

Broken Bonds

Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents

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Executive Summary

Parental incarceration affects a large and increasing number of children. The most recent estimates (for 2002) indicate that over 1.5 million children have a parent who is currently in state or federal prison. Most of these children are young, low-income, and black or Hispanic. These children face significant uncertainty in nearly every aspect of their lives. Temporary, informal care arrangements may permanently separate children from their imprisoned parent, their family, and their friends. The expense and discomfort of prison visits may limit the contact between parent and child needed to maintain a relationship during incarceration. Dramatic reductions in parental income and resource-strained caregivers may lead to significant financial hardship.

This hardship only aggravates the trauma and stigma that often accompany the incarceration of a parent. Children typically display short-term coping responses to deal with their loss, which can develop into long-term emotional and behavioral challenges, such as depression, problems with school, delinquency, and drug use. Although a variety of associated risk factors could explain the coping behaviors common to these children, recent research indicates that parental incarceration exerts a unique influence on child outcomes.

While children with parents behind bars face significant risks as a group, their individual stories demonstrate a wide variety of outcomes. More research is needed on how children of different ages and genders vary in their reaction to parental incarceration, as well as how children with incarcerated fathers differ from those with incarcerated mothers and from those with both parents behind bars. We do know, however, that strong, close, and supportive relationships provide some of the best forms of protection against the risks of having a parent in prison. These relationships are not limited to those involving the incarcerated parent or the current caregiver; children also benefit from developing bonds with adults outside of their home. For many children, “support” can be as simple as acknowledging the unique nature of their loss in a manner that accepts rather than stigmatizes.

In response to the needs and challenges of this unique population and the individual children who comprise it, this report offers several recommendations to those involved in research, policy, and service delivery. The research community should contribute more toward our understanding of how the impact of parental incarceration on children may differ based upon both child and parental characteristics. The policy community should maintain better statistics on the number and characteristics of children with parents behind bars and revise or create policies that improve contact between parents before, during, and after imprisonment. Finally, the service community should continue to provide programs to strengthen parent-child relationships and create new programs that focus on supporting the caregivers, family members, and communities that are affected by parental incarceration.

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Introduction

The physical and emotional well being of children can be threatened or harmed in a myriad of ways, not the least of which is the absence of a parent from their lives. While parental absences can occur through marital separation or even death, the removal of a parent through incarceration creates unique stressors in a child's life, many of which go unnoticed to the outside world. The stigma and shame associated with parental incarceration makes identifying children of incarcerated parents difficult for schools and social service agencies. Children of incarcerated parents are also subject to significant uncertainty and instability, as many incarcerated parents repeatedly cycle in and out of prison. Moreover, while most children have a means of personal contact with a parent who is absent because of marital separation, the barriers to communication between a child and his or her incarcerated parent are tremendous and are complicated by the fact that caregivers may be reluctant to facilitate such contact.

The needs of these children have become more pronounced as the nation's prison population, particularly the population of female inmates, continues to grow. Since the early 1970s, the number of adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons in the United States has continuously risen, placing the current incarceration rate at 501 per 100,000 residents (Sabol, Couture, and Harrison 2007). This number represents an increasing portion of the total population behind bars, and thus a larger share of children each year is affected by parental incarceration. The most recent estimates (based on 1997 data) indicate that on any given day, roughly 1.5 million children in this country have a parent in prison (Mumola 2000), yet very little is known about the characteristics and needs of this unique population. What is the nature of their home environments before, during, and after incarceration? What barriers exist to maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship during incarceration and what are the benefits of reunification after a parent's release? What emotional and behavioral challenges do these children face, and what can charitable organizations, practitioners, and policy makers do to address those challenges?

With these questions in mind, this report seeks to develop a better understanding of this distinct population of children through a review of empirical research on the topic. We begin by illustrating the scope of the problem, quantifying the number of children with adult parents who are incarcerated in prisons—as well as those under other forms of criminal justice supervision—as well as identifying specific demographic traits shared by these children. We then describe the changes that children of incarcerated parents will likely encounter as they negotiate new living arrangements, family relationships, and financial circumstances. This descriptive information is followed by a review of empirical studies that have examined the emotional and behavioral correlates of having an incarcerated parent. The results of these studies are used to support the identification of protective factors and programs that may mitigate the impact of parental incarceration on children. We conclude with a series of recommendations for how this unique and vulnerable population can be better served.

