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## Incarcerated Parenting: How Family Relationships can be Beneficial

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Incarcerated Parenting: How Family Relationships can be Beneficial

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### Abstract

The United States maintains one of the highest incarceration rates in the entire world. The disturbing reality of these mass incarcerations is that they do not exclusively impact the offender, but the friends, family, and most importantly, the children of these incarcerated individuals. A startling number of children in the United States are separated from their biological parents through incarcerations. The effects of separation are rarely considered in legislation.

In the past few years, there has been a rise in programs designed to help maintain relationships between families and incarcerated individuals. One of the goals of these family programs is to increase the likelihood that the inmate will maintain a positive relationship with their children. Maintaining a relationship between incarcerated parent and child has proven to be beneficial for both parties. Family programs minimize the challenges associated with maintaining these child-parent relationships.

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## **Introduction**

Over the last few decades, incarceration rates have skyrocketed in the United States. The rapid rise in incarceration has resulted in a disturbing increase in the number of children exposed to parental incarceration. “Currently, 2.6 million children—or 4 percent of the population under age 18—have a mother or father behind bars, and many more children have experienced a parent’s incarceration at some point in their lives” (Turney & Goodsell, 2018, p.148). This phenomenon has created a unique situation where individuals are forced to either give up custody of their children or attempt to parent from prison.

In recent years, the relationships between a child and parent while the parent is incarcerated have received more scholarly attention. With the emergence of programs to help connect children and incarcerated parents, it is important for the public to understand how maintaining this relationship impacts recidivism and the mental health of both parents and children. Research has shown that staying connected to family during incarceration aids the transition back into society after release, thus decreasing the likelihood that the individual will reoffend.

A study conducted by Bales and Mears (2008) found that family involvement in the form of visitation during an individual’s incarceration tremendously reduces recidivism. The ongoing studies conducted by Bales and Mears (p.312) have shown that positive visitation and frequent visitation were both associated with lower frequency of recidivism. However, visitation is often extremely difficult, especially when involving children. Prisons are located away from high population areas, meaning families typically have far distances to travel for visitations. Arranging transportation can be difficult especially when the caregiver of the child is the sole provider. There is also the issue of exposing a child to prison. The fences and barbed wire, the treatment from the

correctional staff, including pat downs and security clearances, can make the experience of a visit stressful for a child. Serrato (2016) explains that a large number of incarcerated parents do not have physical interaction with their children, despite the fact that it has proven to be beneficial. The lack of visitation is due to prison conditions not being suitable for children. Along with the already stressful environment, she describes that “even when visitation is offered, visitors, including children, speak with their incarcerated parent through a glass partition and must communicate through a telephone” (Serrato, 2016, p.188).

All of these factors time, money, and overall experience make child visitations problematic. However, research indicates that maintaining a child-parent relationship during and after incarceration is beneficial for both parent and child. Evaluation of family programs implemented within prisons has demonstrated that they effectively promote positive child-parent relationships.

### **Incarceration Demographics**

Statistics demonstrate that the United States justice system disproportionately impacts minorities, especially those in lower income communities and whites with a lower socioeconomic position. This means that the already vulnerable children of minorities and lower income households are more likely to experience the arrest of a parent and the struggles that follow. The Federal Bureau of Prisons reports that as of September 29th, 2018, Asians made up 1.5% of the BOP populations, Native Americans make up 2.2%, and black individuals account for 38.1% of all inmates in federal custody. The Federal Bureau of Prisons also reports the number of incarcerated men at 93.0% while women are only at 7%. Of these incarcerated men, a majority of them have

children. “Almost half the men incarcerated in U.S. prisons are fathers (average number of children = 2.4; U.S. Department of Justice, 1992). Even though only one third are visited often by their children, 80% have stated that they desire to strengthen and improve their parenting skills and are willing to be active in prison programs that support their parenting aspirations, roles, and commitments (Hairston, 1989).

Lower income communities are associated with having higher crime rates and less opportunity for employment. Martensen (2012) states that disadvantaged communities are trapped in a cycle of inequality. Limited employment opportunities lead to crime, which leads to incarceration, which reduces the likelihood to find employment after release from prison. These lower income communities have few outlets for change (Martensen, 2012).

