As the rate at which adults are being incarcerated in the United States escalates, child welfare professionals are encountering growing numbers of children who have parents in prison. Current estimates indicate that as many as 1.5 million children have an incarcerated parent; many thousands of others have experienced the incarceration of a parent at some point in their lives. These vulnerable children face unique difficulties, and their growing numbers and special needs demand attention. Challenges facing the child welfare system as it attempts to work with this population are explored.
An estimated 200,000 children in this country have an imprisoned mother and more than 1.6 million have an imprisoned father. With the nation’s incarcerated population growing by an average of 6.5% each year [Gilliard & Beck 1998], the number of children with parents in prison will likely continue to increase. Parental incarceration—and the crimes and arrests that precede it—cause chaos in the lives of these children, including traumatic separations and erratic shifts from one caregiver to another. Most children with incarcerated parents live in poverty before, during, and after their parents’ incarceration [Johnston 1995a].

The increasing incarceration rate for adult women is particularly foreboding because incarcerated women are often the sole caregivers of their children. Since 1985, the number of women in prison has almost tripled [U.S. Dept. of Justice 1997]. On any given day, more than 100,000 women are being held in this country’s jails and prisons [Gilliard & Beck 1998; U.S. Dept. of Justice 1997]. Six percent of women entering prison are pregnant [Beck et al. 1992].

The Scope of the Problem

Although the number of children affected by parental incarceration can be estimated, the true scope of the problem is uncertain because few reliable statistics exist. For the most part, law enforcement does not gather information about the children of arrested adults and correctional institutions do not ask prisoners for specific information about their children. Because there is no specific agency or system charged with collecting data about this population, it is unclear how many children are affected, who they are, or where they live.

In fulfilling its mission to protect vulnerable children and promote family stability, the child welfare system has been and will continue to be significantly affected by the increasing num-
ber of children with incarcerated parents. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ 1994 National Study of Protective, Preventive and Reunification Services Delivered to Children and Their Families [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau 1997] identified “incarceration” as the presenting problem of the primary caregiver in 4% of the cases of children and families who received child welfare services in 1994. Studies suggest that 8-10% of the children of female prisoners and 1-2% of the children of male prisoners are in some form of out-of-home care [Beck et al. 1992; Beckerman 1994; Bloom & Steinhart 1993; Johnston 1995d; Snell 1994]. Many more children with incarcerated parents likely have intermittent contact with the child welfare system.

Although case workers presumably know on a case-by-case basis when children have parents in prison, a 1997 Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) survey of state child welfare agencies confirmed that most state information systems do not capture data about parental incarceration in a way that permits analysis of the information on a systemwide basis [Child Welfare League of America 1998]. In the CWLA survey, only 21% of the 38 responding states indicated that their systems capture this information at the intake and assessment phase. Of these states, several clarified that their systems capture the information only under certain circumstances such as when the parent’s incarceration is the primary reason for the placement.

Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

Much of the research on children with incarcerated parents has been methodologically limited. Many of the studies used relatively small samples and inadequate comparison groups [Gabel 1992; Gaudin & Sutphen 1993]. There have been no longitudinal studies following children through different phases of parental incarceration and release [Gabel 1992]. Few studies have em-
ployed standardized assessments of children and almost no re-
search has been conducted through direct contact with children
[Johnston 1995c; Gabel 1992]. Instead, much of the existing re-
search has relied upon self-reporting by incarcerated parents or
caregivers [Gabel 1992; Gaudin & Sutphen 1993; Johnston 1995c].

The existing literature, though scarce, does indicate that chil-
dren whose parents are incarcerated experience a variety of nega-
tive consequences, particularly in terms of their emotional health
and well-being; contact with their parents; and physical care and
custody [Johnston 1995a, 1995c]. The extent to which a child will
be affected by parental incarceration depends on a large number
of variables, including the age at which the parent-child separa-
tion occurs, length of the separation, health of the family, disrup-
tiveness of the incarceration, child’s familiarity with the place-
ment or new caregiver, strength of the parent-child relationship,
number and result of previous separation experiences, nature of
the parent’s crime, length of the parent’s sentence, availability of
family or community support, and degree of stigma that the com-
community associates with incarceration [Gaudin & Sutphen 1993;
The Osborne Association 1993].

