

# Alaska Dispatch News

Published on *Alaska Dispatch News* (<http://www.adn.com>)

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June 19, 2015

OPINION: Alaska is now taking the first step down a path toward successful criminal justice reform, this proven process will lead to cost-saving improvements, as it has already done in other states.

On June 21, families across America will fire up their barbecues and take time out to honor dads. As a father of five children, I look forward eagerly to this annual paternal celebration we call Father's Day.

But I am also mindful that for over 2.5 million of our nation's children, Father's Day was just another day of separation from a parent who is out of reach -- serving time in jail or prison. A 2010 study by The Pew Charitable Trusts found that one in 28 children in the United States has a parent incarcerated, up from one in 125 just a quarter century ago.

This is a deeply troubling statistic, and it's one reason I'm a member of the conservative campaign movement known as Right on Crime. Launched in Texas, Right on Crime supports criminal justice policies that improve public safety, cut costs and help more nonviolent offenders return to their families and lead productive, law-abiding lives.

Our country's 30-year prison building boom and its fiscal impacts have been widely discussed. But one often-overlooked impact of America's high incarceration rates is the impact upon children and families, those innocent casualties left behind.

When I served in law enforcement earlier in my career, I had a front-row seat to observe the collateral damage our criminal justice policies can inflict on children with parents behind bars. The harm often starts when children experience the trauma of witnessing a parent's arrest, and grows from there.

A 2014 report by the National Academy of Sciences highlighted the problem, concluding that "fathers' incarceration and family hardship, including housing

insecurity, and behavioral problems in children, are strongly related.” Rates of homelessness are higher among families with a father behind bars, and children of the incarcerated often land in foster care, have trouble in school and struggle to form attachments with peers.

Lacking authority figures and positive role models in their lives, too many of these kids engage in delinquency and wind up incarcerated themselves.

As a conservative, I certainly believe prison is the proper place for violent and career criminals, who present a threat to the rest of us. But a large majority of offenders who are parents are doing time for nonviolent crimes. For example, among female inmates, most of whom are mothers, 85 percent are in prison for nonviolent offenses.

For lower-level lawbreakers like these, we need to adjust our correctional approach in ways that take into account what’s best for family preservation and the future of our children. That means expanding the use of alternative sanctions that enable offenders to pay their debt to society but also remain in the community, where they can stay on the job as parents to their kids.

As a part of the alternative, government must engage the help of nonprofit and faith-based organizations that can help these moms and dads understand their irreplaceable role in the life of their children.

Fortunately, leaders in more than two dozen states – from Texas to Georgia, South Dakota, Ohio, and Oregon – have launched reforms designed to create a criminal justice system more attuned to the importance of family unity. By strengthening proven options such as drug courts, probation supervision, and the use of today’s sophisticated new monitoring technologies, states are holding offenders accountable for their crimes while also keeping more families intact.

I’m heartened to see that Alaska is now taking the first step down a path toward successful criminal justice reform traveled by numerous other states. The Alaska Criminal Justice Commission is launching a comprehensive review of the state’s criminal justice system as part of the national Justice Reinvestment Initiative. I’m confident this proven process will lead to cost-saving improvements for Alaska, as it has already done in so many other states.

Alaska’s jail and prison system has grown substantially in recent years, and the state now spends \$334 million annually on corrections, up 50 percent in

the last decade alone. Despite this heavy cost, Alaskans are not getting a good return on their public safety spending. Nearly two out of every three offenders who leave the state's prisons are back behind bars within three years.

I look forward to watching Alaska move toward reforms that will help more fathers -- and mothers -- be at home for those important, life-enriching barbecues with their families.

**Tony Perkins** is a former Louisiana legislator and is the president of the Family Research Council. He is a signatory of the Right on Crime campaign.

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