Scope of the Problem

Estimating the number of children affected by parental incarceration is no small task. Most estimates begin by quantifying the number of parents currently behind bars, with recent data indicating that nearly half of all state and federal prisoners, or 700,000 inmates, have at least one minor child. These parents expect to serve an average sentence of 80 to 103 months,¹ most often for crimes involving a violent offense or drug trafficking. For those parents incarcerated in state prison systems, 75 percent hold a prior conviction and 56 percent have served time before (Mumola 2000). On average, for each one of these parents who is currently incarcerated, two children are left behind.²

While these figures help to approximate the number of children with an incarcerated parent, they fall short of accurately representing the true size of this population. Most estimates are derived from a 1997 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey³; given the ever increasing volume of adults behind bars, the number of children currently with an incarcerated parent is likely to be much higher. Indeed, between 1991 and 1999, the number of children with an incarcerated parent increased by 50 percent, or about half a million children (Mumola 2000); assuming similar growth from late 1990 to the present, there are probably over 2 million children with a parent currently in prison. However, even this adjusted statistic fails to take into account children who have experienced the incarceration of a parent at some point in their life. It is also important to acknowledge that because these estimates did not track whether male and female inmates were parents of the same child, they may over represent the number of children with an incarcerated parent by not capturing dual-parent incarceration. Empirically, research indicates that maternal incarceration often co-occurs with paternal incarceration, with one study determining that among a sample of teenagers with incarcerated mothers, two-thirds also had a father behind bars (Garfinkel, Geller, and Cooper 2007; Phillips et al. 2006).

Despite the limitations of these estimates, it is safe to conclude that parental incarceration impacts a large and increasing number of children, most of whom are young, poor, and black or Hispanic.⁴ Surveys of inmates place the average age of their children at just eight years old; over one in five is under the age of five. Most reside in low-income homes, with about half of incarcerated parents reporting a monthly income of less than \$1,000 prior to arrest. Parental incarceration also disproportionately impacts ethnic minorities, such that black children are almost nine times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison. Hispanic children are three times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison.

The growing size of this problem and its tendency to impact already vulnerable children signals a need to clarify both the unique needs and challenges shared by these children as well as the individual qualities and circumstances that mediate the effect of parental incarceration. In order to learn more about this population, we must first examine how parental incarceration affects daily life.

¹ This range in months represents the difference between sentences in state and federal prison. See Mumola 2000.

² 2002 estimates indicate that there are approximately 750,000 parents in state or federal prison, and 1.5 million children with a parent in state or federal prison. See Mumola 2000.

³ An analysis of the 2004 «Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities» is expected in summer of 2008.

⁴ All research cited in this paragraph comes from Mumola 2000.

Changes in Daily Life

Whether they have lost their sole caregiver or an already absentee parent, children will likely experience a dramatic disruption in their lives following the incarceration of a parent.⁵ The experiences that children encounter can be categorized into three groups: changes in living arrangements, changes in parent-child relationships, and changes in financial circumstances.

Living Arrangements

An increasing number of children will lose their primary caregivers to incarceration. Although fathers still represent the vast majority of incarcerated parents, more mothers are finding themselves behind bars. Indeed, between 1991 and 1999, the number of children with incarcerated mothers nearly doubled while the number with an incarcerated father grew by 58 percent. In contrast to incarcerated fathers,⁶ most mothers in prison lived with their children before the arrest, often in a single-parent household.⁷ While many of these mothers resided with other relatives, about one-third raised their children completely alone prior to incarceration. In support of this finding, a survey of California law enforcement officials reported that about 80 percent of arrested sole-caretakers were mothers (Nieto 2002).

After a parent is arrested (and often ultimately incarcerated), the decision of where to place his or her children generally requires immediate resolution, often not allowing ample time for appropriate legal, psychological, social, and financial considerations (Katz 1998). A 2001 survey of law enforcement officials in California (Nieto 2002) found that only one in eight agencies had policies requiring officers to ask an arrestee if they have any children, regardless of the presence of children at the time of arrest. In cases where a child is present at the time of arrest, only 42 percent of officers inquire about that child's care; nearly one third will request that Child Protective Services (CPS) take custody of the child. For law enforcement agencies who do assume responsibility for a minor child upon the arrest of a sole caretaker, about half determine where the child is placed without involving CPS. Two-thirds of officials who request a recommendation for a caregiver from the arrested parent will accept it, despite the fact that some parents may not be willing or able to offer a sound placement recommendation.⁸

Whereas children of incarcerated fathers are typically placed with their mothers and often will not experience a significant change in their living situation, children of incarcerated mothers tend to have more varied and uncertain living arrangements.⁹ The majority do not live with their fathers, instead residing in the care of grandparents, other relatives, or friends.¹⁰ Research suggests that many of these

⁵ While this report focuses primarily on children whose parents are sentenced to state and federal prisoners, as Walker (2005) reports, many of the issues and challenges encountered by such children are similar to those experienced by children whose parents cycle in and out of county jail systems.

⁶ 52.8 percent in federal prison and 64.4 percent in state prison; see Mumola 2000.

⁷ 64 percent and 84 percent mothers in state and federal prison lived with their children before the arrest; 46 percent of mothers in state prison and 51.3 percent in federal lived in single parent households prior to arrest; see Mumola 2000.

⁸ Some arrested parents choose not to reveal the existence of their minor children out of fears of losing custody, while others refrain from making a placement recommendation in hopes that an informal arrangement can be made without official involvement.

⁹ Unfortunately, the nature of these children's living arrangements prior to their mother's incarceration is unknown.