Emotional and Behavioral Consequences

Most children with incarcerated parents experience a broad range
of emotions, including fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness,
and guilt [The Osborne Association 1993]. They may exhibit low
self-esteem, depression, and emotional withdrawal from friends
and family [The Osborne Association 1993]. They may also begin
to act out inappropriately, become disruptive in the classroom,
or engage in other antisocial behaviors [Gabel 1992]. Often, their
academic performance deteriorates and they develop other
school-related difficulties [Gabel 1992]. These emotional and be-
behavioral difficulties have been linked to a variety of factors, in-
cluding the stress of parent-child separation, the child’s identifi-
cation with the incarcerated parent, social stigma, and attempts
to deceive children about their parents’ incarceration [Gabel 1992].
The extent to which these difficulties are tied to factors apart from the incarceration itself—such as poor parenting or the criminal behavior of the parent—has not yet been explored.

**Lack of Contact**

Approximately one-half of incarcerated parents do not receive any visits from their children; the others receive only infrequent visits [Snell 1994]. Inhibiting visits are such factors as the geographical location of many prisons, the family’s inability to afford transportation, the unwillingness of caregivers to facilitate visits, visiting rooms that are inhospitable to children, and parents’ reluctance to have contact [Bloom 1995]. Maintaining contact through phone calls and letters is somewhat more common [Snell 1994]—but these forms of communication are limited by a family’s ability to afford expensive collect phone calls and by the literacy level of the parent, child, and caregiver.

**Physical Care and Custody**

Children whose mothers are incarcerated often experience disrupted and multiple placements. Approximately half of children whose mothers are incarcerated live with grandparents, one-quarter live with their fathers, and the remaining one-quarter are placed in out-of-home care or live with other relatives or friends in informal placements [Snell 1994]. These children are often separated from their siblings and may experience erratic shifts in caregivers [Johnston 1995a]. Their new caregivers tend to have low incomes and may lack the social supports and other resources necessary to meet the children’s complex needs [Bloom & Steinhart 1993; Dressel & Barnhill 1994].

**Parental Incarceration and Child Abuse and Neglect**

Parental incarceration may be a risk factor for child abuse and neglect [Gabel 1992]. Prior to a incarceration, a parent’s criminal justice involvement may be symptomatic of family problems or issues that prevent the parent from providing appropriate care.
During a parent’s incarceration, children may be at risk if placed with caregivers who are unwilling or unable to provide appropriate care. When a parent is released, the stresses associated with community and family reintegration may also increase the risk of abuse or neglect [Hairston & Lockett 1985].

Children in the Child Welfare System Whose Parents are Incarcerated

Given the general scarcity of information regarding children whose parents are incarcerated, it is not surprising that little is known about children in the child welfare system who have parents in prison. In several ways, children with incarcerated or criminal justice-involved parents are quite similar to the rest of the child welfare population: (1) their families struggle with an array of complex problems, including poverty, domestic violence, inadequate housing, lack of education, and difficulties with interpersonal relationships; (2) children of color are disproportionately affected; and (3) parental substance abuse plays a large role in many of their lives.

It is tempting to characterize these children as no more or less vulnerable than other children receiving child welfare services, but they are different in ways that make them and their families a challenging population to serve. At a minimum, children in out-of-home care with parents in prison have unique permanency planning needs because the length of the parent-child separation cannot be shortened or affected by the parent’s completion of a service plan or demonstrated ability to care for the child. These children may also have unique therapeutic needs resulting from the criminal behaviors exhibited by their parents prior to incarceration, the trauma of parent-child separation, or the significant stigma associated with incarceration. In addition, these children have unique casework needs because the structure of the criminal justice system makes it difficult for parents, children, caregiv-
ers, and case workers to maintain contact with one another and to plan for the child’s future.  

