
Executive Summary

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The U.S. Department of Justice has estimated that nationally approximately 1.5 million children under the age of 18 had an incarcerated parent in 1999. The total number of children affected sometime during their childhood or adolescence is far higher. Within Michigan, there are about 56,000 children with incarcerated parents. These children, their parents and their caregivers have special needs that are currently not being met by child welfare agencies or the criminal justice system. As the incarcerated population grows by an average of 6.5% every year, the number of children with incarcerated parents will also increase.

This *Michigan Family Impact Seminars* briefing report, *What about Me? Children with Incarcerated Parents*, focuses on this topic. The report examines how children are affected by parental incarceration, looks at the specific issues that emerge when mothers and fathers are incarcerated, and provides a range of potential program and policy options that can begin to address the many problems encountered by children and families as a result of parental incarceration.

The presenters at the seminar held on March 12th, 2002--Peter Breen, Creasia Finney Hairston, and Rosemary Sarri--are renowned national scholars and leaders in advancing our knowledge and practice base concerning children with incarcerated parents. Additional contributors to the report include Lois Wright, Cynthia Seymour, Deborah Satyanathan and Lynda Ferro.

Major highlights from the report include a discussion of how children react to parental incarceration. In *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children*, Wright and Seymour identify the following characteristics of children's reaction to the trauma of parental incarceration:

- Children are diverted from development tasks when they experience trauma.
- Children's responses to trauma will vary according to age.
- Children's reactions will vary over time.
- Children are always traumatized by separation.
- Children's abilities to cope are hampered by uncertainty.
- Children's trauma due to parental incarceration has some unique features.

As a result of the trauma faced by children when parents are incarcerated, children may exhibit the following symptoms:

- Fear, sadness, loneliness, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, emotional withdrawal from friends and family
- Separation anxiety and fears of abandonment
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Anxiety and hyperarousal, attention disorders and developmental regression
- Physical aggression, withdrawal, acting out, academic and classroom behavior difficulties, truancy.

In *Children of Incarcerated Mothers*, Rosemary Sarri examines the special problems encountered by children when their mothers are incarcerated:

- Those who were residing with the mother experience a dramatic change in where they live and in their daily lives.
- Children face the risk of permanent separation from their mothers, even after the incarceration is ended.

Sarri points out that 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. Laws, however, typically address parents who voluntarily abandon or give up a child, not those who are involuntarily separated.

In *Fathers in Prison: Responsible Fatherhood and Responsible Public Policies*, Creasie Finney Hairston presents an overview of the family roles and relationships of incarcerated men and describes the ways in which individual situations and public decisions affect their ability to function as parents. With few exceptions, fathers in prison have been out of sight and out of mind of community organizations concerned with family life and children's well-being. She emphasizes that:

- Men in prison have not been encouraged to maintain relationships with their children and have not been supported in carrying out parenting obligations or commitments.
- Parent-child relationships during imprisonment are tenuous at best as fathers seldom see their children and have few opportunities to provide emotional or social support to them.

Hairston also argues that parenting during and after imprisonment is not simply a matter of individual commitment or personal choice. Public policies together with the perceptions and goals that shape them affect incarcerated fathers' ability to parent. While most departments of corrections cite the importance of family relationships to the achievement of correctional goals, helping fathers maintain relationships with their children is one of the least important considerations in policy directives and day-to-day operations. She stresses, however, that:

- A consistent body of research has highlighted the positive role and function of strong family ties during imprisonment.

All of the chapters in the report describe a wide range of policy and program decisions that Michigan policymakers, child welfare agencies and correctional systems can make to assist incarcerated parents, their children and their children's caregivers.