

How the courts are fostering ties between kids and their absent parents

When she was 8 years old, Ashley Menefee felt lucky just to spend some time with her mom on Mother's Day.

It's not easy when your mom is in jail.

"I was very excited," she recalled. "It meant the world to us."

Menefee, now 24, recently spoke about the importance of visitation to a group of Somerset County Jail inmates participating in a parenting program. She was part of an outreach session, sponsored by a department of the AOPC, to promote awareness of the unique challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents.

Experts estimate there are more than 2.6 million children in this country who have a parent locked up. About half are 10 or younger. Studies suggest losing a parent to incarceration can be more devastating to children than divorce or even death. And children of prisoners are deemed to be at risk of becoming criminals themselves.

Efforts to address the situation nationwide have come from many quarters over the years. A recent high-profile information campaign, *Sesame Street Little Children: Big Challenges*, features a muppet character with an incarcerated parent. Laura Kaeppler, Miss America 2012, whose father

served time in prison used her celebrity platform to shine a spotlight on kids with an incarcerated parent.

The movement gained significant momentum in Pennsylvania three years ago when a newly created Children's Roundtable Initiative identified issues of statewide concern involving dependent children — or those in foster care and other temporary living situations who have been removed from their parents under court order.

Among the ideas that emerged was the creation of a workgroup dedicated to addressing problems faced by dependent children of incarcerated parents. The Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) supports the team — providing information and resources to judges, lawyers and other professionals working to address systemic dependency issues in their communities.



Ashley Menefee

OCFC holds information sessions, like the one held in Somerset, to nurture the idea of stronger relationships between children and their jailed parents.

Spotlighting an issue that many treat with indifference can be challenging. Studies show public attitudes generally are not overly sympathetic toward those in prison, let alone their children.

"A lot of people think that children shouldn't be going for visits in a prison — that it's bad for the kids," said **Angela Sager**, an OCFC programs analyst who staffs the workgroup. "And they think that the prisoners don't deserve to have such visits."



Westmoreland County visitation room

What's more, advocates point out that the children and their families generally aren't seeking visibility, either as individuals or as a group. Since kids tend to be embarrassed about having a parent behind bars, they keep that fact hidden and their needs for mentoring often go unrecognized, experts note.

"There is much trauma that a child can experience when a parent is jailed," Sager explained. "The workgroup offers best practices for professionals that may help mitigate that trauma."

While exact numbers are difficult to come by, there are an estimated 70,000 children in Pennsylvania with a parent incarcerated in a county or state facility. That's enough kids to fill the stadium that hosts the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team — twice.

Part of the challenge in facing the issue lies in hoping to ensure children remained connected to their incarcerated parent. The message is that it's not just about the incarcerated parent — it's also about the child.

"One thing that our workgroup wanted to do was to train judges and legal professionals on dependent children of incarcerated parents to address the myths and biases around the children of incarcerated," Sager said.

"Our workgroup focuses less on the parents' punishment and more on what is in the best interest of the child," Sager added.

Research and individual stories — like Menefee's — suggest children benefit

from having contact and visitation with their parents even if they are in jail. Also, advocates argue an incarcerated parent has the same legal rights as a parent who is not jailed to see their child.

Allegheny County Family Court Judge **Kim Berkeley Clark** was involved in efforts to rewrite parts of a Pennsylvania Dependency benchbook that is used as a resource on such matters by judges to include information on the topic. In addition, training has been offered for corrections officials and law enforcement to follow certain protocols to protect the parental bond even during arrest, noted Judge Clark who chairs the workgroup.

Cost is a factor. But private support has increased, such as in Allegheny County, where the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation underwrote the cost of an educational video. The video promotes awareness among judges, wardens, child welfare staff and

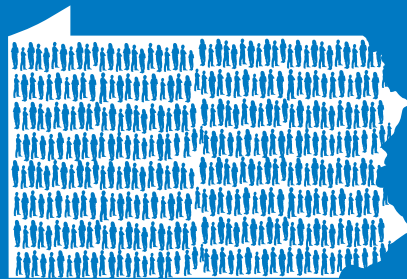
(continued on page 4)



Experts estimate there are more than **2.6 million**

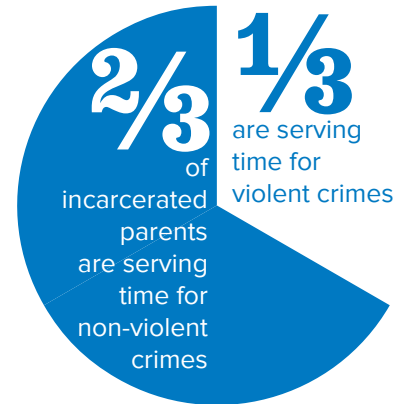
children in this country who have a parent locked up. Studies suggest losing a parent to incarceration can be more devastating to children than divorce or death.

About half are age 10 or younger.



The estimated number of PA kids with a parent in jail is about

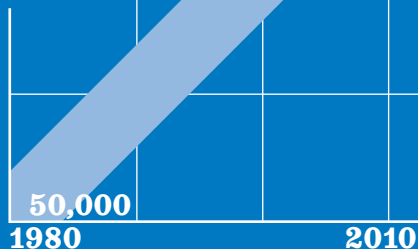
70,000.



2/3 of incarcerated parents are serving time for non-violent crimes

1/3 are serving time for violent crimes

Our nation's jail and prison population has sharply increased in the past few decades.



"Even if one inmate takes something away (from the program) and stops the cycle of incarceration, it was worth it."

Somerset Jail Warden
Gregory Briggs

Source: National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated



1 in 28 American children has an incarcerated parent.