### **Why Maintain the Relationship?**

The primary goal of most research regarding parental incarceration is to determine if the positive effects of maintaining a relationship between incarcerated parent and child outweigh the negatives. Research also strives to identify and understand these positive and negative consequences. The most important of these positive effects of maintaining a relationship between incarcerated parent and child include better behavior from the inmate, a reduced likelihood of recidivism, and a higher sense of security for the child (Bartlett, 2000).

Humans are naturally social creatures. It is widely accepted throughout social sciences that individuals need human interaction and interpersonal relationships to function normally within society. Family is the first connection a child forms and what first links the child to the outside

world. The family remains a vital factor in an individual's social ties throughout life. Incarceration not only disconnects individuals from society, but separates them from a crucial element of their humanity, their families. Family ties have been shown to help an individual assimilate into society after release from prison. Successful reentry is an essential factor in reducing the likelihood of recidivism. Maintaining a relationship with family while incarcerated helps ease the transition back into normal life for many reasons. Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017) describe that, “..familial attachments during a prison sentence can be crucial for managing the pressures of prison life, providing hope for when they are released, and granting essential support during the resettlement process” (p.463).

When an incarcerated individual has a sense of attachment to his or her family, they are much more likely to exhibit positive behavior while in prison. Family programs that promote these relationships demonstrate to the incarcerated individuals that the correctional staff cares about the inmate's prosperity. Blumberg and Griffin (2013) describe that these family programs are utilized as an incentive for inmates to maintain good behavior. They discuss that the individuals who are motivated to participate in programs of interest are at a lower risk of becoming bored and disruptive (p.254). This means that inmates who are actively attempting to maintain family relationships are likely to be better behaved while incarcerated. “Bayse, Algid, and Van Wyk (1991) reported that inmates in a program designed to assist participants' maintenance of family relationships returned to prison at the low rate of 2% to 4% and had fewer discipline problems within the institution” (Harrison, 1997, p.588). Incarcerated individuals typically benefit from a connection with family but more importantly, incarcerated parents desire a connection with their children. Blumberg and Griffin evaluate a family program that has been utilized in multiple



correctional facilities across the country known as “Family Connections.” Blumberg and Griffin use both data from the study and first hand experiences of the correctional staff, to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The article summarizes an interview with Commander Rich Miller of the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department. Miller describes that inmates are eager to participate in this reading program because of the positive changes in the behaviors of those who have participated. He also stated that the department’s correctional counselors fully support the program, because of the enthusiasm from the inmates and the positive and functional behaviors that are exhibited after participation (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013, p.262).

The benefits of participation in these programs extend beyond the correctional facility. Individuals who maintain or develop connections with family by participating in these programs have a reduced likelihood to reoffend after release from prison. The transition out of prison and back into society can be stressful and, often, defeating. The challenges of finding housing, employment, and an individual’s place among the community often result in recidivism. Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017) argue for increased family bonds while incarcerated, stating that “the potential stress to familial relationships during the resettlement transition can also be reduced through visitation, with opportunities to discuss and emotionally prepare for a return to family living” (p.465). Blumberg and Griffin describe that “when inmates utilize positive, prosocial skills learned while incarcerated, they are less likely to reoffend when they return to the community” (p.255). Having family connections after being released can provide an individual with a place to live, reduce loneliness, encourage employment and introduce an individual back into society. Rather than an ex-offender falling into the pattern of recidivism, having the support of a family can offer an opportunity for a fresh start.

Contrary to stigmas surrounding incarcerated parents, maintaining a relationship between child and incarcerated parent can be extremely beneficial for the child. Anna Smyke, Letia Bailey and Charles Zeanah (2017) analyze the effects of parental incarceration on a child's mental health. In their article they state that, "understanding the psychological construct of attachment is essential to appreciating the impact of parental incarceration on children" (p.408). Attachment is the necessary psychological bond that is formed between child and caretaker early in life. Though these attachments are most important during early stages of development, they remain crucial throughout childhood (p.409). Smyke, Bailey and Zeanah (2017) warn that severing these attachment relationships can present serious risks to young children. They also describe that the more significant and the more frequent disruptions the child experiences, the higher the likelihood of long-term consequences (p.410). When a parent is removed from a child's life because of incarceration, the child is at risk for psychological and social damage. Children with incarcerated parents are also at a higher risk for deviant behavior, mental health issues and problems in school.

