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## THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING FAMILY CONNECTIONS TO ENSURE SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY

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### INTRODUCTION

As of the latest estimates, approximately two million individuals are currently incarcerated in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Each of these has a family, which broadens the impact of incarceration to millions of family members across the nation. This brings negative repercussions: incarcerated parents are separated from children, interpersonal relationships become strained and financial support disappears. Furthermore, federal, state and local policies often present barriers to meaningful and continued family connections while incarcerated. Yet, paradoxically, it is during this time that positive family connections are so key. Indeed, they are critical to successful re-entry after a person's time is served, as they help encourage individual transformation, mitigate the negative impact of incarceration on children and other loved ones, and support stronger families in general. This, in turn, makes communities safer. For these reasons, society can benefit by understanding the importance of these connections and creating policies that help to bolster them for the good of incarcerated individuals, their families and their communities at large.

### THE CURRENT STATE OF FAMILY CONNECTIONS DURING INCARCERATION

For a significant portion of incarcerated individuals, having the opportunity to stay connected with family members—particularly children—is the dream rather than the norm. According to the most recently available data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2004, approximately 21 percent of parents incarcerated in state prisons had no contact with their children at all during their incarceration; whether via telephone, mail or visits.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, an estimated 47 percent of parents incarcerated in state prisons had *never* talked with their child over the phone and 59 percent never had the opportunity to visit with their child.<sup>3</sup> In some instances, incarcerated individuals and family members may have antagonistic or abusive relationships and continued contact during incarceration is undesired or, perhaps, unwise. However, a family-first agenda should ensure that current policies support continued contact when desired and appropriate.

Perhaps due to a child's reliance on adult caregivers to facilitate contact, visitation from other family members may be more common, although still non-existent for a large segment of the incarcerated population. A study of over 16,000 individuals in Minnesota prisons, for example, found that 61 percent had at least one visit throughout the entire time period in which they were incarcerated.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, 19 percent of individuals reported visits from a son or daughter, 31 percent reported visits from their mother, 16 percent reported visits from their father and 26 percent reported visits from a sibling.<sup>5</sup> However, this data suggests that almost 4 in 10 prisoners in the study received no visitors throughout their entire incarceration, leaving many with virtually no in-person contact with family members. However, the Vera Institute for Justice found that those incarcerated for up to two years in local jails report 59 percent more visits in comparison to previously reported rates among imprisoned populations.<sup>6</sup> This research suggests that families may be able to connect more easily when loved ones are incarcerated in local jails, which are often located closer to the incarcerated individual's family and community.

In some places, correctional facilities are prioritizing active family engagement, with most family-oriented programming centered on parent-child relationships. Despite some progress in this regard, however, programs with direct child involvement are often few and far between. For example, one study that collected survey data from over 380 correctional facilities across the nation estimated that only 33 percent of female-only facilities and 10 percent of male-only facilities reported such programs.<sup>7</sup>

When these programs exist, they do much to promote positive family connections. For instance, through a partnership with a local community-based organization, San Francisco jails provide incarcerated parents opportunities to engage in

contact visits along with parenting curriculum. During these visits, trained partner staff escort children to a special visiting room filled with books, games, toys and coloring activities where parents and children can connect.<sup>8</sup> Programs such as this may promote parental knowledge of healthy discipline, reduced parental distress and increased empathy toward children.<sup>9</sup> A randomized controlled trial evaluating this “Parenting Inside Out” curriculum found that participants were less likely to be depressed or stressed compared to parents who did not participate. They also reported higher levels of positive, family interactions during incarceration.<sup>10</sup> Another initiative, “Girl Scouts Beyond Bars,” provides Girl Scout troop members an opportunity to spend an afternoon with their incarcerated mothers once a month.<sup>11</sup> Programs such as these both facilitate and support positive family interactions, building community within parenting groups and among children with the shared experience of parental incarceration.

### Barriers to Family Connections

Currently, substantial barriers exist in our justice system that restrict opportunities for family connection via written and verbal communication, as well as in-person visitation. And while a few safeguards are prudent for the maintenance of public safety, others fail to provide any rational benefit. For example, while it seems reasonable to monitor inmate mail, several jurisdictions have severely regulated the form and length of mail unnecessarily. Indeed, in some instances, families may only send postcards and incarcerated individuals may not be able to receive a colored drawing, greeting card or photo printed on cardstock or photo paper.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the costs associated with family connections do not often present a meaningful public safety benefit. Monitoring phone calls, video visits, electronic communication and in-person visits certainly is not without cost to correctional agencies. However, the costs passed on to families of the incarcerated are often so excessive that they appear as little more than a money-making scheme. For example, unlike in our homes or businesses, correctional facilities may charge a fee per electronic message.<sup>13</sup> And worse, some jurisdictions severely limit the number of characters each message can contain.<sup>14</sup> As a result, families are sometimes forced to attempt to communicate meaningfully in little more than the space of a tweet before they are charged additional money for an additional message. Similarly, phone call rates can be exorbitant, often charging families several dollars for a 10-minute conversation.<sup>15</sup> Such practices actually thwart positive family connections and, therefore, public safety. Additionally, visitation procedures, such as policies that preclude physical contact with an incarcerated parent, may make visitation a negative experience for both child and parent, which is also counterproductive.<sup>16</sup>

