

## What Currently or Formerly Incarcerated Parents Would Like Educators to Know About Their Children and Families

In 2006, the Washington State Legislature established the Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) to reduce opportunity gaps by supporting families, students, educators, and communities in understanding the public K-12 education system and resolving concerns collaboratively. In recent years, we have looked at how incarceration affects families, particularly students' success in school. Many classrooms have children with incarcerated parents and students might not want to tell teachers about those experiences because of stigma. Students of incarcerated parents need supports around them so that they can share their hopes and concerns. We have created this resource to dispel myths about currently and formerly incarcerated parents, as well as promote student-centered collaboration. Families affected by incarceration and educators have shared their stories.

Many of our neighbors in Washington have been or are incarcerated right now – and many of these currently or formerly incarcerated individuals are parents of school age children.

More than 37,000 people in Washington are incarcerated in state prisons, federal prisons, immigration detention centers, local jails, and juvenile facilities. That number represents 480 people per 100,000 people. More than 88,000 people in Washington are currently on probation.<sup>1</sup> According to the Washington Statewide Reentry Council, between 8,000 and 9,000 people each year reenter our communities.

Nationally, one in 28 children currently has an incarcerated parent; approximately half of the children are under ten years old.<sup>2</sup> According to the *Governor's 2016 Executive Order, 16-05, Building Safe and Strong Communities Through Successful Reentry*, approximately 50% of the 17,000 adults in Washington State prisons are parents. This number accounts only for those parents in state prisons and not those in federal prisons or local jails, or the number of reentering parents. The statistic is also lower than a legislative report that estimated that over 83% of inmates were parents with more than 29,000 dependent children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prison Policy Initiative (2019) *Washington State Profile*. Available at: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/WA.html>

<sup>2</sup> National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (2014). *Children and Families of the Incarcerated Fact Sheet*. Available at: <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/nrccfi-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/exe\\_order/eo\\_16-05.pdf](https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/exe_order/eo_16-05.pdf). These numbers may not capture the full picture. This estimate of 50% of the population being parents is lower than the numbers cited in a 2010 update report from the Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee. That report referred to a 2006 survey concluding that "15,000 of the 18,000 offenders in confinement in Washington State Department of Corrections facilities are parents . . . and those confined offender parents have approximately 29,000 dependent children." *Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee Annual Report*, January 2010.

## Incarceration is a racial justice and resources issue and therefore, it affects students of color and students living in poverty in profound ways.

Disproportionately, incarcerated people are people of color and people living in poverty. Both fathers and mothers experience these impacts; the women's prison population continues to expand.<sup>4</sup> Not only do some of our students most affected by opportunity gaps face the stress of a parent experiencing incarceration, but they might also know others in their communities who are in similar situations.

## Most incarcerated parents don't lose their rights as parents.

While the ways in which incarcerated parents can support their children varies, most parents who are incarcerated do not have their parental rights terminated automatically. While incarcerated parents are not the custodial parents during their sentence, many of them still have the right to remain in contact with their children and families. When they return home, they might resume their roles as custodial parents.

## Consistent visitation between currently incarcerated parents and their children can be challenging but many parents want to remain involved.

Parents are often placed in prisons that are not in their communities or even their regions of the state. There are many obstacles to travel, including families not having the financial resources, time, and transportation to reach prisons.<sup>5</sup> Understandably, rates of visitation decrease as more miles are put between children and parents.<sup>6</sup> However, we also know that the parent-child connection reduces rates of recidivism and removes barriers to reunification and consistency for children.

*The main issue is sometimes the relationship with the other parent is broken so cooperation to get the child on the visitation list is very difficult; also if that's the case, then finding a person that the other parent gives approval to bring the child to see you. Visits are very essential to the child's advancement in everyday life, especially in schooling where they may come in contact with friends who have both parents and start to feel a sense of abandonment. It will start to reflect in their attitude toward life. Especially in school, they just start to rebel.*

*That's why I feel visitation with the incarcerated parent is very important. . . It's a struggle because it takes support from across the board-- from the community to the institution, such as money, phone cards, visitation, and programs inside the institutions.*

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<sup>4</sup> Prison Policy Initiative (2019). *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie*. Available at: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html>

<sup>5</sup> Nationally, most prisons are not accessible by public transportation. National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (2014). *Children and Families of the Incarcerated Fact Sheet*. Available at: <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/nrccfi-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Prison Policy Initiative (2015). *Separation by Bars and Miles*. Available at: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/prisonvisits.html>

*Also, what we need is consistency.*

*I know that a lot of people have the misconception that incarcerated parents don't want anything to do with their children . . . However, there are those parents such as myself who want to break the chain of failure and incarceration and to see their seeds flourish beyond imagination.—Demeko Holland, Father*

## Parents are involved in their children's lives, despite the many barriers of incarceration, because they care, and know educators do, too.

