

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parent Partnership

SOFIA GOMEZ

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One in thirty-three American children and one in eight African American children have a parent behind bars. There is now a growing awareness that parents who go to prison do not suffer the consequences alone; the children of incarcerated parents often lose contact with their parent and visits are sometimes rare. Children impacted by parental incarceration are clearly woven into the population served by the child welfare system.

In 2000, The San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP) was founded to address the needs of this population. This is a coalition of public and private partners, which include: Child Welfare (founding partner), Sheriff's Department, Public Defender Community Works and Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. This initia-

tive aims to improve the lives of the children with an incarcerated parent in the child welfare system. The goals of the program are to decrease the trauma experienced by children at the time of a parental arrest, increase and improve contact visits between children and parents who are in the county jail, and increase communication between workers and parents and children and parents in cases where the parent is incarcerated. This research will provide information on what services have been implemented since SFCIPP was founded and how services are being coordinated with Children and Family Services (C&FS) and the police and sheriff's department. It will also highlight other agencies, such as Friends Outside, that are providing enhanced services to this population and having very positive results.

**Sofia Gomez, Management Analyst III,
San Mateo County Human Services Agency**

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Introduction

One in thirty-three American children and one in eight African American children have a parent behind bars. One out of every ten children has a parent under criminal justice supervision—in prison, on probation, or on parole. Despite these staggering numbers, however, the children of the incarcerated remain largely invisible.

Mass incarceration has had significant and long-lasting impacts on American society, particularly on communities of color. There is now a growing awareness that parents who go to prison do not suffer the consequences alone; the children of incarcerated parents often lose contact with their parent and visits are sometimes rare. Children of incarcerated parents are also more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency and subsequently be incarcerated themselves.¹

Many children, especially in cases of women's incarceration, live in single-parent homes and are then cared for by a grandparent or other relative while their mother is in jail. In other cases where substance abuse and other issues are a factor, incarcerated parents have either not lived with their children or not provided a secure environment for them and these children are now in the custody of Child Protective Services.

The increasing incarceration of women means that more mothers are being incarcerated than ever before. There is some evidence that maternal incarceration can be more damaging to a child and result in more negative consequences than paternal incarceration. The number of incarcerated mothers has more than doubled between 1991 to 2007, going from 29,500 to 65,600 (an increase of 122%).²

¹Dallaire, D.H. (2007). Incarcerated mothers and fathers: A Comparison of risks for children and families. *Family Relations*, 56(5), 440–453

²Dallaire, D.H. (2007). Incarcerated mothers and fathers: A Comparison of risks for children and families. *Family Relations*, 56(5), 440–453

About San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership

The San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP) is a coalition of public and private partners, which includes: Child Welfare (founding partner), the Sheriff's Department, Public Defender, Community Works and Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. SFCIPP was formed in 2000 under the auspices of the Zellerbach Family Foundation.³

The goals of SFCIPP are to:

- Decrease trauma at the time of parental arrest.
- Decrease shelter or stranger placement for children whose parents are arrested.
- Increase and improve contact visits between children and parents who are in the county jail.
- Increase communication between workers and parents and children and parents in cases where the parent is incarcerated.
- Offer incarcerated parents access to an evidence-based parenting class within the jail that is designed specifically for incarcerated parents and that satisfies parenting requirements within the child welfare system.

The San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) obtained a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to hire a coordinator to help achieve these goals. The coordinator dedicates half of her time as an active member of SFCIPP as well as working with the SFHSA internal staff.

San Francisco Family and Children Services (SFF&CS) currently estimates that 20% of cases are children of incarcerated parents, although there are difficulties in obtaining accurate data on the number of children in care. Often, this information is not in the CMS/CWS data system and frequently workers are not aware that a missing parent is incarcerated.

³Bernstein, Nell. "San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents." Web, 28 Apr 2009. <http://www.sfcipp.org/intro.html>.

Elements for Success

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Program recognizes that witnessing an arrest is traumatic for children and that it is the responsibility of all participating partners to minimize the negative impacts of the arrest on children.

SFHSA and the San Francisco Police Department have entered into an agreement on joint procedures to protect children at the time of the parent or caregiver's arrest and to minimize trauma. The joint procedure will include training in both the police and the child welfare departments. If Child Welfare Services (CWS) and the police department work in a more coordinated manner, the number of children placed in the shelters is expected to decrease. In addition to those efforts, the police department is considering including language in the intake form that will ask questions to determine if the arrestee has a child at home that may need additional services. This information will be shared with SF Family and Children Services staff, who will then follow up to make sure that the child is being properly cared for or intervene if necessary. SFCIPP has also worked extensively with the Sheriff's Department. The Sheriff's Department has already changed its intake form to include three questions about whether an inmate has children and where the children are.

SFHSA has also contracted with Friends Outside, a national organization that assists in providing services to incarcerated parents with children in Family and Children Services. Currently SFHSA is the only county agency in the nation that is utilizing the services of Friends Outside to provide services to incarcerated parents.