Due to the scarcity of reliable data, the child welfare community lacks critical pieces of information about how children are affected by their parents’ incarceration and what services and attention they need to increase their overall well-being. It is not known when or why these children come into care—as a result of abuse or neglect prior to the parent’s incarceration, as a direct result of the primary caregiving parent’s arrest, or as a result of inadequate caregiving arrangements during a parent’s incarceration. It is unclear to what extent the problems experienced by these children are attributable to the incarceration itself—and the resultant parent-child separation—or are more closely tied to factors such as poverty, parents’ criminal behaviors, and/or inability to provide appropriate parenting prior to incarceration. Little is known about the effectiveness of child welfare interventions, outcomes of child welfare services, or whether these families reunify successfully after the incarcerated parent is released. There are also questions concerning the quality of care for children during their parents’ incarceration.

The Current State of Child Welfare Policy and Practice

Although child welfare case workers are seeing increasing numbers of children with parents in prison, few child welfare policies and procedures have been developed. Smith and Elstein [1994] focused on collaboration among law enforcement, child protection, foster care, and correctional services when a primary caregiver is arrested and incarcerated. They contacted 500 child welfare, law enforcement, and correctional officials in 100 counties across the country. Although more than half of the child protective services sample reported increased requests in recent years for help in placing children whose parents had been arrested, 80% acknowledged that there were no specific policies in place for
responding to these requests. Similarly, more than half of the foster care administrators reported an increase in the number of children of incarcerated mothers needing placement in family foster homes, but 97% reported that their agencies had no specific policies in place to guide their work with these children.

CWLA's 1997 survey of state child welfare agencies [Child Welfare League of America 1998] confirms that while certain state and local agencies have begun to focus on children with incarcerated parents, few child welfare agencies have enacted policies or developed programs that specifically address their needs. Only six of the 38 responding states reported having policies that focus specifically on children with incarcerated parents.

Twenty-eight states provided information about programs and services available to children with parents in prison. Most indicated that they facilitate visits between incarcerated parents and their children. Twelve states assist parents with prerelease planning; four states provide support groups for children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers; one state offers counseling services for children; and one state works with prison social workers to provide coordinated services for children and parents. Ten states collaborate with other organizations to provide services to children with incarcerated parents.

Only two of the 38 states responding provide their staff with specific training regarding the needs of children with incarcerated parents and only one of these has developed a formal training curriculum.

Shared Interests: Child Welfare's Interface with the Criminal Justice and Prisoner Advocacy Communities

As the child welfare and criminal justice systems increasingly encounter many of the same families, identification of shared interests and collaboration among the different stakeholders becomes imperative.
Child Welfare and the Criminal Justice Community

The child welfare and criminal justice systems have a shared interest in maximizing opportunities for families involved with both systems. If both systems collaborate effectively, the period of incarceration can actually provide an opportunity for positive intervention with families at risk [Women’s Prison Association 1996]. Just as incarceration is a symptom of more complex family problems, it also provides an opportunity for assessment of at-risk children and families, identification of broader family issues, and comprehensive intervention. Both systems have a stake in collaboration because effective intervention with incarcerated parents may decrease the likelihood that the parent will reoffend and improve the chances that children will be reunited safely with their parents or find permanency with other families in a timely manner.

Child Welfare and the Prisoner Advocacy Community

The child welfare and prisoner advocacy communities have a shared interest in supporting children and families affected by incarceration. For many years, advocates for prisoners and their families have worked hard to raise awareness about the issue of parental incarceration and to advocate for services directed toward children and families of prisoners. This community’s work has focused most intently on the trauma of parent-child separation, the need for parent-child contact, and the threat of termination of parental rights. Although prisoner advocates have long sought to engage the child welfare community concerning parental incarceration, the discussion has seemed to be limited to facilitating visits and working effectively with parents in prison. The child welfare community may have more to offer by contributing to the dialogue its expertise in caring for children who are separated from their parents and its understanding of the need that children have for a permanent family.
Challenges for the Future

The increasing rate of parental incarceration poses a unique challenge—and raises many questions—for the child welfare system. To meet this challenge—and best serve the needs of these children and families—the field should consider creating a comprehensive strategy that includes developing and promoting a research agenda; identifying and addressing the therapeutic needs of children with incarcerated parents; clarifying the role of child protective services; promoting the accessibility of family preservation and support services; developing better methods for facilitating visits and other parent-child contact; enhancing work with children, parents, and caregivers; identifying and addressing the special permanency planning needs of this population; and developing methods for collaboration with the criminal justice system.

