

# WHAT'S NEW WITH KIDS?

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December 2008

## Site of the Month

### CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

I happened upon a 2008 special report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics titled *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, which piqued my interest. The report estimates the number of minor children with a parent in the nation's prisons at 1,706,600 at midyear 2007—1,427,500 in state prisons and 279,100 in federal prisons. Of course, I immediately thumbed through the brief for state data. When none could be found, I did what I considered a thorough Internet search for the corresponding state statistics. My search was futile.

During my search, I did, however, find two interviews on National Public Radio (NPR) that dealt with the issue. They were conducted on May 29, 2008, and were short, less than 10 minutes each. In the first, "When a Parent Does Hard Time, So Does the Family" an NPR interviewer talks with a mother and her daughter. The mother had been in prison for 15 years because she was involved in the killing of her common-law husband over a child-custody battle. The daughter was nine years old when her mother started serving time. Both women described their feelings and experiences during the 15-year period; the mother expressed feelings of guilt, and the daughter expressed feelings of loss and embarrassment. For me, the lasting message from the interview is the importance of the parent-child-relationship during a parent's incarceration.

In the second NPR interview, "Families Coping with Incarcerated Parents" Nell Bernstein, coordinator of the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, was interviewed. She stressed the emotional pain that children endure when parents are incarcerated. Bernstein said that children of incarcerated parents do not feel different from children whose parent(s) was spirited away for a period of time, such as losing a parent to divorce or having a parent shipped to Iraq. The children experience loss, grief, sorrow, and loneliness. One child told her, she felt "out of the circle," a world where "everybody's normal."

Bernstein's research with incarcerated parents and their children are compiled in a book she wrote titled *All Alone in the World*. It includes the experiences of families affected by incarceration, programs that consider the needs of the children while their parents are incarcerated, and recommendations to "protect and support children at every step of the process, from arrest through reentry." I recommend the book.