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# When parents go to jail, their kids often feel the punishment

By [Peter Hirschfeld](#) Times Argus Staff

KILLINGTON – The jail sentences handed down by Vermont courts often punish the state's most innocent residents, according to children's advocates on hand for a first-of-its kind conference in Killington Monday.

Watching a mother or father taken off to jail is among the more traumatic events a child can experience, experts said Monday, and Vermont's rapidly growing prison population means more young people than ever are coping with the loss of a parent to a jail sentence.

"There's this overwhelming isolation, this feeling of shame and loneliness and uncertainty that has an enormous impact on children," says Tara Graham.

Graham, with the Vermont Children's Aid Society's Kids-A-Part program, works with families affected by jail terms. Monday's conference, organized by Graham's nonprofit, drew more than 500 Vermont advocates, caregivers and policy makers to Killington's Grand Resort Hotel.

"We hear so much about our courts and jails ... and we're trying to shift the focus to the kids," Graham says. "The kid shouldn't be punished by their parent's crime. If we as a state are going to hand out these punishments ... it seems there's some responsibility to help fix the family system we've interrupted."

The Children's Aid Society has introduced to Vermont a Bill of Rights for the children of incarcerated parents. The document, first drafted in San Francisco, is intended to serve as a "guiding light" for legislators, corrections officials and other state and community leaders making decisions that may affect those children, Graham said.

Steve Dale is the commissioner of the Department of Children and Families. When he came to the state in 1973, Dale told a packed ballroom, Vermont had less than 400 people in its jails. Today, the number stands at well over 2,000, and many of those incarcerated men and women have children on the outside.

"Thirty years ago, having a parent go to jail was a rare happening," Dale said. "It's pretty commonplace these days."

Statistical information on the children of incarcerated parents is scant, and the

Children's Aid Society is working to compile an authoritative database that would track figures. But Dale says that in 2006, there were somewhere in the range of 4,000 children "who had the experience of seeing a parent go to jail.

"We know that children of incarcerated adults shoulder tremendous burdens of guilt, shame and isolation," he said. "We also know they're separated from siblings, their homes and their communities."

Ruby Carter, of Brandon, said she attended the conference for both professional and personal reasons. As an employee of Vermont's Nurturing Parent Program for young parents, Carter deals with children affected by incarcerated parents.

"It's huge for kids. They need to have that contact, that time with the parent, even if it's in jail," Carter said.

Carter is familiar with the impacts of incarceration on children for another reason: Her male partner, currently incarcerated, had until his sentencing been a father figure in her two children's lives. Since his incarceration, she said, it's been a struggle to preserve the sense of family to which they'd grown accustomed.

"It changes the family dynamic, and not in a good way," she said.

Vikki Patterson works with children and families in Chittenden County. She said the children of incarcerated parents manifest their anxiety and sense of loss in a variety of ways.

"We see an impact in children's lives directly," she said. "The parent's here today, gone tomorrow, and the child, not surprisingly begins acting out in various ways."

Patterson said that anecdotally, more and more professional caregivers and social workers are encountering families affected by incarceration. The rising number hasn't helped to decrease the stigma and embarrassment children continue to endure, she said.

"Nobody really talks about it. It's like somebody died," Patterson said. "There's this huge veil of shame. It's an extremely difficult stigma for a child to have to deal with."

Graham called the Bill of Rights a "framework to think about how to make shifts in public policy that helps kids."

Instituting arrest protocols for police agencies outlining how to deal with children, she said, is one of the immediate measures Vermont can act on. Improving the often-harsh conditions under which many state prisons conduct family visits, she said, is another step the state can take.

Recidivism rates among incarcerated parents who maintain regular contact with their children, she said, are substantially lower than those who do not. Other studies, she said, indicate that children who stay in contact with their jailed parent also enjoy more positive outcomes.

If nothing else, Graham said, the conference is intended to bring the issue into the public realm.

"It's the silencing of this issue that perpetuates them feeling really shamed and isolated," Graham said. "My hope would be for us to begin talking more openly about an issue that's really affecting a huge number of Vermont children."

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