

Children of Incarcerated Parents Task Force

On any given day, more than 26,000 Oklahoma children have a parent in an Oklahoma prison. This number does not include children with parents jailed or imprisoned in county jails and federal correctional facilities. More than half of these children were living with their parent immediately before incarceration. With thousands of inmates entering the prison system each year, this number underrepresents the total number of children impacted in the state.

In 2011, the Oklahoma Legislature created a task force to look at the needs of children with a parent in prison. Oklahoma leads the nation in the rate of women sent to prison and is ranked fourth in the rate of male incarceration. With more than 3 percent of all children being impacted by our state's high rate of incarceration, it is key that our state understand the breadth of this issue and develop appropriate services to meet the needs of this at-risk population.

To inform our work, the Children of Incarcerated Parents Task Force gathered estimates of the number of children impacted by parental incarceration in Oklahoma. As there were already reliable estimates of the number of children with a mother in prison, the Task Force collected data from incarcerated men about their children during September, 2011. A survey was developed by the Task Force to assess the number of children with an incarcerated father. This survey resulted in an estimate of 21,482 children with a father in prison, 10,204 living with the father at the time of incarceration. According to the Oklahoma Study of Incarcerated Women 2009 report (OCCY) and the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Division of Female Offenders *Fiscal Year 2010 Annual Report* (ODOC), there were approximately 4,624 minor children in Oklahoma in 2009 that had a mother in prison, 2,430 of who lived with their mothers at the time of incarceration.

The growing number of mothers in prisons is especially significant since incarcerated mothers often are the sole support for their children, making incarceration a more disruptive change and more difficult adjustment for children and families. In addition, our research has discovered that a significant number of these children were living with their fathers prior to the fathers' incarceration. Most prisoners have never experienced positive parenting role models.

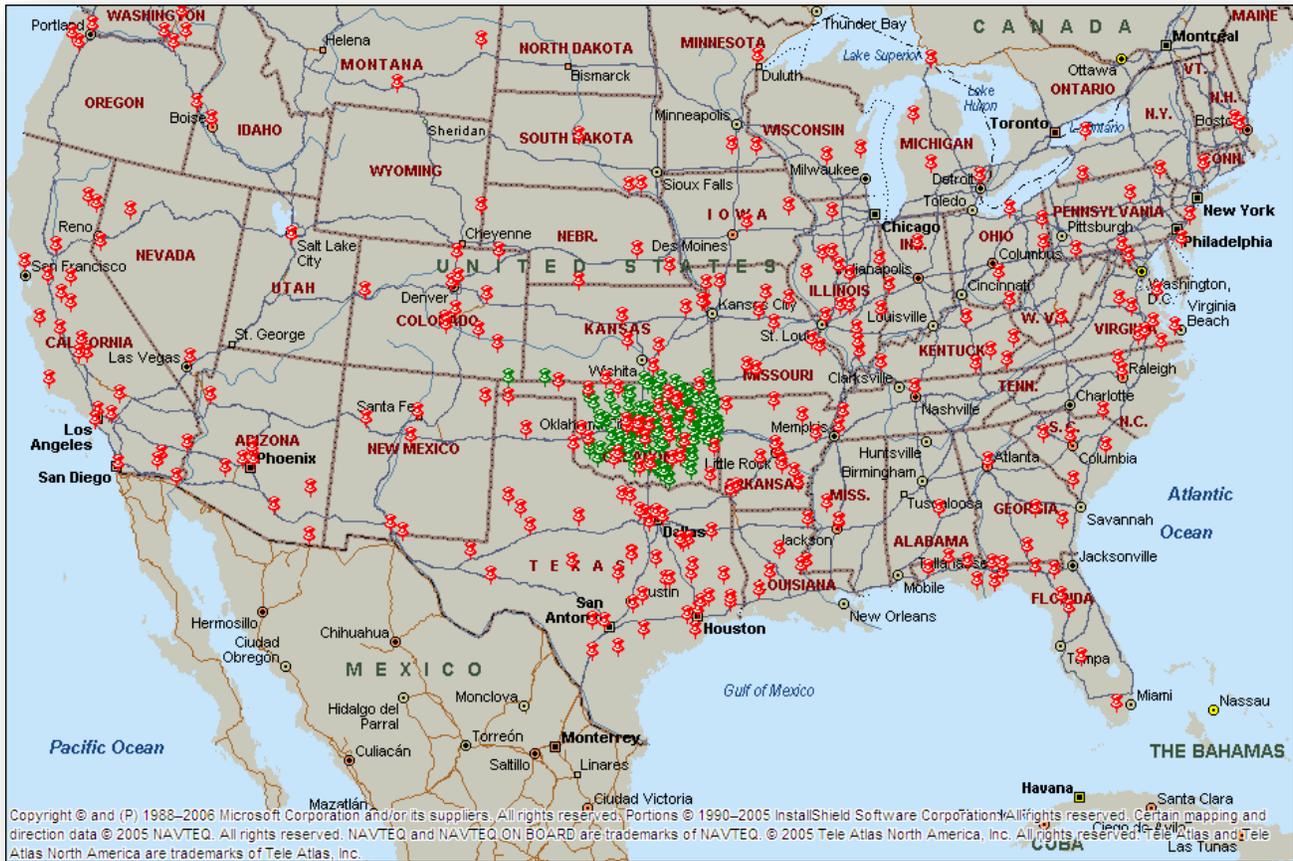
A large number of children are being adversely impacted by parental incarceration. We know from prior research that incarceration of a parent can increase the problems of children, including school challenges, attachment disorders, behavioral problems, criminal activity, physical health problems, and substance abuse.¹ (Study of Incarcerated Women and their Children, January 22, 2010)

