



Pittsburgh  
Child Guidance  
Foundation

## New Initiative to Help Children of Prisoners

Over the past 18 months the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation (PCGF) has studied the impact on children when parents are incarcerated.

Study findings, just released, are alarming. For example, 25 percent of the mothers and 13 percent of the fathers at the Allegheny County Jail were, when arrested, the sole caretakers of children under 18.

PCGF, a private foundation, has committed its resources to advocating for children of prisoners in Allegheny County by

- increasing the community's knowledge of children of prisoners and the policies and practices that strengthen their emotional lives, and
- forging partnerships and mobilizing resources to address the needs of children of prisoners.

We invite you to learn more about the critical issues presented here and to join with PCGF and its partners to identify and implement solutions.

# ADVOCATING for Children of Prisoners

First Report to  
the Community  
March 2005

Currently, more than two million American children have at least one parent in jail or prison. Another 10 million children have experienced the incarceration of one or both parents. The number of parents in prison has risen more than 400 percent since 1970 and continues to rise.

In Allegheny County alone, 7,000 children have a parent in jail or prison. The children live in every school district and ZIP code, and they tend to be young: three-quarters of the children whose parents are in Allegheny County Jail are under 13.

For the most part, children of prisoners are ignored by the criminal justice system and by child-serving agencies. To ensure the emotional health of these children and prevent enormous future burdens on our society, the needs of prisoners' children must be better understood and met.

To learn more, the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation (PCGF) gathered information from many experts. In addition to surveying parents at the Allegheny County Jail, PCGF sponsored focus groups with children of prisoners, their current caregivers, currently and formerly incarcerated parents, and community- and faith-based providers. Local criminal justice and child welfare representatives interviewed by PCGF described how their agencies react to children when parents are arrested or jailed. Local and national researchers also contributed their data.

A PCGF report, "Children of Incarcerated Parents," presents some of the research. That report is summarized here and will serve as a foundation for PCGF's initiative to mobilize action on behalf of children. The complete report is also available from PCGF and on-line (see page 8).

## KEY FINDINGS

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### Five Key Needs

Testimony gathered from hundreds of experts creates a compelling picture of the losses experienced by children when a parent is incarcerated. Five overarching needs emerged.

- 1 Children of prisoners are “invisible” and therefore our community fails to address their needs.
- 2 The families who care for children of incarcerated parents often struggle without support to provide for children’s needs.
- 3 Children are not always told what is happening and then live in fear, confusion, and longing.
- 4 Children’s grief can be overlooked or misunderstood, and it sometimes overwhelms the adults in their lives.
- 5 Many obstacles hinder the desired contact between children and their incarcerated parents.

When communities address these issues, they can make a big difference in the lives of children and in the future of the region. Other jurisdictions across the country have begun efforts that the Pittsburgh region can learn from as we develop our own resources. This report will elaborate on these five needs and offer suggestions based on advice from parents and children and successful models developed elsewhere.

### Effects on Children and Society

Studies suggest that children whose parents are in jail or prison are more likely than other children to

- show developmental delays and gaps
- do poorly in school
- suffer emotional distress and be referred for psychological counseling
- develop substance abuse disorders
- engage in early sexual activity
- commit multiple serious delinquent acts
- be incarcerated themselves as adults.

There are steep costs for neglecting the emotional health of children of prisoners, for children, families, and society. Unfortunately, the number of children whose parents are incarcerated has increased dramatically over the past several decades and continues to rise.

### Children of Prisoners in Allegheny County

In Allegheny County, **7,000 children** have one or both parents in jail or prison.

These children live in **every County ZIP code and school district.**

Of children with parents in the Allegheny County Jail, **50 percent are white and 50 percent are African American.**

**Three-quarters** of these children are **under 13**; their **average age is 8.**

*“My son is having trouble in school. He’s taking things out on his grandmother. It’s much harder on kids than on people in here.”*

A single father in Allegheny County Jail



# 1

## Children of Prisoners Are “Invisible”

### Challenges

Children of arrestees and prisoners are invisible to the systems that are designed to protect and serve them. Children are also invisible to the people and systems that are likely to interact with families at some point in the arrest, processing, and incarceration of parents. And police officers, magistrates, adult probation officers, and other officials in the criminal justice system have no mandates to consider children of arrestees or prisoners. In general, systems lack data, policies, and programs to effectively support children of arrestees and prisoners. There is no way to know with certainty how many children of prisoners there are or where they are.