¹⁰ 28 percent of children with mothers in state prison and 30.7 percent in federal prison live with their fathers; 52.9 percent of mothers in state prison and 44.9 percent of mothers in federal prison have a grandparent taking care of their children; 25.7 percent and 33.9 percent have a relative caring for their children; and about one in ten mothers will have a friend take care of their children; see Mumola 2000.

new caregivers assume responsibility for the child with little information about how long the parent will be away and with limited resources needed to address possible traumas experienced by the child due to his or her parent's incarceration (Katz 1998). Grandparents often will raise their grandchildren unofficially and without formal rights out of fear of disrupting the family, losing custody of the children, or implying poor parenting on the part of the incarcerated parent. The time consuming and expensive process of obtaining formal rights also may prevent some caregivers from seeking custody (Beltran 2001 as cited in Hanlon, Carswell, and Rose 2007), with one study finding that only 13 percent of caregivers of children with an incarcerated parent had been involved in court proceedings to obtain formal guardianship (Harm and Thompson 1995 as cited in Phillips and Bloom 1998). Parents also may treat the arrangements as temporary, restricting contact with their children because they believe their release to be imminent (Hairston 2002).

Although the actions of those around children of incarcerated parents reinforce the message that the situation is temporary, research suggests that permanent change is likely. One study found that only one in eleven older children of prisoners had lived continuously with a primary caregiver since birth (Johnston 1991 as cited in Simmons 2000). Another study indicated that children of the incarcerated are 130 percent more likely to experience family instability than those without incarcerated parents (Phillips et al. 2006). This instability often results in separation from family and friends. Siblings may be placed in separate homes and even different areas of the country (Johnston 1995; Stanton 1980; Koban 1983 as cited in Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999): one study determined that 29 percent of children with an imprisoned mother had been separated from their siblings (Harm and Thompson 1995 as cited in Phillips and Bloom 1998). Marriages may become strained when a spouse is incarcerated and end before release from prison (Hairston 2002). Children may move to different neighborhoods or cities and lose their connection with friends and members of the community. Perhaps most significantly, children may permanently lose their parents. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act proscribes that the process for termination of parental rights begin when a child has been in foster care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months. Given that about nine percent of mothers in state prison currently have a child in a foster home or agency, and that the average sentence for an incarcerated parent ranges from 80 to 103 months, many inmates risk losing custody of their children prior to their release, regardless of desire or willingness to parent (Travis, McBride and Solomon 2003). It should be noted, however, that the loss of custody rights often occurs before the parent's incarceration; one study found that children were removed at a time when their mother's criminal activity had increased to a point at which she was no longer able to care for them (Ehrensaft et al. 2003; George and Lalonde 2002).

Parent-child relationship

Incarcerated parents risk "losing" their children in ways other than the formal revocation of custody rights. The majority of incarcerated parents reside over 100 miles away from the home they occupied before arrest, making travel to the prison facility time consuming, expensive, and difficult to coordinate. Long-distance phone calls may also be prohibitive, as one study estimates that prisoner-initiated collect-calls cost the receiving household as much as three times that of a call placed from a standard pay phone and

five to ten times that of a call from a residential phone (Hairston 1998). Aside from financial barriers, many of the policies and procedures designed to promote safety within the prison also discourage visits, as family members often encounter intimidating, uncomfortable, and humiliating conditions that may deter future contact. Studies have cited long waiting periods before a visit can occur; frisk searches and disrespectful treatment; crowded and noisy visiting areas; and conversation spaces separated by glass barriers (Hairston 1998). Inmates and their visitors may also face conflicting policies and procedures; many rules seem arbitrary while others are inconsistently applied (Hairston 2002; Jeffries, Menghraj, and Hairston 2001).

While the vast majority of caregivers believe contact between incarcerated mothers and their children is important,¹¹ the often discomfoting experience of visiting an incarcerated parent makes many caregivers reluctant to coordinate and chaperone visits to prison. Caregivers may also have hostile relationships with the incarcerated parent, providing a strong disincentive for facilitating visits for the child. In addition, parents may not want their child to visit them in prison out of shame or fear that seeing them behind bars would upset the child (Hairston 2002). Ultimately, over half of incarcerated parents do not receive any visits from their children during their sentence; 40 percent of mothers and 60 percent of fathers report no weekly contact of any kind (Mumola 2000). Parents incarcerated before or soon after the birth of their child may not see their child until after the critical period for attachment has ended (Myers et al. 1999 as cited in Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001).

It is important to note that not all contact should be maintained; many children whose parents become incarcerated are relieved of a stressful, dangerous home environment.¹² One study found that one out of eight children who are reported victims of maltreatment have parents who were recently arrested; in 90 percent of cases, it was the child's mother who was arrested (Phillips and Gleeson 2007). Substance addiction and the neglect and abuse that can accompany it may also make parental contact and reunification a questionable goal if substance abuse treatment is not obtained. The majority of incarcerated parents used drugs one month before their offense and were in prison for violent offenses or drug trafficking (Mumola 2000). Research has documented pre-prison mother-child relationships that range from neglectful or absent to warm and nurturing (Baunach 1985 as cited in Block and Potthast 1998). In some cases, imprisonment often serves as a way of removing a parent who has "burned through" the supportive capacity of the family and become a drain or threat rather than asset (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999).

