



**Briefing Report**



# **Michigan Family Impact Seminars**



## **What about Me? Children with Incarcerated Parents**

**Briefing Report No. 2002-1**

**WAYNE STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

School of Social Work

**MICHIGAN STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

Institute for Children, Youth, and Families

# What about Me? Children with Incarcerated Parents

Michigan Family Impact Seminars  
Briefing Report No. 2002-1

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# About Family Impact Seminars

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- Family Impact Seminars are nonpartisan educational forums on family issues for state policymakers.
- The seminars analyze the consequences to families of an issue, policy, or program.
- The seminars provide objective nonpartisan information on current issues. They do not advocate or lobby for particular policies.
- Briefing reports make scholarly findings available in an accessible format.
- A Legislative Advisory Committee selects issues for seminars based on emerging legislative need.
- National scholarly experts bring state-of-the-art research on current family issues to policymakers.
- Audiotapes make information available to those not able to attend the seminar.

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# Executive Summary

Eileen Trzcinski

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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 12<sup>th</sup>, 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.

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# Overview

Deborah Satyanathan

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## Scope of the Problem

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 [10]. 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 [13], the number of children with incarcerated parents will also increase.

Little data exists regarding the number of children affected. However, nationally, we do know:

- Approximately two-thirds of incarcerated women and 55% of incarcerated men have children below 18 years old [4].
- Most (72%) of the incarcerated mothers lived with their children before entering prison [4].
- Approximately 25% of women are pregnant or have recently delivered when they enter prison [9].

Children of incarcerated parents are often uprooted from their homes and placed with relatives or in foster care. The living arrangements for children with incarcerated fathers and imprisoned mothers differ in the following ways:

- Most (90%) children with incarcerated fathers live with their mother [9].
- Only approximately 25% of children with incarcerated mothers live with their fathers [9].
- One half of children with incarcerated mothers live with their grandparents [4].
- An additional 2% of children with fathers in prison and 10% of children with mothers in prison live in a foster care home or an institution [4].

It is not known how many Michigan children are affected by parental incarceration. According to the Michigan Department of Corrections, the total prisoner population in 1999 was 46,617, with women prisoners totaling 2,018 [8]. From this data, we can estimate:

- Approximately 1,345 incarcerated women and 24,975 incarcerated men in Michigan have children under the age of 18.
- Because studies have shown that mothers average 2.4 children and fathers average 2.0 children [13], then 3,229 Michigan children below 18 years old have an incarcerated mother, and 49,951 children have an imprisoned father.

*Approximately two-thirds of incarcerated women and 55% of incarcerated men have children below 18 years old.*

*Approximately 25% of women are pregnant or have recently delivered when they enter prison.*

*Children of incarcerated parents are often uprooted from their homes and placed with relatives or in foster care.*



*Children are deeply affected when their parents are incarcerated.*

### **How are children affected when parents are incarcerated?**

Children are deeply affected when their parents are incarcerated, beginning at the time of the parent's arrest and continuing after the parent is released. Common harmful results include:

- Emotional problems, including feelings of fear, anxiety, abandonment, embarrassment, shame and guilt [1,5,13].
- Behavioral symptoms, with increased risk for poor academic performance, truancy, gang participation, substance abuse and early pregnancy [1,5,13].
- Increased risk for delinquency: It is estimated that one half of juveniles in detention have an incarcerated parent [6] and that children with an incarcerated parent are five to six times more likely than those without imprisoned parents to enter the criminal justice system [1].
- Permanent separation from parents.

*When women are released from prison, they may have difficulty finding housing and jobs; they still have many of the same emotional and physical problems (or more) with which they entered the criminal justice system.*

### **Which prison conditions contribute to the negative affects of incarcerated parents and their children?**

Conditions in women's prisons have a large effect on mothers and children post-release. When these women are released from prison, they may have difficulty finding housing and jobs; they still have many of the same emotional and physical problems (or more) with which they entered the criminal justice system. Because of these multiple problems, many mothers have difficulty regaining custody of their children upon release. Some of these difficult prison conditions include:

- Physical abuse and/or rape by other inmates or guards [11].
- A lack of educational services and job training [11].
- A lack of mental health services for mental illness and other common problems such as substance abuse, childhood physical and/or sexual abuse, and domestic violence [11].
- Inadequate health care [3,11].

Prison visitation policies hinder contact between incarcerated parents and their children. Only 10% of mothers receive regular visits from their children, and approximately half do not receive any visits from their children at all [3]. Reasons for this lack of visitation between children and their imprisoned parents include:

- Geographical distance and transportation costs [5].
- Intimidating and non-child-friendly visiting areas [5].
- Lack of information about visiting hours and procedures [13].
- Non-contact visitation (i.e. no hugs or sitting on a parent's lap) in jails [7].
- Reluctance on the part of parents or caregivers to have children visit their parents in a prison setting [13].

Phone calls are also difficult. Parents are only allowed to make collect calls out of the prison, and the charges for these calls are much higher than a collect call made from a pay phone [5]. Due to the financial burdens of the children's caregivers, they may not be able to accept many collect calls from the children's parents.

*Only 10% of mothers receive regular visits from their children, and approximately half do not receive any visits from their children at all.*

## **Which state and federal policies negatively affect incarcerated parents and their children?**

*The Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.* For those children who entered the child welfare system due to their parents' incarceration, permanency planning must begin within 12 months of their original placement [13]. Because a woman's average prison sentence is 24-36 months [1] and imprisonment may be considered neglect or abandonment of her children [2], her parental rights may be terminated while she is incarcerated. Many of these women are not notified of the court hearings related to their children, and legal assistance for these women is limited [1].

*Foster Care Policies.* Licensed foster care parents receive financial support for caring for children. However, many children of incarcerated parents are cared for by grandparents or other relatives. These helpful kin do not receive financial support from the state [1], and many caregivers report that they do not have the financial resources to properly care for the children [11]. Therefore, many children live in poverty while their parents are in prison.

*The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996.* One provision of PRWORA provides that any person convicted of a drug crime is no longer eligible to receive Temporary Aid for Need Families (TANF) [13]. In 1998, 72% of women in federal prisons were incarcerated for a drug offense [13]. Therefore many mothers may have financial difficulties once they are released from prison. This difficulty may hinder them from regaining custody of their children or may place their children in poverty post-release.

*Mandatory Sentencing Laws.* Throughout the nation, approximately 70% of imprisoned women committed a drug or other non-violent crime [3]. Many of these crimes now have mandatory sentences, reducing a judge's flexibility in determining the best interests for convicted parents and their children [13].

## **How does the lack of collaboration between the child welfare system and the criminal justice system contribute to the unmet needs of families?**

- Families may receive duplicate or unnecessary services from both systems, such as parenting classes or drug counseling, and not obtain other needed services [7].
- Prison inmates usually are not allowed to receive incoming phone calls [2]. Child welfare workers also struggle with the same visitation rules as do children and caregivers. They may not know visitation policies and procedures, or the prison may simply be too far to travel. Therefore it is difficult for child welfare workers to contact imprisoned parents.
- Some correctional agencies prohibit contact between prisoners and child welfare workers [13].
- Incarcerated women may have no idea where their children are placed, or they may not know the name of their children's child welfare worker [2].

