Ohio who had been a single parent living alone with his son. He has been arrested 15 times, incarcerated twice and expects to be in Jail up to 3 months. Child's grandmother has stepped in to care for him.*

### **The Survey**

During the week of April 7, 2003, six members of a Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation team under the supervision of Claire A. Walker, Ph.D., interviewed 186 parents then incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail: 120 women, and 66 men. Approximately half of the men and women interviewed were African American; half were white. They were 18 to 55 years old, with an average age of 33.

The sample was randomly drawn from a Jail-provided roster of inmates who had been in the Jail two weeks or longer. The sample was drawn by Hide Yamatani Ph.D., Vice President for Research of the Center on Race and Social Problems of the University of Pittsburgh. Men and women in intake units and men in maximum security were excluded from the roster. On the day the roster was produced, there were 2,304 residents in the Allegheny County Jail – 285 women and 2018 men. Isami Arifuku, Ph.D. and her staff at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, assisted in developing the survey instrument and analyzing the data.

Participation in the survey was voluntary. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each. During the first day of interviewing, guards called out each inmate whose number had been drawn and brought him/her to an interviewing room in each unit. Some inmates did not have children under 18. A very brief (5 to 8 minutes) interview was conducted with the inmates who did not have children under the age of 18. Responses from inmates without minor children are not included in this analysis.

Most of the parents had been in the County Jail at least two weeks on the current charge; almost half had been in the Jail three months or longer. Of the 156 respondents who knew or believed they knew how long they would be incarcerated on the current charges, 40% expected their sentences to be six months or longer.

The interviewees were parents to 414 minor children. Three-quarters of their minor children were 12 or younger, with a median age of 8.

### **Our sample is fairly representative of national statistics, except in gender**

Although both nationally and locally, incarcerated populations are overwhelmingly male, more women than men were included in this Survey. The Project team was advised by the staff of the Jail that mothers would know more about their children than men would, and that mothers would be more willing to talk about their children. Local and national researchers also urged us to interview more (or only) women prisoners.

**Disruption in Children’s Lives**

**Parents who lived with their children at the time of arrest**

About half of the children under 18 represented in our survey lived with their now-jailed parents when the parents were arrested.

<b>Percentage of Children Living with Now-Jailed Parent before Arrest</b>		
<b>Living Arrangement</b>	<b>Children of Female Inmates</b>	<b>Children of Male Inmates</b>
Incarcerated parent alone	24.9%	12.5%
Incarcerated parent + other biological parent	16.5%	27.2%
Incarcerated parent + grandparents	8.0%	1.5%
Incarcerated parent + other	4.2%	0.7%
<b>TOTAL WITH PARENT</b>	<b>53.6%</b>	<b>41.9%</b>
Missing	0.8%	0%

\*The inmate sample included 120 women and 66 men.

**Single Parents**

One-fifth of the children – 25% of the female prisoners’ children and 13% of the male inmates’ children – had lived solely with the incarcerated parent before the parent went to Jail. These children lost both their sole parent and much of their stability.

**Moving from place to place**

One-third of the children had moved at least once since their parents’ arrest.

**Many children have been separated from their parents for longer than this incarceration**

Almost half of the female inmates’ children and more than half of the male inmates’ children lived with someone else when this parent was jailed.

<b>Percentage of Children NOT Living with the Jailed Parent before Arrest</b>		
<b>Living Arrangement</b>	<b>Children of FEMALE Inmates</b>	<b>Children of MALE Inmates</b>
Other biological parent	8.5%	50.7%
Grandparents	15.7%	2.2%
Other biological parent + grandparents	0.8%	1.5%
Other relative	8.4%	0.0%
Foster care	5.0%	0.7%
Other residence	7.3%	2.9%
<b>TOTAL WITH OTHER CARETAKER</b>	<b>45.7%</b>	<b>58.0%</b>
Missing	0.8%	0.0%

\*The inmate sample included 120 women and 66 men.

### Children's lives are repeatedly disrupted by parents' incarceration

In the lives of many of the children, the arrest and incarceration of one – and sometimes both – parents had occurred repeatedly.

**A three and a half year old girl whose mother had been arrested five times and incarcerated twice is described as clinging to her grandmother who is the primary caretaker now. She does not want to leave the house, gets sick more, looks for Mom's car, and often sets a plate at the dinner table for Mom.**

*-24 year-old white mother from suburbs who expects to be in Jail 3 to 12 months.*

More than half of the parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail had been in jail or prison three or more times. Almost one-fourth of the inmates interviewed reported that the other biological parent of at least one of their children had been incarcerated as well.