Financial circumstances

Children who have lost a parent to incarceration will likely experience greater financial hardship than other children. When compared to children whose parents had no history of criminal justice system involvement, one study determined that those with parents who had been incarcerated were 80 percent more likely to live in a household that experienced economic strain, even after controlling for the

¹¹ 94 percent of caregivers believe contact between incarcerated mother and child is important and 97 percent have helped promote such contact ; similar data was not found on caregivers' feelings about contact between father and child; see Bloom & Steinhart 1993 as cited in Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001.

¹² See Zierbert 2006 for further discussion .

incarcerated parent's substance use, mental health, education and race.¹³ These children also suffer greater material disadvantage than children with a parent absent for reasons other than incarceration. A recent study found that after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors, children with fathers incarcerated before or after their birth were more likely to experience financial hardship than were children with never-incarcerated, never-resident fathers (Garfinkel et al. 2007). Similarly, children with a mother incarcerated before their birth fared significantly worse than those with a never-incarcerated mother.¹⁴ Another nationally representative sample of parents found that children who have both parents behind bars experience higher levels of material hardship than those with only one parent incarcerated (Garfinkel et al. 2007).

Several factors might explain the increase in financial strain following a parent's incarceration. Typically, currently or formerly incarcerated parents cannot provide the level of financial support they offered prior to their arrest. As a result, non-resident fathers who paid child support before their arrest (Hairston 1998) cannot afford child care payments while in prison, as even those fathers who obtain employment in prison typically earn far less than the amount ordered for support (Jeffries et al. 2001). Estimates in Massachusetts suggest that less than one in four prisoners made a payment on their child support order in the twelve months preceding the study.¹⁵ Children may also lose the support of welfare funds from parents who were unemployed prior to incarceration, as these monies are often difficult to transfer to a new caregiver (Hairston 2002).

The loss in parental income places a significant burden on the child's current caregiver to provide for the household. Caregivers may need to quit their jobs in order to care for the child (Harm and Thompson 1995 as cited in Phillips and Bloom 1998); retired caregivers often exhaust their retirement savings attending to the needs of the new ward (Minkler and Roe 1993). Indeed, studies have found that one in four children living with a grandmother live in poverty, and a third do not have health insurance (Bryson and Casper 1999). Two-thirds of caregivers of children with incarcerated mothers reported not having the financial support needed to meet the necessary expenses for the child (Bloom and Steinhart 1993 as cited in Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Limited finances may be stretched further by expensive telephone calls and visits along with the prisoner's requests for money.

The incarceration of a parent leads to great change and uncertainty in nearly every aspect of a child's life. Temporary, informal care arrangements may permanently separate children from their incarcerated parent, family, and friends. Expensive and uncomfortable visits may limit the contact between parent and child needed to maintain a relationship during incarceration. Dramatic reductions in parent income and resource-strained caregivers may result in significant financial hardship. How do children cope with this disruption and strain? The next section explores the emotional and behavioral correlates of having a parent behind bars.

13 The study's sample of youth from rural counties in North Carolina should not be generalized to the entire population; Philips et al. 2006.

14 However, because children of parents incarcerated before and after their birth experienced nearly identical outcomes, the authors speculate that an unmeasured risk factor may cause parents' "selection" into incarceration while making them unable to provide for their family.

15 The study also found that inmates entering a Department of Correction prison owe an average of \$10,543 in unpaid child support. If they stay in prison until their projected release date and their orders remain at their pre-incarceration levels, they will accumulate another \$20,461 in child support debt. See Thoennes 2002.

Emotional and Behavioral Impact

Separation from a parent for any reason will likely result in stress, sadness, and fear; indeed, many scholars have likened the experience of losing a parent to incarceration to that of losing a parent to death or divorce (Lowenstein 1986 as cited in Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). However, while death is naturally occurring and final, separation due to incarceration is ambiguous; children may not know how to grieve the loss of a parent who is alive, yet emotionally and physically absent (Miller 2006). Children may be seriously emotionally affected by this sudden and ambiguous loss. One study, although limited to 36 children of incarcerated mothers, found that the trauma of parental incarceration often triggered chronic sleeplessness, difficulties concentrating, and depression (Kampfner 1995 as cited in Ziebert 2006). Another study found that 16 percent of children with a parent behind bars developed temporary school phobias that made them unwilling to attend school for up to six weeks following their parent's incarceration (Sack et al. 1987 as cited in Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001).