Children experience emotional and physical trauma and therefore, adverse childhood experiences, because of the impacts of incarceration on their families.<sup>7</sup> Children have their mothers or fathers removed from their homes. They feel shame, stigma, and isolation that compound lack of access to educational and service supports. Families then confront many barriers, from financial insecurity to parental health declines. Family-school engagement can help everyone to support the whole child. Teachers help build bridges to reunification by keeping channels of communication open with parents even before they return home.<sup>8</sup>

Consider how you can connect with efforts in your district or create new relationships with prisons. For example, the Seattle Teacher Residency has forged a connection with the Black Prisoners Caucus at Monroe Correctional Complex.<sup>9</sup> Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) has a thriving infant-toddler Residential Parenting Program with the Washington Corrections Center for Women that supports incarcerated mothers while they keep their young children with them at the facility.

*I wanted nothing more than to keep my baby, raising and loving her the way she deserved. Now there I was, walking into my own room, with a crib and a desk (which I later used to write out a plan for my future). It was all I needed and my heart was full. This opportunity that I was given was pure grace. I hadn't earned it or deserved it, but yet there it was. That was the catalyst that changed the course of our lives forever.*

*We spent the next 14 months bonding and growing together, while I worked, completed drug treatment and went to school for cosmetology. R went to the Early Head Start program which was a sheer gift. It showed me how to be a mom and how to specifically attend to R's needs. I learned so much there that I still use today and even feel ahead of the game in the parenting department due to what I learned from their education and true caring nature. — Former Participant in PSESD/DOC's Residential Parenting Program*

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Corrections (2016). *Infographic: Children of Incarcerated Parents*. Available at <https://www.doc.wa.gov/docs/publications/infographics/100-PO005.htm>

<sup>8</sup> AFT (2019). *Understanding the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents: What Educators Should Know*. Available at: <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2019/turney>

<sup>9</sup> Ann Dornfield (2019). *The End of the Pipeline: Seattle Teachers Go to Prison to Get Schooled*. KUOW. Available at: <https://www.kuow.org/stories/the-other-end-of-the-pipeline-teachers-go-to-prison-to-get-schooled>

## Parent-teacher conferences are beneficial for all children and families, but especially for children impacted by incarceration.

According to Harvard's Global Family Resource Project, parent-teacher conferences are an essential component of family engagement programs.<sup>10</sup> They offer a time and space for the school and family to focus on the student's strengths and needs and develop strategies for progress and social-emotional well-being. Parent-teacher conferences are critical to building hope, maintaining connection, and collaborating with parents to share the value of education with their children.

*We have had some success with conferencing with incarcerated parents. One example is a father who was incarcerated who was allowed to schedule regular phone conferences with school staff at Lincoln to get updates on his daughter's progress at school. The student was often a participant in these phone conferences. We (the school) could also call the counselor at the facility and request a phone conference with the parent when needed, and the counselor would help set one up. We found this to be very helpful and beneficial. The student really benefited from knowing that, while her dad couldn't be physically present, he was interested in her, he supported her, and wanted to be an active part of her life. — Marci Knauft, Principal, Lincoln High School (Walla Walla)*

## Reentry and reunification aren't just about formerly incarcerated parents coming home to their children and families; success is about being welcomed home.

Parents and children who were able to maintain their bond during incarceration are both less likely to have future interactions with the courts and more likely to have better economic, health, and social outcomes than if that tie was interrupted. Research shows that community supports are critical to these successes—from mentoring programs to parenting classes, counseling to housing assistance.<sup>11</sup>

Educators can also help to reduce stigma in their schools and classrooms and promote strong family and student connections to school by encouraging children to talk about school and homework with their parents, offering a safe place to share hopes and fears, being an additional caring adult in students' and families' lives, and sharing opportunities to get involved in school.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Global Family Resource Project (2018). *Parent-Teacher Conferences: Strategies for Principals, Teachers, and Parents*. Available at: <https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Parent-Teacher-Conferences-Strategies-for-Principals-Teachers-and-Parents>

