

Eight Essential Tips for Law Enforcement to Safeguard Children of Arrested Parents

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Arresting parents of children is common in the day-to-day duties of police officers. These arrests can, and often do, have significant and lasting negative effects on children, whether they witness the arrest or not. When a parent is arrested, children often experience stress, which may develop into psychological trauma. A growing body of research links parental arrest to worse life outcomes for children, including higher risks for alcoholism and drug use; depression and suicide; domestic violence; health-related problems; and criminal behavior.^[1] The good news is that by implementing the right strategies, the devastating effects of parental arrests can be minimized.

But how can law enforcement help? And, what is the scope of the problem? The data on how many children are present at the time of parental arrest is unavailable because such data is not typically captured in arrest reports. However, we do know that over 1.7 million children in the United States have a parent in prison, and this doesn't include the number of parents in jail.^[2]

The best outcomes for children come from connecting with caring, responsible, adults. Police officers can be this powerful protective factor that decreases the potential harmful effects of parental arrest on children. Officers play a critical role in re-establishing safety and security for children, both physically and psychologically. They can provide an external sense of control, which can help a child recover faster in that moment.

Consider these eight strategies to lessen the potential harmful effects of parental arrest on children and youth:

1. Ask the arrestee if he or she is a parent of a child who would need arrangements for supervision because of the arrest, including children who may not be present at the time.
2. Question and handcuff the parent out of sight and sound of the child.
3. Don't leave the arrest scene until the child/youth is with a caregiver.
4. If another parent is not available to care for the child, give the arrested parent an opportunity to select and contact a caregiver, unless there is a compelling reason not to do so (e.g., the arrest is for child abuse or neglect).
5. Run background and child welfare checks on identified caregivers to ensure they are capable.
6. If appropriate, give the parent an opportunity to reassure the child and explain what is happening. If that isn't possible, take the time to explain to the child what is happening, using age-appropriate language.
7. Ask the parent about items that provide comfort to the child, such as toys, blankets, photographs, or food that can be taken with them.

8. If there are children that are not present, discuss with the parent how the child will be picked up and by whom.^[3]

Law enforcement agencies can access more tips by downloading the cost-free International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) [Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents Model Policy](#). In addition, a roll call video will soon be available demonstrating how police officers can put these and other best practices in action.

For more information on the IACP/BJA's Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents initiative and no-cost resources and training for law enforcement and allied stakeholders, refer to two webinars hosted on IACP's website that were conducted in partnership with BJA NTTAC: "[Protecting Children of Arrested Parents: Using a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)" and "[Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents During Investigative and Tactical Operations](#)." In addition, you can visit <http://www.theiacp.org/cap> or contact Sabrina Rhodes at 1-800-THE-IACP, extension 831, or at iacpyouth@theiacp.org.

[1] Ginny Puddefoot and Lisa Foster, *Keeping Children Safe When Their Parents are Arrested: Local Approaches That Work* (California Research Bureau, July 2007).

[2] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report, *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, revised March 30, 2010, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2014).

[3] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents, International Association of Chiefs of Police (August 2014), www.theiacp.org/childrenofarrestedparents.