Researchers speculate that these initial reactions to the trauma of parental incarceration may trigger emotional responses, which in turn lead to long-term reactive behaviors, coping patterns, and possible criminal activity (Gabel and Johnston n.d. as cited in Simmons 2000). Unfortunately, past efforts to examine this theory have met with difficulty.¹⁶ As it is exceptional for a family to experience incarceration in the absence of other difficulties (Wright and Seymour 2000), a parent's imprisonment may represent just one risk factor to a child's healthy development within a larger family context of drug abuse, violence, crime and disadvantage. Indeed, one national study of children encountered by Child Welfare Services (CWS) determined that children with currently or formerly incarcerated parents were exposed to a greater number of problems (parental substance abuse, mental illness, extreme poverty, domestic violence) than other children encountered by CWS (Phillips and Gleeson 2007). Previous studies that have examined the impact of a parent's incarceration on his or her children too often fail to adequately address the influence of these other risk factors by relying on small samples, weak control groups, and potentially biased self-reports.¹⁷

A recent study, however, provides promising evidence of an independent, causal relationship between parental incarceration and its associated emotional and behavioral outcomes (Murray and Farrington 2007). Using results from studies with representative samples, the analysis revealed that, after controlling for other risk factors, three of five studies demonstrated an independent effect of parental incarceration on child anti-social behavior; two additional studies showed an independent effect of parental imprisonment on child mental health, drug use, school failure, and unemployment. One longitudinal study of English boys found that parental incarceration represents a unique risk factor for antisocial and delinquent behavior, determining that among boys who experienced parental incarceration before the age of ten, nearly half were convicted of a crime as adults, compared to a quarter of

¹⁶ For a comprehensive review of studies and their limitations, please see Murray and Farrington 2007

¹⁷ A study by Trice and Brewster (2004) that compared children of incarcerated parents to their best friends, but did not measure whether those friends also experienced parental incarceration; other studies have simply compared children of incarcerated parents to those within the general population. Other research has relied on potentially biased self-reports, such as a study by Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) that asked incarcerated parents to report on their child's externalizing and internalizing symptoms without controlling for how often the parent saw their child. For a comprehensive review of studies and their limitations, please see Murray and Farrington 2007.

demographically-matched boys who were separated from their parents for other reasons (Murray and Farrington 2005). The difference between the two groups remained significant after controlling for parent criminality and other childhood risk factors. A similar study of children of the incarcerated in Sweden found that the number of times a parent was incarcerated predicted the number of offenses committed by their child later in life (Murray, Janson, and Farrington 2007). Another longitudinal study of 48 male children of incarcerated parents compared to a matched comparison group found that the former group was much more likely to have committed serious delinquent acts, to have repeated a grade in school, and to have substance abuse disorders than the comparison group (Loeber 2004).¹⁸

Other studies, although lacking the same level of empirical rigor as Murray and Farrington (2007), have noted a similar impact of parental incarceration on children, including the occurrence of internalizing behaviors (including depression, disordered eating and sleeping, and emotional withdrawal) and externalizing behaviors (including aggression, developmental regression, and acting out/classroom behavioral problems) (Gabel 1992, Henriques 1982, Hungerford 1993, Kampfner 1995, Rocheleau 1987, and Zalba 1964 as cited in Block and Potthast 1998; Johnston 1995; Osborne Association 1993 as cited in Lee 1993; Stanton 1980; Henriques 1980 and Sack et al. 1997 as cited in Wright and Seymour 2000). Children who have an incarcerated parent also experience a two-fold increase in risk for mental health problems, and higher rates major depression and attention disorders, than the general population of youth (Murray and Farrington 2007; Phillips et al. 2002; Stanton 1980; Henriques 1980 and Sack et al. 1997 as cited in Wright and Seymour 2000). A national study of children encountered by Child Welfare Services estimates that among children with recently arrested parents, one in five had clinically significant internalizing problems (depression, anxiety, withdrawal) and one in three had clinically significant externalizing problems (aggression, attention problems, disruptive behavior), compared to roughly one in ten children in the general population (Phillips and Gleeson 2007). Children of the incarcerated also demonstrate below-average academic performance, even when compared to children of mothers on probation (70 percent compared to 17 percent), and are more likely than similarly disadvantaged children to fail or dropout of school (Stanton 1980; Trice and Brewster 2004).

Research also suggests that parental incarceration exerts a unique impact on different types of children.¹⁹ One study of children with incarcerated mothers found that older children were more likely to hold secure attachments than were their younger children, suggesting that these children may better understand the complexity of the situation than younger children (Poehlmann 2005). However, other studies suggest that older children simply react differently than their younger counterparts, with younger children experiencing disorganized feelings and behaviors upon their parent's incarceration and older children displaying more antisocial behavior, conduct disorders, and signs of depression (Johnston 1992 as cited in Wright and Seymour 2000). Boys and girls may also react differently to a parent's incarceration. Traditionally, males are believed to suffer more from parental separation than are females,

¹⁸ Loeber, Rolf. 2004. Unpublished analysis of Pittsburgh Youth Study data, transmitted by personal correspondence to Claire Walker. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, April 16.

