

Tip Sheet for Providers: Supporting Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

www.YOUTH.gov/COIP

This tip sheet was written by youth who have or have had incarcerated parents for service providers who work with them or may interact with them. The purpose is to provide practical advice for how to help the 2.7 million children and youth who have at least one incarcerated parent.

In June 2016, the federal government hosted a listening session with youth from across the country who have or have had an incarcerated parent. The listening session brought together 19 youth, ages 15 to 23, with a diverse range of experiences to discuss the challenges they had during their parent's incarceration and their ideas for how the government could better support them and their families. This tip sheet is a product of that listening session.



"[The program I am in] helped me a lot in realizing my needs and getting support."

-male, 23, NYC

From the youth: What you should know.

- We rely on our own inner strength
- We often grow up too soon taking on responsibilities:
 - Taking care of younger siblings
 - Getting jobs to help with family finances
 - Negotiating services such as healthcare and mental health
 - Navigating systems and avoiding negative attention from Child Welfare or Human Services who might take us or our siblings away
- We love our parents, even though they have made mistakes. We miss them during:
 - Big events like having the parent there for holidays and graduation
 - Small activities like having the parent there to help with homework and going to our sporting event
 - Everyday opportunities for having parent as a role model
- We are misjudged by many and negatively judged because of our parent(s) or our parent's actions
- We are sometimes told we will turn out like our parent(s) and we are constantly fighting against and running from that judgement
- We have different experiences than other youth whose parent is absent for another reason like divorce:
 - Not being able to pick up the phone and talk to our parent any time we want
 - Not being able to hug our parent during a visit
 - Being judged differently and feeling shame and stigma because of those judgments

WHO CAN USE THIS TIP SHEET?

This tip sheet was developed for service providers, who may be staff at youth serving organizations, including community-based and faith-based; advocacy agencies; or state and local government agencies such as departments of labor, housing, corrections, and education.

- We have different experiences even from each other:
 - Living arrangements before the incarceration
 - Relationship status with our parent before the incarceration
 - Being told the truth or lies about the incarceration
 - Involvement with child welfare during the incarceration
 - Changes in financial stability during the incarceration
- We are not different from other youth in that we are young people, too, with the same needs and wants:
 - To be loved
 - To have support
 - To be successful
 - To have friends
- We do not have control over the situation, which is difficult:
 - We don't know what to expect with the incarceration process or when visiting our parent in a facility
 - We don't know with any certainty when we will be able to talk to or see our parent again



For more information about strategies and recommendations from youth, visit:

www.youth.gov/COIP-Listening-Session-Report

From the youth: Changes we would like to see.

- **Increased opportunities to visit.** Our parents are often incarcerated in facilities that are far away. Whenever safe and appropriate we would like for courts and correctional agencies to place our incarcerated parents in facilities closer to family. If that's not possible, courts, corrections, and community-based organizations could consider providing additional transportation assistance to make visitation easier.
- **More frequent and less expensive opportunities to communicate.** The cost of phone calls from prison can be too expensive, making it difficult, or even impossible, for us to communicate with our parents. Corrections could consider reducing these costs and allowing for longer calls. Organizations serving youth could consider ways to help pay for or share the costs of calls, which would allow us to talk to our parents more often.
- **Better communication between corrections and schools.** We would like our parents to have the opportunity to participate in parent-teacher conferences. Corrections and courts should consider allowing flexibility for our parents to participate by phone or video technology, which the schools could help coordinate. Additionally, we often receive unexcused absences from school for going to visit our parents during the school day, even when we do not have other options. Schools could consider providing excused absences, and corrections could consider providing proof of visitation.
- **Improved sharing of information about our parents.** During the arrest, pretrial, trial, incarceration, and reentry processes, our parents are frequently moved around without letting us know. Courts, corrections, and probation should consider ways to ensure that we and our families have the most up to date information possible on the location of our parents.

“Even though the anger of being a child with an incarcerated parent is painful, we have the power to give back to the communities affected by this issue that shaped us... [We can use our stories] to shape the narrative... [We can use our stories] as a powerful tool in affecting change.”

-female, 23, Austin, TX

- **Better understanding about the impact of mandatory reporting rules.** We frequently choose not to share personal details about our parents or our lives with people or organizations who we fear will report that information to child welfare. Youth serving organizations should be aware of our hesitations and find safe, comfortable ways for us to share what is happening in our lives.
- **Friendlier interactions when visiting.** We often feel like we are the ones who have done something wrong when we go to visit our incarcerated parents. Most prisons have strict rules about who can visit, the number of visitors, what we can bring, what we can wear, etc. These rules can be unclear, cause our families stress, and sometimes even result in a cancelled visit. Youth serving organizations can help us understand the rules and prepare for our visit. Corrections can make the rules easier to find and provide training for staff that reminds them that family visits are supposed to be a positive experience for all.

“We are not a statistic!”

-female, 22, Little Rock, AR