Services for Children of Incarcerated Mothers

JANNA HRUBY

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN FAMILIES AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
Myths and Facts

- **Myth:** Most incarcerated mothers are in for violent crimes
  - **Fact:** Actually, the majority of women are incarcerated for drug-related offenses, the number doubled from 1990-1996.

- **Myth:** Very few incarcerated parents have completed their education.
  - **Fact:** Almost 40% of incarcerated parents have at least a high school education and 15% graduated from college.

- **Myth:** Incarcerated parents are unlikely to be working at the time of their arrest.
  - **Fact:** Most incarcerated parents were contributing to the family income prior to incarceration. 68% of the men and 47% of the women were employed prior to arrest.
Questions to Address

- What are the family situations of these children?
- What were their relationships with their parents prior to incarceration?
- Who is caring for them now?
- How is the parent-child relationship maintained or disrupted during incarceration?
- How does parental incarceration affect children emotionally, behaviorally, and developmentally?
- What are the needs and challenges of children with incarcerated parents?
- How do these needs differ from those of other at-risk children?
Children of Prisoners in the US

- Under 1 year: 2%
- 1-4 years old: 20%
- **5-9 years old: 36%**
- 10-14 years old: 28%
- 15-17 years old: 14%
On any given day, more than 150,000 children have a mother in prison (Urban Institute 2008)

~2.3 million individuals in US jails and prisons, and more than 798,000 people on parole

Estimated that 7.5 million children have a parent who is in prison, in jail or under correctional supervision (HHS 2008)

Parents expected to serve an average sentence of 80 to 103 months

On average, for each one of these parents who is currently incarcerated, two children are left behind

Most of these children are young, low-income, and black or Hispanic

Too little is known about these children and their needs and experiences

Why is this population invisible?

Polices

Service Providers
Key Findings

- A mother’s incarceration is a greater disruption in a child’s life than a father’s incarceration
- Children with incarcerated parents face difficult living situations
- Maintaining a relationship with a parent during incarceration is challenging
- The process of release and reintegration is a particularly stressful time
- Parental incarceration is associated with a variety of negative behavioral outcomes
- Children with incarcerated parents need a variety of supports
Benefits of Prison Visits

- Provides assurance
- Reduces separation anxiety
- Can reduce the child’s incidence of problematic behavior and improve outcomes
- Provides stabilization
- Maintains parent-child attachment

Some common misconceptions:
- the incarcerated parent does not want visits.
- the child does not want contact with an incarcerated parent.
My Work and Research at the State House

- **Representative Khan’s History with this Issue**

- **My Research**
  - Mothers at time of Arrest
  - Parenting from Prison
  - Transportation Issues
  - Communication Issues
  - Maintaining Contact

- **Services and Programs in Massachusetts**
  - Conference Attended: Girl Scouts Beyond Bars

- **Services and Programs in Other States**
Cycle of Incarceration

Criminal involvement

Potential Risks:
- Abuse/Neglect
- Chemical dependency
- Domestic Violence

Interventions:
- School-based
- Community-based treatment/prevention

Parent arrested

Potential Risks:
- Exposure to trauma at time of arrest
- Change in caregiver, placement
- Self-blame

Interventions:
- Arrest protocols
- Crisis centers

Parent incarcerated

Potential Risks:
- Family’s needs increase: financial, emotional
- Reactions to trauma, including AOD use by youth
- School problems

Interventions:
- Mentoring, appropriate visitation
- Prevention and Treatment

Parent released

Potential Risks:
- New family relationships destabilized. Safety concern?
- Parent: pressures to provide support, but maintain their own stability

Interventions:
- Teaming support, including MH and CD

Re-integration (majority) OR Decomposition of a parent

To consider throughout process:

- Cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic differences and the need for culturally-appropriate care. Awareness of disparate impact of incarceration on some minority communities.

- Protective factors and strengths: Not every family experiences similar risks, many families manage incarceration of a parent through strengths, including protective and caregiving adults other than the parent.

- Environment of shame and secrecy due to stigma, and impact of illicit activities, and increase of impact if youth is experiencing stigma-induced shame due to sexual minority identity or other reason. (Bearse 2009)
Do Parents and Children have Contact?

Contact Between State Inmate Parents and Their Children

(From S. Christian, 2008, Casey Family Programs)
Child Visitation with Incarcerated Parents in State Facilities, by Child's Current Caregiver (2004 Survey Results)

From S. Christian, 2008, Casey Family Programs
Future Research

- Bedford Hills Prison, New York
  - Research on day camps
  - Transportation Services
- Trailer Studies that have been proven successful
- Habitat for Humanity (building houses on prison site)
- More research is needed on
  - Prevention
  - Long term effects
  - Re-entry for at risk youths
  - Transitional period/programs
  - Funding for research
Future Recommendations

- **Needs within the Policy Community**
  - Tracking children and gathering information would help agencies that encounter such children during the process from arrest, through the court, and into the correctional facility

- **Longitudinal Studies**
  - Following emotional, social, physical, and educational outcomes among children of incarcerated parents compared to a matched comparison group

- More services and funding for programs that strengthen children’s connections with their parents, their family, their caregivers, and others within the community

- **Visitation, Communication, and Transportation**

- **Make the Issue Visible: Don’t Keep Mothers Hiden Behind Bars!**