



Marriage and Family Strengthening for Incarcerated Individuals

By Amanda Elk Szekely

The number of individuals in the nation's prisons has increased dramatically over the last decade, from 850,000 inmates in 1992 to 1.4 million inmates in 2002. As a result, more and more families are now affected by the incarceration of a parent or spouse. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than half of incarcerated individuals in state prisons, the vast majority of whom are men, are the parents of minor children. Nearly one quarter of parents currently serving time in a state prison are married, while another 28 percent are divorced or separated from a spouse.¹

For children and families with an incarcerated family member, the prolonged period of separation caused by a prison sentence may lead to a range of problems, including financial insecurity, the weakening of family bonds, and potential disruptions in healthy child development.² According to a study by Western and McLanahan (2000), the high rate of incarceration of low-income men is one of the factors leading to a rise in single-parent households in poor communities. In addition to the effects of spousal separation, Western and McLanahan found that the stigma of incarceration and related labor market challenges can negatively affect an individual's ability to serve as a responsible spouse and parent upon release from prison.³

Marriage and family strengthening programs, which are currently receiving increased attention in welfare policy, can help to promote, improve, and sustain positive family relationships among incarcerated individuals and their families by:

- **Providing parenting or marriage education directly to inmates.** These services are sometimes part of a more comprehensive curriculum on personal responsibility or anger management. Support services,

such as family counseling, may also be provided to families following an individual's release from prison.

- **Providing services to the children and families of incarcerated individuals.** For example, children may benefit from mentors and/or counseling to cope with the absence of a parent.
- **Addressing the geographic distance between prisoners and their families** by facilitating family visits and/or promoting an exchange of letters between prisoners and their children, especially when prisons are located in remote, rural locations.
- **Connecting incarcerated individuals to community-based or faith-based organizations** with expertise in building healthy family relationships. While family strengthening programs may be operated by the state or the prison itself, programs are often contracted out.

Under the 1996 welfare reform law, states may rely on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds to reduce the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. States have flexibility in how they design and implement family strengthening programs and may choose to serve high-priority populations, such as individuals in or recently released from prison. Funding is also available for programs serving the children of prisoners under the Mentoring Children of Prisoners grant program. This program, established in 2003, makes competitive grants to programs that link the children of prisoners with mentors, promote healthy youth development, and develop a plan to serve the children's families. Funds may also be available from state departments of corrections and from private organizations.

This *Resources for Welfare Decisions* provides sources for further information on family strengthening programs for imprisoned individuals and ex-offenders. For additional information and updated materials, see The Finance Project's web page on *Family Formation* at: <http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/win/familyformation.asp>.

State and Local Initiatives

Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) trains workshop leaders in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) curriculum, a premarital education program that addresses skills and strategies for communicating effectively, solving problems, and protecting relationships from destructive conflict. The curriculum has been adapted for specific populations, including prisoners, religious groups, youth, low-income audiences, and the Hispanic community. OMI provides training to workshop leaders free of charge in exchange for an agreement to deliver at least four free community-based workshops a year. Workshop leaders are recruited based on their ability to serve target populations across the state. To date, OMI has trained over 1,200 workshop leaders, who collectively have carried out 1,826 workshops with 24,435 participants. Of these, OMI staff have worked together with the Department of Corrections to train 23 Department of Corrections chaplains who have provided marriage education classes to over 500 prisoners about to be released from incarceration. For more information, see the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative website at <http://www.okmarriage.org> or contact Mary Myrick, President of Public Strategies Inc., 405.848.2171 or mary@publicstrategies.com.

Horizon Communities in Prison. The Horizon Communities in Prison program, formerly known as Kairos Horizon, is a yearlong

multifaith-based program that promotes personal responsibility, family responsibility, and employability among prisoners. Horizon Communities in Prison is an outgrowth of Kairos Prison Ministry, established in 1976, which is active in 250 maximum and medium security prisons in the United States and abroad. The purpose of the Horizon Communities in Prison program is to build links between the faith community and correctional institutions in order to effect an inner transformation of inmates and prepare them to live with others in mutual support, trust, and respect. To encourage family responsibility, all participants write at least one letter a week to their children or family members. Horizon also offers a volunteer-led program on parenting, anger management, and conflict resolution. By December 2004, more than 800 men in five states will have completed the program. During the last two years, 60 percent of prisoners participating in the program reported that they restored family relationships where they had previously been estranged, some for over 25 years. In the states where the program is active, Horizon has negotiated contracts with state departments of corrections and aims to work collaboratively with prison administration. In some cases, these contracts involve the awarding of funds to cover the cost of program personnel. All other costs are funded through private donations. For additional information, see *Uniting Incarcerated Parents and their Families*, http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/pdf/seminar_summary2.pdf.