Developing and Promoting a Research Agenda

To fully understand the needs of children with incarcerated parents, the child welfare community will need to promote and undertake quantitative and qualitative research on the effect of parental incarceration on children. Ideally, this research will include sufficient sample size, employ adequate comparison groups, gather information directly from children, and follow subjects for a substantial length of time. Important questions to explore include:

- How many children in care have incarcerated parents? Criminal justice-involved parents? How many children are already in care before a parent’s arrest? Why did those children come into care? How many come into care because of parental incarceration? With whom do these children live? To what extent is parental incarceration a risk factor for child abuse and neglect?
- To what extent does parent-child separation resulting from
incarceration harm children? To what extent do children find more stability when parents are incarcerated? Are children stigmatized by parental incarceration or has the experience of incarceration been normalized in our society?

- What are the life experiences of children with parents in prison? How does a child's experience of parental incarceration vary with age and developmental level? How does visiting parents in prison affect children?

- What are the permanency outcomes for children with parents in prison? What percentages are reunited with parents, placed permanently with relatives, freed for adoption, or age out of the foster care system? Are children who have been reunited with formerly incarcerated parents safe and well? Do children who are not reunited with parents find stability and permanent families? Can children find permanency with other families and still maintain connections with incarcerated parents? What is the relationship between permanency outcomes and factors such as length of incarceration, number of times a parent is incarcerated, and reasons for the incarceration? Do outcomes differ for children with incarcerated mothers and children with incarcerated fathers? How?

- What child welfare interventions are successful?

- Are programs that keep criminal justice-involved parents and their children together (e.g., prison nurseries, alternatives to incarceration, halfway houses, residential drug treatment facilities) good for children?

**Addressing the Therapeutic Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents**

How do the therapeutic needs of children with incarcerated parents differ from the needs of the rest of the child welfare population? If children are traumatized by a parent's criminal behavior, arrest, or resultant incarceration, what are appropriate therapeu-
tic interventions? What interventions work well with young children? School-age children? Adolescents? How can child welfare professionals help children cope with the stigma of parental incarceration? How can child welfare professionals address the special needs of these children without further stigmatizing them?

**Clarifying the Role of Child Protective Services**

Some experts argue that children become inherently vulnerable when a parent is arrested or incarcerated and that child protective services (CPS) should have an automatic, formalized role in evaluating placement decisions. Others argue that arrested parents should be entitled to make caregiving decisions for their children and that extensive CPS involvement will result in unnecessary placements into out-of-home care.

When a parent is arrested or detained, what role should child protective services play? How can law enforcement and CPS work together most effectively to ensure the safety of children whose parents are arrested or detained? Can community-based organizations play a role by offering voluntary services that support child and family well-being? How can community-based interventions be made more available and accessible?

**Promoting Family Preservation and Support Services**

A large population of children who may not be known to the child welfare system may be at risk of abuse or neglect because of their parents’ criminal behavior and/or incarceration. For those children who are living with parents who are involved with the criminal justice system, family preservation services may help stabilize the family. During a parent’s incarceration, children living with caregivers who are overwhelmed or lack resources to meet their needs may benefit from accessing voluntary family support services. Family support services may also help parents who have been released from prison and who are seeking to re-unify with their children.
How can preventative services be made more available to families affected by criminal behavior or incarceration? Is there a way to provide family preservation services to families when parents are sentenced to an alternative to incarceration programs? What is the best way to make family support services more accessible to kinship families caring for children with incarcerated parents? What role can community-based organizations play in providing preventative or supportive services?

