

Children of Incarcerated Parents: Implications for School Counselors

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### **Abstract**

The recent increase in prison populations has given rise to an unprecedented number of children in the school system with incarcerated parents. To cope with stressors before, during, or after parents' incarceration, children can exhibit a range of problematic and maladaptive behaviors. This article explores the negative behaviors these children can exhibit during various stages of their parents' incarceration and the implications of such behaviors in school and learning environments. In addition, the paper argues for the critical role counselors can have in providing relevant therapeutic interventions, reducing stigma of incarceration in the schools, and integrating community resources.

### Children of Incarcerated Parents: Implications for School Counselors

Over the past 20 years, the number of inmates in the prison system has risen annually by approximately 4% (Miller, 2006) with the current prison population estimated at 200,000 (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2008). The number of female prisoners has seen an even greater increase, largely attributed to a surge in non-violent crimes (Arditti, 2005; Reed & Reed, 1997), including drug use, prostitution, and theft (Miller, 2006; Smith, Krisman, Strozier & Marley, 2004). This growing population of women, many of whom are primary caregivers for their children (Johnston, 2006; Miller, 2006), has contributed to an unprecedented number of children with incarcerated parents in the public school system. Since 1991, the population of minor children with at least one incarcerated parent has increased by 80% as the number of male and female inmates has grown (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Regarding the consequences of these trends, Murray and Farrington (2005) have suggested that parental incarceration causes “profound psychosocial difficulties” in children (p. 1269). The negative conditions before, during, or after parents’ incarceration as well as additional stressors outside of the home may create emotional trauma in children (Mazza, 2002). Likewise, these environmental risk factors can weaken children’s ability to cope, exhibiting maladaptive behaviors to overcome stressful events. Furthermore, families’ decisions to keep parental incarceration private (Adalist-Estrin, 2006) and the wide range of responses children can exhibit towards their parents’ confinement may cause difficulty for community and governmental agencies in identifying and serving these individuals. According to Murray (2007), the social isolation children experience as result of their parents’ incarceration may contribute to

their decisions to engage in delinquent activity, and thus creates a generational cycle of criminal behavior.

School counselors are in a unique position to aid these children and their families. These individuals may be able to identify children of incarcerated parents because they have frequent interaction with this population during the school day. In addition, the school setting may be a place where these children feel safest and more willing to express their emotions. Currently, there is insufficient literature addressing how school counselors can heighten their awareness and develop skills for working with this population of children. This article aims to examine children of incarcerated parents, the environments they live in, and the role school counselors can take in these children's lives. In particular, we will address how school counselors can become advocates for this population by creating counseling programs that offer support through appropriate interventions, school-wide education, and community outreach.

### **Considerations for Children of Incarcerated Parents**

When facing the trauma of parents' incarceration, a variety of negative family and environmental conditions can influence children's ability to maintain resiliency (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas, & Taylor, 2005). Often these factors, including poverty (Dallaire, 2007; Newby, 2006), exposure to violence, child abuse, as well as substance abuse and mental illness (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2004), are present in the home prior to parents' arrests and imprisonment. Furthermore, these factors may strongly affect how children will respond in school when their parents become incarcerated.

Children and families' cultural and racial identities are important components in understanding society's view of incarceration and criminal behavior. According to

Krisberg and Engel-Temin (2007), "African American children are nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than white children. Latino children are three times more likely to have an imprisoned parent than white children." (p. 185). This discrepancy between ethnic groups has become more pronounced as the population of children with incarcerated parents has risen over the past decade (Krisberg & Engel-Temin, 2007). Because a higher number of African American and Latino children have parents in prison, school counselors may observe a higher portion of these students exhibiting maladaptive coping strategies, emotional turmoil, and academic difficulties.

Moreover, because many children of incarcerated parents often engage in negative behaviors that can lead to imprisonment, these statistics may suggest that a disproportionate number of African American and Latino children will become incarcerated as adults. Pattillo, Weiman, and Western (2004) have found that African American and Latino youth have higher arrest rates and commit more homicides than any other racial group in the United States. Pattillo et al. (2004) have also found that those who are of lower socio-economic status (SES) and dwell in predominantly minority neighborhoods prior to incarceration compile the majority of the current prison population.