### Why Children Are **INVISIBLE**

No records kept or data collected

No official policies in place about their rights and treatment

No special supportive services

No community-based service to help parents and police place children

No simple way to grant caregivers authority for medical care or school

**Police.** Locally and across the country, police departments lack formal, written guidelines that detail how children of arrestees are treated. What happens to a child after the arrest of a parent depends on the officers involved. If a child is present at the arrest of a parent, the parent is likely to identify a caregiver. The officers may confirm that the potential caregiver is willing to accept financial and medical responsibility for the child for an unknown period of time. However, there is no system in place to assist parents and officers in getting children to caregivers and following up. And there is no requirement to gather information about the child.

Temporary custody is not documented, though officers may record a caregiver’s name in the report.

If a child is present at arrest and a caregiver is not available, the officers are likely to call the Department of Human Services Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF).

If children are not present at an arrest because they are at school or are playing elsewhere, officers may not know about the children unless the parent volunteers the information. Many parents will tell officers about their children so that arrangements can be made, but others, fearing that their children will be taken by the County, withhold the information. They may try to arrange for child care by calling a friend or family member after they are processed.

**Allegheny County Jail.** Those admitted to the Jail are screened by the Jail’s health service and are asked whether they have children and if so, how many. But in many cases, people coming into the Jail may be frightened and unlikely to reveal information that could trigger further official scrutiny of their lives and families.

### Children, Youth and Families (CYF).

CYF has no way of knowing or counting most children of prisoners, whose other parent and extended family members step in to care for them. In PCGF’s study, only one in 20 of the children of parents in the Allegheny County Jail was under CYF supervision. The children of prisoners in CYF caseloads also are not counted. The CYF record-keeping system does not identify children of prisoners though caseworkers estimate that many children in their cases have experienced parental arrest and incarceration.

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## “Invisible” Children

### Challenges *continued*

According to caregivers and judges, most children who are placed informally are not identified unless the children enter school or need medical care and caregivers do not have birth certificates or legal custody.

Parents, family members, and advocates urge retaining parent choice and family

*“Children should pick who they stay with. Have a few families and pick.”*

A 14-year-old boy discussing foster care

placements while providing more support for children and better information. Children feel that their wishes and connections with siblings should be considered in choice of placement.

### Possible Approaches

- Develop policies and training for police officers so they can assist the children of persons being arrested.
- Keep uniform records on the children of prisoners for planning services and, at the same time, protect children’s privacy.
- Create a non-CYF, community-based resource to help parents and all members of the criminal justice system address children’s needs when their parents are arrested and incarcerated. This resource could keep children informed about what is happening to their parents, transport children, coordinate any needed screening of potential caregivers, provide emergency assistance for caregivers, arrange for counseling and emergency assistance to children, follow up on children, and move children if original caregivers are unable to continue.



# 2 Families Often Struggle without Support

### Challenges

Most of the burden of caring for children of prisoners falls on prisoners’ families. Children of prisoners often experience a great deal of stability when they live in their extended families. But with little support and often without financial assistance, family members may be overburdened as they struggle to help the children in their care.

**Financial Strain.** Families already strapped by the costs of caring for children and by court-related costs are further burdened by collect phone calls from the Jail

and additional clothing and supplies for the incarcerated parent. Incarceration in a State prison adds the costs of long-distance travel.

**Physical and Emotional Stress.** If the incarcerated parent was involved in his children’s lives before arrest, the weight of all the child care is shifted to the other parent or another member of the family. At the same time, caregivers may be working hard to provide support for the now incarcerated parents, and relatives may be caring for other children in their families. Coping with their own feelings and helping children cope with theirs may drain caregivers further. Visits to the County Jail or to distant State prisons create another layer of exhaustion.