*Many incarcerated women with children are not notified of the court hearings related to their children, and legal assistance for these women is limited.*

*Many caregivers report that they do not have the financial resources to properly care for the children. Therefore, many children live in poverty while their parents are in prison.*

*Incarcerated women may have no idea where their children are placed, or they may not know the name of their children's child welfare worker.*

*Studies of prisoners consistently show that those who maintain strong family and friendship ties during imprisonment and assume responsible marital and parental roles upon release have lower recidivism rates than those who function without family ties, expectation and obligations.*

### **Why should we care?**

According to Pimlott and Sarri (2002), “Studies of prisoners consistently show that those who maintain strong family and friendship ties during imprisonment and assume responsible marital and parental roles upon release have lower recidivism rates than those who function without family ties, expectation and obligations” [13, p. 27]. In addition, if women receive proper educational and job training and mental health services (especially for substance abuse), they are less likely to re-enter the criminal justice system. If recidivism rates decrease, then state and federal costs for building prisons and maintaining prisoners also decrease.

### **What policy and program decisions can be made to ensure that Michigan is meeting the needs of incarcerated parents and their children?**

As the number of parents who are incarcerated increases, and therefore the number of children affected increases, Michigan policymakers, child welfare agencies and correctional systems can make policy and program decisions to assist incarcerated parents, their children and their children’s caregivers, including:

1. Increased Research
  - Data collection on the number of children affected by their parents’ incarceration and how they are affected
  - Longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of parental incarceration.
  - Evaluation and replication of existing programs
2. Changes in Public Policy
  - Exceptions to the 12-month termination of parental rights statute for imprisoned parents
  - Increased financial support for relatives caring for children of incarcerated parents
  - Financial support for those convicted of drug crimes post-release
  - Community-based alternatives to imprisonment for non-violent offenders.
3. Changes in Prison and Jail Policies and Services
  - Supportive visitation and increased flexibility with phone calls
  - Improved mental health services, including substance abuse counseling, and physical health care
  - Educational services and employment training
  - Inmate safety from abuse or rape
4. Collaboration between the Criminal Justice and Child Welfare Systems
  - Cross-training of criminal justice and child welfare personnel
  - A central database holding information regarding children, parents and incarceration
5. Implementation of Programs and Services for Children and their Caregivers
  - Counseling and support groups for parents, children and caregivers
  - Transportation services
  - Legal assistance for parents in prison who risk having their children removed from their custody.
  - Parental involvement in the permanency planning of their children
  - Parenting education.

# State and Federal Policy Responses

Deborah Satyanathan

Some states have responded to the special needs of children and their incarcerated parents, while many other states do not have specific policies or programs in place for this unique population.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) researched state responses to this problem in 1998[1]. Thirty-eight of the fifty states responded to CWLA’s survey. Only six states reported that they had specific policies related to children and their imprisoned parents. In addition, ten states’ child welfare agencies had special termination of parental rights policies related to incarcerated parents. Twenty-eight states responded to the sections regarding services that were provided to children of incarcerated parents. Table 1 indicates that 27 of the states involve imprisoned parents in the permanency planning of their children. Twelve states assisted parents with post-prison release planning, and four states provided support groups for the children of incarcerated parents.

*In 1998, only six states had specific policies related to children and their imprisoned parents.*

**Table 1: Services Provided to Children with Incarcerated Parents[1]**

Services	Number of States
Involves incarcerated parents in permanency planning	27
Involves incarcerated parents in case planning	24
Provides pre-placement prevention services	16
Assists parents with post prison release planning (e.g., housing, transfer of public benefits, etc.)	12
Visitation with incarcerated parent	25
Transportation to visit incarcerated parent	25
Support groups for the children of incarcerated parents	4
Support groups for caregivers of children with incarcerated parents	4
Other	3

*27 of the states involved imprisoned parents in the permanency planning of their children.*

Fourteen states were able to provide data regarding governmental agencies with specific programs. Table 2 shows that the departments of corrections in twelve states had programs designed for children with incarcerated parents. None of the public school systems, the boards of education or the mental health departments of any state had a specific program targeted to children whose parents are imprisoned.

*Two of the states provided special training to agency staff about the needs of children with incarcerated parents.*

Eleven states provided information regarding the nature of collaboration between child welfare and governmental agencies. The survey results indicated that four states provided funding for collaboration, five states provided information and/or cross training and seven states provided consultation. Two of the states provided special training to agency staff about the needs of children with incarcerated parents. Twenty-five states provided data regarding direct and indirect resources that their agency provided to children of incarcerated parents.

**Table 2: State Governmental Agencies with Specific Programs Targeted to Children with Incarcerated Parents [1]**

Agency	Number of States
Board of Education	0
Courts	2
Department of Corrections	12
Department of Labor (employment/job referrals)	0
District Attorneys/Attorney General	1
Juvenile Court	2
Law Enforcement	1
Mental Health Department	0
Public School System	0
Other	2

**What have specific states done to meet the needs of children of incarcerated parents?**

*The Ohio legislature is currently debating a bill that provides for the use of prison nurseries for certain incarcerated women so that the mother and child can reside together in prison.*

- The Ohio legislature is currently debating a bill that provides for the use of prison nurseries. One of the eligibility requirements is that the woman must have a prison sentence of 18 months or less [Ohio HB 661].
- California law provides for services to incarcerated parents and their children, including paying the cost of telephone calls and assisting with transportation for visits. In addition, child welfare agencies must collaborate with parents regarding service plans [2].
- New York policy makes suggestions to social service agencies on how they can service children and their incarcerated parents, including providing transportation and suggesting different forms of treatment [2].
- The Texas Department of Corrections received state assistance in developing the Family Support Program (FSP). The program includes a focus on the offender and the family system, on the children, and on the community service network and emphasizes dynamic predictors of offender reintegration. Evaluations of this program suggest promising results for offending parents in Texas [3].

*California law provides for services to incarcerated parents and their children, including paying the cost of telephone calls and assisting with transportation for visits.*

**What has the federal government done to meet the needs of children of incarcerated parents?**

On January 17, 2002, the federal government enacted a law entitled “Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001,” PL 107-33. One amendment directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to award grants to organizations in areas with a significant number of children with incarcerated parents. These grants will support mentoring programs for these children.

**What can Michigan policymakers do to meet the needs of children with incarcerated parents?**

The state of Michigan has not yet responded to the needs of children with incarcerated parents. Michigan policymakers can review policies and programs in other states and introduce those policies and programs that seem to be working well.

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# Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children and Families

Lois E. Wright, Ph.D. and Cynthia B. Seymour, JD

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Despite the large and increasing numbers of incarcerated parents, the children have been a forgotten population, with their special needs inadequately understood or addressed. Despite the inadequacy of our data on these children, the limited research, taken together with our theoretical and empirical knowledge of similar populations, can provide us with some understanding of the effects of parental incarceration on children.

It is exceptional for a family to experience incarceration in the absence of other difficulties. More often than not, an array of social, cultural, and familial risk factors coexist, each adding perhaps only a small increment to the totality of risk for the child and family. Though no one factor is predictive of particular child difficulties, we can predict negative outcomes from an accumulative array of factors; generally, the more endangering factors, the greater the risk. (This is not to say that negative outcomes are inevitable, and resilience within children with incarcerated parents remains largely unexplored.)