Cyphert (2018) describes the devastating effects parent incarceration has on children including, "everything from decreases in their physical and psychological health to an increased risk for homelessness and educational failures. These problems follow children into adulthood, setting them up for an increased risk of problems such as drug use, unemployment, and, ultimately, incarceration themselves" (Cyphert, 2018, p. 387). Cyphert, like Smyke, Bailey, and Zeanah, emphasizes the importance of attachment in these parent-child relationships. She writes, "the disruption of parental attachment caused by parental incarceration can sharply increase rates of depression and anxiety and severely disrupt a child's educational performance" (Cyphert, 2018, p.391).

Programs that help connect incarcerated parents and their children promote the maintenance of these attachment relationships which in turn promote the well-being of both parent and child. Cyphert (2018) adds, “where the visitation is of a high quality, it is associated with positive outcomes for children”, and that “maintaining contact with one’s incarcerated parent appears to be one of the most effective ways to improve a child’s emotional response to the incarceration and reduce the incidence of problematic behavior” (p.395).

### **Issues with Incarcerated Parenting**

Despite the noted benefits of parent-child relationships during incarceration, the issues that surround maintaining this relationship limit legitimate efforts. Issues include the limitations when an inmate has lost parental rights, the complications of visitation, the stigma faced by the children, and the overall expense of maintaining these relationships.

Government legislation rarely considers an individual’s parental role when prosecuting. In fact, “Guidelines Section 5F11.6,7 explicitly instructs sentencing judges that the impact of a parent’s incarceration on minor children or other family members is generally *not* to be considered when fashioning a sentence” (Cyphert, 2018, p.387). When an individual is separated from children during arrest, chances of reunification are slim, unless there is an adequate guardian that can act as a substitute caregiver during the length of the sentence. Still, if the caregiver and incarcerated parent are separated or have poor relations, obtaining custody or visitation rights are nearly impossible while incarcerated.

Obtaining or attempting to regain parental rights is incredibly difficult while an individual is incarcerated. Child Support Services have rigid expectations of parents which are unable to be met within the confines of a correctional facility. “The correctional focus on security and emphasis on punishment preclude the types of parental involvement and worker-client contact that the child welfare system requires for parents to demonstrate competent parenting to prevent the termination of parental rights and to promote family reunification” (Hairston, 1998, p.630). While most welfare agencies claim to have to children’s best interest in mind, the children of incarcerated parents often experience a lifetime of hardship. The number of children within the welfare system with an incarcerated parent is one out of five (Cyphert, 2018, p.393). Maintaining a relationship between parent and child during incarceration is difficult even with a supportive caregiver and full participation from both parties. When there are barriers with child protective agencies, it becomes nearly impossible.

The challenges of sustaining a child-parent relationship while incarcerated are obvious but often overlooked. As mentioned before, visitation has a significant impact on the relationship between a parent and child. However, visitation is not always feasible. Cyphert (2018) describes that visitation policies complicate and limit an incarcerated parent’s ability to see his or her children. “Inconvenient visitation hours, lack of parking, visitation rooms that are not private or child friendly, and rules about who is eligible to visit and when visitation can occur, can all deter family members, especially children, from visiting” (p.397). Along with the policy limitations, visitations can be stressful on the caregiver of the child and the child. The environment of correctional facilities is typically unwelcoming and overwhelming. Hairston (1998) highlights the experience of “standing in line for hours to be cleared for a visit that lasts less than half the time

spent waiting, being subjected to pat and frisk searches and rude treatment, and visiting in crowded, noisy, dirty, overheated facilities, or with parents and children separated by a glass barrier” stating that these conditions “are hardly conducive to promoting family bonds” (p.625). These harsh conditions could make the experience of visiting an incarcerated parent more damaging than beneficial for some children. Incarcerated parents are also reluctant to allow their children to come visit, despite wanting to maintain a relationship with them. The children’s caregivers may share similar feelings, concerned about the psychological harm of visits (Cyphert, 2018, p.397).

Caregivers play a crucial role in the relationship between incarcerated parent and child. If the inmate has a poor relationship with their child’s caretaker, whether a previous partner or a family member, the caretaker could limit or prevent contact. Hairston writes “..contact with their children during imprisonment is limited and dependent, to a large extent, on their ongoing legal relationship with each child's mother” (Hairston, 1998, p.621). He adds “Most incarcerated fathers are not currently and have never been married to the mother of one or more of their children” (p.620). The same can be said about incarcerated mothers and their children’s caregivers.