**Facilitating Visits and Other Forms of Contact**

Child welfare workers are legally mandated to facilitate parent-child visits when such visits are not detrimental to the child. Visiting can decrease the stress of separation, enable children to maintain relationships with parents, and increase the likelihood of successful reunification. Facilitating visits between children and parents in prison, though, can be difficult. Case workers have identified a number of obstacles to visiting, including inadequate information about visiting procedures, lack of cooperation from departments of correction, difficulties in scheduling visits, the time-consuming nature of visits, visiting procedures that are uncomfortable or humiliating, concern about children’s reactions to visits, and parents, foster parents, or kinship caregivers who are resistant to visits [Women’s Prison Association 1996].

Given the extent to which child welfare agencies must manage high caseloads with limited resources, what procedures can help workers facilitate parent-child visits when a parent is in prison? How can workers help children and families keep in touch when parents are incarcerated at facilities far from where the children reside? When parents are incarcerated in facilities that are not hospitable to children? When caregivers are reluctant to facilitate visits? When incarcerated parents or their children express an unwillingness to visit? Is there a role for community-based organizations in facilitating visits and other forms of parent-child contact?
Working with Children, Incarcerated Parents, and Caregivers

Working with Children. With little information and few resources available, what guidance can be given to child welfare professionals working with children who have parents in prison? How should workers explain parental incarceration to young children? How can workers prepare children for prison visits? How can workers help children and caregivers cope when children return from visits? What are the issues surrounding parental incarceration for infants? For small children? For school-age children? For adolescents? For young adults? How can workers help older children sustain relationships with parents who are incarcerated for long periods of time? Is it possible for infants and small children to develop meaningful relationships with parents who are incarcerated for long periods of time? What is the best way to identify and address behavioral issues resulting from a child’s experience of a parent’s criminal lifestyle or subsequent incarceration?

Working with Incarcerated Parents. Incarcerated parents who hope to reunify with their children must be able to complete their service plans and maintain meaningful contact with their children while they are in prison. For many incarcerated parents, case workers are their only link with children in care. Parents often express frustration about not receiving communication from case workers and not having sufficient information about their children [Beckerman 1994]. Parents also maintain that they are unable to access in prison the services necessary to complete their service plans.

As part of their legal mandate to make “reasonable efforts” to reunify families, case workers are obligated to facilitate contact between parents and their children and to help parents access those services that might allow them to parent their children appropriately upon release. The challenges, though, of maintaining contact with and providing services to parents in prison are
great. Geographical distance, prison security requirements, and high caseloads impede case worker communication with parents. And though case workers may recognize a parent's need for drug treatment, job training, education, or parenting classes, they often have little knowledge of services available inside the prison or have difficulties linking parents to available programs [Women's Prison Association 1996].

Given geographical distance and other constraints of incarceration, how can workers better maintain contact with incarcerated parents? How can workers help parents feel connected to their children? How can workers develop service plans that are about more than visitation and that utilize services available to incarcerated parents? How can child welfare and corrections officials develop linkages that facilitate parents' access to services and programs inside the prison?

Working with Kinship Families. Given that most children of incarcerated mothers live with grandparents or other relatives, how can child welfare agencies better support these kinship families? How can workers evaluate risk to children placed in kinship families? How can workers talk with kinship families about the permanency needs of children and permanency options such as guardianship or kinship adoption, particularly when families may be feeling protective and supportive of the imprisoned parent? How can workers engage kinship families in long-term planning, especially when parents will be incarcerated for long periods of time? How can workers help kinship families address their own feelings toward the incarcerated individual? How can workers help kinship families facilitate parent-child contact, particularly when families are angry with the incarcerated individual?

Working with Nonrelative Foster Families. Many nonrelative foster families express concerns about parental incarceration. They question the parenting capacities of incarcerated parents, the
likelihood of rehabilitation, and the advisability of parent-child visitation in a prison setting. They may be reluctant to take children to visits because of their own fears about prisons or because of worries about children’s reactions to the prison environment.