Incarcerating individuals in several, larger facilities may reduce a jurisdiction’s short-term costs but may also result in additional barriers to connection and possibly additional long-term costs. When loved ones want to visit an individual in prison, they often must travel long distances to a large, overcrowded facility and, dependent upon when a facility allows visitation, must spend time away from employment. It, therefore, should come as no surprise that research shows that as the distance of a facility from an inmate’s community increases, visitation decreases.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as the oversight of in-person visits often requires additional manpower, correctional agencies across the nation are using video visitation as a tool to supplant and replace in-person visits. Indeed, a Prison Policy Initiative report found that 74 percent of jails discontinued in-person visits following the implementation of video visitation.<sup>18</sup> Instead of multiplying avenues for positive family connections, these barriers restrict opportunities for relational growth and increase the financial burden on families. All of these policies ultimately conflict with public safety aims.

### WHY DO FAMILY CONNECTIONS MATTER?

#### They offer critical emotional and psychological support

In a variety of ways, families are a critical tool to promote successful re-entry. For example, according to national survey data, approximately 37 percent of prisoners and 44 percent of jail inmates reported being diagnosed with mental health conditions, such as depression, bipolar, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>19</sup> And the most recently available national statistics suggest that over half of individuals sentenced to jail or incarcerated in state prisons struggle with substance abuse or dependence.<sup>20</sup>

In light of this, families can offer critical emotional and psychological support for these individuals during incarceration and following release. Indeed, research demonstrates that supportive relationships are critical to promoting both physiological and psychological health, whereas stress-filled ones or social isolation can encourage mental and physiological harm.<sup>21</sup> Yet, incarceration often accentuates social isolation by removing loved ones from their families. Encouraging more frequent visits and consistent contact with families can help to bridge this gap.<sup>22</sup>

#### They may help incarcerated individuals gain practical support that aids successful re-entry

Families also serve as important sources of financial support. Survey data gathered by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights suggests that the majority of incarcerated individuals rely upon family members to help them pay court-related costs.<sup>23</sup> This support often continues following incarceration,

as many rely on relatives to find or provide housing upon re-entry.<sup>24</sup> Familial connections may also provide opportunities for employment and thus may reduce an individual's dependence on public assistance after release.<sup>25</sup> For these reasons, connecting family members with their incarcerated loved ones—and helping to maintain those relationships while behind bars—has direct, practical impact on a smooth, successful re-entry process.

### **They may mitigate the harm parental incarceration has on children**

An estimated 2.7 million children have an incarcerated parent, with millions of additional children having experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.<sup>26</sup> Several studies have linked parental incarceration to worse outcomes for children, although these often vary depending upon whether a child is experiencing paternal or maternal incarceration or if the child has endured other adverse experiences.<sup>27</sup> However, research suggests that young children are less likely to form healthy parent-child attachments when their primary caretaker is incarcerated and these relationships are crucial to child development.<sup>28</sup>

Children with currently or formerly incarcerated parents may be more likely to struggle with mental health issues and may struggle with feelings of shame and stigmatization.<sup>29</sup> They may also be at-risk for child homelessness and are more likely to move from place to place, further disrupting any positive support networks.<sup>30</sup> Parental incarceration may also negatively influence a child's mental or physical health as an adult, both directly and through mechanisms such as poverty and reduced social support.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, incarceration often results in stress and financial distress for family members, including romantic partners and grandparents who often assume duties as child caregivers.<sup>32</sup>

Continued family interaction while incarcerated has the opportunity to mitigate these negative impacts on children and family members by supporting strong, pro-social relationships. Communication is integral to healthy attachments and allows child caregivers to discuss any problems with incarcerated loved ones. Moreover, increased visitation and connection during incarceration may support stronger parent-child attachments and it has also been associated with increased parental involvement in their children's lives after release.<sup>33</sup> Regular and accessible visitation can reduce child anxiety surrounding parental absence.<sup>34</sup> A study including data from over 120,000 children in Minnesota suggests that children who have stronger relationships with their parents are less likely to suffer from poor mental health outcomes during or following parental incarceration.<sup>35</sup> And, when done in a child-friendly setting, contact visitation may promote a child's emotional adjustment and lead to better behavior in school.<sup>36</sup>

### **Family connections are an important part of family reunification**

Furthermore, the most recently available statistics suggest that approximately 11 percent of incarcerated mothers and 2 percent of incarcerated fathers have children in the foster care system.<sup>37</sup> Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act, incarcerated parents with children in foster care risk having their parental rights terminated depending on the length of their sentence and the extent of their relationship with the child.<sup>38</sup> Frequent, positive contact during incarceration is thus crucial to supporting efforts to regain child custody after release.

