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Effects of long-distance parental incarceration on kids

Everyone all know that our state is the midst of belt-tightening. The Legislature has been forced to make extraordinarily challenging funding decisions which have been well-covered in the press. And, as part of this decision-making, the Department of Corrections, which accounts for 12 percent of the state's budget currently, has been under pressure to reduce spending.

In the name of belt-tightening, a well-publicized plan to hopscotch men and women offenders around the state and out of the state has emerged: close the women's prison in Waterbury, turn the women's prison in Windsor into a men's work camp, shift all the female offenders to the St. Albans prison, and move men from St. Albans out of state.

Let's take a moment to do the numbers

? There were 12,559 people under the supervision of the Department of Corrections in 2007.

? Of those, 7,190 individual offenders spent time in prison last year: 1,015 females and 6,175 males.

? However, the people we are incarcerating are not just "individuals" or "offenders" — approximately 80 percent of the women are mothers, and 50 percent of the men are fathers.

Our current rate of incarceration not only negatively impacts the state budget. It also means that of the 131,250 children and youth in Vermont, approximately 4,500 to 6,000 young Vermonters are affected by parental incarceration every year.

Here in Vermont, we are unconsciously undertaking a major social experiment.

These 4,500 to 8,500 children experience the trauma of parent-child separation accompanied by tremendous shame and social stigma. Children with incarcerated parents may display aggression, defiance, depression, withdrawal, developmental regression, and poor academic performance. Some children see their parents arrested in front of them, some children have come home to an empty house, and 25 percent are in foster care.

The cyclical financial implications of parental incarceration are certain: incarceration disproportionately affects families already living in poverty, and the incarceration of a parent creates even more financial strain for the children and caregivers left behind.

This is an emerging issue that has not been a priority for researchers, but the studies that exist and the experiences of Vermonters reflect a growing number of children and youth are at grave risk for being blamed for the sins of their parents, traumatized by arrest and

separation, and dealing with the insidious challenges of poverty.

The plan to move 100 to 150 more men out of state — on top of the 513 male offenders already out of state — is being made using financial criteria. These 613 to 763 men will be shipped to states such as Kentucky, leaving behind between 300 and 750 children.

A recent Annie E. Casey Foundation report showed that only 16 percent of offenders received visitors in a given month when they were at a prison more than 500 miles away from home. How many Vermont families, who have already been dealt a financial blow with a parent in prison, can afford to bring the kids to Kentucky in order to maintain a relationship with dad?

Everyone agrees that we can't afford to spend 12 percent of our state's budget on corrections. But, we also can't afford to discount the incalculable effect of the current prison plan on thousands of our children.

Christine Zachai is executive director of the Permanent Fund for the Well-Being of Vermont Children in Montpelier.