How can child welfare agencies better support foster families caring for children with incarcerated parents? How can workers support foster parents in identifying their own fears and biases about crime and incarceration? How can child welfare agencies train foster parents to help children understand and cope with parental incarceration? How can agencies help foster parents facilitate contact between incarcerated parents and their children?

Finding Permanency for Children with Incarcerated Parents

Identifying Permanency Needs. Given what is known about child development, a child’s sense of time, and a child’s need for a safety, security, and consistent, sustaining relationships, what should permanency look like for children with incarcerated parents? What are the permanency needs of infants? Young children? Older children? Adolescents? How can a child’s need for permanency be reconciled with a parent’s lengthy prison sentence? How can workers evaluate the nature of the parent-child relationship and the extent to which parents and children are bonded? How long is too long for children to wait?

Evaluating Parents’ Ability to Provide Permanence. Although one of the most practical considerations in a permanency determination is the length of time a parent will be incarcerated, case workers often find it difficult to obtain the most basic information about a parent’s actual sentence, eligibility for parole or expected release date [Women’s Prison Association 1996]. Once a release date is established, the fundamental consideration becomes the parent’s ability, upon release, to provide appropriate
care for a child. In a prison setting, though, it can be difficult to assess parental capacity to support and nurture a child because prison surroundings prevent observation of parent-child interaction in a day-to-day setting. Another important consideration is parental ability to cope with the inevitable difficulties that will be experienced upon release. Case workers may find it hard to predict whether parents will be able to find a job, find housing, cope with financial difficulties, or avoid drug or alcohol relapse.

What practices can be developed to help workers better assess parent-child relationships—and parental ability to provide care and support for children—when parents are incarcerated? How can incarcerated parents demonstrate the competencies necessary to support a decision to reunify? In making permanency decisions, how should workers factor in a history of recidivism? What does concurrent planning and casework look like when parents are in prison? How can workers talk with parents, especially those incarcerated for long periods of time, about the permanency needs of their children? How can workers engage parents in planning for their children’s future?

Identifying Other Permanency Options. When reunification is not the appropriate plan for a child, other options for permanency should be considered (i.e., adoption, guardianship, or, as a last alternative, long-term foster care). Because many children with incarcerated mothers are living with grandparents or other relatives, advocates may tend to dismiss adoption as a viable option. While some kinship families may be reluctant to adopt because adoption requires supporting a termination of parental rights proceeding against a family member, other kinship families may welcome the stability that adoption provides. When lengthy incarceration is the primary factor preventing reunification—and the incarcerated parent desires and is capable of sustaining a relationship with the child—open adoption may be a means of
preserving that relationship while providing the child with a permanent family. When adoption is not appropriate, guardianship can be a middle ground that provides some security and stability for a child, assigns rights and responsibilities to the caregiver, and still preserves the incarcerated parent’s parental rights.

When parents are incarcerated, how do permanency determinations differ for infants, young children, older children, and adolescents? How can all permanency options be explored and discussed with children, parents, kinship families, foster families, or potential adoptive families? When and how can workers talk to parents about voluntary relinquishment, open adoption or other options that provide permanence for children but still allow parents to maintain relationships?

**Legal Issues.** Parental incarceration does not alter the requirements of state and federal laws, and recommendations for enhanced services to children with parents in prison and their families must be addressed within the existing legal framework. Case workers are legally obligated to make “reasonable efforts” to reunify families separated by incarceration—and courts may hold agencies legally accountable for maintaining ongoing communication with parents in prison and exploring fully the extent to which services might be provided to incarcerated parents [In re Sabrina N. 1998]. More than 25 states have termination of parental rights statutes or adoption statutes that explicitly pertain to incarcerated parents [Genty 1995], though, and under the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89), children must have a plan for permanency within 12 months of placement.

What must agencies do to meet their legal obligation to work with incarcerated parents? Are incarcerated parents at risk of having their parental rights terminated inappropriately because of permanency timeframes? Or will children linger for inappropriately long periods in care because workers are unable (because
of a parent’s incarceration) to meet the criteria necessary for terminating parental rights? Given its focus on shorter and more structured permanency planning timeframes, what impact will the Adoption and Safe Families Act have on permanency planning with incarcerated parents? Will states interpret and implement the federal law in a way that will make it harder for incarcerated parents to be reunited with their children?