<sup>11</sup> Institute for Family Studies (2016). *The Complicated Problems of Children with Incarcerated Parents*. Available at: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-complicated-problems-of-children-with-incarcerated-parents>; Institute for Family Studies (2018). *Factors That Shape Parent-Child Reunification After a Parent is Released from Prison*. Available at: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/factors-that-shape-parent-child-reunification-after-a-parent-is-released-from-prison>

<sup>12</sup> AFT (2019). *Understanding the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents: What Educators Should Know*. Available at: <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2019/turney>

*Successful reentry and reunification of formerly incarcerated parents have to start with being able to participate in our children's school activities. Parents returning home need to have opportunities in prison to learn skills and be given tools to understand how they can help their children. This would mean there have to be programs available to them. Also, being welcomed back to community should include parents being able to continue to develop positive working relationships with their children's teachers but it starts with working on relationships while the parents are incarcerated. There are barriers to this but this will also reduce the risk of recidivism for the parent and reduce the risk for the child. I believe that teachers are on the list of caregivers, so that is an important relationship. – James Chambers, Father*

Even though parent volunteering improves school climate and academic outcomes, many formerly incarcerated parents can't volunteer in schools because of district policies. They want to make schools better and offer their skills.

Formerly incarcerated parents want to be involved in their children's schools when they return to their communities. Currently, many districts in Washington State have policies that do not allow formerly incarcerated parents to volunteer in their children's classrooms even if the basis for their prior incarceration wouldn't pose a threat to children.<sup>13</sup> Parental volunteering promotes greater student engagement and improves school climate.<sup>14</sup>

*People forget that formerly incarcerated people are parents, too. The focus should be on the children and giving them every opportunity to thrive, by supporting that family as a whole unit. When you start allowing what is just, then you start to change the culture and you start to humanize a set of people as well. Discriminatory practices only create further stigma and shame, and children shouldn't have to carry that with them. – Carolina Landa, Mother*

To hear Carolina's story, please watch this video from The Civil Survival Project:

<https://youtu.be/xuRIDK7QaEI>

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<sup>13</sup> S. Sowersby (2020). *Washington Considers Faster Pathways to Restoring Rights for Some Felons*. Crosscut. Available at: <https://crosscut.com/2020/02/washington-considers-faster-pathways-restoring-rights-some-felons>

<sup>14</sup> UCLA's National Center for Mental Health in Schools. *Volunteers Are an Important Part of a System of Student and Learning Supports*. Available at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/vols.pdf>

You aren't alone in trying to make this connection. There are many resources. Here are just a few:

- American Federation of Teachers. *Understanding the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents: What Educators Should Know (2019)*: <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2019/turney>
- National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated: <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>
- Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO): <https://oeo.wa.gov/en>
- Department of Corrections Family Services Program: <https://www.doc.wa.gov/family/program.htm>
  - Parent-teacher conference program: <https://www.doc.wa.gov/family/conferences.htm>
  - Family Services contacts by region: <https://www.doc.wa.gov/family/contact.htm#regional-liaisons>
- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction:
  - Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents: <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/access-opportunity-education/children-and-families-incarcerated-parents>
  - Institutional Education (resources for youth who are also parenting while in the juvenile rehabilitation system): <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/access-opportunity-education/institutional-education>
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services
  - Guide for Family and Friends of Those Incarcerated: <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/node/2743>
  - Washington Connection: Your Link to Services: <https://www.washingtonconnection.org/home/>
- Washington Statewide Reentry Council: <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/about-us/boards-and-commissions/statewide-reentry-council/>
- Office of the Corrections Ombuds: <https://oco.wa.gov/>
- As well as a host of community organizations, such as:
  - Black Prisoners Caucus: <https://www.facebook.com/blackprisonerscaucus>
  - Village of Hope: <https://www.thevillageofhopeseattle.org/>
  - Fabian's Fund: <https://fabiansfund.org/>
  - Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Political-Organization/APICAGAsian-Pacific-Islander-Cultural-Awareness-Group-316304565741848/>
  - Civil Survival Project: <https://civilsurvival.org/>
  - Washington Defender Association's Incarcerated Parents Project: <https://defensenet.org/case-support/incarcerated-parents-project/>
  - YWCA's Passage Point Program: <https://www.ywcaworks.org/locations/passage-point>