## What Are the Effects on Children?

To understand the effects of parental incarceration on a child, we must look at the totality of a family's experiences involving a multiplicity of interrelated social, cultural, and familial factors, making it difficult to sort out the results of crime, arrest, and incarceration from ongoing life problems. To begin to understand these children's difficulties, we must look at their experiences both before the incarceration and during the incarceration. Though some children may have enjoyed a fairly stable and nurturing preincarceration family life, most will have experienced considerable instability and possibly maltreatment, with the problems related to incarceration superimposed upon existing difficulties.

Children's circumstances will vary, and each may experience a unique combination of risk factors. In addition, each child will react differently to his or her experiences, and available services and supports for each child vary. These differences complicate our ability to understand children's reactions to parental incarceration.

Some of the risk factors occurring both before and during incarceration are:

*Poverty.* Parents are apt to have been living in poverty before their incarceration and to have been unable to provide basic material resources. Poverty is often the core issue for a range of other difficulties that have consequences for children, including living in impoverished neighborhoods, limited parental educational achievement and limited parental job prospects.

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*Parents are apt to have been living in poverty before their incarceration and to have been unable to provide basic material resources.*

***Substance abuse usually has a role in the incarceration, either as a causal factor or as the primary offense.***

*Alcohol and other drugs.* Substance use and abuse is associated with poor neighborhoods, child maltreatment, and other social ills, severely limiting the user's ability to function appropriately across a range of life roles. Substance abuse usually has a role in the incarceration, either as a causal factor or as the primary offense. Even without the additional problems created by arrest and incarceration, "a mother's drug addiction can undermine her ability to provide consistent nurturing to her children" [8].

*Crime.* Living in an environment of ongoing criminal activity, either the parent's own crime or crime in the neighborhood, has documented effects on children, as they may live in constant fear or may have become numb, accepting danger as a normal part of growing up.

*Intrafamilial violence.* The parent may have been battered or a batterer. If the mother's partner is currently abusing her, her children are likely to be exposed to that violence at home [8]. Witnessing battering has been documented to negatively affect children (e.g., fear, guilt, and desensitizing to violence) [1].

*Child maltreatment.* Abuse or neglect of a child for some period before incarceration or as a precipitating factor in the incarceration is well documented as having a range of effects on children.

*Previous separations.* The children may have experienced previous foster care or other separation, and this period of incarceration may represent one more separation, though one with a slightly different meaning. Still, an ongoing pattern of instability leaves children more vulnerable to effects from additional separations.

*Parent's history of abuse.* The parent him/herself may have been maltreated as a child, and this experience can affect parenting abilities [8]. Abused parents who have not had the opportunity to deal with their own histories of child abuse or to recognize the ways it might affect how they raise their children may have an impaired ability to provide nurturing and discipline.

*Enduring trauma.* Enduring trauma is not a separate risk factor but rather a term used by The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents to describe the multiple and ongoing traumatization some children experience throughout one or several life stages, with no recovery time or supportive resources between traumas [6].

*Arrest and incarceration.* The parental arrest and incarceration expose the child to additional risks: further separations from the parent and possibly siblings, unstable care arrangements, uncertainty about his or her future, secrecy and deception regarding the incarceration, stigma, and difficulties with visitation.

***The parental arrest and incarceration expose the child to additional risks: further separations from the parent and possibly siblings, unstable care arrangements, uncertainty about his or her future, secrecy and deception regarding the incarceration, stigma, and difficulties with visitation.***

## What Are Children's Reactions?

Despite the limitations in our knowledge of this population and the difficulty of establishing cause-effect relationships amid the potential multiplicity of risk factors, we do have a beginning body of knowledge about some of the negative consequences. Studies have indicated some child difficulties that may be related to the incarceration itself and that distinguish this group of children. We will review here some more general findings (i.e., effects that are similar to those of other forms of trauma) as well as those specifically linked to parental crime, arrest, and incarceration.

As a general context for looking at children's specific reactions to parental incarceration, it is important to understanding the following:

*Children are diverted from development tasks when they experience trauma.* It is normally expected that children's emotional energy will be invested in mastering their age-specific developmental tasks (i.e., forming attachments and developing trust, developing autonomy, developing initiative, learning to work productively, and achieving identity). The everyday challenges children experience, if they have the coping resources to meet them, make children stronger and move them forward developmentally. But if the challenges are too great and exceed children's capacity to cope, emotional survival begins to take precedence over mastery of developmental tasks, and they begin to show developmental delays (e.g., retarded language development) or regression (e.g., soiling or clinging), as well as other inappropriate coping strategies (e.g., numbing).

*Children's responses to trauma will vary according to age.* For instance, Johnston (1992) found disorganized feelings and behaviors in early childhood and maladaptive behaviors in later childhood (i.e., antisocial behaviors such as lying and stealing, aggressive or isolated behavioral disorders, conduct disorders, and depression). Among older children, sexual misconduct, truancy, delinquency, substance abuse, and gang activity were found [5]. In addition, children of different ages vary in terms of coping ability. Young children are least likely to have acquired the developmental skills necessary to cope with trauma and will be most in need of intervention. If they are unable to respond adaptively, they will respond maladaptively [5].

*Children's reactions will vary over time.* While we lack longitudinal studies documenting how children's reactions change overtime, we know generally that a crisis reaction is different from a long-term accommodation (adaptive or maladaptive) to trauma. In addition, we know that intervention is more effective if it is offered before maladaptive patterns have settled in and begun to feel "normal" for the child. Theory related to the grieving process suggests that people go through stages of grieving; these children are grieving for the absent parent. While the pattern of reaction is not invariable and the theory not entirely substantiated, it does provide some guidelines for understanding changing reactions over time. In addition, long after the traumatic event, posttraumatic stress reaction has been observed in some children [5].

*Children are diverted from development tasks when they experience trauma. If the challenges are too great and exceed children's capacity to cope, emotional survival begins to take precedence over mastery of developmental tasks.*

*Children's responses to trauma will vary according to age.*

*Children's reactions will vary over time.*



*Children are always traumatized by separation.* Regardless of the cause of the separation (e.g., parental death, divorce, military service, incapacity, or incarceration), it has a profound effect. These effects on children of different ages have already been well documented in the child welfare and divorce literature. We know that, depending upon the child's age and length of separation, reactions can include such things as inability to form later attachments, woebegone searching, numbing, self-blame, anger, depression, regression, and antisocial behaviors.

***When a parent is incarcerated, the child enters a period of remarkable instability and uncertainty, not even knowing with what he or she must cope.***

*Children's abilities to cope are hampered by uncertainty.* While coping with bad situations is difficult, coping with uncertainty (e.g., relatives missing in action or abducted) is even more difficult. Yet uncertainty pervades the child's life when a parent is incarcerated, touching basic life issues. Answers to questions such as "what is going on?" "where will I live?" "who will care for me?" "when will I see my parent again?" "when will she/he home again?" "will there be enough money?" and "what will happen next?" remain nebulous. The child enters a period of remarkable instability and uncertainty, not even knowing with what he or she must cope. Often, a caregiver's well-meaning attempts to deceive the child only serve to increase the child's stress.

