

Excerpts from *Incarceration and the Family: A Review of Research and Promising Approaches for Serving Fathers and Families*.

Reentry and the Marital/Partner Relationship

With some exceptions, most men who are imprisoned return home. Reentry is the dynamic process of exiting prison and returning to a free society. Although this can be an exciting time for some families, it can be a fearful time for others (particularly those whose partners have a history of domestic violence). There are a number of challenges that men and women need to anticipate as men attempt to resume their roles as husbands/partners and fathers. The reentry experience for each inmate is shaped by his pre-incarceration history (e.g., substance abuse, domestic violence history, job skills and experience); his prison experience (i.e., mental and physical health status); and his attitudes, beliefs, and personality traits.

Inmates frequently look first to their families to meet their immediate needs for money, housing, and emotional support. The majority of prisoners being released report feeling close to their family, and expected to live with their family upon release from prison. Research suggests that married men who reside with their wives and children upon release have a more successful transition. Although families play a substantial role in the reentry process, the criminal justice system does little to prepare families for their reunion.

There can be resentment, fear, disappointment, and anger over past hurts. For men who have been used to suppressing their emotions in prison, communicating intense feelings, especially if they are negative, was difficult. Lack of contact can weaken bonds and impede healthy patterns of communication. Thus, many couples could benefit from assistance at post-release in working through these emotional struggles.

Reuniting partners often face many points of conflict including jealousy, differences in how children should be raised, and the threat of new relationships women may have developed during their partner's absence. Conflict—especially conflicts that occur in conjunction with alcohol or drug use—can easily escalate to violence. Perceptions of low self-efficacy in relationships have been linked to under- and un-employment which is common among released prisoners.

Intense treatment is needed for men with histories of family violence, and reunion with families should be treated with caution if women and children face any risk of abuse. Not all batterers can and should be reunited with their partners; thus, family strengthening programs should include screening for domestic violence and safety planning. The goal of family strengthening efforts with this population must not be reunification at all costs, but the provision of interventions in situations where there is a reasonable likelihood of benefits.

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