¹⁹ See Wright and Seymour 2000.

as they are more likely to lose their same-sex parent, to face social expectations of “toughness,” and to display psychological vulnerability (Amato 1994). Research has produced mixed findings on the different reactions of boys and girls, with some studies finding more severe antisocial reactions among boys and others finding worse effects among girls.²⁰ As with the age of the child, gender may simply predict different reactions to incarceration, with boys of fathers behind bars displaying more delinquency and aggression and girls exhibiting more internalizing behaviors and attention problems.²¹ These reactions may prompt different responses in those around the children and alter the impact of parental incarceration.²²

In addition to the emotional and behavioral impacts of parental incarceration, many children will also be exposed to considerable stigmatization. While children who lose a parent for reasons other than incarceration will likely receive sympathy and care from others, children who have lost a parent to incarceration face social burdens and potential stigma (Fritsch and Burkhead 1981). When stigma surrounds the loss of a parent, the child is denied many necessary supports and normal social outlets for grieving the departed parent (Hostetter and Jinnah 1993). They may internalize the stigma and experience lower self-esteem, especially if they identify with the incarcerated parent (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership 2005). Others may react with anger, defiance, and a desire for retaliation against those who reject and taunt them (Sherman 1993 as cited in Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Regardless of the nature of a child’s response to such stigma, it represents one of the most damaging results and heaviest burdens of parental incarceration, lasting for many children long after the parent is released (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership 2005). Very little research exists on these children’s direct experiences with stigma, except for findings that children with incarcerated parents were teased more frequently at school (Kampfner 1991 as cited in Johnston 1995) and that stigma may have the greatest impact on children and families with little experience in the criminal justice system (Lowenstein 1986 as cited in Ziebert 2006).

The stigma associated with parental incarceration may prompt family members to cover up the parent’s whereabouts, both from the child and from the community. Children may be lied to about the reasons for their parent’s absence and not find out until much later the real cause for their departure (Hairston 2002). According to one report, a quarter of female prisoners’ children did not know that their mothers were in prison (Kiser 1991 as cited in Hostetter and Jinnah 1993). Although the specific consequences of such deceit are not known, researchers generally agree that children need to receive honest, factual information and to have their experiences validated (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001); by trying to “protect” the child from the truth, family members may actually cause worry, uncertainty, fear and distrust. Children may wonder if they too will mysteriously disappear (Herrmann-Keeling 1988 as cited in Hostetter and Jinnah 1993), or find out about the incarceration through other sources and learn to distrust

20 Murray and Farrington 2007. One study revealed that parental incarceration had a greater impact on criminality in females than in males, though the authors note that this finding could result from the low number of female offenders in the sample; see Murray et al. 2007 for further explanation.

21 These results were found using a small sample of children attending a day hospital and cannot be generalized to the population; see Gabel and Shindledecker 1993.

22 Poehlmann (2005) found that children who react to a mother’s incarceration with sadness are likely to have more secure attachments to caregivers than those who react with anger, as sadness may elicit a more nurturing and supportive response. Therefore, because girls are more likely to react with sadness and boys with anger, girls may receive more support in coping with the loss of a parent to incarceration.

those closest to them (Poehlmann 2005). Children who are deceived about their parent's absence are also unlikely to visit their parent while incarcerated (Hairston 2002) and hence, cannot maintain a relationship with the parent while in prison and encounter greater reunification challenges upon the parent's release.

Protective Factors

Thus far, this report has painted a sobering picture of the lives of typical children with incarcerated parents. They face significant changes in their living arrangements and relationships with others, must navigate the barriers to maintaining contact with their incarcerated parent, and will likely encounter significant financial hardship. This uncertainty only aggravates the trauma, stigma, and other risk factors that often accompany the incarceration of a parent. In the end, these obstacles often prove too challenging for many children to deal with, leading to emotional and behavioral problems that may last throughout their lifetime.

Although children with incarcerated parents face significant risks as a group, their individual stories demonstrate a wide variety of outcomes. While the similarities between children of the incarcerated have helped inform our understanding of the distinct needs of this population, we must also examine what factors enable certain children to thrive in spite of their circumstances. Of particular interest is the extent to which different traits, circumstances, and experiences can help temper the negative impact of parental incarceration. Aside from simply an absence of risk, what protective factors in a child's life might ease the burden of a parent's imprisonment?

Relationship with parent before and during incarceration

The closeness of the parent-child relationship before incarceration will likely determine how well a child copes with the loss once the parent is behind bars. Clearly, losing a parent to which one is close will likely produce more disruption and sadness than losing an absentee parent. However, a positive pre-incarceration relationship can impact parent-child communication during the period of incarceration. One study determined that the relationship between mother and child before incarceration impacted the frequency of visits: 54 percent of mothers who lived with their child before arrest received at least one visit in prison, compared to 28 percent who did not live with the child (Bloom and Steinhart 1993 as cited in Block and Potthast 1998).