The Friends Outside liaison has an office in the SF County jail from where she provides an invaluable service to incarcerated parents. She works mainly with the incarcerated parents who have a child involved with SFF&CS. Because of her ability to enter the jail and visit with the inmates, she is able to be an effective liaison for the parents as well as the SFF&CS social work staff. This fits in with Welfare Institution Code (WIC), which states that: "If the parent

or guardian is incarcerated or institutionalized, the court shall order reasonable services."

Penal Code, Section 2625 indicates that parents who are incarcerated in federal or state custody are entitled to notice of all court hearings involving proceedings affecting their child. Failure to provide proper notice to incarcerated parents will not only result in denial of the parent's fundamental rights but will result in court continuances and possible sanctions against the Human Services Agency.

The Friends Outside liaison has made compliance with the above WIC and Penal code easier. Social work staff can utilize the Friends Outside liaison to assist in getting required forms signed; she can gather information that the social worker may need for a timely filing of a court report and set up the compliance visit between the social worker and the incarcerated parent. Most importantly, she arranges and supervises child visits that would otherwise be difficult. The sheriff's department has worked hard to accommodate parent-child contact visits in a family friendly environment. This is a pilot program that has begun in the women's jail but will be expanding to additional jails.

From my observation, the Friends Outside liaison's presence inside the jail and her ability to communicate with the inmates is very important. On the day of my visit with her, I was very impressed with the relationship that she has formed with the inmates. As soon as we entered the jail, women lined up to talk with her. They had questions about their CWS case and asked the liaison to follow up with social workers on their behalf. It is often difficult for the inmates to obtain information because when they are able to place a call (assuming the other receiving party accepts collect calls), frequently they get voice mails. It is often several days or up to a week before they make contact with the social worker or their legal representatives. Meanwhile, they are anxious and concerned about what is going on with their children as they want to be able to make arrangements and have input as to where their children will be placed during their absence. When we left the jail, the liaison had a list of people to call. On the following day or so, she

would report back to the inmates and provide them with any information she had. It was very apparent to me that she was able to put their minds at ease because they knew she would come back to them with information. This made them feel less isolated and more hopeful about not being completely disconnected from the outside and their children.

Another important coalition member of SFCIPP is Community Works. They have a wonderful program within the San Francisco County women's jail and other jails. This program coordinates a variety of learning opportunities for incarcerated men and women. They have a charter school which allows inmates to obtain a GED while incarcerated. They also have a parenting class, which they have made as a requirement for women who are incarcerated and who want to have visits with their children. The curriculum is extensive and provides women the opportunity to work on their communication skills with their children which will help them to continue to co-parent while incarcerated. It has been certified by the Human Services Agency so that those parents who have parenting classes as part of their case plans can fulfill the requirement and move closer to reunification, even while incarcerated. The curriculum teaches women how to appropriately explain to their children, who are often confused about the situation and do not really understand when and if the incarcerated parent will return, what they are dealing with and also how to provide some comfort to the children. They help develop communication skills to make the visits with the children more productive. Many of these women have experienced mental, physical and emotional abuse and they themselves have not had loving relationships with their parents. Despite their history and their current circumstances these women are caring mothers who are heartbroken about being away from their children and want desperately to remain in their children's lives. As I sat in the back of the class observing, I watched as each and every one of these women glowed with pride and love as they talked about their children. They had something positive to think about and they participated enthusiastically. They talked about how much

they want to improve their lives so they can be better parents to their children when they are no longer incarcerated. These classes provide hope for a better tomorrow for them and for their children.

Recommendations

The problems faced by the children of incarcerated parents are not unique to San Francisco County. San Mateo County (SMCO) must also continue to address the needs of this "forgotten population." Children and Family Services (C&FS) and law enforcement have a point where the services intersect. When C&FS can step in and assist law enforcement at the time of arrest, the children are likely to have a less traumatic experience. Establishing a joint arrest procedure between SMCO Human Services Agency (SMCO HSA) and the police department should be one of the first things to accomplish. The SMCO HSA should also explore the feasibility of contracting with the Friends Outside organization. They already have the knowledge and experience of working with the sheriff's department, and they are familiar with C&FS goals and regulations for this population.

Studies were done on the issues affecting these children and their families, and SFCIPP members agreed that the children's perspective was the logical framework from which all future work should evolve. This approach had not only proven to benefit the children but also to the SMCO HSA and the police department. SMCO HSA may benefit from the decreased cost for shelter placements if the parent can identify a relative placement at the time of the arrest and the police department will spend less time caring for children present at the time of the arrest.

Funding Needs

SMCO HSA should research grant funding and, if available, apply to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It should also consider contracting with the Friends Outside organization since they already have the experience in working with sheriff departments, incarcerated parents and C&FS social workers. They are also familiar with the C&FS regulations and can facilitate the required monthly visits and eliminate the

need for social workers to do the visits themselves. San Mateo County Human Services Agency can also look to utilizing current resources to implement this initiative. By evaluating and possibly redirecting current resources, this initiative can be implemented with relatively minimal or no additional funding if they do not receive additional grant funding.

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Resources

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Program, www.sfcipp.org

Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, www.urban.org

Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents, <http://www.urban.org>

Community Works, <http://www.community-works-ca.org/programs>

Friends Outside, <http://friendsoutside.org/>