



▼ Prisoner Child Support - Broke But Not Deadbeat

▼ Dana Reichert, National Conference of State Legislatures

As many as 70 percent of low-income dads have had contact with the justice system, and the majority of incarcerated men are fathers. This presents an interesting dilemma because in most states, fathers continue to accrue arrearages while they are locked up, despite the obvious fact that they have no resources to pay support. When released, they may have satisfied their debt to society, but are met with a new debt because of child support arrears.

Research has shown that a job and a strong family connection are the two most important elements than an individual needs to keep from returning to jail. There are few available support systems to help these men re-enter society by finding jobs, and even fewer that assist them with rebuilding relationships that have suffered or ceased while they were incarcerated. While in jail, it is very difficult for fathers to keep in contact with families. The nature of some men's convictions warrant that they do not have contact with their children, but for most, this is not the case.

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A handful of states-including Colorado, Florida, New Mexico and Massachusetts-have developed programs designed to serve fathers while they are in jail or upon their release to strengthen their role as fathers and to help link them to employment.

In Massachusetts, parolees can enroll in a program designed to teach them about how to foster relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. Dads can obtain some job training through the Inner-city job Training Program sponsored by Polaroid. There are 102 program locations, five of which are offered in

partnership with churches. The program is run by probation officials and requires attendance at 12 weekly group sessions. The sessions require participants to live by the program's five principles of fatherhood and to report to the group what actions they took during the week to meet these goals. Topics in the weekly sessions include, self-esteem building, affection and guidance, financial support, respect and living a substance-free lifestyle.

Fathers must make a commitment to stay substance-free and provide love and encouragement to themselves and their children. Participants who complete the program can earn a reduction in fines and court costs, and some may have probation reduced.

The Colorado Department of Corrections operates a reemployment program for inmates who are being released from jail. The program attempts to provide individuals with basic job so they can get jobs once released, and provides referrals to support

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networks that can help fathers work with child support enforcement and establish family linkages. New Mexico targets its services to teen fathers by providing conflict resolution, contraceptive information and basic job skills services.

Florida helps inmates with literacy skills by teaching them how to read books and write letters to their children. Dads make tape recordings of themselves reading stories that are sent to their children. “These people are going to go back into society. We have two choices: we can help them to establish relationships with their families, or we can do nothing and see them end up back in jail,” asserts Buddy Whitman, director of the Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood.

*This article was previously published as “Chapter 7, Dads Behind Bars” in *Broke But Not Deadbeat: Reconnecting Low-Income Fathers and Children* by Dana Reichert, National Conference of State Legislatures, www.calib.com/peerta/pdf/broken.pdf •*

Resources on Child Support

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