

# Correlating Incarcerated Mothers, Foster Care and Mother-Child Reunification

By Marilyn C. Moses

**Author's note:** *Points of view expressed in this article do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

**I**s a mother's incarceration directly responsible for her child's placement in foster care, and how likely is a mother to be reunited with her child? Interim findings from an ongoing NIJ-funded study<sup>1</sup> revealed surprising answers: most incarcerated mothers lost their children to foster care prior to incarceration and most are very unlikely to be reunited with their children.

The study, which was jointly funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the Open Society Institute, The Chicago Community Trust and the Russell Sage Foundation, was awarded to researchers at the Universities of California and Chicago. The researchers focused on mothers who were incarcerated in Illinois State prisons and the Cook County Jail in Chicago from 1990 to 2000<sup>2</sup> to examine the relationship between a mother's imprisonment and the probability that her child would be placed in foster care. They also studied the children's foster care placement outcomes (see Figure 1).

## Which Came First?

Researchers found that 27 percent of the incarcerated mothers had a child who had been placed in foster care at some point during the child's life. Surprisingly, researchers found that in most cases the mother's incarceration was not the reason the child was placed in foster care. In almost

three-quarters of the cases, the child was placed in foster care prior to his or her mother's first incarceration. And in more than 40 percent of those cases, the child entered foster care as many as three years before his or her mother went to jail.

This finding contradicts a widely held assumption that children are placed in foster care as a direct result of their mothers' incarceration. The early findings indicate that a child's foster care status is rarely a direct result of a mother's imprisonment.

## Likelihood of Mother-Child Reunification

Researchers also compared the outcomes for the children of these incarcerated mothers with outcomes for all children in foster care. Figure 1 shows that other children in foster care are twice as likely to reunite with their parents as children of incarcerated mothers in foster care. Additionally, children of imprisoned mothers are more likely to be adopted than all children in foster care. This could be for a number of reasons, but mostly because many of the children are placed in kinship/foster care, where they are taken care of by other relatives who adopt them.

Perhaps most notable is that children of incarcerated mothers were four times more likely to be "still in" foster care than all other children (see Figure 1). These children linger in foster care until they are 18 when they "age out" of the system; they do not reunify with their parents, get adopted, enter into subsidized guardianship, go into independent

living or leave through some other means. Moreover, another recent study has found that children who "age out" have a high probability of ending up incarcerated as adults, regardless of whether their parents were incarcerated or not.<sup>3</sup>

## Getting The Research Right

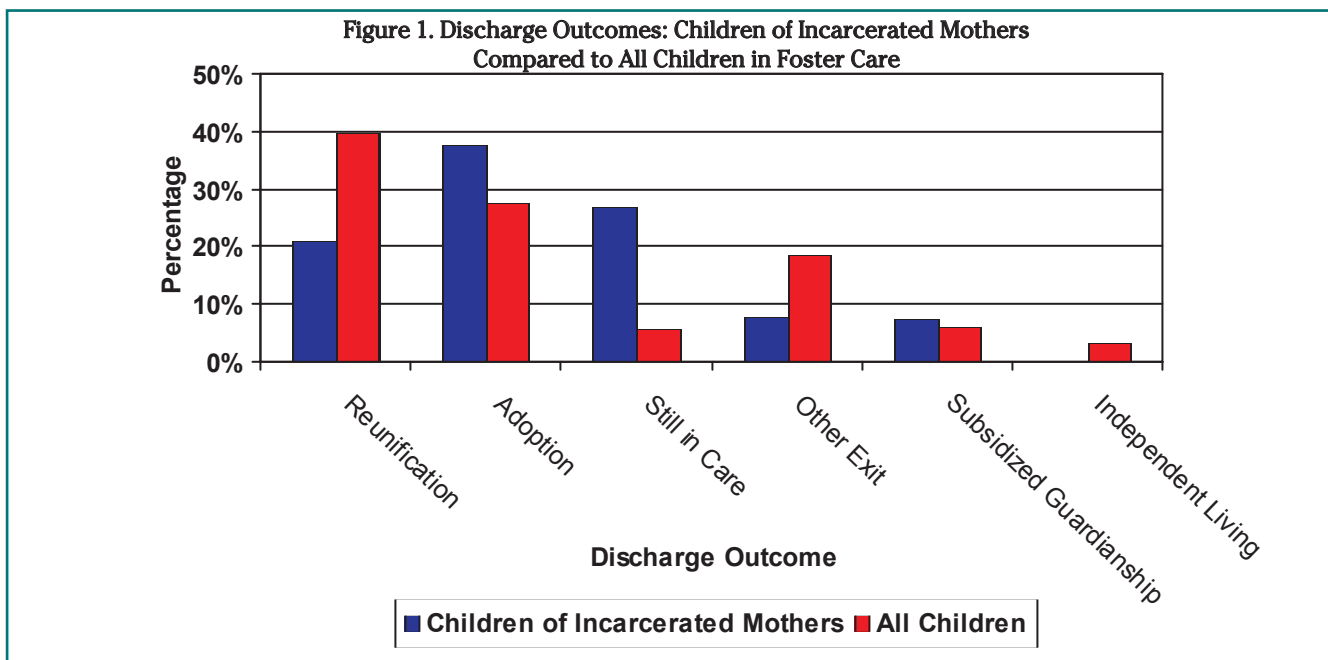
The interim findings from the study represent a significant step forward in the development of knowledge regarding incarcerated parents and their children. Until now, no study of this magnitude focused exclusively on the status of children of incarcerated parents. Instead, researchers had focused primarily on the incarcerated parent; data on children and their custody status were incidental to that inquiry.

