

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal law sets timelines for states' decisions about placing foster care children in permanent homes, and, in some cases, for filing to terminate parental rights. Some policymakers have questioned the reasonableness of these timelines for children of incarcerated parents and expressed interest in how states work with these families. GAO was asked to examine: (1) the number of foster care children with incarcerated parents, (2) strategies used by child welfare and corrections agencies in selected states that may support contact or reunification, and (3) how the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) have helped these agencies support affected children and families. GAO analyzed national data, reviewed federal policies, interviewed state child welfare and corrections officials in 10 selected states that contain almost half of the nation's prison and foster care populations, and visited local child welfare agencies and prisons.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HHS improve its data on the foster care children of incarcerated parents and that it more systematically disseminate information to child welfare agencies. GAO also recommends that DOJ consider ways to promote collaboration between corrections and child welfare agencies, including establishing protocols for federal prisons to facilitate communication between these entities. HHS and DOJ agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-11-863](#). For more information, contact Kay E. Brown at (202) 512-7215 or [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov).

## CHILD WELFARE

### More Information and Collaboration Could Promote Ties between Foster Care Children and Their Incarcerated Parents

## What GAO Found

Foster care children with an incarcerated parent are not a well-identified population, although they are likely to number in the tens of thousands. HHS data collected from states show that, in 2009 alone, more than 14,000 children entered foster care due at least partly to the incarceration of a parent. This may be an undercount, however, due to some underreporting from states and other factors. For instance, the data do not identify when a parent is incarcerated after the child entered foster care—a more common occurrence, according to case workers GAO interviewed. HHS is currently developing a proposal for new state reporting requirements on all foster care children; however, officials had not determined whether these new requirements would include more information collected from states on children with incarcerated parents.

In 10 selected states, GAO found a range of strategies that support family ties. Some state child welfare agencies have provided guidance and training to caseworkers for managing such cases; and local agencies have worked with dependency courts to help inmates participate in child welfare hearings by phone or other means. For their part, some corrections agencies ease children's visits to prisons with special visitation hours and programs. In several cases, corrections agencies and child welfare agencies have collaborated, which has resulted in some interagency training for personnel, the creation of liaison staff positions, and video visitation facilitated by non-profit providers.

HHS and DOJ each provide information and assistance to child welfare and corrections agencies on behalf of these children and families. For example, both federal agencies post information on their websites for practitioners working with children or their incarcerated parents, with some specific to foster care. The HHS information, however, was not always up to date or centrally organized, and officials from most of the state child welfare and corrections agencies GAO interviewed said they would benefit from information on how to serve these children. Further, DOJ has not developed protocols for federal prisons under its own jurisdiction for working with child welfare agencies and their staff, although GAO heard from some state and local child welfare officials that collaboration between child welfare and corrections agencies would facilitate their work with foster care children and their parents. This would also be in keeping with a DOJ agency goal to build partnerships with other entities to improve services and promote reintegration of offenders into communities.

#### Examples of Strategies to Support Family Ties



Video visit with incarcerated parent



Children's visiting room in women's prison

Source: © May 2011 The Osborne Association; photo by Jonathan Stenger (left); GAO (right).