



## Why Unify Children with their parents in prison?

# THE RESEARCH

**Children of incarcerated parents are the innocent victims of crime.** Their lives, psychological development, parental bond and sense of home are altered by circumstances completely beyond their control. **Get On The Bus unifies children with their parent in prison for Mother's and Father's Day.** The aim of the program is to create a positive childhood memory of a special family day, and to strengthen the family bonds that will benefit children during their parent's incarceration and after.

According to Elizabeth Gaynes, Executive Director of the Osborne Association, "Research consistently demonstrates that supporting this parent-child relationship meets the needs and respects the rights of children and strengthening the family leads to improved outcomes for parents and their children during and following incarceration." We share some of this research here.

## Why do children and families need Get on The Bus . . .

### Prison: It's a Family Affair

- ➔ **California has the largest prison system in the United States and its children suffer disproportionately: 195,000 children have a parent in state prison** and another 97,000 children have parents in county jail. The parents of 564,000 other children were on parole and probation, bringing the total number of California children with parents involved in the adult criminal justice system to 856,000.<sup>i</sup>
- ➔ **65% of women and 55% of men in prison are parents to minor children.**<sup>ii</sup>
- ➔ **Over 60% of mothers and fathers are sentenced to prisons more than 100 miles away from their families.** In California, 60% of all female inmates are from Southern California, but the two largest women's prisons, Central California Women's Facility and the Valley State Prison for Women, are located near Chowchilla, about 300 miles north of Los Angeles.<sup>iii</sup>
- ➔ About 60% of children live with grandparents (usually maternal) after their mother's incarceration, 17% live with other relatives and a quarter live with non-relatives (often in foster care). In contrast, only half of incarcerated fathers were living with their youngest child prior to incarceration, and most of their children (nearly 90 percent) continued to live with their mothers after the incarceration.<sup>iv</sup>
- ➔ The chaos displayed in the lives of these parents is often replicated in the lives of their children. In fact, among a sample of approximately 500 incarcerated women in California, 34% reported that they had also experienced the incarceration of a parent during their childhood.<sup>v</sup>
- ➔ There is a disparate impact on families of color, with African-American children nine times more likely and Hispanic children three times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison.<sup>vi</sup>
- ➔ **The family is probably this country's most valuable resource in fighting crime.** Maintaining family bonds is the single greatest predictor of a parent's successful re-entry from prison.<sup>vii</sup>

*As one grandmother put it, "When my daughter went to prison, we all went to prison."*



## The Impact of Parental Incarceration On Children

- ➡ The number of children with a parent in prison has increased 82% since the early 1990's.<sup>viii</sup>
- ➡ One study found that 20% of children were present at the time of their parent's arrest, and over half of the children were between three and six years old.<sup>ix</sup> Witnessing the arrest of a parent intensifies the child's loss, sense of helplessness and creates additional trauma.<sup>x</sup>
- ➡ Literature suggests that parental incarceration can have profound consequences for children including: feelings of shame, grief, guilt, abandonment, and anger; social stigma; disconnection from parent; poor school performance; impaired ability to cope with future stress and trauma; potential addiction; negative perceptions of police and other authority figures.<sup>xi</sup>
- ➡ Children will typically exhibit internalizing problems (anxiety, withdrawal, hyper-vigilance, depression, shame and guilt), somatic problems such as sleep and eating disorders, and/or externalizing behaviors (anger, aggression, hostility toward caregivers and siblings).<sup>xii</sup>
- ➡ Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency, and subsequently be incarcerated themselves.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Why bring children to visit their parents in prison?

- ➡ **Research has found that facilitating contact can reduce the strain of separation and increase the likelihood of successful reunification:**
  - Visits allow children to express their emotional reactions to the separation. The more disturbed children are by the separation, the more important it is that visitation occurs.
  - Visitation helps parents to deal with separation and loss issues, increasing their ability to help their children deal with the same issues.
  - Parent-child separation can cause irrational feelings and fears in children about their parents. Visits allow children to deal with those feelings and fears, and help them to form a more realistic understanding of their parents' circumstances.
  - Visits allow parents to model appropriate interactions for children who react negatively to the separation.
  - Visits allow parents and children to maintain their existing relationships, which leads to more successful reunification after incarceration.<sup>xiv</sup>
- ➡ Contact visitation, as opposed to phone visits or non-contact visits behind glass, helps to normalize the interaction between parent and child, and benefits children emotionally and behaviorally.<sup>xv</sup>



- ➡ In addition to lowering the likelihood of recidivism among incarcerated parents, there is evidence that maintaining contact with one's incarcerated parent improves a child's emotional response to the incarceration and supports parent-child attachment.<sup>xvi</sup>

*Get On The Bus believes that facilitating child-parent visitation is a simple and cost-effective way to help children to cope with parental incarceration.*

## Works Cited

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