**Resistance to Seeking Support.** Family members often experience grief and shame and resist seeking services outside of the family. Fearful of losing custody, they avoid CYF. But without external resources, families suffer financial and physical exhaustion.

### Possible Approach

- Establish sensitive and community-based services in trusted community organizations that can address the needs of caregivers, children, and parents. Among the services may be transportation and visiting emergency concrete aid, support groups, and respite.



# 3

## Children May Live in Fear, Confusion, and Longing

### Challenges

Adults may not know how to tell children that a parent has committed a crime and has gone to jail. Jailed parents and adult family members may say that the parent is in a hospital, away at school, or taking care of a sick relative. Such fictions confuse children and create anxiety. If they do not have the truth, children may invent their own frightening stories to explain why their parents have disappeared. Often children blame themselves for their parents leaving.

### Possible Approaches

- Design pamphlets and easy-to-carry “What to say when...” cards with helpful hints on telling children of different ages where their parents are.
- Provide materials to parents, caregivers, police, magistrates, court personnel, clergy, teachers, and service providers.
- Distribute children’s reading and coloring books about the incarceration of a parent through libraries, schools, child care and afterschool programs. Develop guides to assist adults in using these books with children.



*“My kids are doing much better this time. I was honest and prepared them.”*

A mother in jail for the second time

*“The hardest thing for me when my dad went to jail was that my mom tried to keep something away from me. She should have told me before she waited so long. It was bad for me.”*

A young boy on not knowing what happened to his father

*“My daughter, she’s about five at the time, she’s like, ‘Where did my dad go all of a sudden?’ He was here and he did come home every night and he’s just gone. And it took*

*me months, months, months, and I was waiting, and I was*

*waiting. What am I going to tell her? What am I going to tell her?”*

A parent on the difficulty of telling a child that her father has been incarcerated

# 4

## Children's Grief Can Be Overlooked

### Challenges

Many children are grieving the loss of the parent they had or the loss of a parent they never had. Grief has many faces—sadness, anger, aggression, shame, withdrawal. Children's grief at the loss of a parent can be misinterpreted or overlooked.

Children need time and help to grieve. They may feel completely alone in their grief, pain, shame, and fear.

Incarcerated parents may feel helpless to comfort children, and other family members may be overwhelmed by their own feelings. Officials working in the criminal justice system—from police officers, to judges, to probation officers, and others—may not see the children of prisoners as their concern. Many schools may not understand the aggressive or withdrawing behavior children exhibit out of grief and shame, and children are often not protected from teasing. Schools may compound children's suffering by having events such as "Bring Your Dad to School Day," and may not understand their acting out in response. One parent said that her son went from honor roll to special education after her incarceration.

Children of incarcerated parents may experience physical symptoms of stress. Their emotional needs may not be addressed until they are older and engaged in anti-social behavior. "We could track when an individual begins acts of defiance," said a defense attorney when asked about the impact on children. "It is very close to when his or her parents have been taken away. They do poorly in school and seek out attention from the wrong individuals."

### Possible Approaches

- Establish groups that help children share their feelings. In a panel on a nationally broadcast videoconference, "Children of Prisoners: Children of Promise," children from Houston and New York City said that being in weekly or daily support groups helped them survive and feel loved.
- Provide access to long-term counseling by well-trained professionals to help children deal with grief and loss.
- Establish visiting conditions that allow parents to physically comfort their children, especially when they are very young.
- Develop afterschool activities that engage children and help them build competence so they have healthy ways of working through their feelings.

*"My mom never told me about her childhood, her first date. And did she prop her foot up when she got her first kiss?"*

A 10-year-old girl whose mother is in prison

- Create ways to help incarcerated parents continue to be involved in children's lives. One state has Parent-Teacher Organizations in prisons. Other states have "Girl Scouts Behind Bars" programs, transporting daughters to their mothers and providing skill-based programming for both. One mother in the Allegheny County Jail suggested afterschool programs that would include visits to the Jail and help the parent engage in everyday activities with the child (doing homework, for example).