*Children's trauma due to parental incarceration has some unique features.* Sometimes the parent's crime is actually against the child, as in the case of severe physical or sexual abuse. The child may have witnessed a crime (including murder) by one parent against another. The child might have witnessed other types of criminal activity or been solicited for involvement in criminal activity (considered emotional abuse). Thus, it may pit family member against family member, undermining the child's sense of safety, security, and loyalty to a parent.

***Children suffer stigma when a parent is incarcerated. For most, stigma is everywhere in the community, among peers, and often in their own extended family—causing feelings of shame and low self-esteem.***

*Children suffer stigma when a parent is incarcerated.* For most, stigma is everywhere in the community, among peers, and often in their own extended family—causing feelings of shame and low self-esteem. For other children, coming from neighborhoods or families in which incarceration and related trauma are everyday events, stigma is not a great factor [2,9]. These children's lives are already seriously disrupted, hence the fact that they experience less stigma than others is no gift.

*Children express their distress through their bodies.* Most children will find it difficult to communicate their distress through words, unless there is strong support for doing so. Rather, they express themselves through physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral means that we call symptoms.

In addition, posttraumatic stress reaction is receiving increasing attention. When children have been exposed to multiple and ongoing traumas, such as seeing a parent arrested, unstable care arrangements, secrecy, and stigma, they begin to show a constellation of symptoms that comprise posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [8]. Chart 1 presents some of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that have been noted in children with incarcerated parents.

### Chart 1. Child Reactions to Parental Incarceration

- Identification with the incarcerated parent, awareness of social stigma
- Change in future orientation and intrusive thoughts about their parents
- Concern about outcomes of case, unsure and worried about how to live without mother, concern about an uncertain future
- Flashbacks to traumatic events related to arrests
- Embarrassment and anger
- Fear, sadness, loneliness, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, emotional withdrawal from friends and family
- Separation anxiety and fears of abandonment
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Aggression, anxiety and hyperarousal, attention disorders and developmental regression
- Physical aggression, withdrawal, acting out, academic and classroom behavior difficulties, truancy.

Source: Table 7. Child Reactions to Parental Incarceration, Wright, L.E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press.

### What Are the Effects on the Family?

It is important to look at the effects on the family, because that is the primary environment of the child, providing support and protection or exposing the child to threat and endangerment. As noted above, many families experience ongoing difficulties: poverty, instability, violence, and substance involvement, upon which the crisis of crime and incarceration is superimposed. How is the family different after the crime and incarceration? The primary changes can be categorized as structural, material, emotional, and dynamic, though these actually interact, each impacting the other.

Perhaps the most immediately apparent change in a family is structural. A family member is now absent, and either a remaining family member must take on the departing parent's roles and responsibilities, or those roles remain unfulfilled. Either scenario produces stress on the family.

Though most incarcerated men are either single or divorced, with fewer than one-fourth being married, most have children in whose lives they have played some part prior to incarceration [3]. Usually, because the father is seldom the sole caregiver of a child, the children continue to live with their mother. Still, the incarceration, whether the father was a full-time member of a household or a nonresident contributor, does remove him from whatever roles he may have filled in his child's household (and some fathers leave several households behind, as they have fathered children by several women).

***Because the mother is more likely than the father is to be the custodial parent and primary caregiver of a child, her incarceration will most likely have an even greater effect on family structure.***

Because the mother is more likely than the father is to be the custodial parent and primary caregiver of a child, her incarceration will most likely have an even greater effect on family structure. If she has run an independent household, her children will need new living arrangements. Usually her children will stay with a relative, most often the maternal grandmother. The caregiver's home will also experience structural change through the addition of the children. Children may find themselves living in a home that has been disrupted by their presence even though they may be wanted there. Sometimes one caregiver is not able to care for an entire sibling group, so brothers and sisters may be separated. This separation only contributes to the trauma and disorientation that children experience when mothers become incarcerated.

Incarceration occurs disproportionately for families who are already living in poverty [4] and poses further financial difficulties. If a father is incarcerated, child support (court ordered or informal help) will be interrupted, possibly plunging the family into financial crisis. If he is the sole support of his family, the mother may have to go to work, which will have structural, emotional, and dynamic reverberations. If a mother who is the primary caregiver is incarcerated, the children may be left with no means of financial support except what can be provided by the substitute caregiver, often with state assistance.

***The whole family may go through an emotional upheaval as they experience the stigma, shame, guilt, and pain of dealing with a family member's incarceration.***

If the substitute caregiver is a relative, most likely a grandmother, she may be unprepared for the financial effect of taking on a new child or children. Meeting children's needs is not without cost, and the older the child, the greater the cost.

The whole family may go through an emotional upheaval as they experience the stigma, shame, guilt, and pain of dealing with a family member's incarceration. Dealing with the criminal justice system—the lack of information about how to contact the parent, conditions surrounding visits, uncertainty about what will happen to the parent—involves additional stress. While some families will cope admirably well, others may cope by expressing anger at the parent or insisting on secrecy about the incarceration.

It is important to reemphasize that some families will have experienced few of these factors. Perhaps for them the parent's crime and incarceration were fairly isolated incidents in otherwise stable families. We can't stereotype these families, which are as different from one another as any group of families would be. Just as multiple factors combine to pose risk for children and families, multiple factors can also influence eventual positive outcomes.

Adapted with permission from Wright, L.E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press.

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# Children of Incarcerated Mothers

Rosemary Sarri, Ph.D.

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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 Prison<sup>1</sup>**

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].

*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.*

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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	
<b>Average number of Children</b>	2.48	2.22	2.38	2.04
<b>Living with Child(ren) Prior to Incarceration</b>	78%	50.5%	64.3%	43.8%
<b>Average Age</b>	30.16	31.25	32.90	33.04
<b>Race</b>				
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%
<b>Marital Status</b>				
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%
<b>Completed High School/ Have G.E.D.</b>	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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*Many departments of corrections staff do not accept that they have responsibility for facilitating the maintenance of parental responsibilities by their incarcerated parents.*

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.

*Incarcerated mothers have worries and concerns about their children that are similar to those of other mothers.*

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.

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# Fathers in Prisons: Responsible Fatherhood and Responsible Public Policies

Creasie Finney Hairston, Ph.D.

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The chapter 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 [11,27]. 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.

## How is the Policy Environment Changing?

On any given day, there are more than a million children whose fathers are in prison or jail and millions more whose fathers have been or will be incarcerated at some point during their growing up years [22,31]. These numbers are likely to increase as a result of:

- laws mandating long prison terms for drug and certain other criminal offenses
- life terms for repeat criminal offenders.

A heavy reliance on prisons as a major criminal justice strategy has consequences that extend far beyond the individuals imprisoned today and well into the next generation. Although it may be hard to think of imprisoned fathers as significant, positive figures in their children's lives, numerous problems are associated with their absence. Research on father absence, including during and because of incarceration, indicates that father absence results in decreased financial resources for the families and loss of regular father-child interaction [21,28,29]. Negative effects of fatherlessness include a greater risk of juvenile delinquency and later adult criminality and a host of other difficulties such as school failure, withdrawal and excessive sadness, aggressive behavior, and teenage pregnancy [8,24,28,33,36].

With predictions that indicate that three in ten African-American men will spend some time in prison [18], the issue of absent parents becomes an even more pressing public policy concern. The rediscovery of fatherhood and the implementation of state-led responsible fatherhood initiatives challenge the conventional wisdom of treating incarcerated fathers' family responsibilities as private matters.