### **Family connections promote public safety**

When incarcerated individuals have stronger family relationships, they are less likely to return to the walls of a prison cell.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, high family conflict is associated with a return to substance abuse and crime upon release.<sup>40</sup> Continued, positive family connections while incarcerated thus can play an important role in reducing such detrimental behaviors. Moreover, connected families create a safer public in the form of reduced crime and incarceration. For example, in one study, authors found that individuals in Minnesota prisons who received visits were 13 percent less likely to be convicted of a new felony offense and 25 percent less likely to have technical violation revocation of supervised release.<sup>41</sup> Yet another study found that visitation within the last twelve months of an individual's sentence reduced the odds of reconviction within two years of release by over 30 percent. Further, the greater number of visits, the greater the gains to public safety.<sup>42</sup> Research also suggests that more consistent visitors throughout the entire period of incarceration or later on in an individual's incarceration is associated with lower rates of prisoner misconduct.<sup>43</sup> Thus, family connections may bring benefits for officer and inmate safety within bars, as well as to the public.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Remove unnecessary and unproductive barriers to family connections**

The first step to increasing positive family connections is removing unproductive barriers. For example, while maintaining safety behind bars is important, relegating families to communicate by postcard is counterintuitive. Further, electronic messages should not be censored by meager character limits. And telephone and video call rates should—at most—reflect only the true cost of service, not the funds necessary to offset government concession fees. Moreover, jurisdictions should remove anti-family visitation policies that preclude family members from visiting with their loved ones in person. Video visitation services should be a complement to rather than a substitute for in-person visitation. Agencies

should therefore work to provide multiple avenues for positive family communication.

### **Make visitation more accessible and productive**

Whenever possible, incarcerated loved ones should be housed in the facility closest to their families to reduce distance. Furthermore, decisionmakers should work to make visitation a positive experience for children and family members by mitigating the sometimes traumatic impact of current search policies and creating visitation spaces that are welcoming and allow meaningful interactions.

### **Expand the impact of positive family connections**

Furthermore, policymakers should promote the importance of family connections through the implementation of pro-family solutions. For many jurisdictions, this means first assessing the impact of current policies on families and implementing new procedures to gather data. Policymakers should expand the current repertoire and accessibility of family-oriented programming and visitation through community-based partnerships. Moreover, agencies should work with incarcerated individuals as well as child health and human services specialists to craft meaningful, effective curriculum. Incarcerated mothers and fathers and teenage parents should also be offered family-oriented programming. And given that recent research suggests that the offense for which an individual is convicted does not necessarily translate into an individual's parenting ability, family connection programs should not preclude the participation of those convicted of violent offenses, unless it is deemed to be in the best interest of the child or family member.<sup>44</sup>

Instead of constructing new barriers, government policies should focus on encouraging connections and, therefore, promoting families and public safety. Indeed, jurisdictions can utilize technology, such as text notification systems, to increase information dissemination and make families aware of updated policies or scheduling changes. Moreover, correctional agencies can include families and other state agencies as critical allies in the reentry planning process. Social workers, for example, are often key partners in reunifying parents with children, and jurisdictions have the opportunity to reduce duplicative services and thus costs by identifying similar requirements for familial reunification and parole. For example, if recently released mothers must complete a drug test as part of the process of regaining custody, corrections staff may choose to honor the results of that drug test instead of requiring a mother to pay for and take a second test as part of her parole requirements. Moreover, when families understand parole requirements, they can help support their loved one's efforts to fulfill the conditions of their release. And, as families often provide financial and housing support, corrections staff should work with individuals and

their families to anticipate challenges and create realistic expectations. Instead of making an individual's return to their community more challenging, policy should support the relationships critical to ensuring success.

## **CONCLUSION**

Behind most incarcerated individuals is a family that is critical to encouraging positive change on the inside and supporting them as they prepare for life on the outside. Despite this, government policies and family circumstances often impede the ability of families to stay connected during incarceration. However, changes to government policies, community-based partnerships and the expansion of family-oriented programming can help families overcome these obstacles, with great benefit both to individuals and to society as a whole.

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