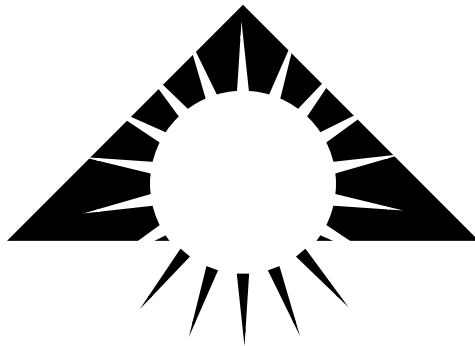


Family Impact Seminar

**The Center for Research on Children in the U.S. (CROCUS) &
Georgetown Public Policy Institute**



Children of Prisoners

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Background Briefing Report

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Children of Prisoners

The Panel Features the Following Speakers:

- Dr. Dorothy Browne, Senior Scientist, Drug Abuse Research Center & Director, Center for Health Disparities, Morgan State University
- Rev. Dr. Wilson Goode, Sr., Senior Advisor, Public/Private Ventures & Director, Amachi Mentoring Program
- Dr. William Muth, Education Administrator, Federal Bureau of Prisons

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Background

Nearly two-thirds (58.8 percent) of females in federal prison and just under half (45.3 percent) of women prisoners in state facilities have children under 18-years-old. The comparable figures for incarcerated fathers are even greater -- 63.4 percent and 54.7 percent, respectively (Mumola 2000). Their children, numbering roughly 1.5 million in 1999, are at increased risk of behavioral and emotional problems (Lowenstein 1986; Stanton 1980; Zalba 1964). Juvenile delinquency, aggression, fear, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, poor academic performance, and emotional withdrawal are among the most commonly cited deleterious outcomes among children of prisoners (Covington and Katz 1997; Gable and Johnston 1995). What makes children of prisoners an especially at-risk population? What is being done to help them? This report addresses what is known about children of prisoners and strategies policymakers, government officials, and community leaders are considering to address their unique needs.

Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children

Although it seems convenient to generalize the impact upon children of having parents in prison, the actual responses of children are shaped by factors that are unique to their situation, including the gender of the parent, the age at which the separation occurs, and the length and disruptiveness of the incarceration. The gender of the imprisoned parent is one significant factor that tends to affect how children will respond to incarceration. Regardless of the gender of the child, the response of children affected by maternal incarceration can be characterized as “acting in” behavior, such as crying and emotional withdrawal. Paternal incarceration generally provokes in children behavior characterized as “acting out,” which includes truancy and running away (Fritsch and Burkhead 1981).

The age at which the parent-child separation occurs is a second factor that contributes to the response of children to incarceration. Generally separation is more harmful when the child is young. Unfortunately comprehensive findings to date, which have focused on the female prison population, indicate that almost two-thirds of children are younger than ten and nearly a quarter younger than four at the time of their mothers’ incarceration. This finding is significant because it illustrates that the majority of children experience separation specifically from their mothers during their early formative years when a positive nurturing relationship is essential for healthy child development (McGowan and Blumenthal 1978).

The length and disruptiveness of the incarceration is a third predictive factor that tends to correlate with how a child will respond to having an imprisoned parent. Typically incarceration is less disruptive for children who have frequent contact with their imprisoned parents, and two main factors tend to facilitate whether this will occur. First, regular contact is more likely to occur when children live with immediate family members than when they are placed in foster care (McGowan and Blumenthal 1978). Second, contact is more likely to occur the closer the facility is in which the incarcerated parent resides. However, over 60% of parents in a state prison facility and 80% of parents in a federal facility are held more than 100 miles from their last place of residence (Mumola 2000). Thus, structural barriers, such as distance, often make prison visits—and thus sustained communication—impossible. Even for children who sustain contact

with their incarcerated parents, many confront challenges when they return home. Both parent and child must work to reestablish their relationships and overcome any strain that resulted from their separation (Travis and Waul 2004).

In addition, the likelihood of sustained contact during and a reunion after incarceration decreases each time a parent is sent to prison (McGowan and Blumenthal 1978). This is especially problematic given the likelihood that many prisoners who are already released from prison will be reconvicted for a new offense and or re-arrested and sent back to prison within two years of returning to the community. The likelihood that recidivism will occur is greater among men, African-American offenders, and younger inmates. Specifically, 24.3% of men recidivate compared to 13.7% of women. Further, 32.8% of African-American offenders recidivate compared to 24.3% of Hispanic offenders and 16% of white offenders. Lastly, those under 50 recidivate the most; at 21, 35.5% recidivate compared with 9.5% at 50 (U.S. Sentencing Commission 2004).