### Incarceration of other people close to the children

- 20% of the interviewed parents indicated that their children's aunts and uncles had also been incarcerated
- 10% of the parents said that their children's grandparents had also been in jail or prison.

**A fourteen year old is described as rebellious and acting like a grown-up. She's already been arrested once. In this child's family, other members have been incarcerated - a stepparent, grandparent, aunt and uncle. Child says she has to do whatever it takes to take care of herself.**

*-32 year-old white mother from a Mon Valley industrial town arrested for the first time and incarcerated less than one month who expects to be jailed 3 months.*

### Children's lives are disrupted by violence

- One-third of the interviewed parents reported that their children witnessed or experienced violence while living with them
  - 39% of the women said that their children witnessed or experienced violence while living with them; 23% of the men also said this.
  - 1 in 8 respondents said that their children witnessed or experienced violence BOTH while living with them AND while living with others.
  - Unprompted, several parents described neighborhood violence witnessed or experienced by their children.

### Lack of communication between parents in Jail and their children

- One-third of the children were completely out of touch with the interviewed parent
  - 21% of the men's children and 7% of the women's children do not know that their parent is in jail, either because the parent or caregiver does not want them to know or because the parent has been out of touch with the children. In some instances children have been told the incarcerated parent is at work, at school, or in the hospital.

**A three-year-old child was told during a previous incarceration that her mother was at school. Now her mother says she is terrified of school and wakes up with nightmares asking for her Mom.**  
*-23 yr. old white mother from inner suburbs arrested and incarcerated 3 times.*

- 11% of the men's children and 2% of the women's children never communicate with their parent because the parent does not want the child to experience a jail environment.
- Older teens are least likely to be in communication with a jailed parent. Children 4 and under and children between 12 and 14 are most likely to be in touch.
- Among the children who have communicated with their incarcerated parent
  - Two-thirds have not visited their parents during the interviewed parents' current incarceration

### **The Circle of Caring Around the Child**

#### **Parents who remain in their children's lives**

**A mother says that her 17-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter are doing much better this time she is incarcerated because she was honest with them this time and prepared them for what was happening.**

*-45 yr. old white mother arrested and incarcerated 3 times whose children continue to live with father in this intact family.*

- Two-thirds of the parents we interviewed maintained some contact with their children during this incarceration.
  - Most communication between children and parents happens on the telephone, when the incarcerated parent calls the child collect.
- 60% of the children who had any contact with their parents received phone calls from their incarcerated parent.
- One-third of the children who were in contact with their parents talked by phone with their parents at least once a day.
  - Parents write to their children less often than calling (about half of the children with whom parents communicated received letters) and children rarely write back.
  - More children who lived with their incarcerated parent before arrest remained in communication with their parent after the parent went to Jail. But a surprising proportion of children (45%) who did NOT previously live with the interviewed parent remained in contact during the parents' incarceration.
  - Parents are much more likely to stay in contact with their younger children. During interviews parents said that they were more reluctant to have older children visit or stay in touch because school or other activities interfered or parents did not want to interfere with them. In some instances the older children did not want to come to the Jail.

Family members step in

The 186 parents in the Allegheny County Jail who participated in this study had an average of 2.23 minor children each. Overwhelmingly the children were cared for by family members during the interviewed parents' incarceration.

- Who is taking care of the children?
  - 83% of the 414 children under 18 live with a family member while this parent is incarcerated.
  - Only 6% of the women's children and 4% of the men's children are in foster care or have been adopted. (Though some children may be in officially recognized kinship care not identified as such by parents.)

<b>Current Caregiver</b>	<b>Percentage Children of Female Inmates</b>	<b>Percentage Children of Male Inmates</b>
Other biological parent	31%	74%
Grandparent	30%	11%
Other close relative	16%	2%

Who provides support to incarcerated parents and their children?