Indeed, maintaining contact with one's incarcerated parent appears to be one of the most effective ways to improve a child's emotional response to the incarceration and reduce the incidence of problematic behavior. Children who maintain contact with their parent during incarceration exhibit fewer disruptive and anxious behaviors (Sack and Seidler 1978; Stanton 1980) and overall improved outcomes (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004; Klein, Bartholomew, and Hibbert 2002; La Vigne et al. 2005). In addition to these direct benefits to the child's emotional health and behavior, maintaining contact helps the incarcerated parent as well. Studies suggest that it lowers recidivism rates (Adams and Fischer 1976; Glaser 1969; Hairston 2002; Holt and Miller 1972; Klein et al. 2002; Ohlin 1954) and is linked to other

positive outcomes associated with successful reentry (Edin et al. 2004; Sampson and Laub 1993; Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004). These improvements for the parent will indirectly benefit the child by adding a greater degree of stability to their life once their parent has left prison.²³

Given these empirical findings, it comes as no surprise that several programs that offer enhanced visiting programs for incarcerated parents and their children show promising results. The Girl Scouts Beyond Bars Program strives to reduce reunification problems and the stress of separation by supporting a healthy relationship between incarcerated mothers and their daughters. The program helps facilitate meetings, provides activities for mothers and daughters, and transports the children to the prison. An evaluation found that although about half of the mothers reported no change in their daughter's visiting patterns, the program provided the only means of contact for the 36 percent of mothers who did not receive regular visits. Interviews with caregivers indicated perceived improvements in daughters' emotional well-being, including less anger, worry, fear, and rebellion (Block and Potthast 1998).

The Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program also uses enhanced visitation to develop stronger relationships between incarcerated parent and child. LIFE provides parent-child participants with a low-stress, child-friendly environment in which to work on 4-H activities supplemented with monthly parenting classes. In follow-up interviews, fathers believed that their children benefited from an atmosphere conducive to relaxed physical contact, 4-H activities that promoted constructive interaction with their child, and parenting education classes that improved their communication skills and provided a supportive network of other incarcerated fathers. Self-reported benefits included stronger parent-child relationships, mutual respect and bonding, improved communication, family unity, life skills (e.g., leadership, empathy and self-control), and improved behavior and academic performance among participating children.²⁴

Support from family, caregivers, and members of the community

Strong relationships with primary caregivers, family members, friends and other members of the community can support children as they negotiate their parent's incarceration. These relationships may be particularly important for children who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to have a close, positive relationship with the incarcerated parent. Research suggests that close emotional relationships with extended family members may ease the trauma of incarceration and mitigate the associated negative effects (Bloom and Steinhart 1993 as cited in Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2001), particularly if the children lived with those family members before their parent's incarceration. One study found that urban black adolescents who resided with their mothers and their grandmothers prior to maternal incarceration tended to already view the grandparents as their primary caregivers, making incarceration less disruptive to daily life (Hanlon et al. 2005). Indeed, a close, positive relationship with an adult caregiver may represent one of the strongest protective factors for youth.²⁵

23 Murray et al. (2007) also suggest that shorter sentence times may improve child outcomes, with one study of Swedish children speculating that the reason incarceration did not impact later criminality might lie in the country's relatively short prison sentences.

24 All information based on research by Dunn and Arbuckle 2002.

25 Turner (1995) points out to several investigators, including Rutter 1980, Rutter 1987 and Werner 1989; see Hanlon et al. 2007.

Children of incarcerated parents may also derive support from outside of the home, particularly through mentoring programs. Although no studies have specifically examined the impact of mentoring programs on children with a parent behind bars,²⁶ research has found that mentoring in general leads to marked improvements in the academic performance, social behavior, relationships and decision making skills of a range of children (Grossman and Garry 1997), particularly those exposed to multiple risk factors (Johnston 1995). One study found that when compared to controls, children who participated in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program were significantly less likely to initiate drug use or consume alcohol; the effect was even stronger among minority youth (Grossman and Garry 1997). Mentored youth in BB/BS were also significantly less likely to skip school and reported more feelings of competence about school work; perhaps as a result, they also demonstrated a modest improvement in their grades. Mentees also reported improved relationships with their parents by the end of the study. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know how mentoring specifically impacts children of incarcerated parents.

Social support can also be as simple as the acknowledgement and acceptance of the parent's incarceration. By having individuals around them who neither stigmatize nor ignore their parent's imprisonment, children can begin to cope with and move beyond the trauma. Children with incarcerated fathers are more likely to find this level of acceptance, as the loss of one's mother to prison is likely to represent more of an anomaly and hence, will receive harsher judgment (Women in Prison Project March 2006). Unfortunately, an absence of community stigma may signal that incarceration is no longer viewed as a social problem or negative situation, which may have its own detrimental impact.