Federal Outreach for Children of Prisoners

I. President George W. Bush

By all accounts, children of prisoners are in need of targeted outreach. Historically, few programs—public or private—have existed to reach out to this particular population. But that appears to be changing. President George W. Bush can be credited in large part with elevating the status of children of prisoners to the national agenda and ushering in a greater awareness of their needs among both the public and private sectors. Through his repeated references to this at-risk population in public addresses, he has helped to increase the level of interest in and support for this at-risk population. Most importantly, funding for targeted programs has reached a record high during the Bush Administration. As part of a three-year initiative outlined in his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush has made more than \$45 million available exclusively to organizations that provide both community-based and faith-based mentoring for children of prisoners (<http://www.hhs.gov>).

II. Department of Health and Human Services

The Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families administers the grant money made available through Bush's initiative to provide mentors for children of prisoners. Programs that receive funding must adhere to a number of critical guidelines. They include: 1) Linking children with mentors who have received training and support in mentoring; 2) Incorporating elements of Positive Youth Development by providing guidance from a positive adult role model; and 3) Coordinating with partnering groups to develop a plan for the whole family that includes connecting the child with the imprisoned parent with permission from the other spouse or guardian; coordinating support services to siblings and families; and supporting caregivers with training and help navigating the services provided by the mentoring network. Thus far, 164 programs have received funding and are mentoring approximately 6,000 children of prisoners. The goal is to serve an additional 33,000 youth (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov>).

Many of these programs are based on the Amachi Mentoring Program, which has been at the forefront of providing mentoring to children of prisoners since its inception in September of 2000 under the guidance of Reverend W. Wilson Goode, Sr., the former mayor of Philadelphia. Its motto, "People of Faith Mentoring Children of Promise," succinctly sums up both its mission and its strength; Amachi recruits members of the faith community to serve as promising adult role models in the lives of several of the most at-risk youth. Currently, more than 1900 children are being served by 31 agencies nationwide that are using the Amachi Model.

III. The Department of Justice

Two different agencies within the Department of Justice provide resources and support for children of prisoners: the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the National Institute of Corrections.

A. The Federal Bureau of Prisons

Through its parenting programs, the Federal Bureau of Prisons provides inmates with opportunities to counteract negative family consequences resulting from their incarceration and to maintain and sustain contacts with their families (<http://www.bop.gov>). One current initiative is a family literacy program, in which a number of incarcerated parents at 14 institutions are participating. In partnership with the national Reading is Fundamental Program, children of participating inmates visit their parents on three different organized occasions. During these visits, the children select books to read with their parents. The goal is to expand this program to additional institutions within the next several years.

B. National Institute of Corrections

The National Institute of Corrections funded a number of cooperative agreements in 2001 to assist programs that help children of prisoners. Of significance, it awarded the Child Welfare League of America with a three-year cooperative award to create the Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners. Located in Washington DC, this center conducts research and evaluation; collects and disseminates information; and provides training and technical assistance (<http://www.cwla.org>).

Community Outreach

These programs can broadly be divided into three categories: 1) those providing counseling and mentoring, such as Amachi; 2) those providing academic support; and 3) those facilitating contact between incarcerated parents and their children. A variety of counseling programs exists that provide emotional assistance for children of incarcerated parents, most commonly taking the form of a support group. Some support groups are designed for only children, promoting emotional well being and family stability. Some programs also help to connect them with other children of prisoners, as is the case with Families with a Future. Founded in 1996, this organization offers support groups for

children in Berkeley and San Francisco, whose parents are incarcerated, during which time children are given a place to express their feelings. Others seek to assist both the children and the prisoner's families. A variety of academic programs exists to give children of prisoners supplemental help with their schoolwork and commonly takes the form of tutoring. One intensive program is the Capital Area Head Start at the Woodside Center in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, which provides a full-time Head Start program for children ages 3 to 5 of mothers who are incarcerated or have been incarcerated.

A number of programs have been identified that seek to connect parents with their children. These programs commonly help to provide transportation for children to enable them to visit their parents. One such national program, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, provides life skills training, transportation, and visitation for daughters of incarcerated mothers. Other programs provide on-site services for children once they arrive at the prison. The Children's Center at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York has a playroom, nursery, and infant daycare for inmates' children. Another program, Reading Family Ties, links incarcerated parents with their children. Through a partnership between the Faith Temple Believers Church and the Florida Department of Corrections, this program offers one-hour visits over computer or video and telephone hookups for offenders in two Northern Florida correctional institutions who have families living in Southern Florida. It supports improved literacy for both the parents and children.

Conclusion

Although several programs currently exist to help children of prisoners, the key of course is whether these programs actually improve the lives of children. Existing research does not make a definitive answer possible. Through additional research, it is hoped that a better picture will emerge so that policymakers, government officials, and community leaders can most effectively address the unique needs of children of prisoners.

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