**Collaborating with the Criminal Justice System**

The child welfare and criminal justice systems work with many of the same families. At this time, however, the two systems lack formal channels of contact and have not developed methods for information-sharing or coordination of services. Professionals in both systems express frustration about this lack of coordination and acknowledge that increased collaboration between the two systems would certainly enhance outcomes for children and families. Collaboration is difficult, though, because the two systems have different priorities and responsibilities; neither may have a thorough understanding of the other’s processes or concerns, and both are often overextended and have limited resources to invest in collaboration.

A few child welfare agencies have begun to engage in collaborative work with state and local departments of corrections. For example, one state agency provides local departments of social services with a contact person at each correctional facility to coordinate visits and services. Another agency has assigned a social worker to a women’s prison to act as a liaison for crises involving parents and children. A third state agency assigns specialized staff to cases in which women give birth while incarcerated. In other creative collaborations, child welfare agencies have worked cooperatively with corrections officials to establish eligibility for community treatment programs, collaborated with community service providers to arrange counseling for families and special recreational activities for children, and collaborated with
state prisons to establish special facilities for parent-child visitation [Child Welfare League of America 1998].

A needs assessment initiated by the Maryland Department of Human Resources in 1996 provides one model for child welfare agencies wishing to explore collaborations with the criminal justice community [Women’s Prison Association 1996]. The initial project activities included collecting background information about parental incarceration in Maryland; convening a focus group of child welfare case workers and managers to discuss their experiences working with incarcerated parents and their children; and visiting Maryland prison and detention centers to understand how facilities, processes, and programs impact child welfare goals and to begin building more collaborative relationships between Maryland’s child welfare and corrections officials [Women’s Prison Association 1996].

What are the different values underlying the child welfare and criminal justice systems? What shared goals can be identified? How can child welfare and correctional systems gain greater awareness of each other’s systems, programs, resources, responsibilities, and concerns? Given the different priorities and responsibilities of each system, to what extent can professionals be expected to collaborate and work together around parental incarceration? What is the best way to develop linkages? To what extent would enhanced outcomes for children translate into beneficial outcomes for the criminal justice system? What specific steps can be taken to facilitate collaboration between the child welfare and criminal justice systems?

Conclusion

As the country’s most basic support for vulnerable children, the child welfare system must begin to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents in a thoughtful, systematic way. The articles in this special issue of Child Welfare further explore the
phenomenon of parental incarceration and its impact on the child welfare system and the children it serves, and present models and first steps toward meeting the needs of these children and families.

Notes

1. No one knows for certain how many children in this country have an incarcerated parent. Extrapolating from data collected in previous studies, the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents has developed a formula for calculating these numbers: To estimate the number of children with incarcerated mothers, multiply the number of currently incarcerated women by .75 (the average percentage of incarcerated women with children) and then multiply that number by 2.4 (the average number of children per incarcerated mother). To estimate the number of children with incarcerated fathers, multiply the number of currently incarcerated men by .56 (the average percentage of incarcerated men with children) and then multiply that number by 2.0 (the average number of children per incarcerated father) [Johnston 1995c]. Using this formula with 1995 data, 113,100 incarcerated women [U.S. Department of Justice 1997] have 203,580 children and 1.4 million incarcerated men [U.S. Department of Justice 1997] have 1.6 million incarcerated children.

2. In August, 1997, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) surveyed state child welfare agencies to learn more about the field’s level of awareness and state of knowledge regarding children with incarcerated parents. CWLA asked agencies if they could identify the number of children in their caseloads with parents in prison and if they had collected any data around this population. Overall, the 38 states that responded were able to provide almost no substantive data on the children in their systems who have a currently incarcerated parent or a parent with a history of incarceration [Child Welfare League of America 1998].