McNeil Island Corrections Center Family and Fatherhood Program. The McNeil Island Corrections Center (MICC) in Washington State has developed a comprehensive family and fatherhood program for incarcerated men and their families. The program has several components, including regular sessions on family responsibility, father-child activities, and Marriage Encounter weekend workshops, designed to strengthen relationships and

improve communication between couples. Case managers direct prisoners to family and fatherhood programs based on their specific needs, while Family Advocate Volunteers represent offenders' families within the prison. The MICC Advisory Council, a group made up of local community stakeholders, has founded Families Matter, a nonprofit organization that develops community partnerships to provide resources and training to prisoners at MICC. MICC's family and fatherhood program receives in-kind resources and assistance from the National Fatherhood Initiative and from trained volunteer mentors. For additional information, see The McNeil Island Corrections Center Family and Fatherhood Program Overview, <http://www.fcnetwork.org/fathersconf2002/proceedings/MICC.pdf>.

Illinois Department of Corrections Adult Transitional Centers. The Illinois Department of Corrections has several programs to help those incarcerated in the state's prison system successfully re-enter their communities, including Adult Transitional Centers (ATCs) and the Women and Family Services Division. Inmates who are within two years of release and classified as minimum security may apply for placement at an ATC through their counselors. Inmates who are placed in these centers must work or go to school and return to the center when not occupied in an approved activity. The ATCs stress family reunification, offer parenting programs, and allow home visitation to those who earn it. The inmates and their significant others are also encouraged to participate together in group therapy sessions and other seminars offered to families. The Women and Family Services Division was created in 1999 and promotes a variety of programs to strengthen and reinforce the bonding between mothers and their children. All of the women's facilities offer parenting programs. In addition, different facilities offer family activities such as day camps for mothers and children, video

visiting programs, storybook programs, summer reading programs, 4H clubs and holiday activities for mothers and children. For more information, contact Roberta Fewes, Deputy Director Office of Programs & Support Services, 217.522.2666.

Publications and Resources

Bobbit, Mike and Marta Nelson. *The Front Line: Building Programs that Recognize Families' Role in Reentry*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, September 2004. Available at: http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/249_476.pdf.

Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. *Incarceration and the Bonds Among Parents*. Fragile Families Research Brief, Number 12. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University, October 2002. Available online at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/files/briefs/ResearchBrief12.pdf>.

Friskics-Warren, Mary. *Considering Marriage: A Premarital Workbook for Couples Separated by Incarceration*. American Correctional Association. Not available online.

Ganow, Michelle. *Family Formation: Resources for Welfare Decisions*. Washington, DC: The Finance Project, August 2001. Available at: <http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/publications/familyformation.htm>.

Haberkern, Rachel. *Helping Parents with Criminal Records to Find Employment and Achieve Self-Sufficiency*. Washington, DC: The Finance Project, March 2003. See: <http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/Publications/helpingparentswithcriminalrecordsIN.htm>.

Mumola, Christopher J. *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2000. Available online at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/iptc.pdf>.

Sachs, Heidi. *Support Services for Incarcerated and Released Non-Custodial Parents*. Washington, DC: The Finance Project, 2000. Available at: <http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/Publications/heidijune2.htm>.

Travis, Jeremy and Michele Waul. *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families and Communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, February 2004. Not available online.

Travis, Jeremy et al. *Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003. Available at: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310882_families_left_behind.pdf.

Wadman, Nicole. *Uniting Incarcerated Parents and their Families*. Report prepared for Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network, Office of Family Assistance, Department of Health and Human Service. Caliber Associates, July 2002. Available online at: http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/pdf/seminar_summary2.pdf.

Western, Bruce and Sara McLanahan. *Fathers Behind Bars: The Impact of Incarceration on Family Formation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, June 2000. Available online at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP00-08-FF-Western.pdf>.

White, Danielle and Jan Kaplan. *The State's Role in Supporting Marriage and Family Formation*. Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project, June 2003. Available at: <http://.financeprojectinfo.org/publications/supportingmarriageandfamilyformationIN.htm>.

Resource Contacts

Center for Research on Child Wellbeing:
<http://crcw.princeton.edu>

Family and Corrections Network:
<http://www.fcnetwork.org>

National Center on Fathers and Families:
<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs:
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families:

Healthy Marriage Initiative:
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>

Fatherhood Initiative:
<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/index.shtml>

End Notes

¹ Mumola, Christopher J. *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2000. Available online at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/iptc.pdf>. Inmates in federal prison are more likely to married and/or to have minor children.

² Travis, Jeremy et al. *Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2003. Available at: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310882_families_left_behind.pdf.

³ Western, Bruce and Sara McLanahan. *Fathers Behind Bars: The Impact of Incarceration on Family Formation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, June 2000. Available online at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP00-08-FF-Western.pdf>.

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