The caretakers of minor children with incarcerated parents must embrace the challenges associated with maintaining such a relationship. However, it is not always simply a matter of the caretaker’s willingness, but a matter of ability. Incarcerated individuals typically come from low-income communities and their children are often left with caregivers with limited resources. Since most correctional facilities are located far away from families’ residences, this generally means families must travel long distances for in person visitation. If the caretaker does not have access to a vehicle, they must pay for transportation. Regardless, doing so is expensive. Cyphert

(2018) states, “the cost of visitation, from bus fares or gas costs to meals and missed work for adults, can certainly chill visits from children to their incarcerated parents... a vast majority of parents in federal prisons are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their last residence.” (p.396).

The alternative to the stressful, time-consuming and expensive visitation process is just as problematic. Phone calls from a correctional facility cost the receiving individual three times more than a payphone call and five times more than a standard phone call (Hairston, 1998, p.262). Video calls, where a child could virtually interact with their parent, are even more expensive. “Some jurisdictions charge \$20.00 for a twenty minute [video call] visit” (Cyphert, 2018, p.396).

Connecting a parent and child while the parent is incarcerated is not only challenging, but expensive. The low-income populations that cannot afford these costs are the ones most heavily impacted by incarceration. These individuals are also faced with the stigma associated with having an incarcerated loved-one. Hairston (1998) discusses that one of the only alternatives to visitation and phone calls is mailing letters. However, mail from many prisons is labelled with a warning that the package is from a correctional institution. “This public label makes many mothers and other caregivers discourage prisoners from sending mail to their homes” (Hairston, 1998, p.419). Society shuns individuals who have any history of “criminal activity” and discriminates against individuals who associate themselves with these individuals. The negative stigma surrounding contact with an incarcerated individual damages already at risk relationships.

Occasionally, contact is not beneficial for fostering positive relationships. Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017) describe that “In some circumstances, visits may also make relations worse, with negative interactions between a prisoner and family increasing the strain on a prisoner, who is

unable to control or remedy such tensions through the limited communication opportunities afforded by the prison” (p.466). However, research has shown that this scenario is not typical.

### **Family Programs**

Programs within prisons have been developed to assess the benefits of a child-parent relationship during incarceration, without the interference of the negative elements typically associated with maintaining relationships with an incarcerated individual. These programs range from parenting classes to video recordings that get mailed to the children.

Harrison overviews several different programs that have been utilized. Harrison describes a program used at the Hennepin County Adult Corrections Facility in which men received parent education courses. After completing the courses, inmates reported improved communication with their children and better management of discipline problems (Harrison, 1997, p.589). She also describes a program in The New York State Department of Correctional Services where incarcerated fathers were allowed overnight visitations with their children in a home-like facility (p.589). A child-centered program like this removes a majority of the issues associated with in-person visitations while still allowing quality time for both father and child. Harrison reports, “Thirty-three inmates who participated in this program for more than 2 years reported that the quality of their relationships with their children had improved. They felt more successful in parenting and expected fewer problems upon reentering the family after release from prison” (Harrison, 1997, p.589).

Harrison's personal research was an experimental program that evaluated a parenting education program for fathers. The experiment was attempting to determine if parent education would improve the self esteem of the incarcerated individual and the child. Inmates who were permitted to participate in the program were divided into control and experimental groups. "The inmates in the experimental group received parent education and behavior-management training. Those in the control group received no systematic training or education regarding child rearing; instead, they viewed video tapes, participated in discussions, and answered questions relevant to family or father-oriented audio/videotapes; they received no instruction, advice, or encouragement toward appropriate parenting" (Harrison, 1997, p.590).

Although the individuals who completed the courses showed improved attitudes towards parenting, the self-perceptions of the children showed no significant changes and individual scores actually reflected low-to-average opinions and perceptions of self-worth. Harrison describes that this result was not surprising considering hardly any of the fathers participating had the opportunity to utilize the knowledge gained (p.592). Despite the inconclusive results, Harrison believes parent-education programs like this one help individuals acquire the necessary skills, attitudes and information they need to prepare for the difficulties of fatherhood after release from prison (Harrison, 1997, p.592). Unfortunately, programs like these will not reflect any significant improvement unless the incarcerated individuals are given the opportunity to demonstrate the change.