Estimated Number of Children Impacted by Parental Incarceration in ODOC	
Total estimated minor children with incarcerated mother:	4,624
Total estimated minor children living with mother prior to incarceration:	2,430
Total estimated minor children with incarcerated father:	21,482
Total estimated minor children living with father prior to incarceration:	10,204
Total estimated number of children with incarcerated parent:	26,106

Source: (Survey of Incarcerated Fathers, 2011) It is important to note that these are cross-sectional data. The actual number of children affected each year is higher because of new receptions.

¹ Response rates in prison research are affected by a number of factors. While some non-response can be attributed to subject's refusal to participate, other factors such as discharge, movement to a different facility or being in segregated housing result in no-availability of those in the sample.

Location of Children and Incarcerated Parents



Source: (Prison Fellowship Ministries, Project Angel Tree) Location of children and incarcerated parents data. The green dots on the above map represent where the children of incarcerated parents are located. The red dots represent where their parents are incarcerated throughout the United States.

As part of the task force’s work, several groups came together in an effort to get an accurate estimate of the number of children impacted by Oklahoma’s high rates of incarceration. Many of the children of incarcerated parents live with family members as their parent’s serve out their sentences. To better provide services to children with incarcerated parents, it is important to know roughly how many children have a parent in prison.

In addition to children whose parents are incarcerated in Oklahoma, there are many Oklahoma children with a parent incarcerated in another state, increasing the scope of the problem. Prison Fellowship Ministries, Project Angel Tree is a prison fellowship program that connects parents in prison with their children. Prison Fellowship Ministries, Project Angel Tree partnered with the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth to extract and analyze data that has been collected on its inmate Christmas participation form and provided a preliminary description of the characteristics of children with incarcerated parents in Oklahoma. The distribution of incarcerated parents with minor children in Oklahoma comes from data collected by Project Angel Tree applications from 2009-2011.

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Contact between an incarcerated parent and their child is an important aspect of maintaining the relationships and can be beneficial to both parent and child when it is in the child's best interest. For the parent, regular contact with their children helps reduce the anguish that results from separation. For the child, regular contact offers reassurance that the parent is doing okay and still loves the child. (Source: Study of Incarcerated Women and Their Children, 2010)

Objective: To foster communication among children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents in order to maintain contact with their parents and to minimize the impact of the parent's incarceration on their children.

Recommendation: Support activities to maintain contact between an incarcerated parent and a minor child when it is in the best interest of the child.