## 5

## Obstacles Hinder the Contact between Children and Parents

*“My three and a half year old clings to her grandma and doesn’t want to leave the house now. She gets sick a lot, looks for my car, and often sets a plate at the dinner table for me.”*

A mother who will be in jail a year

- Provide effective literature that offers tips for supporting children and points the way to concrete resources and help. Such literature could be distributed to family members in court, in the waiting area at the Jail, or on agency-sponsored family transportation to prisons. Racks of brochures could be distributed to churches, libraries, and clinics.
- Offer services for adults to strengthen their focus on children’s feelings and needs, including support groups, classes, short- and long-term family therapy.
- Help staff in both schools and child care programs understand the impact of parental incarceration on children and support them as they develop policies and practices that are sensitive to the emotional needs of children of prisoners. Allegheny County Safe Start sensitizes principals, teachers, and child care professionals to children’s responses to violence. This program offers a model for addressing the issues of children of prisoners.



### Challenges

Many children want to see and talk with their incarcerated parents, yet barriers to healthy interaction exist. Several studies show that visiting with biological parents is important to a child’s emotional health and that visiting an incarcerated parent may diminish a child’s pain. Frequent visits with children are also good for incarcerated parents. They are more likely to rejoin their families and stay out of jail when they are released.

**Visiting.** Despite the benefits of visiting, few parents interviewed in the Allegheny County Jail had seen any of their children since their incarceration, a finding that also holds true nationally. PCGF found that when visits occurred they were very stressful.

Children often wait for an hour on hard plastic seats in the Jail’s lobby with no distractions or play areas. When the visit finally occurs, children and parents see each other through thick glass and wire mesh, and speak through a telephone. Very few children—those with specific court orders or whose parents have earned worker status—may have “contact” visits during which they can physically touch and hug their parents.

Children who visit their parents in State prisons endure arduous journeys that often start at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, as well as embarrassing searches and sometimes harsh treatment by guards.

**Phone Calls.** Most of the contact between children and parents at the Allegheny County Jail is by phone. All calls must be placed by the incarcerated parent, and they are made collect, a very expensive method of calling to which a surcharge is added by the County. The phone expenses are prohibitive for some financially struggling family members.

*Continues on page 8*

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## Obstacles Hinder Contact

### Challenges *continued*

**The Consequences of Lack of Contact.** Lack of contact can have long-term emotional and legal consequences for parents and children. Legally, CYF can terminate parental rights if a child has been in placement under the supervision of CYF for 15 of the past 22 months. Many incarcerated parents exceed this 15-month limit. If parents are able to demonstrate consistent involvement in their children's lives, CYF may decide not to press for termination. The legal as well as the emotional bonds between parent and child are threatened by long distances, unfriendly environments, expensive phone calls, or caregivers who are reluctant or unable to bring children for visits or accept calls.

### Possible Approaches

Parents, caregivers, and other experts suggest four key changes to improve contact between children and their parents.

- Increase the number of contact visits at the Allegheny County Jail.
- Create comfortable conditions for children visiting the Jail and State prisons.
- Assist adults as they prepare children for visits and cope with emotions afterward.
- Reduce the cost of phone calls from parents in Jail to their children. 

*“The ‘cage’ makes her cry. It is hard to see and not be able to touch. We decided to end visiting for my eight-year-old daughter who was crying to the point of hyperventilating.”*

A 27-year-old mother on visiting with her daughter through thick glass and wire mesh at the Allegheny County Jail

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Gayle Mallinger	Hidenori Yamatani PhD

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**Pittsburgh  
Child Guidance  
Foundation**

425 Sixth Avenue  
Suite 2460  
Pgh., PA 15219-1851  
Tel: (412) 434-1665  
Fax: (412) 434-0406  
Email: [pcgf@smartbuilding.org](mailto:pcgf@smartbuilding.org)

[www.PittsburghChildGuidanceFoundation.org](http://www.PittsburghChildGuidanceFoundation.org)

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