As an example, the State of Illinois has implemented procedures to establish paternity and child support orders for prison inmates as a key component of its responsible father initiative [16]. Similar state-led initiatives aimed at increasing the amount of child support that states raise from prison inmates, along with proposals to make parent education for fathers an accepted part of prison programming [16], have raised the issue of parental incarceration to a new level of visibility and importance.

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*The State of Illinois has implemented procedures to establish paternity and child support orders for prison inmates as a key component of its responsible father initiative.*

*A 1993 U.S. Department of Justice report indicated that more than half of the state prison inmate population were fathers, with 56% having at least one child under the age of 18.*

*More recent studies of prisoners report that most men in prison are not married although the majority are parents of dependent children.*

*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.*

### **What are the Social Characteristics, Family Roles, and Family Relationships of the Prison Population?**

National surveys of prison inmates indicate that while the prison population has been steadily increasing, several social characteristics of the population have remained relatively stable over several years. According to the most comprehensive national report providing detailed statistics on prisoners' social and family characteristics, prisoners are primarily young, undereducated, poor and people of color. This 1993 U.S. Department of Justice report, which presented a 1991 profile of the state prison inmate population [31], indicated that more than half were fathers with 56% having at least one child under the age of 18. Nearly a third (32%) had two or more children prior to being incarcerated.

Both national and state level data collected during the latter half of the 1990's show a marked overrepresentation of people of color and an increasing percentage of prisoners who are African-American. Gilliard and Beck [7] reported that 1997 data indicated that African-American males constituted about 50% of the state and federal prison population. Recent studies of prisoners that focus on prisoners' family relationships report that most men in prison are not married although the majority are parents of dependent children [19,24,28,33,36].

### **What Kinds of Parent-Child Relationships Do Incarcerated Men Develop?**

Hairston's [8,9,10] studies of men incarcerated in three southeastern prisons provide the most descriptive information on men's family relationships. Fathers in the Hairston studies fulfilled a range of different economic provider and nurture roles with their children. Most fathers indicated that they lived in the same household as at least one of their children at the time of arrest. Most children, however, were not living in the same household as their fathers.

When fathers did live in the same household as one of their children, it was most frequently with the youngest child. They usually provided for the financial support of that child and shared caregiving with the child's mother. Even though fathers were not involved in the day-to-day physical care of their children who did not live with them, many carried out some parenting responsibilities. Two-thirds said they were contributing to the financial support of and/or spending time with at least one of their children prior to incarceration.

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's studies had the following findings about father-child contact while the father was imprisoned:

- Fewer than one-third of the fathers reported seeing their children on a regular basis, with married men having more regular contact than other fathers.
- Thirty percent of the men in the 1995 study had not seen their children at all since imprisonment.
- Fewer than 50% had seen at least one of their children at least once in the six months preceding the survey.

Hairston asked fathers why they believed their children did not visit more often. The major reasons fathers gave for no or few visits were:

- the child had no one to bring him or her to the prison (42%) or
- the child's mother did not want the child to visit (22%).

Only 5% of the incarcerated fathers thought the child did not want to visit. Interviews and conversations with prisoners' children and children's mothers indicate that there is a strong desire on the part of many children to see their incarcerated fathers, even if the children's mothers do not want the children to visit their fathers. Recent studies [1,3,5] have indicated that men in prison, similar to many other men, equate being a good father primarily with providing financially for their children, being physically present to protect them, and being in control. These findings suggest that fathers who are unable to control their own day-to-day routines, to make mundane decisions about their own lives, or to carry out traditional roles are at high risk of perceiving themselves as powerless and/or of devaluing their role as parents.

### **What Factors Affect Prison Parenting?**

Parenting from prison is difficult and affected by diverse personal, familial, and public forces. These forces must be taken into consideration in designing fatherhood programs and adoption policy options.

*Personal Issues.* Many prisoners have serious social and emotional problems that inhibit their ability to parent effectively. These problems include the large numbers of prisoners with substance abuse problems, who are in need of drug or alcohol treatment, and the social conditions that brought them into conflict with the law. Others have engaged in repetitive criminal activity and sometimes violent and abusive relationships [19]. Reports of high levels of mental illness and serious chronic health problems further complicate the issue [23]. Because many men in prison may not really know how to be good parents, most responsible fatherhood programs include parent education as a fundamental component of the programming [2,6,16].

*Family Histories.* Prisoners' pre-prison family relationships are major determinants of the relationships they have with their children during imprisonment and upon release. In some cases, an imprisoned father's pre-prison lifestyle may not have been one in which much time was spent with his children. In cases where fathers were very much involved in the day-to-day lives of their children in positive ways, these fathers may be embarrassed that they cannot do the things that they once did. Pride, hurt and grief, and a desire for their children to move on with their lives may cause these fathers to disengage from their families.

*Prison Environment.* Fathers' parenting roles and behaviors are also shaped by the realities of the social environment of prisons. A prisoner's life involves childlike dependency; a prisoner's major responsibility centers on obeying rules. Social survival involves evasive and deceitful behavior and aggression and violence. A prison environment discourages the behaviors required to be a responsible parent or even a caring and compassionate adult.

*Interviews and conversations with prisoners' children and children's mothers indicate that there is a strong desire on the part of many children to see their incarcerated fathers, even if the children's mothers do not want the children to visit their fathers.*

*Because many men in prison may not really know how to be good parents, most responsible fatherhood programs include parent education as a fundamental component of the programming.*

*Although official memorandum of 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.*

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

*In recent years, policies have been added that make it more difficult for children to visit their incarcerated fathers.*

## **How Do Public Policies Affect Parenting during Incarceration?**

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. Although official memorandum of 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.

*Prison Locations and Prisoner Placements.* Many state and federal level policy decisions discourage family relationships. The use of imprisonment as a primary policy option for addressing problems of drug, poverty, and crime is a major example. For individuals convicted of non-violent crimes and drug possession, punishment and rehabilitation services in their own communities would not create immediate parent-child family disruptions with long term negative consequences for children. Incarceration often leads to permanent termination of parental rights, the severance of parent-child attachments and the relegation of parenting solely to mothers and other female relatives.

Legislative and administrative decisions regarding the location of prisons and the placement of prisoners are usually made with little or no regard for, or understanding of, family connections, parenting responsibilities, or the long term societal consequences of fatherlessness.

The notion of responsible fatherhood and most of what it entails has clearly not been factored into prisoner placement strategies. Current strategies often place prisoners in the geographic area of a state that is farthest from their homes at the beginning of a sentence and move them closer to their homes toward the end of their sentences. There is little or no evidence that isolation measures will reduce recidivism, enhance character, support children's development, or strengthen family ties. However, a consistent body of research has highlighted the positive role and function of strong family ties during imprisonment [9].

*Prison Visits.* Communication policies governing visits and telephone calls vary considerably from one state to another, and within states from one institution to another. Within institutions, sanctioned practices vary from one staff person to another. The State of New York is one of a few states that permit overnight visits for husbands, wives and their children, but these visits are not permitted statewide. Most states have a history of restricting the frequency, duration, and time of children's visits [12].

In recent years, policies have been added that make visitation more difficult [30]. These restrictions include requiring that the children's mother or legal custodians escort them on visits, limiting visiting privileges to children for whom there is documentation that the incarcerated parent is the child's biological father, and requiring identification for infants and other young children [13]. Many prison visits involve a long journey to the prison site, long waits to be processed to visit and pat and frisk searches.

