
Children of Incarcerated Mothers

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Children of incarcerated parents are a group who experience serious emotional, behavioral and psychological suffering that often receives little attention because they are not viewed as a victim when their parents are incarcerated. Neither the justice or child welfare systems respond to their situation unless a serious crisis arises. A decade ago few in Michigan or the United States were aware of this issue, but with the rapid growth in prison populations it is now estimated that there are 1.5 million children with incarcerated parents in this country and about 56,000 children in Michigan. Nationally, the growth since 1986 is particularly apparent:

Table 1. Number of Parents in Prison¹

Year	Number of Parents
1986	273,045
1991	438,121
1997	637,389

We know most about children of incarcerated mothers because 75% of them have one or more minor children when they enter prison and most of the research has been done with this group. Among male prisoners approximately 44% had children with whom they resided when imprisoned or were convicted and placed in jail. Children of most incarcerated males remain with the mother when a father enters prison, but when a mother is sent to prison, she is likely to be the sole custodian of her children [1,5,9]. As a result children lose their home, and most reside with a grandparent, other relative or a friend of the mother. In recent years, however a growing number have ended up homeless and in the child welfare system.

Table 2 presents a picture of the demographic characteristics of the parents taken from the national survey of inmates in 1986 and 1997. These parents have an average of more than two children with 64% of the mothers and 44% of the fathers residing with their children when they entered prison. Persons of color are overrepresented; the majority are single and only half have completed high school. Most reside in poverty when they enter prison so there are few if any resources available for their children. About 37% of women in prison had annual incomes less than \$8000 [13].

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There are about 56,000 children with incarcerated parents in Michigan.

¹ Source of data: Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities in 1986 ; Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Parents in State Prison

Sample (Weighted)	Mothers n=1,967 (n=13,382)	Fathers n=5,769 (n=231,856)	Mothers n=1,889 (n=42,963)	Fathers n=6,158 (n=538,761)
	1986		1997	
Average number of Children	2.48	2.22	2.38	2.04
Living with Child(ren) Prior to Incarceration	78%	50.5%	64.3%	43.8%
Average Age	30.16	31.25	32.90	33.04
Race				
White (non-Hispanic)	35.2%	34.3%	32.1%	28.6%
Black (non-Hispanic)	49.1%	48.6%	48.4%	49.4%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	00.7%	00.9%	01.1%	00.7%
Native American (non-Hispanic)	02.3%	01.4%	02.3%	01.9%
Hispanic	12.7%	14.3%	15.8%	19.2%
Marital Status				
Married	23.3%	30.2%	19.5%	23.3%
Widowed	05.9%	01.6%	04.1%	01.4%
Divorced	21.6%	23.3%	20.4%	20.5%
Separated	11.8%	08.0%	09.8%	07.0%
Never Married	37.4%	36.8%	46.2%	47.8%
Completed High School/ Have G.E.D.	39.4%	43.0%	46.6%	52.8%

Source: Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 1986; Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997.

What Are the Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children?

We rely on limited research about the effects of parental incarceration on children because much of the information is based on interviews with parents or caregivers rather than with the child. The overall impact of parental incarceration is unknown because there have been no longitudinal studies. Separation from parents affects children in a variety of ways. Those who were residing with the mother experience a dramatic change in where they live and in their daily lives.

Johnston (1995) found that 10% of children have two or more changes in caregivers and more had changes in residence. Many have emotional problems related to the incarceration. They may suffer from anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Jose-Kampfner (1995) reported that three out of four of the 36 children that she studied reported symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome such as depression, difficulty in sleeping and in concentrating and flashbacks about the time of the mother's arrest or removal from the home.

One ten year old said the following:

Kids of the incarcerated need for people to understand them, and take time with them; and listen to what we have to say. People on the outside don't know what we go through.

Children under the age of 2 may suffer serious psychological effects due to separation from the mother, says Johnston (1995), because strong attachment to parental figures is crucial to the normal development of the child. Children between the ages of two and six often witness the arrest of the mother, and they may recognize that they have a separate identity, but that does not relieve the pain of separation. If the child already has an alternate loving caregiver, the pain of separation may be alleviated, but that is often not the situation.

Older children ages 7 to 12 years are less likely to witness their mother's arrest, but they still are affected because they must adapt to a new caregiver and are likely to have to move to a different home [1]. They often have difficulty concentrating or in controlling anxiety. Some may rebel and express their anxiety against peers or family in very inappropriate behavior. Many experience scapegoating and discrimination for having an incarcerated parent.

For adolescents it is typical that they will develop maladaptive coping patterns as a response to a parent's incarceration, and many manifest delinquency, poor school performance, dropping out, substance abuse and other inappropriate coping behaviors. Others face family responsibilities including the care of younger siblings when they are ill-equipped to be caregivers.

There is little reliable information about the effect of a parent's incarceration on a child's subsequent incarceration, but Meyers, et. al. (1999) suggest that these children are five to six times more likely to enter the criminal justice system than are children who have not had an incarcerated parent. There is no reliable information about their contacts with the mental health or child welfare systems. We do know that departments of social services have not treated children of incarcerated parents systematically as persons needing protective services. As a result they may drift from one system to another, become homeless and attempt to survive on their own.