Another program that was utilized at two correctional facilities in Florida is known as "Family Reading Ties: Face to Face." This program uses high-speed videoconferencing technology to connect mothers to their children for weekly visits (Bartlett, 2000, p.103). The



children are brought to a public area with the equipment set up in advance. The incarcerated mothers read an age appropriate book to their child through the webcam and are allowed time to ask and answer questions. First hand accounts depicted a child hugging the computer screen after the video call ends. Although there has been little evaluation of the effects of this program, they have received a great deal of positive feedback. Programs like these reassure children that they have not been abandoned and that their mothers love them (Bartlett, 2000)

Blumberg and Griffin (2013) evaluate a similar program that uses DVD rather than video-chatting. The program, known as “Reading Legacies,” video tapes an incarcerated parent reading a book in a child-friendly environment. The video is then sent home along with the book the parent read on the video, so that the child may read along.

This program connects a parent and child without the normal expenses of visitation and calls. The parent has an opportunity to be a part of their child’s education. “The theory underlying this program is that when incarcerated parents participate in the daily reading activities of their children, the parent gains a sense of responsibility... a first step toward returning to roles as functioning parents and community members” (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013, p.261). This program, and ones similar to it, have received tremendous amounts of positive feedback.

A video on one of these programs is available here:

<http://clifonline.org/literacy-programs/children-of-prison-inmates/>

### **Benefits Outweigh the Obstacles**

Research has demonstrated that maintaining a child-parent relationships during and after incarceration is beneficial for both parents and children. Incarcerated parents experience higher

self-esteem when they feel they are contributing members of their families, have improved behavior while in prison, and are less likely to reoffend after release. The children also experience higher self esteem when they feel their parents are engaged in their lives. The children may also experience less stress during and after the sentence if their parents remain in their lives.

The challenges associated with maintaining relationships present obstacles that family programs seek to eliminate. With legislative cooperation and more funding, these programs could have massive implications for the entire justice system, potentially ending the pattern of recidivism and reducing the likelihood of an offender's children winding up incarcerated themselves.

### **Recommendations**

The benefits of maintaining a relationship between an incarcerated parent and child are often overshadowed by the challenges associated with accomplishing such a task. The United States correctional system is not structured to facilitate meaningful family bonds. The judicial system also places little to no emphasis on family relationships when an individual is being incarcerated. The design of the correctional system makes maintaining family relationships during incarceration virtually unfeasible. Challenges range from limited access to transportation to the restrictions of the correctional facilities themselves. However, when the challenges of relationship maintenance are removed or lessened, the impact of these connections can be better understood and examined. Research suggests that these relationships are beneficial for both the parent and the child, despite the obstacles. With the disturbing mass incarceration rates in the United States, it is becoming vital that the structure of the judicial system be focused on promoting productive behaviors and reducing the likelihood of recidivism.

Family programs within correctional facilities are the primary way in which the benefits of parent-child relationships can be utilized and evaluated. These programs are implemented in order to reduce the strain associated with keeping these connections during incarceration but they unfortunately receive little funding. With government support and reallocation of funds, these programs could change the lives of incarcerated individuals and their families. Positive child-parent relationships during and after incarceration reduce the likelihood of recidivism of the incarcerated individual and lower the risk of the child of that individual offending later in life. Since the judicial system disproportionately impacts lower income and disadvantaged minority communities, decreasing the cycle of crime could create a world of opportunity for these vulnerable populations.

Previous studies have demonstrated the vast range of benefits of these programs that promote family relationships, but the implementation of these programs is limited by the limits to access of volunteers and resources. If these programs receive more funding and government support, the impacts could shift the culture of crime.