Strong relationships in a child's life provide one of the best forms of protection against the risks of having a parent in prison. Although a close bond with a parent before incarceration may make the experience of imprisonment initially harder on the child, these strong relationships are not only more likely to be maintained, but are also more likely to improve children's outcomes in the long run. Similarly, a healthy, supportive relationship with a caregiver or other adult within the community may improve emotional health, behavioral outcomes, and school performance. For many children, support can be as simple as acknowledging and accepting the unique nature of their loss without stigma or deceit.

Recommendations

Although a considerable amount of information currently exists on children of incarcerated parents, more research is needed to understand variation within this unique group of at-risk children. Particularly, the research community should examine the impact of parental incarceration on different types of children and family situations, looking at factors such as age and gender; the sex of the incarcerated parent; and the relationship with that parent prior to incarceration. Further research is also needed to examine the relationship between children and caregivers, mentors, and other important adults in their lives, specifically in terms of how certain factors may temper the loss of the parent behind bars. The research community also needs rigorous evaluations on the effectiveness of existing programs designed to

²⁶ The Department of Health and Human Services recently funded several mentoring programs that focus on children of incarcerated parents. Findings from an evaluation are expected in 2009.

improve the outcomes of children that have incarcerated parents. A longitudinal study following emotional, social, physical, and educational outcomes among children of incarcerated parents compared to a matched comparison group, while costly, would contribute tremendously to the field of knowledge on this topic. Similarly, there is a lack of rigorous evaluations of programs designed to mitigate the negative impact of parental incarceration on children. Rigorously evaluated demonstration projects that use best practices of programs for other vulnerable children to address the specific needs and challenges of children of incarcerated parents would provide important guidance for ways in which to invest efforts to serve this population.

One of the greatest needs within the policy community lies in obtaining better records of the number of children with incarcerated parents. Information about these children, their caregivers, and their needs should be systematically solicited, recorded, and shared to design effective services (Russell et al. 2006). Gathering information on children with incarcerated parents would also help agencies that encounter such children during the process from arrest, through the court, and into the correctional facility. Particularly, law enforcement agencies and CWS would benefit from additional information on this population in developing policies that guide their employees in effectively serving such children.

Given that close, healthy relationships represent one of the great protective factors for children of the incarcerated, programs are needed that strengthen children's connections with their parents, their family, their caregivers, and others within the community. While considerable effort has been made to create programs that maintain contact between parent and child during incarceration as well as to develop mentoring programs, more services are still needed. Particularly, more focus must be placed on developing the parent-child relationship before, during and after incarceration. Parents at risk for incarceration may need extra help in both learning how to parent and staying away from criminal activities. Currently incarcerated parents would benefit from amendments to current visitation policies, more programs that facilitate contact with children, and close family involvement in reentry planning. Parents reentering society from prison will also need supports if they are expected to parent: many prisoners have few skills with which to find and maintain employment. This issue, coupled with restrictive hiring policies and stigmas associated with possessing a criminal history, makes it difficult for parents to provide adequate support to their families (Hirsch et al. 2002). Hence, prison reentry programs should focus on training prisoners in basic skills and help them to find employment upon release.

Understanding that reunification between formerly incarcerated parent and child is not always in the best interests of the child, it is still noteworthy that current laws favor termination of parental rights in lieu of keeping families intact. To address this potential bias, the policy community should consider reexamining the timeline for terminating custody rights as outlined in the ASFA and working with foster care agencies to create policies for dealing with children of incarcerated parents.²⁷

In addition to supporting parents, policies and programs must also aid caregivers as they negotiate care for children with incarcerated parents. One particularly helpful service might be to arrange formal and informal opportunities for caregivers, especially grandparents, to convene and share their problems,

²⁷ In 1994, 97 percent of foster care agencies did not have a policy for dealing with children of incarcerated parents; see Reed and Reed 1997.

not only for the benefit of the grandparent, but also to assist them in addressing the unique needs of their ward(s). Further, as incarceration often separates children from their family members and friends, programs might also address how to keep children in contact with brothers and sisters, members of the extended family, and former friends. The stigma that comes with the incarceration of a parent should also be addressed by creating supportive peer networks of impacted children and community workshops that “get the problem out in the open.” Caregivers may also benefit from professional guidance on how to provide an honest and clear explanation about the parent’s absence (Poehlmann 2005). Finally, policies should be created to support caregivers financially, particularly by granting benefits to individuals raising the child of an incarcerated family member.

Parental incarceration affects a large and increasing number of children who face significant uncertainty in nearly every aspect of their lives. For many children, the trauma of incarceration and the stigma associated with having a parent behind bars will impact their emotional and behavioral development. Some may develop delinquent habits that turn into criminal behavior in later life. Others may internalize their feelings and risk later depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. However, with these great challenges also comes great opportunity. Research shows that when children of incarcerated parents have strong, healthy relationships with others, they cope better with the loss of their parent and exhibit fewer problematic behaviors. Although the most important relationship to develop and maintain is probably that which exists between child and parent, a supportive relationship with a caregiver, mentor, or other adult in the community may lead to similar benefits in the child’s life. Such benefits can, in turn, contribute toward healthier families and communities across the nation.

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