

Chapter 1: Families in Need

- The Impact of the Criminal Justice System on Families

There are over 2 million prisoners in the United States. What is happening to their families and their children? When someone goes to prison, their family members become invisible victims. Many view these families as guilty by association. There are relatively few agencies or programs to help these millions of families. There is no government agency charged with specific responsibility for the impact of the criminal justice system on families and children.

While each family's experience is unique, there are some common themes. Many families find that, at a time when help is most needed, people seem to withdraw from them. There is often a sense of shame and a fear of being labeled. No one seems to understand or care what is happening to them. Many families were already short on money before their loved one's incarceration and now are plunged into a struggle for economic survival. The justice system and its procedures are often baffling and frustrating. Ties outside blood or marriage may not be recognized by the system. Self-confidence can be undercut by friends, family and society members who criticize a relationship with a prisoner.

Women carry much of the burden imposed by the incarceration of a family member. Since most prisoners (93%) are men, their female partners are left to carry on in the community. In the case of incarcerated mothers, women in the community (especially grandmothers) often care for the children.

There are many cultural and traditional values and expectations that focus so much responsibility for family care on women in general. Women take on even more responsibility when family members go

to prison. Recently a national movement for responsible fatherhood has emerged. This movement has focused on encouraging men to assume greater responsibility for their families and children. A growing number of fatherhood programs serve fathers behind bars as well as fathers in the community. These programs can provide much needed support and assistance to incarcerated fathers and to other men impacted by the imprisonment of a family member.



Men and women alike experience many difficulties maintaining relationships with an incarcerated family member. Visiting conditions are usually stressful. Prisons are typically located in remote areas, not served by public transportation.

The incarcerated family member is almost always out of touch with everyday family life. When visits do occur, the happy and unhappy feelings and events of day-to-day life seem hard to talk about. Over time, unconnectedness can overtake relationships. This is especially hard for children.

One in forty children in the United States has an incarcerated parent. These children are often present at the time of their parent's arrest. Many times, children with incarcerated parents are not told the truth about their incarcerated parent's whereabouts. This leaves children confused and questioning. They imagine all kinds of explanations and answers. They feel vulnerable, unprotected and at fault. When children blame themselves for the loss of a parent to incarceration, they may become rebellious or withdrawn. They are often afraid to talk to anyone about it, limiting the ability of others to understand and help.