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New Annie E. Casey Foundation report recommends policies to help children with incarcerated parents

More than 5.1 million U.S. children have a parent who has served time, including 10,000 Rhode Island children who have been impacted by parental incarceration

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (April 25, 2016) – The Annie E. Casey Foundation released a report today highlighting the effect of parental incarceration on child and family well-being. *A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities* offers recommendations for policymakers to address the emotional and financial instability that stems from parental incarceration.

More than 5 million U.S. children (7% of all children in America) have experienced the separation of a parent due to incarceration, including 10,000 Rhode Island children (5% of all children in the state). The needs of these children, who face increased poverty, stress, and other significant obstacles in life, are often overlooked.

“Having a parent in prison creates a tremendous vacuum in a child’s life,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Children often become invisible during the incarceration of a parent or parents and are at heightened risk for poor outcomes. They are less likely to receive needed services and intervention. However, there are steps that can be taken to ensure that Rhode Island children with an incarcerated parent are supported during the parent’s incarceration and after they return.”

The negative impact of parental incarceration

Having a parent incarcerated is a traumatic experience, and research shows that parental incarceration can have as much negative impact on children’s well-being as abuse or domestic violence. Parental incarceration negatively impacts children and families on many levels:

- **Emotionally:** Parental incarceration destabilizes children’s lives and severs their connection to a parent.
- **Socio-developmentally:** Parental incarceration creates an unstable environment for a child that can have lasting effects on development. The shame and isolation that children of incarcerated parents experience can be detrimental to a child’s sense of self and self-worth.
- **Financially:** Losing a parent, especially a breadwinner, for a prolonged period of time, leaves families scrambling to cover basic needs along with legal and other court fees. Sixty-five percent of U.S. families with a member in

prison cannot meet basic needs. When fathers are incarcerated, the average family income drops by 22%.

“Our nation’s overreliance on incarceration has left millions of children poorer, less stable and emotionally cut off from the most important relationship of their young lives,” says Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Casey Foundation. “We are calling on states and communities to act now, so that these kids – like all kids – have equal opportunity and a fair chance for the bright future they deserve.”

Policy recommendations

The Foundation’s three policy recommendations are:

1. Ensure children are supported while parents are incarcerated and after they return.
2. Connect parents who have returned to the community with pathways to employment.
3. Strengthen communities, particularly those disproportionately affected by incarceration and reentry, to promote family stability and opportunity.

“Leaders can take action right now to support children from the moment their families come in contact with the criminal justice system,” says Scot Spencer, the Foundation’s associate director for advocacy and influence. “It is alarming to see eight states with double-digit percentage figures of children who have had an incarcerated parent. Racial disparities are also a distressing reality because the likelihood that African-American and Latino kids will have a parent incarcerated is about seven and three times greater than their white peers, respectively.”

The Foundation calls for the following:

Judges:

- Consider the impact on children and families when making sentencing and decisions about where parents will be confined.
- Require courts to inform local social service agencies and community-based organizations when a parent is incarcerated so the organizations can proactively reach out to connect with families.

Community organizations:

- Build family connections and offer programs and resources tailored to children with incarcerated parents.
- Provide family counseling and parenting courses through prisons and in neighborhoods.

Local governments:

- Create additional pathways with anchor institutions, such as hospitals and

universities, to ensure economic inclusion.

States:

- Direct more funds toward prison education and training for in-demand jobs.
- Minimize the negative effects of a criminal record once a parent has successfully reentered society through “ban the box” policies.
- Facilitate access for affected families to financial, legal, childcare and housing assistance.
- Enable families impacted by incarceration to access Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs to cover basic needs and become self-sufficient.
- Provide incentives to housing authorities and private landlords to allow people with records to access safe, affordable housing.

Detailed recommendations can be found in *A Shared Sentence*, which will be available April 25 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org/sharedsentence. Additional information is available at www.aecf.org

Additional information on children of incarcerated parents in Rhode Island

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recently released *The 2016 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook*, which charts improvements and declines in the wellbeing of Rhode Island’s children. An indicator included each year is ‘Children of Incarcerated Parents’ which shows that of the 2,548 inmates serving a sentence at the ACI who were surveyed on September 30, 2015, 1,476 reported that they had a total of 3,316 children. To access ‘Children of Incarcerated Parents’ please visit <http://bit.ly/IncarceratedRI>

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation’s children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.