For these reasons, counselors in any setting can develop multicultural competence by acknowledging their own cultural biases (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Counselors can also expand their knowledge in the customs and practices of various ethnic and racial groups to advance their skills for working with culturally diverse individuals (Sue et al., 1992). Likewise, because of the relationship between incarceration and lower SES (Pattillo et al., 2004), school counselors may need to

recognize that children of incarcerated parents may be living in poor environmental conditions and/or poverty (Dallaire, 2007). In addition to the societal barriers regarding race and ethnicity, these living conditions may require further exploration into families' coping strategies and resilience. In the school setting, a broadened perspective of multicultural and socioeconomic issues can assist school counselors in recognizing children's needs, validating children's experiences, and promoting better solutions for children in the classroom and at home.

Despite the data regarding the incarceration of minority populations, school counselors can acknowledge that children of any race or ethnic group may cope with parental incarceration by exhibiting attention-seeking behaviors in the classroom (Hanlon et al., 2005; Johnston, 1995). Failing to intervene during this critical period may intensify the disruptions in children's emotional and cognitive development (Johnston, 1995, 2006). With this in mind, we will examine specific aspects of parental incarceration that can lead to these negative emotional and behavioral outcomes in children. These aspects include separation from their parents, poor quality of care after parents' incarceration, traumatic visitations with parents in prison, and difficult transition periods when incarcerated parents reenter the home.

### **Separation from Parents**

Children's initial experiences with their parents' incarceration may include witnessing parents' arrests. These experiences can be traumatic (Murray, 2007), especially if police officers have to use force. Seeing parents arrested by police may be confusing or frightening for children (Mazza, 2002). In addition, because their parents are no longer available to protect them, feelings of helplessness can surface for

children, which can ultimately lead to anxiety or avoidant behaviors while in school. Moreover, children may show reluctance to attend school out of the fear that the other caregiver will be taken away by police during the school day.

The trauma involved for children as they witness their parents' arrests may cause these individuals to form negative images of law enforcement officials, seeing them as assailants instead of protectors (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Unlike adults who may turn their emotions inward in response to violence, children may express their feelings outward in efforts to gain control. Their experience with this violence may anger children and inhibit their ability to produce empathy, causing them to display their emotions through violent, disruptive, and/or defiant actions (Osofsky, 1995).

In the school setting, children's feelings of abandonment and lack of trust in adults can manifest into a disregard for school rules, classroom instructions, and the rights and safety of other students. During these traumatic periods, school counselors may need to engage children in activities that promote trust. School counselors can also work with children to heighten their awareness of the feelings of others as well as develop more positive ways to deal with their anger, fear, and shame.

In addition to witnessing or learning of arrests, children often struggle with the physical separation from their incarcerated parents (Poehlmann, 2005). Arditti (2005) describes that "incarceration represents the social death of the loved one, and surviving family members may experience a profound sense of loss" (p. 253). Moreover, Poehlmann (2005) observed a sample of children with incarcerated mothers to exhibit their grief with persistent crying and sadness, developmental regressions (e.g., thumb-sucking, loss of toilet training, etc.), and sleeping problems (e.g., nightmares, insomnia).

In contrast, Miller (2006) asserts that children who have formed positive attachment relationships with their parents will respond better to parental incarceration than children who do not have these attachments. Lack of attachment to either parent may decrease children's confidence, increase anxiety, and inhibit cognitive processes that enable them to control their own behavior (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). These behaviors can become highly problematic in school, often limiting children's academic progress as well as their ability to socialize with peers.

In addition to higher instances of externalizing behavior (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity), researchers have identified more internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression, withdrawal) in children of incarcerated parents than in children whose parents were not incarcerated (Kinner, Alati, Najman & Williams, 2007). When interviewed, many caregivers and incarcerated mothers described children as detached, apprehensive, disoriented, and depressed (Poehlmann, 2005). In addition to these internalizing behaviors, the effects of maternal or paternal incarceration may also increase children's vulnerability to peer pressure (Hanlon et al., 2005), which often involves negative, at-risk behaviors.

Though longer time spent together may positively influence children's attachment to their parents (Johnson, 2006) as well as encourage more adaptive behaviors, school counselors can recognize that parental incarceration may have negative implications for children at any age. These helping professionals can work with young children to establish meaning through their experiences with their incarcerated parent. This work could include school counselors and children creating stories and drawings, and/or



utilizing various toys (i.e., puppets, dolls, games) to promote solutions as well as alternate understandings to the challenges in their lives.

