



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: House Bill 6237 Regarding Children of Incarcerated Parents

House Health, Education & Welfare Committee

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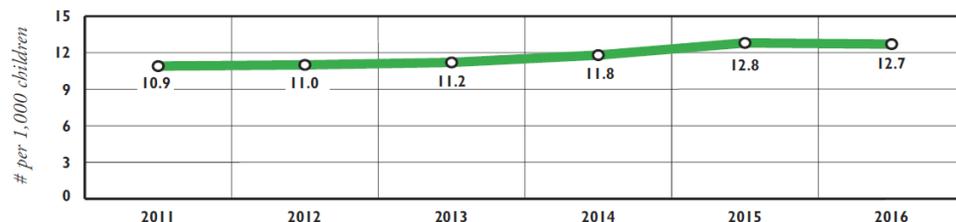
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would especially like to thank Representative Ranglin-Vassell for sponsoring this bill and for raising awareness about the needs of children with incarcerated parents. Today, I am here to offer information and resources pertinent to House Bill 6237.

Just last month, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its newest *Issue Brief on Children of Incarcerated Parents in Rhode Island*. A copy of this *Issue Brief* and a related policy report that The Annie E. Casey Foundation released last year are included in your packets. Our *Issue Brief* presents information on parental incarceration in Rhode Island; racial and ethnic disparities; and key strategies for meeting the unique needs of children with incarcerated parents and their families while a parent is incarcerated and after they are released from prison.

From 2011 to 2016, the rate of Rhode Island children with incarcerated parents has increased from 10.9 per 1,000 children to 12.7 per 1,000 children.

**Children of Incarcerated Parents
per 1,000 Children, Rhode Island, 2011-2016***



Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, 2011-2016. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010. *Data is point-in-time on September 30 of each year. Offenders who were on home confinement and the awaiting trial population are excluded.

Many parents who become incarcerated live with their children just prior to incarceration. Even if parents were not living with their children before incarceration, many provide primary financial support. Most children of incarcerated parents live with their other parent, a grandparent, or other relatives.

On an annual survey, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections asks ACI inmates if they have children and if so how many. Of the 3,097 inmates incarcerated on September 30, 2016, 1,857 (60%) reported having 4,146 children. Of the 1,857 incarcerated parents, 93% were fathers and 7% were mothers; and 41% were White, 30% were Black, 26% were Hispanic, and 3% were of another race. In Rhode Island, Black children are eight times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than White children.

The *Issue Brief* includes a section on how schools can support children who have an incarcerated parent as well as recommendations related to all systems that touch the lives of children with incarcerated parents, including the schools.

How Schools Can Support Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

Children who experience parental incarceration are more likely to have speech and language problems, developmental delays, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and behavioral problems, have lower grade point averages, have lower school engagement, and are more likely to be suspended or expelled. Even when controlling for race, poverty status, mother's educational level, and IQ, children who have experienced parental incarceration are more likely to drop out of high school than their peers.

Teachers and other school personnel, including guidance counselors and school psychologists, can support children with incarcerated parents by:

- Establishing themselves as a trusting and caring adult
- Serving as a role model
- Challenging the stigma and shame that can come with parental incarceration
- Referring families to community services that can meet the specialized needs of these children
- Implementing behavioral and academic supports
- Promoting high expectations
- Exploring whether absenteeism or behavioral problems may be related to parental incarceration.

But school personnel cannot do this without support. They need information, resources, and other professional development to help them to provide social and emotional support to children with incarcerated parents and support their academic achievement.

The schools also cannot do this alone. All of the systems that touch the lives of children with incarcerated parents, including corrections, child welfare, health and human services, education, and the courts, need to work together to jointly assess and improve their policies, programs, and practices to improve outcomes for these children. For this reason, we support this bill but would recommend that the scope of the bill be expanded to include state agencies other than RIDE that touch the lives of children with incarcerated parents.

We hope that the attached *Issue Brief* provides a good starting point for a continuing discussion about how schools and other public and private institutions can better support children with incarcerated parents and their families. Please let us know if we can provide additional information.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.