**A mom praised her family as the sole help to her and her children ages 12, 2, and 1. The children had been living alone with her and now their father has stepped in and they have not had to move. Because of him and their grandparents she sees children twice a week and talks to them on the phone four times a week. In addition she writes twice a month and her 12 year-old son does the same.**

*-37 year-old African American mother from Pittsburgh who has been arrested and incarcerated twice and expects to be in Jail 6 months.*

- 70% of the parents interviewed said that members of their families provided the primary or only emotional and financial support for themselves and their children. Interviewees commented 135 times on their family's help. Many shared a mother's sentiment when she said, "Bless the perfect grandmother." Another mother described her husband as "Mr. Mom." Children's aunts, uncles, cousins all were described as doing everything -- physically and financially.
  - Several parents said that their children were doing well living with grandmother or aunt, because their lives were stable now.
- Some respondents indicated that they received specific help from identified organizations:
  - the Jail, for linking inmates to services
  - Lydia's Place – a faith-based program that works with women both in and after jail – for parenting classes, events for children and caretakers, and A Mother's Voice, a program which allows some inmates to record children's books and send the books and tapes to their children as gifts
  - A Second Chance Inc., Boys and Girls Clubs, CYF, the YMCA, Project Bundle Up, Food Pantries, Union Aid, the Children's Museum, PACE, local recreation center, AIU day care, and the pastor of a church were also mentioned as helpful.
- A majority of parents indicated that neither community organizations nor churches had been helpful to them, their children, or the children's caretakers:

- 64% of the parents interviewed said that they and their children received no help from the community or from community organizations.
- 69% said that they had received no help from any church or faith-based service.

### **A Family's Burden**

Most parents who participated in this study identified their families as the sources of physical, emotional, and financial support for themselves and their children.

- Many respondents talked about the economic hardships their family members faced in caring for their children and providing for the inmates' needs.
  - Several men identified the absence of their own incomes as a major loss to their families.
  - One mother expressed great sadness that her teenager now had to work long hours, and that when she was home she earned enough so that he could concentrate on his school work.
  - The inability of family members to purchase beds for all of the children who now lived with them or to afford health insurance for themselves worried several inmates.
  - Inmates who could not be home for their children's birthdays and holidays wished the Jail had a program, like the Angel Tree, that could send gifts in their names.
  - Many other parents indicated that the family members caring for their children made sure that the children had "everything they wanted."
  - Some inmates' families knew about and received a variety of financial assistance, while other inmates' families did not. There was no consistency in the knowledge or use of resources.
- A significant barrier identified by many respondents is the inability of family members to pay the phone bills generated by collect calls from the Jail. Jailed parents are dependent upon family members who are able to accept collect calls, and sometimes to patch the inmate's call through to others, in order to remain in phone communication with their children and family. The surcharge on calls from the Jail increases the already higher cost of collect calls. Also, inmates cannot use phone cards or 800 numbers in order to reduce costs. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Corrections indicates that it has changed its policy and no longer surcharges inmates' phone calls. The Allegheny County Jail continues this practice.
- Inmates are dependent upon family and friends to deposit funds in the inmates' commissary accounts.
  - Two inmates who were estranged from family members wished for envelopes, stamps, pens and paper in order to write to their children. Others wished there was a program that provided these items for children.
- Family members, especially those who work or are elderly and disabled, face great challenges in making sure that children who want to can visit their incarcerated parents.
  - Most families live within 30 minutes of the Jail but are dependent upon difficult bus schedules or on the availability of a relative with a car in order to facilitate visiting. Caregivers of teens, who have active schedules of their own, find these challenges especially insurmountable.

## Financial Stress

- Based upon information provided by parents and by conservative estimates of charges for telephone calls, commissary items, and bus transportation, an average family spends \$54 a month maintaining communication between incarcerated parents and their children and helping to provide some basic comforts for the inmates. These charges include:
  - A phone bill of at least \$25 per month
  - Commissary costs of \$23 per month
  - Bus transportation of \$6.00 per month
- In the first month of a parent's incarceration, when basic clothing items, such as thermal underwear, are bought, the average cost may rise to approximately \$70.
- These minimal costs DO NOT include the costs of caring for the children or expenditures for the inmate's defense or court-related costs.
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- The burden that the incarceration of parents places on families is aggravated by harsh economic circumstances in which many families live. Though interviewed parents came from areas throughout Allegheny County, the most frequently identified zip codes of residence of inmates' families are among the poorest communities in Pittsburgh and the Mon Valley. The majority of households in several of these communities earn less than \$15,000 per year.