### **Quality of Care**

The quality of care children receive from caregivers may strongly influence children's ways of coping with parental incarceration (Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). Within many families, incarceration leads to a single parent household. Women are often left to care for their children when fathers enter the criminal justice system (Smith et al., 2004). Lowenstein (1986) found that children's abilities to adjust to this family restructuring heavily depends upon their mothers' coping skills. For example, children's maladjustment to their father's incarceration (e.g., decrease in school performance, poor relationships with others, delinquent behaviors) was linked with younger mothers who had low levels of education and insufficient familial support systems (Lowenstein, 1986).

When mothers become incarcerated, grandparents usually become children's primary caregivers (Grant, 2000; Miller, 2006; Phillips & Bloom, 1998; Ruiz, 2002). In addition, aunts, uncles, and other kinship members may assume responsibility of caring for these children (Young & Smith, 2000). Though children often experience better emotional outcomes in kinship care (Young & Smith, 2000), caregivers usually receive minimal services and funding from governmental and social agencies (Berrick, Barth & Needell, 1994). As a result, limited financial resources may cause the quality of life for children in kinship care to decrease because these caregivers tend to live in unsafe neighborhoods (Chipman, Wells & Johnson, 2002).

Young and Smith (2002) indicate that kinship caregivers may face “emotional, physical, and financial difficulties when they take on the care of an incarcerated relative’s children” (p. 134). Grandparents can experience additional emotional and physical stress if children have physical disabilities, academic difficulties, or developmental delays as a result of parental separation (Grant, 2000). In addition to these difficulties, kinship caregivers can harbor negative attitudes toward incarcerated parents, which can lead to ambivalence in where loyalty lies with children (Adalist-Estrin, 2006). Children may feel guilty because they have a healthier relationship with their caregivers than their incarcerated parents.

Children will often enter foster care if relatives are unable to care for them in parents’ absences (Reed & Reed, 1997). Placement with non-relative caregivers may involve children losing ties to members of their social networks (Perry, 2006). For example, foster care often requires children to live in different neighborhoods, change schools (Dannerbeck, 2005), as well as separate from their siblings (Miller, 2006). With no connections to important figures in their lives, children may feel isolated and unloved. The risks children face in foster care have the potential to contribute to negative outcomes as they mature into adulthood. Daining and DePanfilis (2007) have theorized that children in foster care are at higher risk for homelessness, mental disorders, and incarceration in adulthood.

Undoubtedly, single parents, grandparents, other kinship caregivers, and foster parents can experience difficulty when trying to meet the needs of children of incarcerated parents who are in their care. This may impact the school environment because caregivers may find it difficult to attend school meetings and parent/teacher

conferences due to work conflicts, physical health restrictions, and/or lack of childcare. School counselors can assist these caregivers through ongoing support and communication as well as adequate flexibility when meeting with these surrogate parents. Moreover, a thorough knowledge of community resources can allow school counselors to refer caregivers to agencies that provide counseling, food, clothing, and other services. Though providing accommodations for these caregivers can be frustrating and time consuming, school counselors can recognize that these acts may be necessary in promoting children's emotional and academic progress.

### **Visiting Parents in Prison**

Though many families do not see inmates (Reed & Reed, 1997), research shows that consistent visitations in prison have the potential to be helpful for children and parents (Smith et al., 2004). These visitations may enable children and parents to maintain healthy relationships throughout the incarceration period (Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Newby, 2006). Nonetheless, visiting incarcerated parents can be strenuous and upsetting for caregivers and children (Arditti, 2003; Arditti et al., 2003).

For example, many families live far from prisons (Greenberg, 2006). Because of the distance, visiting inmates may be financially costly as well as physically tiring for families (Arditti et al., 2003; Greenberg, 2006). Once at the prison, caregivers and children often have to wait a long period of time for a relatively short visit with incarcerated parents (Arditti, 2005). In addition, families usually find prison waiting areas to be uncomfortable and unwelcoming (Poehlmann, 2005). Among interviews of children's experiences in waiting rooms, caregivers reported that children were not allowed to bring toys into the area and often had to be quiet and physically still (Arditti,

2005). Thus, the lack of physical and verbal stimulation may be extremely difficult for children, especially if they are very young.

Because of prison regulations, children are often unable to hug their parents in visitations, which can be very upsetting and confusing (Arditti, 2003; Christian et al., 2006; Greenberg, 2006). In addition to their distress while interacting with parents, Arditti (2003) notes that children may be traumatized when they see and interact with other inmates and prison staff in the visiting areas. Parents may also refuse to see their children because of the shame and embarrassment of being in prison (Young & Smith, 2000). This can result in children responding to parents' refusals with feelings of rejection (Young & Smith, 2000).