### **Implementation of Family Programs**

Family programs, such as the ones discussed previously, can provide a means of maintaining relationships through the barriers of incarceration. These barriers include the conditions of the prison facility, transportation restrictions, and the overall expense of keeping contact with a prisoner. Some of these programs utilize video conferences to connect parent and child when physical visitation is not possible. Other more immersive programs create a

child-friendly space within the correctional facility or at an off-prison site for children to have physical interaction with the incarcerated parent. These programs attempt to diminish the obstacles associated with maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated individual. Still, these programs lack funding and present barriers themselves. One example of an obstacle with the family programs that utilize video chat is that the programs occasionally require families to meet at a public location in order to hold the session. Transportation to these locations can be difficult for low-income families, especially when the incarcerated parent leaves the other parent to care for the child or children alone. Finding the time and transportation to these video conference locations can be difficult. Other programs seek to avoid this problem by using video recording methods. The incarcerated parent is placed in a room with child friendly decorations and is recorded reading an age appropriate book. The video is then mailed to the child or children.

Although these video recording programs are the most common form of family programs used in detention facilities and have received positive feedback, the value of in-person visitation cannot be ignored. William Bales and Daniel Mears (2008) found that visitation by family members directly influences recidivism rates, stating “any visitation and more frequent visitation were both associated with a lower likelihood of recidivism” (p.312). Understandably, visitation is not always possible. Restricted visitation hours, facilities being located too far away, lack of resources to access transportation, and the conditions of the correctional facilities all limit the ability for visitation.

With funding and government support, programs could be implemented to overcome these visitation barriers. Transportation could be provided to these families and visitation locations could be made more child-friendly. In order to decrease the number of individuals in the United State’s

correctional facilities, action needs to be taken to lower recidivism and break the pattern of children with an incarcerated parent ending up in prison themselves. These programs can reduce recidivism and provide more opportunity for the communities that are being disproportionately affected by crime and incarcerations.

### **Other Ways of Helping the Connection**

Family programs are the primary way in which incarcerated parents can be connected to their children, however, they are not always available. These programs also do not offer perfect solutions to the barriers of maintaining a relationship. Other ways relationships could be supported are by placing incarcerated individuals closer to their last place of residence or that of a loved one. Correctional facilities are typically located in low populated, isolated areas. These facilities can be located several hours away from an individual's place of residence, sometimes in different states. "Today, over 60 percent of state prison inmates report that they are placed more than 100 miles from their last place of residence" (Serrato, 2016, p.190). This only adds to the strain placed on caregiver and child to visit an incarcerated parent.

During sentencing, judges are advised to not take children or family into account. "Section 5F11.6,7 ... explicitly instructs sentencing judges that the impact of a parent's incarceration on minor children or other family members is generally not to be considered when fashioning a sentence" (Cyphert, 2018, p.387). This means that the judicial system explicitly ignores the benefits of family relationships on behavior and recidivism. With the prevalence of mass incarceration in the United States, the focus should not be on the punishment of the individuals

who have committed crimes, but rather on the rehabilitation of these individuals. Supporting methods to reduce recidivism and promote positive community involvement after release from prison is the first step in changing crime rates in the United States.

Encouraging positive child-parent relationships while a parent is incarcerated is not only beneficial for the prisoner, but helps ensure that the child has a sense of security. Children who have had an incarcerated parent are more likely to offend themselves and end up in a correctional facility. When an incarcerated parent demonstrates positive behavior after release and resumes a position within the child's life, the child is significantly less likely to offend in the future. Supporting these relationships could change the lives of children with incarcerated parents. As previously discussed, visitation plays an important role for the incarcerated individual and have positive effects on the child as long as the experience is positive.

Correctional facilities are generally not suitable for children. Depending on the age of the child, visiting an incarcerated parent may be traumatic. Touch is often not allowed during visitations, which might be upsetting for a young child. "Efforts should be made to create a more child-friendly environment for visitation. Understanding that children will likely want to touch their parent, rather than visit through a glass, is important. Creating a space that allows for families to interact, perhaps with toys or with board games and other developmentally appropriate items, is important to strengthen the visitation experience" (Smyke, Bailey, Zeanah, 2017, p.426).

For various reasons, visitation is not always possible. In place of visitations, phone calls or video calls should be utilized to demonstrate to the child that the parent is still actively involved in his or her life. "Skype, Facetime, or Tango should be used to enable more frequent video interaction between parents and their children" (Smyke, Bailey, Zeanah, 2017, p.427). However,

prison phone and video calls are grossly expensive. With phone calls costing the receiving individual five times more than a standard phone call (Hairston, 1998, p.262) and video calls cost \$20.00 for 20 minutes (Cyphert, 2018, p.396), maintaining video contact through phone calls is a huge expense. Since incarceration has a greater impact on lower-income families, these costs are not feasible for most families wishing to stay connected to an incarcerated individual.

