

FACT SHEET: LEGISLATIVE STUDY UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF THE INCARCERATED SENATOR DAVID JOHNSON

SUMMARY

As of 2008 there were approximately **2.5 million incarcerated adults in the U.S.** and an estimated **7 million children** with a parent incarcerated or under some form of correctional supervision. As of 2011 there were a total of **16,012 inmates in Arkansas prisons** and an estimated **21,439 children** with an incarcerated parent.

Over the last 15 years federal and state governments have expanded and lengthened criminal sentences, particularly for drug offenses, incarcerating an increasing number of adults. Families impacted by incarceration are predominantly low-income minorities, and their poverty most often deepens after their release. An unintended consequence of this rapid increase in adult incarceration has been the **growing number of children whose parents are, or have been, incarcerated.**

THE PROBLEM

When parents are incarcerated their children become unintended victims. The **trauma of an arrest** and the resulting **parent-child separation** can have a profound effect on a child's development, lasting well into adulthood. According to the Center for Disease Control, **having an incarcerated parent is considered an "adverse childhood experience"**, contributing to long-term negative health outcomes. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to suffer from problems such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, social withdrawal and attention problems. Placement in foster care can compound these problems without the comfort of a familiar caregiver and the hope of maintaining contact with their parent.

Although this is an identified at-risk population, **there is work to be done in Arkansas to mitigate the impact of having an incarcerated parent.** The state's institutions designed to protect and serve children must have clear policies to respond to the

special circumstances and issues raised by incarcerated parents and their children.

THE SOLUTION

The goal of this study is to ensure that all children of incarcerated parents are **identified and accessing services** that will improve their outcomes in life. A **collaboration** of state agencies and other organizations led by the Interim Senate Committee on State Agencies and Government Affairs or appointed committee, will seek to **recognize and understand the special needs of children with parents involved in the criminal justice system**, and inform the **development of policies and procedures** that will **minimize trauma and improve outcomes** for the children and their families. The study seeks to achieve the following objectives to accomplish this goal:

- 1) **Collaborators will review and discuss the Bill of Rights for Children with Incarcerated Parents**, a California bill which has served as a framework for many states in developing policies and procedures to decrease trauma and improve outcomes for children and families.
- 2) **Collaborators will gather data** including: the number of children with incarcerated or parolee parents, ages of the children, current caregiver status, where they cluster by county, what support services they currently receive, and what services they are not currently receiving but might be eligible for.
- 3) **Collaborators will examine agency policies and procedures** that impact children of incarceration.
- 4) **Collaborators will make recommendations** to improve outcomes for children and their families.

PROPOSED COLLABORATORS

Departments of: Corrections, Education, Health, Human Services, Justice, and Workforce Development.