## What Parents Want Us to Know

### Concerns about Visiting

Most visiting in the Allegheny County Jail occurs in small visiting areas with 2 chairs, with a requirement that no more than 3 children under the age of 18 can be present, and that they must be accompanied by one adult. Adults must be on the inmate's visitors' list. All visitors must be present at least 30 minutes before the scheduled visit, must be dressed and act appropriately, cannot have been incarcerated, and will not be allowed to enter if they appear high. Visits last one hour and inmates remain in a separate area, visible through thick glass and protective wire mesh. They talk on a phone. Visits may be cancelled because of an inmate or visitor's behavior, or due to a general security action. A few inmates have "contact visits" if a judge orders such visits for their children (usually under the supervision of the Department of Human Services) or if the inmate has earned worker status. In a contact visit, inmates can physically be present with his or her family in the same room without glass separating them.

- Parents in the Allegheny County Jail expressed great concern about the impact of visiting on their children. This subject generated many comments and suggestions for improvement.
  - Most comments echoed those of a woman who said that her child "cannot stand visiting through glass." Another said that her child wouldn't come because the mother, behind thick glass and wire mesh, appeared to be in a "cage" (which is how several parents referred to it.)

**“The ‘Cage’ makes her cry – it is hard to see and not be able to touch. We decided to end visiting for my 8 year old daughter who was crying to the point of hyperventilating.”**

*-27 year-old white mother from Pittsburgh who has been arrested and incarcerated 6 times. She has been in Jail less than a month but expects to be here 12-15 months. She and her daughter lived together before this incarceration.*

- Some parents chose to forego visits rather than put their children through this ordeal or have their children see them in this setting. They instead maintained contact by phone and mail.
- A 24-year-old father astutely related his observation of how hard it is for his two year-old son to remain interested and engaged in visits in which he cannot have any physical contact with his father.
- Twenty-eight respondents specifically requested contact visits, especially for young children.
- Several parents described the wait in the waiting room as particularly difficult for their children especially after traveling to the Jail.
- Many parents described the difficulties of caregivers who work full-time. It is difficult for them to bring several children to visit at times when both the children are available and the Jail accommodates visitors.
- Other parents expressed helplessness in the face of caregivers who couldn't or wouldn't bring children to visit.

#### The Need for Counseling and Mediation

- Many parents asked in a variety of ways for counseling or mediation that could bridge the gaps between their children and themselves while they are in Jail and afterward.
- One parent wished for a program that could provide a mentor or counselor for her son, who would work with him, help him do his homework, and bring him to visit at the Jail -- and then, in this ideal scenario, be a bridge between the parent and the child. And perhaps bring some normalcy – doing homework together – to an otherwise very difficult situation.

**A mother wonders if there could be a program for her daughter and herself – separate classes and then classes together to gain an understanding of what is going on in each other's life. The mother feels contact visits would really be helpful for her daughter.**

*-40 year-old African American mother from a Mon Valley industrial town who has been arrested 5 times and incarcerated twice and expects to be in Jail nine months*

- Other parents wished for counseling or other supports that could help their children deal with their own feelings.
- Parents described their children as crying, lonely, and in need of someone to talk to.
- Parents wished for anger management programs that could address the aggression and rebelliousness children began to display after this incarceration.
- Several parents were very disappointed that they didn't seem to have any way to help their children who were suffering in school, and said that teachers do not communicate with incarcerated parents. One mother felt helpless as her child went

- from the accelerated track to special education after her parent was arrested and incarcerated.
- Occasionally parents acknowledged children's initial relief at not having to worry about where their parents were and how they were doing. , Children knew they were safe, now that they were no longer on the streets. But this relief did not entirely mitigate the children's sadness and anger.
  - Several parents thought that counseling and support for other members of their families was essential because family tensions were interfering with their children's welfare.
    - Several men indicated that they could not contact their children because they did not get along with the children's mothers, and wished that they could. Several women said that family members' stress and anger at them created problems in maintaining contact and communication with their children.
    - One mother said that all of the family members caring for her child experienced so much stress that they were beginning to fight among themselves. She wished for at least one family therapy session at which the individuals could regain their composure and agree on what each would do so they could focus on the child's needs.

## **Summary**

This report presents some of the findings of the survey conducted by the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation at the Allegheny County Jail. Future reports will analyze these findings more closely. The Foundation intends to highlight selected issues, such as visiting and counseling, and also to present additional parents' insights.

## **Acknowledgements**

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