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While the mother is in prison, visitation varies from state to state depending upon correctional visitation policies. In Michigan, a federal court order was required in order to insure visitation (*Buzzetta v. Michigan Department of Corrections*). In contrast, Minnesota provides facilities for overnight and weekend visits with mothers in the state prison. Nonetheless, visitation may be difficult because prisons typically are located some distance from where children reside and there may be no one who can transport the child to the prison or jail. Michigan began a program in the 1980s when volunteers brought children to visit periodically, but that program no longer exists. It was funded by a foundation for a limited period of time.

Many departments of corrections staff do not accept that they have responsibility for facilitating the maintenance of parental responsibilities by their incarcerated parents. A study by Snyder-Joy and Carlo (1998) found that mothers who did have the opportunity for regular visitation reported being able to maintain positive relationships with their children, as compared with those who did not have visitations.

Children may also be negatively affected during a parent's incarceration because legal services are not available to the parent to manage custody arrangements and changes. Prisoners do not have the opportunity to appear in court regarding custodial matters affecting their children so they require legal aid or other assistance to have attorneys represent them in probate court.

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When a mother is released, children may be returned to her immediately or shortly thereafter. Depending upon the length of incarceration and the behavior of the existing caregiver, the transition may be relatively easy or extremely difficult. Problems also arise when the mother returns because she will not have any resources, may not have housing or employment. As a result the family may become homeless, particularly if they are deemed ineligible for any financial assistance until the mother secures employment. Changes in welfare policy since 1996 limit eligibility of incarcerated persons for financial assistance when they leave prison.

What are the Effects for Incarcerated Mothers?

Incarcerated mothers have worries and concerns about their children that are similar to those of other mothers. LeFlore and Holston (1989) found that 72% of those they interviewed reported that the most important thing for a mother is to love her child and to be able to demonstrate that love. They also emphasized the importance of being able to provide and care for their children, but both of these activities are likely to be denied to them for extended periods. Many women are incarcerated when they could be placed on probation or in other community programs that would permit them to maintain their parental roles and responsibilities.

The present rate of incarceration for use, abuse and/or possession of drugs far exceeds earlier rates, but self-reported drug use does not significantly vary between the two time periods [10]. However, women were incarcerated for drug abuse in the past decade whereas that usually was not the case in earlier period.

Block and Potthast (1998) studied a sample of incarcerated mothers who participated in a Girl Scout program with their daughters. They found that participation increased their confidence about their relationships with their daughters, but they worried considerably about the emotional harm to their children from their incarceration. They also expressed concern about the views of their daughters' friends about their incarceration.

Incarcerated Parents and the Child Welfare System

Courts and social agencies often consider all parents in prison as unfit. As a parent, a mother has the legal responsibility to support her child, but most lack the ability to do so and must rely on relatives and friends. Even when mothers establish good care relationships, these may fail with the death or illness of a caregiver, and without legal assistance a mother may be unable to correct the situation. It is not uncommon for a parent to lose all contact or knowledge about her child's whereabouts.

Women face many obstacles in trying to maintain parental rights. In 25 states there are laws terminating parental rights when a parent is incarcerated for a specific period of time [3]. Laws typically address parents who voluntarily abandon or give up a child, not those who are involuntarily separated. The Adoption Assistance Act of 1997 has created even more obstacles for incarcerated parents because there are limits on the length of time that can elapse before a child is placed for adoption when a parent is separated from the child. In the case of adolescents, there may be little likelihood of adoption or even foster care placement, but for young children adoption could well occur unless a relative is the custodial parent. Special needs children may be at a particular disadvantage when a parent is incarcerated.

The Child Welfare League of America surveyed the fifty states and learned that most could not even provide demographic information about children of incarcerated parents [4]. Most of the states (35) could not even provide the number or characteristics of minor children in their state who had an incarcerated parent. Several states indicated that they perceive that these children have needs that are similar to those of all other children. A survey by Beckerman (1994) found that many caseworkers did not maintain any contact with incarcerated mothers of children in foster care when decisions had to be made about custody and other matters.

What Kinds of Programs and Services Exist for Children of Incarcerated Mothers?

Recently a number of voluntary agencies have established special programs for the children of incarcerated mothers [1]:

1. Child Welfare League of American launched the Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative in 1996. It encourages and supports other agencies providing special services to these children.
2. Chicago Legal Aid to Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM) provides legal services and educational programs for women and their families.

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3. Project SEEK (Services to Enable and Empower Kids) in Genesee County, Michigan works directly with children eleven or younger of incarcerated parents. It provides home visits, support groups, advocacy, referral and facilitation of ongoing communication between parent and child.
4. Parenting from a Distance is a program in New York State serving a small number of mothers in one state prison to strengthen mother-child relationships by educating and supporting women in their maternal roles.
5. Minnesota Correctional Facility provides a comprehensive program for maintaining family contact and relationships. The program begins when a woman enters the prison and includes parenting training, frequent visitation, and training in maintaining positive communication by the mother with her child.

Conclusion

The plight of children of incarcerated parents has become a very serious child welfare problem. These children are seriously victimized through no fault of their own. If the state incarcerates a parent when there is no other parent available, under the concept of *parens patriae*, it has the obligation to ensure the child's well-being.