- a. Facilitate a child's ability to maintain regular contact with an incarcerated parent including in-person visits, telephone conversations, and explore other technology that can increase communication.
- b. Facilitate regular in-person visits, especially with infants and toddlers, to ensure the healthy development of trust and attachment.
- c. Ensure criminal justice facilities have child-friendly visitation policies and procedures to encourage regular visitation.
- d. Develop workshops for caregivers and adults who work with children on how to give age-appropriate information to a child regarding an incarcerated parent.

Oklahoma data strongly imply that children of incarcerated parents are at-risk for negative outcomes such as drug use and criminal behaviors in adulthood. It is evident that most children with incarcerated parents are experiencing adverse events.

Study of Incarcerated Women and their Children 2009
They have at least one incarcerated parent
Most come from homes with alcohol and drug abuse
Most come from homes with mental illnesses
Many come from homes where the mother has been battered
Many are at-risk of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect

Source: (Study of Incarcerated Women and their Children 2009, Susan F. Sharp, Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, Adverse Childhood Experiences Study)



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Many parents and caregivers do not seek services for the child due to fear the child will be identified by child welfare agencies or because of the shame and stigma.

Objective: To encourage parents and caregivers to seek services for the child regardless of social stigma.

Recommendation: Eliminate any barriers preventing children of incarcerated parents from accessing quality health care.

- a. Support the activities of the Oklahoma Health Care Authority to ensure that children of incarcerated parents have access to SoonerCare or the Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).
- b. Educate caregivers about services available for important health checks (examples: eye ear, dental, mental health, etc.) and age appropriate medication.

Those who have contact with offenders and their children often lack knowledge about the unique needs of children whose parents are engaged with the criminal justice system.

Objective: To train all criminal justice professionals and individuals whose responsibility is to provide services to children when parent(s) is/are involved with the criminal justice system, either through arrest, county jail placement, or incarceration.

Recommendation: Develop a statewide training curriculum which serves to educate participants on the sweeping adverse effects that parental involvement in the criminal justice system has on children.

- a. Educate law enforcement and individuals including school personnel whose responsibility is to provide services to children of incarcerated parents and their families on the impact of incarceration on children, families and communities.

Parents who are incarcerated may lack appropriate knowledge and skills for raising children.

Objective: To improve the parent-child relationship by providing quality approved education programs.

Recommendation: Provide parent education programs (including child development) to parents to help support a healthy and strong parent-child relationship.

- a. Develop a core curriculum that is approved across agencies.

When a non-custodial parent is removed from the workforce, through arrest or incarceration, the ability to provide financial support (whether court-ordered or not) is adversely impacted. Acknowledgement of parental obligations is an important part of responsible parenting.

Objective: To provide validation of the parent-child relationship and eventually a possible avenue for financial support of the child.

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Recommendation: Provide information to incarcerated non-custodial parents on how to responsibly address financial obligations to their children while incarcerated.

- a. Provide assistance to incarcerated non-custodial parents in the completion and filing of legal materials related to child support obligations.

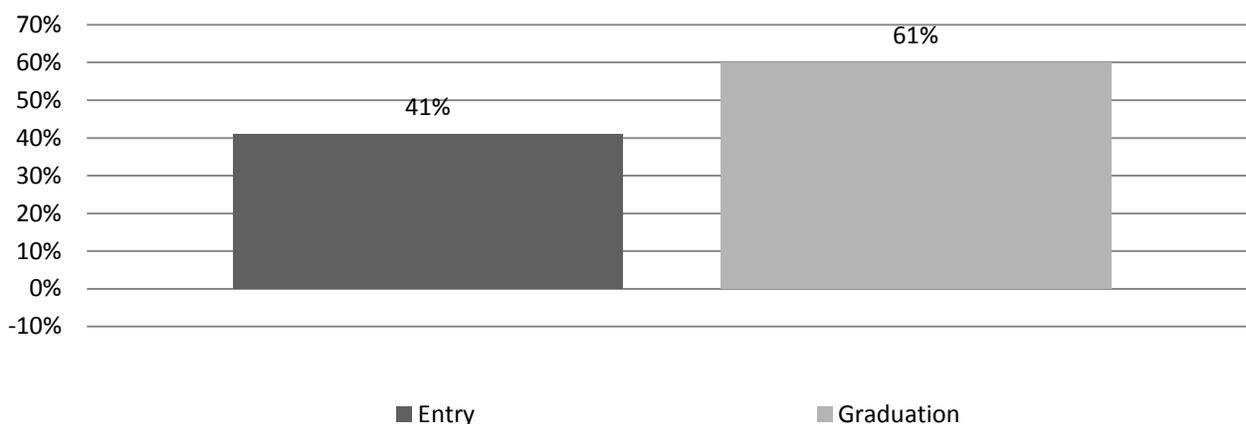
While mindful of public safety, the high rate of incarceration in Oklahoma could be reduced.

