

Family & Corrections Network



Reading Room

Children of Criminal Offenders & Foster Care

From the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents

This data was presented at the 1999 Child Welfare League of America National Conference on Research in Seattle, Washington.

In 1998, the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents and The Casey Family Program [TCFP] conducted a study of children in long-term foster care. Findings from the first phase of the study were dramatic and unexpected.

Approximately 80% of the children studied had at least on parent who had been arrested or incarcerated during the child's lifetime. This number excluded children whose parents had histories of criminal offenses against children. When that group was included, the proportion of children of criminal offenders in the study population was about 90%.

Approximately 40% of the children studied had two birth parents who had been involved in the criminal justice system.

Approximately 70% of the children studied had a parent incarcerated at some time during their tenure in foster care. However, only 10% of the children had a currently incarcerated mother and only 33% had a currently incarcerated father.

About 85% of the children of criminal offenders studied had entered the foster care system for reasons that were not directly related to parental incarceration. This was not true for the 10% whose parents were incarcerated for crimes against children..

Most studies related to this topic have approached it from the perspective of the incarcerated parent. That approach is in line with the traditional focus of the U.S. criminal justice system on the isolated offender and our society's traditional adult-oriented perspective on children's issues, but it does not produce information that reflects the reality of children's lives.

As researchers and advocates move into a new era of interdisciplinary, intersystem and interagency collaboration, we need to keep children's reality in mind. When we remember it and look at phenomena from that perspective, the boundaries and definitions of our struggle change. For example, while very few incarcerated parents have children in foster care, most foster kids have had an incarcerated parent. This fact has tremendous implications for how we design services, frame our research, select our collaborative partners and expend our limited resources in attempting to improve the lives of families involved in the criminal justice system.

The "Children of Criminal Offenders & Foster Care" Study is currently being replicated among a large population of children in a public child welfare agency. A written report of preliminary findings from the 1998 study is in preparation for publication. For more information, contact the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents at Post Office Box 41-286, Eagle Rock, California 90041.