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Improving Coordination for Children of Incarcerated Parents

Lea Quam

Adam K. Matz

University of North Dakota, adam.matz@und.edu

Roni Mayzer

University of North Dakota, roni.mayzer@und.edu

Danielle Korsmo

Maria Kerzmann

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Lea Quam, Adam K. Matz, Roni Mayzer, Danielle Korsmo, Maria Kerzmann, and Marcy Hilzendeger

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Legislative Brief

Contributors:

North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Lea Quam

University of North Dakota

Department of Criminal Justice

Adam K. Matz, Ph.D.

Roni Mayzer, Ph.D.

Danielle Korsmo

Minot State University

Criminal Justice Department

Maria Kerzmann, Ph.D.

Burleigh-Morton County Detention Center

Marcy Hilzendeger



James River Correctional Center resident, Bradley Davis, and family.

Disclaimer: *The views and opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of their respective organizations or the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.*

Parental Intervention Key to Delinquency Prevention

The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimates about 10,000 children in North Dakota have experienced some form of parental incarceration.⁽¹⁾ Compared to non-Hispanic Caucasians, Native American children are 2 to 5 times more likely to have an incarcerated parent.^(7,11) Based on national data, over 50% of all imprisoned individuals in state and federal prisons have minor children, with 64% of mothers and 47% of fathers living with their child prior to arrest or incarceration.⁽⁵⁾

The majority of imprisoned adults are men and 60% of them are fathers, most of whom maintain some form of contact with their children while incarcerated.⁽³⁾

Though mothers represent a small proportion of the incarcerated population, the impact of parental incarceration can be especially pronounced given their greater likelihood to serve as the primary caregiver of a single-parent household.⁽⁵⁾ A national survey of corrections programming found little screening is in place to identify parental needs as they relate to incarcerated individuals' children.^(2,6,8,10)

For the children themselves, there are developmental risks associated with parental incarceration – including insecure attachment, increased aggressiveness and externalizing behaviors, decreased school readiness and cognitive skill, delinquency, and other detrimental outcomes.^(4,6,9) Youth with criminal fathers are reportedly four times more likely to engage in violent crime.⁽¹²⁾ Yet prosocial parental attachment and monitoring is strongly correlated with reductions in delinquency. Parent-child interventions with incarcerated individuals represent an opportunity to break this cycle of intergenerational criminality.

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative

In 2018, the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCR) established the Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative (COIPI). The initiative received considerable support from Governor Doug Burgum and September 15th has since been formally recognized as Children of Incarcerated Parents Day. The initiative has thrived largely based on the volunteer contributions of members of the DOCR and related stakeholders. While the initiative has championed many positive changes (e.g., established support groups for impacted youth with the Bismarck YMCA, created training on Adverse Childhood Experiences, led to two free phone calls or video-visitations for incarcerated parents, revised visitation rooms to be more family-friendly, and implemented the Parenting Inside Out program), the COIPI committee members would like to see the initiative strengthened by hiring a dedicated Family Services Coordinator.

“...about 10,000 children in North Dakota have experienced some form of parental incarceration...”

North Dakota can be a Leader in Family Services for Incarcerated Parents and their Children

In a review of state department of corrections (DOCs) agencies across the nation, we found at least eight DOCs have a dedicated office, division, unit, or position specific to family services. Kansas, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington each appear to have positions specific to family support, although titles vary. For example, Rhode Island has a *Parent Coordinator* while Kansas has a *Supportive Housing and Family Specialist*. Virginia has a *Parenting Manager* but indicated they intend to retitle this position as a *Family Engagement Coordinator*. Finally, Washington State appears to have multiple *Family Service Specialists*. Illinois, Nevada, New York, and North Carolina each have divisions or units dedicated to supporting families of incarcerated individuals. Illinois refers to their specialized unit as the *Women and Family Services Division*. Likewise, Nevada has a *Family Services Division*; New York an *Office of Ministerial, Family, and Volunteer Services*; and North Carolina a *Prisons Offender Family Services* office.

Family Services Coordinator

Absent a Family Services Coordinator, the DOCR is not adequately equipped with the resources needed to identify or provide referrals for interventions based on parent, guardian, family, or child need. Consistent with many DOCs across the nation, family-related resources are primarily dedicated to visitation and communication. This position would move North Dakota into the company of states at the forefront of efforts to help children and strengthen relationships with incarcerated parents through dedicated family services (see left sidebar). In service to the state, among related responsibilities, the DOCR Family Services Coordinator would:

- Lead North Dakota’s Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative
- Implement family engagement practices/events
- Facilitate training to DOCR facilities and personnel on family engagement
- Manage the Parenting Inside Out Program
- Establish community web-based training to families and stakeholders on DOCR programs, events, and initiatives
- Coordinate with the Parole and Probation Field Services Division on implementation of a family support approach to community supervision
- Serve as liaison with child welfare agencies and develop platforms to increase parental involvement for the incarcerated parent
- Support research to evaluate program fidelity, impact, and outcomes

To be clear, the impact of parental incarceration on families and children can vary significantly. Families are complex. However, when appropriate, strained parental relations should be the target of intensive interventions (e.g., filial therapy). Fostering and maintaining healthy child-parent relations during and after incarceration can be critical to both the incarcerated parent and the child’s long-term success. A Family Services Coordinator can identify appropriate programming and referrals for the incarcerated parent but also, in the event the incarcerated parent reports chronic behavioral problems, their child. This position will enable the DOCR to effectively support families, focusing the agency’s limited resources and effort on those most in need of services.

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