Objective: To reduce reliance on incarceration through expansion in the availability and use of programs and interventions which serve as viable alternatives to periods of incarceration. Use of alternative programs and interventions should especially be considered when imposing sentencing options for individuals who are custodial parents of minor children.

Recommendation: Expand the use of community-based sentencing options utilizing evidence-based intervention programs and services targeted to reduce criminal risk factors.

- a. Prior to considering sentencing options for any individual, a thorough assessment/evaluation should be completed to determine risk factors, substance treatment needs, and the need for mental health intervention services.
- b. Prior to imposition of a sentence on a custodial parent, the court should make inquiry, as appropriate, as to the status of minor children and determine, either through the appropriate state agency or family members, how the children will be cared for in the absence of the custodial parent.
- c. Support expanded treatment programs for custodial parents that allow for minor children to remain with the custodial parent if doing so will not adversely impact the minor child.
- d. Ensure all intervention therapies incorporate techniques to safely address trauma-related issues.
- e. Divert to community-based sanction programs for individuals who commit non-violent crimes other than drug offenses that stem from substance abuse.
- f. Remove pre-determined sanctions as a condition of entry into specific court diversion programs.
- g. Provide for a low-cost procedure for dismissal or expungement of a case, if in the interest of justice, when the individual has successfully completed a treatment or intervention program, and has otherwise met the requirements of the court.
- h. Cost savings realized by expanded use of community-based sentencing options should be invested in early intervention activities such as substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, parenting skills development, and employment training and placement.

Drug Court: Percent of Children Living with Parents at Entry and Graduation



The 2012 Smart on Crime initiative identifies how drug court is reuniting children with their parents. At entry, 40 percent of children of drug court participants were living with their parents compared to 61 percent at graduation. (Source: ODMHSAS –Creating Healthier Oklahoma Communities “Smart On Crime”)

Oklahoma lacks ongoing sources of data on the needs of incarcerated parents and their children. The scope of the problem indicates the need for continued efforts.

Objective: To help support and sustain resources which foster transformation in the lives of children of incarcerated parents through the following: support of a statewide data repository, raising public awareness, a clearinghouse for community resources, an overall better collaboration and communication among state agencies and organizations that serve this population.

Recommendation: Designate the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth as the official state agency responsible for increasing public awareness, coordinating research, creating a resource clearinghouse which identifies available services to children of incarcerated parents, and coordinating an advisory committee. This work should continue collaboratively with agencies, community and faith-based providers to better meet the needs and improve the quality of life for children of incarcerated parents.

- a. Data on the needs of children with incarcerated parents and their caregivers are not consistently collected or maintained. The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth is the planning agency in the development and implementation of the internet accessible data sharing system (JOIN) that can act as a clearinghouse and could serve as a central repository for disseminating information. The JOIN database has the potential to help with gathering data in answering key questions about children with incarcerated parents and their needs.
- b. The Commission on Children and Youth should coordinate relevant research and educational materials as needed to raise public awareness and engage in policy advocacy.

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- c. To help ensure that children and families receive the support they need, the Commission on Children and Youth should administer an advisory committee to increase collaboration and communication, improving initiatives, and tailor the strategies to reflect children of incarcerated parents needs and resources.

ANNUAL FISCAL IMPACT: \$50,000.00



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