Of the five responding states that were able to provide any data at all about children with parents in prison, only one was willing to estimate the number of children in its entire child welfare system with an incarcerated parent. That state estimated that 22% of its child welfare population had a parent in prison. Five states gave figures for the number of children in foster care with an incarcerated parent, but only one of those states was able to give an unqualified number. That state reported 12% of its foster care population had a parent in prison. Two other states were able to provide numbers only for those children who entered foster care because of parental incarceration. Those two states reported that 1.6% - 4% of their foster care populations entered care because of parental incarceration. The remaining two states could provide only estimates. One state estimated that 10% of its foster care population had a parent in prison and the other state estimated that 29.5% of its foster care population had a parent in prison.
In 1993, Virginia surveyed 17 local departments of social services for information about parental incarceration [Virginia Commission on Youth 1992]. With its response rate capturing 49% of the state's total foster care caseload, Virginia reported that 7% of its children in foster care had an incarcerated parent. Twenty-two percent of those children were placed in foster care because of parental incarceration.

3. Data from two recent Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) studies support a potential link between parental incarceration and child abuse and neglect. The Odyssey Project is an ongoing CWLA study of children in residential group care, group homes, and therapeutic foster care [Curtis et al. 1998]. Recently released data show that of the 1,492 children studied to date, 241 (16.2%) have a mother who has been convicted of a criminal offense; 189 (12.7%) have a mother who has served time in prison or jail; 360 (24.1%) have a father who has been convicted of criminal offense; and 309 (20.7%) have a father who has served time in prison or jail. Of the 485 children whose mother and/or father had been convicted of a criminal offense, 36.7% had been sexually abused, 47.0% had been physically abused, and 58.1% had been neglected. These percentages of abuse and neglect are greater than those for the population of children studied who had neither a mother nor a father convicted of a criminal offense—22.9% of whom had been sexually abused, 37.4% of whom had been physically abused, and 22.4% of whom had been neglected. Although the children in residential care or therapeutic foster homes tend to have more serious problems than children in the child welfare population at large, these data are still significant in seeking to understand the extent to which parental incarceration is a risk factor for child abuse and neglect.

Another CWLA study sheds additional light on the link between parental incarceration and child abuse and neglect. In a study of young juvenile offenders in Sacramento County, California, CWLA worked with community partners in child welfare, law enforcement, and juvenile justice to better understand the overlap between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems [Child Welfare League of America 1997]. The study focused on 9- to 12-year-old children. Of the 75,000 9- to 12-year-olds in Sacramento County, 1.4% (1,026) were known to the child welfare system because of an investigation of child abuse or neglect. In a 175-person randomly selected sample of those 9- to 12-year-old children investigated by child welfare, 18% had at least one incarcerated parent. Of the 132 9- to 12-year-old children who had been arrested in Sacramento County during that year, 50% (66) were known to child welfare. Of those 66 children, 45% had an incarcerated parent. The study also examined the 20 most expensive placements in the Sacramento County child welfare system and found that 90% of those children had an incarcerated parent. Again, these statistics are from a small sample taken from one county's child welfare system—and the study itself did not focus on parental incarceration. Still, the data suggest that the child welfare community should be cognizant of a parent's criminal behavior and/or incarceration as risk factors for child abuse or neglect.

4. A few studies have focused on the difficulties related to permanency planning for children whose parents are incarcerated. One study showed that 78% of incarcerated
mothers seeking to reunite with their children felt that the services they were receiving from public child welfare agencies were inadequate [Johnston 1995b]. Another study found that a major impediment to effective permanency planning may be the lack of contact between imprisoned mothers and case workers [Beckerman 1994].

5. A 1993 study compared the quality of care being provided to children in informal kinship care because of their mother’s incarceration with the quality of care provided by nonrelative foster parents [Gaudin & Sutphen 1993]. Based on information gathered from a very small sample (N = 40), researchers concluded that, on several measures, foster families provided a somewhat higher quality of care than extended families, especially to preschool-age children. The measures utilized in the study included the HOME Inventory, the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory, and the Social Network Assessment adapted from Pattison’s Psychosocial Network Inventory.

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