Previously, several other factors also impeded research on these children: small sample sizes; reluctance of incarcerated parents, family members, and caregivers to provide information that might disrupt formal or informal custody arrangements; reliance on self-report; and insufficient funding and resources to locate and track children over time.

## NIJ Builds on Prior Research

The interim findings from this study are the latest in NIJ's 15-year history of work in this area. In 1992 the field asked NIJ to provide a practical research-to-practice solution to address the needs of these at-risk

**Until now, no study of this magnitude focused exclusively on the status of children of incarcerated parents.**



children, their imprisoned parents, and the lack of visitation between parent and child. NIJ responded by creating a first-of-its-kind partnership between an adult correctional institution and a major youth service organization — the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars<sup>4</sup> program — and tested its feasibility. This program has since been replicated in more than 20 states and 40 correctional institutions across the country and has won several national awards. Recently, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS or public television) aired a nationally televised documentary on this program, and it was also recently replicated by a boys' youth service organization.<sup>5</sup>

Since the early 1990s, NIJ has conducted research on female offenders, reentry and family reunification efforts. One publication resulting from this effort was the NIJ Program Focus, *Women's Prison Association: Supporting Women Offenders and Their Families*.<sup>6</sup> This effort was followed in the late 1990s by two studies on incarcerated fathers and their children. The first examined the attitudes and perceptions of incarcerated men toward child care and raising children.<sup>7</sup> The second study was a three-year ethnographic examination of the effects of male incarceration on families in the District of Columbia.<sup>8</sup>

While significant, NIJ's research efforts were generally frustrated by the same barriers that had stymied others — small sample sizes, reliance on self-report, and the lack of funding and resources for a long-range study

of such children. The researchers at the universities of California and Chicago have the potential to push the field forward in building knowledge in this evolving discipline. The study's reliance on large administrative datasets provides objective and verifiable data on very large samples of incarcerated mothers and their children over a decade. It offers the opportunity to shed light on a population about which we have had many speculations, but, until now, very little reliable data.

**... while there are more children affected by a father's incarceration due to the overwhelming majority of men in prison, a child's stability appears to be most threatened by a mother's incarceration.**

## What Is Next?

Researchers from the universities of Chicago and California will continue to examine other questions posed by the relationship between child welfare and parental incarceration, such as:

- Do families in which the mother is incarcerated before the child is placed in foster care differ from families in which the child is removed before the parent is incarcerated?
- What effect does the mother's incarceration have on termination of parental rights?
- What is the relationship between the offense that resulted in the mother's incarceration and the types of child maltreatment that prompted child welfare services to intervene?
- What are the similarities and differences between the mother's type of incarceration (jail or prison) and the child welfare issues?

The researchers hope that answers to these questions will illuminate the crossroads of the foster care and criminal justice systems and provide information that will have important implications for both practitioners and policy-makers. As well noted in the field, while there are more children affected by a father's incarceration due to the overwhelming majority of men in

prison, a child's stability appears to be most threatened by a mother's incarceration.<sup>9</sup> Thus, future findings could guide efforts to develop crime prevention and family reunification strategies — especially for mother and child — and create other effective collaborative efforts between the corrections and child welfare systems.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>National Institute of Justice. Ongoing Study, Intersections of Prisons and Child Welfare: Findings From One State Using Administrative Data. October 2006-December 2006.

<sup>2</sup>Researchers looked at 52,883 incarcerated or formerly incarcerated mothers and 124,626 of their children to determine that 7,281 incarcerated or formerly incarcerated mothers had 21,533 children that, at some point in time, went into foster care.

<sup>3</sup>Courtney, M.E., S. Terao, and N.Bost. 2004. Midwest evaluations of the adult functioning of former youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care in Illinois. Chicago. Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

<sup>4</sup>Originally known as Girl Scouts Behind Bars. See Moses, Marilyn. 1995. Keeping incarcerated mothers and their daughters together: Girl Scouts beyond bars. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. Available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/girlsct.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/girlsct.pdf). See also: Moses, Marilyn C. 1995. Synergistic solution for children of incarcerated parents: Girl Scouts beyond bars. *Corrections Today*, 57(7):124-126.

<sup>5</sup>Stripling, Sherry. 2005. New Boy Scout program takes boys behind bars — to see mom. *The Seattle Times*, p.L1. (May 8).

<sup>6</sup>Conly, Catherine. 1998. Women's prison association: Supporting women offenders and their families. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. Available at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/172858.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/172858.htm).

<sup>7</sup>Mendez, Garry. 2001. Incarcerated men and their children: Study report. Final report available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/189789.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/189789.pdf).

<sup>8</sup>Braman, Donald. 2003. Families and incarceration. Final report available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/202981.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/202981.pdf). This report was later pub-

lished as a book: Braman, Donald. 2004. *Doing Time on the Outside*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>9</sup>Mumula, Christopher J. 2000. Incarcerated parents and their children. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

---

*Marilyn C. Moses is a social science analyst in NIJ's Office of Research and Evaluation. For more information, contact her at (202) 514-6205 or [marilyn.moses@usdoj.gov](mailto:marilyn.moses@usdoj.gov).*

*Reprinted with permission of the American Correctional Association, Corrections Today, October 2006. All rights reserved.*