While many of these more recent policies present problems for families of all races, several are particularly insensitive to African-American family traditions and culture wherein child rearing responsibilities are often shared among several individuals and where many children do not reside with their mothers. Visits between prisoners and their children are not likely to occur, if women with whom they long ago severed ties are the only ones who can escort children to prison. These mothers may not object to, or may even be in favor of, children seeing their fathers, but not if it means that they must inconvenience themselves to make visits possible.

*Prison Telephone Calls.* Telephone calls are important means for maintaining parent-child contact when parents and children live in separate households. As a result of states' decisions to use the revenues generated from inmate telephone systems to subsidize other operations, prison telephone calls are expensive. Fathers who maintain telephone contact with their children usually do so by calling collect to the home. The receiving audiences are charged the maximum allowable telephone rates, with large profits being divided among the telephone companies and the corrections department or other state units.

These calls with their very high rates are not welcomed by children's mothers or caregivers who do not have strong relationships with or commitments to the incarcerated families, and they are highly problematic for poor families. Public officials who promote responsible fatherhood initiatives have failed to examine the impact of the competing goals of earning high, profit-splitting returns on prison telephone calls and promoting family relationships.

*Child Support Policies.* Most prisoners are not in a position to carry out traditional father roles as economic providers. Prison pay is too low to allow fathers to meet financial commitments they may have to their children [15,34]. In the absence of real prison jobs, support orders have little meaning and little effect on parenting. When child support debt accrues during imprisonment and must be paid upon release, fathers who lack employment and have few resources will find it difficult to pay these debts. This situation is a precursor for rearrest for nonsupport, repeat crime, tense family relationships, and a host of other social ills. Paternity establishment is also of little benefit to children if other policies counteract and thwart fathers' ability to parent. Legal responsibility for a child does not go very far if communication policies preclude fathers from being able to see, talk, or correspond with their children.

*Child Welfare Policies.* Child welfare policies pose unique challenges for fathers who are in prison. When children are under the custody of the state, parent-child bonds are at high risk of permanent, rather than temporary, severance [6]. Termination of incarcerated parents' rights can result from a father's failure to communicate regularly with his child or from his failure to adhere to court orders regarding participation in treatment programs. A father can also lose his legal rights as a parent because a judge decides that his prior criminal behavior and/or incarceration make him an unfit parent.

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*When child support debt accrues during imprisonment and must be paid upon release, fathers who lack employment and have few resources will find it difficult to pay these debts.*

*The prison focus on security and emphasis on punishment precludes the types of parental involvement, program participation, and father-caseworker contact that the child welfare system requires.*

*Rules that prohibit individuals with criminal records from being on an apartment lease prevent formerly incarcerated fathers from resuming legal residence with their children and children's mothers who live there.*

Child welfare agencies do not have policies that address the unique situations or problems of children whose parents are in prison [13,27,35]. Incarcerated fathers are not generally involved in decision-making about their children. They are rarely included in planning, case plans, or administrative reviews of their children's cases. Furthermore, the prison focus on security and emphasis on punishment precludes the types of parental involvement, program participation, and father-caseworker contact that the child welfare system requires. When fathers are notified of administrative case reviews or termination of parental rights hearings, the probability that they will be able to attend these hearings is also very low.

### **How Do Public Policies Affect Postrelease Fathering?**

The impact of a criminal record does not end with the completion of a prison sentence. The inability to vote, hold certain jobs, or obtain different professional licenses is sanctioned by formal public policy. These types of ongoing sanctions threaten the notion of responsible fatherhood for formerly incarcerated men. Two examples of policies that have a strong potential for undermining the goals of responsible fatherhood initiatives are described here.

Public housing and subsidized housing policies designed to stamp out criminal activity in housing communities work at counter purposes to responsible fatherhood goals. Rules that prohibit individuals with criminal records from being on an apartment lease prevent formerly incarcerated fathers from resuming legal residence with their children and children's mothers who live there.

Similarly, child welfare policies designed to protect children may actually keep them from their fathers and prevent their fathers from being able to provide for themselves and their children. Of specific interest are policies that prohibit individuals with criminal histories from serving as kinship care providers and from living in homes approved as relative foster care. Under these situations, a grandmother providing relative foster care for her incarcerated son's child could be in the position of returning a child to the custody of the state if her formerly incarcerated son had to live in her home.

### **What Kinds of Data and Research Are Needed to Inform the Public Policy Debate?**

The body of scientific evidence about prisoners and their family roles and responsibilities is fairly limited. In order to inform public policy, the following data and research would be beneficial:

1. National statistics on incarcerated fathers and their family characteristics and responsibilities need to be collected and disseminated routinely.
2. Rigorous assessments of policies and programs that are being used to promote responsible fatherhood among incarcerated fathers need to be conducted.
3. Studies need to examine the impact of correctional system policies and regulations on family maintenance and relationships.
4. Research-based studies need to examine the full impact of public policies designed to protect the public from former prisoners or to maintain a safe prison environment.

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# Programs for Children with Incarcerated Parents

Lynda Ferro

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## What are the major program types for incarcerated parents?

Creasia Finney Hairston has identified five major program types for incarcerated parents [6]. These are parent education courses, special parent-child visits, child-oriented visiting activities, parent support groups, and custody and parental rights services.

*Parent Education Courses.* Parent education is the most popular and offered at almost all prisons for women and in some prisons for men. These classes provide education in areas such as child development, parenting techniques, and self-improvement.

*Special Parent-Child Visits.* The second type of programming provides opportunities for the parents to spend extended time with their children on-site at the prison. These visits may be in the form of overnight or special occasion visits that include special programming efforts, meals, arts and crafts, camping, etc. in a structured and well-supervised location at the prison.

*Child-Oriented Visiting Activities.* A third program approach utilizes child-oriented visiting facilities located at the prisons. At these facilities, the children are provided with games or toys to use during the visiting hours. These locations may be part of the regular visiting area, or may be separate from the visiting room. They may be staffed with professional staff members or with trained prison or community volunteers [6].

*Parent Support Groups.* Support groups for parents comprise the fourth model of programs for incarcerated parents. These groups meet on a regular basis and allow inmates to explore a wide variety of topics. Community or staff professionals, volunteer sponsors of the group, or even inmates themselves, often facilitate the groups. These groups sometimes mirror other self-help organizations in structure. They may have officers, hold meetings, fundraise, and even sponsor activities for other inmates.

*Custody and Parental Rights Services.* Finally, services that are provided to help parents maintain custody of and/or communicate with their children may include transportation services that enable the children and the caregivers to travel to the prison, or escort services that bring the children to the prison without their appointed caregivers. This type of program effort may assist inmates in obtaining phone call privileges to communicate with their child, or access to legal services to inform parents of their rights and obligations while incarcerated. [6]

*Five major program types are available to assist children with incarcerated parents: parent education courses, special parent-child visits, child-oriented visiting activities, parent support groups, and custody and parental rights services.*

*Special Parent-Child Visiting programs provide opportunities for the parents to spend extended time with their children on site at the prison.*



## What should be considered when developing programs?

While correctional family programs vary greatly, some key elements have been identified as “lessons learned” when developing programs that work [1]. These are:

- Develop and/or strengthen attachments between the incarcerated parent and the children
- Provide access to a continuum of family support services from sentencing through parole
- Provide structured visits to maximize family time, while preserving security and protecting staff
- Include parenting classes, in combination with visits and support and discussion groups
- Address the specific issues and barriers that incarcerated parents face in parenting, such as long distance parenting, co parenting with a caregiver who may have no interest in the prisoner or wish that the inmate not be involved in the child’s life, etc.
- Design curricula and programs that are relevant to the offender population and specific cultural and ethnic norms [6]
- Involve correctional staff and inmates in planning programs for inmates
- View family support programs as essential components of release preparation rather than as programs that reward criminal behavior.

