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Dads' Resource Center Survey Reveals Majority of Pennsylvania County Jails Bar Most Family Contact Visits

State College – A new survey conducted by Dads' Resource Center (DRC) reveals that fewer than half of Pennsylvania county jails allow inmates barrier-free visits with their children.

Of the 50 jails that responded to the survey, 28 reported that they do not allow contact visits under any circumstances, while 22 said they only allow contact visits under certain – sometimes difficult to achieve -- conditions. Eleven county jails either denied the request or did not respond to requests for policy information. "Contact visits" means that there is no glass barrier between the inmate and his or her visitor.

Research shows that maintaining family contact during incarceration reduces misconduct while in jail and increases the chance an individual will succeed upon release and not return to prison.

County officials say they restrict contact visits because of security reasons, including drug smuggling. However, all of the 24 state Department of Corrections prisons allow contact visits for inmates with the exception of those on death row or under disciplinary segregation.

In Pennsylvania there are roughly 81,000 children with a parent in a prison, and approximately 65 percent of state inmates have at least one child, according to state Department of Corrections estimates.

Some psychologists have compared incarceration to the death of a parent and maintain that losing contact during those formative years can have devastating effects on a child. The emotional consequences of that loss can lead to behavioral problems, the possibility of dropping out of school and becoming involved in the criminal justice system, thus continuing the cycle of crime.

"There are a lot of benefits that can come from contact visits. They can promote and reinforce good behavior and greater connection with family can be an affirmative factor in preventing recidivism," said Dads' Resource Center Founder and Board Chairman Dr. Joel N. Myers. "But most importantly they can help the children of inmates, who statistically are much more likely to engage in criminal activity and end up in jail themselves. It's all about providing children the access they need to their mothers and fathers under incredibly challenging circumstances."

Even in county jails that allow contact visits there are many roadblocks to winning visitation privileges. In some cases, the other parent has to approve of the visit or the inmate must have the child's birth certificate, or the inmate has to be a county resident.

The biggest hurdle for many incarcerated parents is having to enroll in and complete the parenting classes required by eight of the reporting counties. These classes are often only held a few times a year; inmates may have to wait months or longer to enroll. Given that a county jail sentence generally does not exceed 24 months, many people would complete their jail time before they could meet the requirements for a contact visit.

Claire Shubik-Richards, executive director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, called on county jails to fulfill their responsibility to help maintain family bonds.

"The core of the Prison Society's mission is to work to ensure humane prison conditions and to provide support to incarcerated people and their families," said Shubik-Richards. "Being able to hug one's child is a right rather than a privilege to be earned and it is our duty to minimize the harms that incarceration imposes on both parents and children."

Shubik-Richards said the Prison Society is committed to working with prison and jail administrators to ensure that policies are "both sensitive to security concerns while also supportive of the well-being of families."

In some cases, jails only allow contact visits if the family is involved with Children and Youth Services (CYS). While this allows for the possibility of those families having contact visits, it leaves parents not involved with CYS no such possibility. Families enter the CYS system for reasons including allegations of abuse and neglect.

Perhaps more troubling, many county inmates are in jail awaiting trial and so are being denied meaningful contact with their children without having been convicted of a crime.

The [Dads' Resource Center](#) was founded by Dr. Joel N. Myers, AccuWeather founder and chief executive officer in 2015. Its mission is to provide education, resources and advocacy for single fathers so they are able to fulfill their vital role in the well-being and healthy development of their children. At its heart, the Dads' Resource Center is a children's advocacy organization that aims to ensure that each child has the appropriate involvement and contributions from both of their parents.

The [Prison Society](#) was founded in 1787 to ensure humane prison and jail conditions and advocate for sensible criminal justice policies. In the age of mass incarceration, this mission is more relevant than ever. The Society currently facilitates parenting classes in three county jails and connects more than 3,000 loved ones annually through its transportation program.

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