Research has shown that maintaining connection with family members while incarcerated is the primary way in which individuals assimilate back into society after release. Maintaining contact with family during incarceration could be the difference in an individual reoffending or recovering. In order to promote these relationships, the cost of phone calls needs to be significantly reduced. It is imprudent to isolate individuals from family, friends, and all normal social structure and expect them to suddenly be able to reenter society as productive citizens after release from prison. Utilizing family programs and evolving the correctional system to promote family connections is necessary if the United States would like to reduce recidivism and overall incarceration.

### **Unification is the Goal**

Ultimately, the goal of maintaining a relationship between an incarcerated parent and child is so that the parent and child are unified after the parent is released from prison. However, there can be barriers to this reunification. The primary barrier to this unification is social services. When an individual is being arrested, if a direct relative is not available to take the children, the children are placed in the foster care system. Once in the system, it can be extremely difficult to regain

custody of the children. The The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) is in place to ensure that children are placed in foster care temporarily before a more permanent adoption placement can be secured (Serrato, 2016, p.180). “ASFA requires states to file a petition to terminate parental rights when a child is placed in foster care for fifteen of the previous twenty-two months. The drawback with the law is that ‘Congress did not consider or specifically address the rising number of incarcerated parents,’ whose sentences often exceed fifteen months and who are not given an exception with respect to the twenty- two month timeframe” ( p.180). The standards of ASFA can often not be fulfilled by an incarcerated individual. So not only do they not have contact with their children while incarcerated, but the individuals lose their parental rights entirely. Incarcerated individuals are not always unfit parents. There should be more consideration when allowing incarcerated individuals the opportunity to reunite with his or her children before parental rights are terminated.

When a relative or the other parent is available to care for a child while the parent is incarcerated, unification can be a delicate process. As the parent adjusts to the world outside of the correctional facility, the child adjusts to having the parent physically present in his or her life. Only in the circumstance where an incarcerated parent is in a current relationship with the caregiver of the child and the parent will return to the same residence as the child, would there not be the transition from temporary caregiver to the parent. Although this situation still requires a transition period for the child to adjust to having their parent as a physical caregiver, it is less stressful than a child completely switching caregivers. Smyke, Bailey, and Zeanah (2017) describe the sensitive situation of substitute caregiving during incarceration. The substitute caregiver not only has to be a supportive, loving, guardian, but must recognize that the child is eventually



returning to the parent (p.418). This means that they must conceal any negative feelings towards the incarcerated parent and support the relationship between parent and child. “Transitions between substitute caregivers and the returning formerly-incarcerated parents should be carefully planned...The goal is that neither the parent nor the child is overwhelmed by the process, resulting in sabotage of the reunification. When the parent has been released from incarceration, it may be tempting to return the child to the care of the parent immediately. It is as important to assist the child in this transition as it was to support the child when he was first placed with the substitute caregiver” (Smyke, Bailey, Zeanah, 2017, p.424).

## **Conclusion**

Research has demonstrated that maintaining a relationship between an incarcerated parent and his or her child is beneficial for the child’s sense of security and for the recovery of the released inmate (Smyke, Bailey, Zeanah, 2017, p.424). There are other positive aspects such as better behavior from the individual while he or she is incarcerated and improved grades from the children of incarcerated parents (Harrison, 1997, p.589). Depending on the degree of the crimes committed by the individual and if he or she is reasonably considered to be suitable to be a parent, the ultimate goal should be to support relationships between incarcerated parents and their children in order for parent and child to be unified after release.

Barriers preventing child-parent relationships should be reevaluated and more funding should be supplied to programs that support the facilitation of these relationships. The cost of phone and video calls from correctional facilities should be greatly reduced, more child-friendly

areas should be available for family visitation, and legislation needs to consider the residence of the children when sentencing the offender.

These changes have the potential to transform the lives of not just incarcerated individuals and their families, but entire communities that are negatively impacted by mass incarceration and crime. By putting an end to the cycle of recidivism and the pattern for children of incarcerated individuals to offend later in life, the United States could witness a shift in the overall culture of crime.

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