Traditional parenting programs generally do not meet the needs of this population. In order to break the cycle of intergenerational criminal activities, effective parenting programming must focus upon maintaining a parent’s presence in children’s lives, even in the form of open adoptions.

*Because many women prisoners are victims of sexual or physical abuse, their health care needs are increased.*

Because many women prisoners are victims of sexual or physical abuse, their health care needs are increased. Many women enter prison pregnant, or become pregnant while in prison. A great number of incarcerated women suffer from alcohol and substance abuse, which puts them at a greater risk for HIV. Given their poor past health, pregnancies of incarcerated women can be more complicated [7]. Model programs will be inclusive of drug and alcohol screening of all women. Inmates would receive ongoing counseling and drug testing after their initial treatment program, with drug testing to continue upon release.

Bonding between a mother and her children is a two-way street. For incarcerated women, developing and maintaining this bond is difficult. Mothers are often unaware of where their children are, or what is happening to them. Children miss their mothers and blame themselves for the arrest. Bonding requires programs that address the importance of strengthening these relationships.

In addition to the above, programs should be evaluated and replicated, with the use of a national database for dissemination of the information. Although prisons maintain data on prisoners, very few collect data regarding the inmates' family characteristics, number of children, etc. [6] Training programs for practitioners that provide family support services to incarcerated parents and their children should be instituted [1].

*Only two states continue to provide formal prison nurseries today: Nebraska and New York.*

### **What types of programs are available today?**

Many innovative programs exist that help meet the needs of children with incarcerated parents. For example, some states utilize nurseries to allow mothers in prison to nurture their young children. However, only two states continue to provide formal prison nurseries today: Nebraska and New York [10,13]. Both programs stress the development of the nurturing relationship between the mother and her child, while providing parenting classes to educate the women in their parenting role, and enhance their child rearing skills.

### **Challenges in Program Development**

Many challenges exist in developing programs designed to maintain the connection between women and their children, such as:

- A widespread societal belief that making prison miserable will discourage offenders from committing other crimes
- Prison environments discourage visits from children and their guardians
- Prisons are located long distances away
- There is a lack of dependable and affordable public transportation
- The use of invasive search procedures at the prisons
- Limitations regarding food in visitation areas [10].

*In some short-term facilities, young children are not allowed to visit, or there is no physical contact allowed between children and their mothers.*

In some short-term facilities, young children are not allowed to visit, or there is no physical contact allowed between children and their mothers. The fear of liability and established regulations may inhibit maintaining a relationship between a mother in prison and her children.

### **Nebraska Correctional Center for Women**

The program in the Nebraska Correctional Center was established in 1976 under the Department of Corrections. It provides a nursery program that allows inmate mothers to keep their babies near them while they are incarcerated. The mothers and infants are housed together and the care of the infant is the primary responsibility of the inmate mother, who must take child development courses. Childbirth classes are offered, and infants may stay with their mother up to 18 months of age. Overnight and day child visits are also offered [13].

#### Contact Information:

Nebraska Correctional Center for Women  
(402) 362-3317  
1107 Recharge Road  
York, NE 68467  
Mary Alley, Parenting Program Coordinator

### **New York Program Model – The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility [4]**

The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Children’s Center allows overnight and summer visits for older children. The program was founded in 1901, is funded by the Department of Correctional Services, and is administered by Catholic Charities. It is an inmate-centered program. Inmates have the major responsibility for the many activities, with oversight provided by professional program staff. Four inmate caregivers in the Center have earned their credentials as Child Development Associates through an accredited program that prepares graduates to teach in an accredited nursery school anywhere in the country. Other inmates are currently enrolled in this program.

The Center’s main program is designed to provide a warm and inviting atmosphere for children to visit their mothers. There are efforts to keep inmates informed about the status of their children’s physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being while they are apart.

The center is open 365 days a year, with a well-equipped and cheerful playroom for children to visit their mothers unescorted. The room is also used to allow the children to play together while the adults converse, thus increasing the friendships among the children, and allowing them to realize that there are other children that experience the same issues.

A wide range of programs are housed in the Bedford Center, representing the most comprehensive set of programs available to children with incarcerated parents in the country. These services and programs include:

- bilingual parenting
- children’s advocate office
- a program that focuses on personal responsibility
- foster care composed of outside staff foster care advisors and inmates
- holiday activities
- infant day care
- a mental hygiene program
- parenting and prenatal courses
- Story Corner, which allows women to tape record children’s books on tape for their children
- a transportation clinic that provides transportation for caregivers and children
- a program to provide necessities for mothers leaving the prison with their new babies
- a toy library where mothers can choose specific toys for their children to take home
- a nursery where mothers can remain with their infants for up to one year
- a foster home for children that have no other family members to care for them.

Contact information:

Children’s Center at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

(914) 241-3100 Ext. 4050

247 Harris Road

Bedford Hills, NY 10507

[childrens\\_center@mindspring.com](mailto:childrens_center@mindspring.com)

Toni Campoamor, Director

**Table 1. Innovative National Programs**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Reading Family Ties: Face to Face</b>	This program was developed in February of 2000. The program allows incarcerated mothers in two rural central Florida institutions to have weekly family visits via the use of high-speed videoconferencing technology. Once a date and time is selected, a Miami site coordinator confirms the visit with the institutional coordinator. Under constant supervision, the inmate is then taken to a room that is equipped with a computer, camera and speakerphone. It is there that the mother reads a story to her children. Two non-profit agency partners in Florida provide transportation for the children to the reading sites and publicize the program [2].
<b>Girl Scouts Behind Bars</b>	This program began in 1992 as a National Institute of Justice pilot program in Maryland. The program serves daughters aged 5 to 13 who join their mothers two Saturdays a month for a Girl Scout troop meeting in a prison or jail setting. During these two-hour sessions, the women spend supervised time with their daughters working on troop projects [11].
<b>The Motherread Program</b>	Incarcerated mothers in North Carolina are taught how to read stories aloud using expressive manners and techniques to engage children’s attention. Inmates read these books/stories, or compose stories of their own, and are videotaped. This tape is then sent with the book to the child so they are able to follow along while watching and listening to the video. Mothers are taught literacy skills and parenting while they discuss the themes in the children’s stories they are reading [9].
<b>Mothers/Men Inside Loving Kids (M.I.L.K.) Program</b>	This program was originally sponsored by the Parents Anonymous (PA) program in Virginia for mothers in prisons and jails in Virginia and then later expanded to include men. Incarcerated parents are provided with a range of programming, including child development, parent education, and independent living skills classes; weekly ongoing support and education programs; and 4 to 6 daylong contact visits with their children. Local volunteers provide transportation and food for the contact visits [5].
<b>The DC Family Literacy Program</b>	Began in 1991, the Literacy Program is run through a law school. The program serves both men and women. Families meet one time a week for three months to read books, sing songs, and share stories with their children aged eight months to sixteen years [12].

**Table 2. Programs in the State of Michigan**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Contact</b>
<b>Options Center, Inc.</b>	Options Center Inc. was established in 1992. It operates a program called Generations that provides counseling, tutoring, mentoring, referrals and advocacy for children of incarcerated parents. Generations serves the children of incarcerated parents living in Washtenaw County.	Joan Doughty, Children’s Program Coordinator Generations 28990 Carpenter Road, Suite 700 Ann Arbor, MI 48106 (734) 677-1840 <a href="mailto:joandoughty@juno.com">joandoughty@juno.com</a> <a href="http://www.comnet.org/options">www.comnet.org/options</a>
<b>S.A.D.O.I. (Sons and Daughters of the Incarcerated)</b>	The SADOI project works specifically with the children of the incarcerated by providing direct counseling, dealing with the psychological, emotional and social stigmas directly associated with the incarceration of a parent. The project serves residents of Washtenaw county.	Current information not available. Project in process of merging with another agency.
<b>Children’s Visitation Program (CVP)</b>	CVP provides consistent visits between the mother and her children, ongoing support groups, assessment of child/caregiver needs, advocacy for children, assistance with the mother’s parole plan, and full reunification support. Services are provided at Scott’s Correctional Facility located in Plymouth, MI under the guidance of the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency (MCCD).	Florida Andrews, Director Children’s Visitation Program 19500 Middlebelt Road Suite 200-E Livonia, MI 48152 (248) 888-1194
<b>Fathers Behind Bars, Inc.</b>	Fathers Behind Bars, Inc., established in 1994, provides publications and technical assistance on self-help support groups for incarcerated fathers. The program serves incarcerated fathers in the USA and Canada.	Marilyn I. Hamilton 525 Superior Street Niles, MI 49120 (616) 684-5715 <a href="mailto:fathersbehindbars2@msn.com">fathersbehindbars2@msn.com</a>
<b>Project S.E.E.K. (Services to Enable and Empower Kids)</b>	Project S.E.E.K. provides tutoring and support groups, informational groups, family outings, emergency assistance, referrals, and transportation. The program serves incarcerated parents, their families and their children who live in Genesee County.	Sarah Canterbury Project SEEK 806 Tuuri Place Flint, MI 48503 <a href="mailto:Sarahc@mottchc.org">Sarahc@mottchc.org</a>

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# Speakers

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## **Peter Breen, M.S.W.**

Senior Program Consultant, Child Welfare League of America

Peter Breen is the former Executive Director of Centerforce, which provides services to children and families of incarcerated individuals in California. He has worked very closely with the Child Welfare League of America to develop their clearinghouse of information on children with incarcerated parents.

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## **Creasia Finney Hairston, Ph.D.**

Dean and Professor at Jane Addams College of Social Work, the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Creasia Finney Hairston is the editor of *Children with Parents in Prison: Child Welfare Policy, Program, and Practice Issues*. She has authored dozens of articles on issues concerning children with incarcerated parents.

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## **Rosemary Sarri, Ph.D.**

Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Social Work  
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Rosemary Sarri is editor of *Women at the Margins: Neglect, Punishment and Resistance*. She is president of SADOI (Sons and Daughters of the Incarcerated). She has written extensively on issues that concern incarcerated women and their children.

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# Selected Resources

Lynda Ferro

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## Child Welfare League of America

[www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org)

The CWLA is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to develop and promote policies and programs to protect America's children and strengthen America's families. A major program area centers on children with incarcerated parents. Major CWLA publications include *Children with Parents in Prison: Child Welfare Policy, Program, and Practice Issues* by Cynthia Seymour and Creasia Finney Hairston and *Parents in Prison: Children in Crisis: An Issue Brief* by Cynthia Beatty, and *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies* by Lois E. Wright & Cynthia B. Seymour.

## National Council on Crime and Delinquency

[www.nccd-crc.org](http://www.nccd-crc.org)

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency, founded in 1907, is a nonprofit organization that promotes effective, humane, fair and economically sound solutions to family, community and justice problems. NCCD conducts research, promotes reform initiatives, and seeks to work with individuals, public and private organizations and the media to prevent and reduce crime and delinquency. The Children's Research Center is a division of NCCD.

## National Criminal Justice Reference Service

[www.ncjrs.org/index.html](http://www.ncjrs.org/index.html)

The NCJRS provides reports and full resources available to policymakers, criminal and juvenile justice practitioners, educators, community leaders, and the general public. NCJRS is a division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

## National Institute of Corrections

[www.nicic.org](http://www.nicic.org)

The National Institute of Corrections provides a directory (2001) of programs serving incarcerated parents and their children listed by state. Information provided includes program name, contact information, and a brief description. *Directory of Programs Serving Families of Adult Offenders* (2001). The NCIC is a division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

## U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

[www.os.dhhs.gov](http://www.os.dhhs.gov)

The Department of Health and Human Services is the United States government's principal agency for protecting the health of all Americans and providing essential human services, especially for those who are least able to help themselves.

## U.S. Department of Justice

[www.usdoj.gov](http://www.usdoj.gov)

The United States Department of Justice site provides information regarding the Bureau of Justice Statistics information on crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of justice systems at all levels of government. Publications regarding women offenders, women in prison, incarcerated parents and their children and a survey of state prison inmates are available.

### **Family and Corrections Network**

[www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)

The Family and Corrections Network offers information, training and technical assistance on children of prisoners, parenting programs for prisoners, prison visiting, incarcerated fathers and mothers, hospitality programs, keeping in touch, returning to the community, the impact of the justice system on families, and prison marriage. The organization provides a comprehensive directory of services to families of adult offenders and a series of articles on children/families of the incarcerated.

### **Prison Support Directory**

<http://prisonactivist.org/psd.htm>

Includes contact information and short descriptions of organizations and projects that serve inmate populations and their families. Also includes resources related to prison AIDS, advocacy organizations, parole and pre-release information, legal resources, etc.

### **Center for the Children of Incarcerated Parents**

65 South Grand Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91105

(626) 397 1396 fax: (626) 397 1304

or: Pacific Oaks College, 714 W. California Blvd

Pasadena, CA 91105

(626) 397-1300

Provides free educational material for incarcerated parents and their children.

### **Bridges**

Ann Adalist-Estrin

444 Old York Road

Jenkintown, PA 19046

(215) 576-7961

Provides family and child development counseling for the children of incarcerated parents, training and consultation to agencies that provide services to incarcerated parents, and serves as a resource for the development of a white paper on the issue of incarcerated parents and their children.

### **Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency**

1115 South Pennsylvania Avenue

Suite 201

Lansing, MI 48912

(517) 482-4161

### **A Sentence of Their Own**

[www.asentenceoftheirown.com](http://www.asentenceoftheirown.com)

A video that chronicles one family's annual pilgrimage to a New Hampshire State Prison and reveals the damaging impact incarceration has on families is available for purchase. The site also offers a chat room, a glossary, resources, and a listing of organizations that provide extensive information on children with incarcerated parents.