As children's coping strategies tend to be counterproductive, they may benefit from verbalizing their thoughts and reactions toward visitations with school counselors. School counselors can explore children's feelings of anxiety or ambivalence in visitations again by utilizing toys and dolls, drawing and/or painting, and games. These activities and role plays can help children cope with feelings of parental rejection and decrease the relational damage that can result from the separation due to imprisonment.

### **Parents' Reentry into Children's Lives**

As noted earlier, the various aspects of the incarceration period may have profound effects on children's physical health (Kinner et al., 2007), emotional state, mental development (Poehlmann, 2005) and behavior (Arditti et al., 2003). As a result, the transition period in which parents come back into children's lives after incarceration can be a difficult emotional adjustment for all involved individuals (Day, Acock, Bahr, &

Arditti, 2005; Newby, 2006; Waller & Swisher, 2006). Researchers have argued that parents' positive transitions into the home may decrease their desire to engage in criminal behavior again (Day et al., 2005). In addition, children may more easily adjust to their parents' reentry if they had positive relationships with parents before incarceration, frequent visits with parents in prison, and support from caregivers (Newby, 2006).

At times incarcerated parents' reentry into children's lives can be onerous in that parents may act in ways that cause physical and emotional damage to their children. Situations can include parents exhibiting violent behavior, abusing drugs or alcohol, or exposing children to infectious diseases they contracted in prison (Day et al., 2005). These examples suggest that the quality of life for some children can worsen upon parents' release from prison. Most intervention efforts focus on children, parents, and caregivers during the incarceration period instead of after parents' release (Hairston, 1998). Awareness of these issues among this population of children may be essential for school counselors to administer appropriate interventions as well as effectively communicate children's needs to their classroom teachers, school staff, and principals. Because of the lack of information, school counselors may consider utilizing community resources to assist children with these transitions.

Though more exploration is needed, researchers have explored parents' prison experiences and how they influence their capacities to establish positive relationships with their children (Day et al., 2005; Hairston, 1998; Waller & Swisher, 2006). Because many children have poor contact with incarcerated parents while in prison (Arditti et al., 2003; Miller, 2006), many of them find it difficult to form positive bonds with parents

upon prison release (Poehlmann, 2005). Children's ambivalence can be hurtful to their incarcerated parent (Arditti, 2005), and these individuals may struggle with their roles as parents, spouses/significant others, or family members (Arditti et al., 2005).

In contrast, incarcerated parents may hold distorted beliefs about the reentry process with their family and children (Day et al., 2005). Studies have found that despite their lack of interaction with their children, many fathers were optimistic about their skills as parents and their reentry back into their children's lives (Arditti et al., 2005; Day et al., 2005). Researchers assumed that these parents' interview responses were somewhat unrealistic (Arditti et al., 2005; Day et al., 2005). For parents who have reentered their homes from prison, school counselors may need to make parent education accessible through the school or referrals to community agencies. School counselors can also exert increased efforts to make parents feel included in the school community and competent in caring for their children.

### **School Counseling and Advocacy**

According to Keys, Bemak, and Lockhart (1998), school counselors are important individuals who assist schools in identifying and meeting the needs of at-risk students. School counselors' daily interaction with children of incarcerated parents allows these individuals to recognize potential changes in behavior, attitudes, and physical health. These children may feel safest in the school environment and more comfortable talking about their home life, relationships with incarcerated parents, and quality of care in parents' absences. For those reasons, school counselors can promote the well being of these children by addressing their needs, changing the school environment, and advocating in the community. These objectives can be integrated into counseling

programs that contain schools' missions and values, delivery systems of classroom guidance activities and individual student services, organized management systems, and systems of accountability measures that ensure program effectiveness (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2003). All of these systems of operation are components of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2003).

### **Addressing Needs: Identifying, Counseling, and Referring**

In accordance with the ASCA National Model, appropriate school counselor roles involve addressing the needs of students as well as assisting administrators in identifying these students (ASCA, 2003). Identification and effective assistance to children of incarcerated parents may require school counselors to gain awareness of the risk factors in these children's lives (Dallaire, 2007). Once these individuals have identified children of incarcerated parents, they may need to administer appropriate interventions that align with the school's foundation and their role as school counselors (ASCA, 2003).

School counselors may also modify their approaches based on children's developmental, behavioral, and emotional needs. For instance, as noted earlier, the bereavement associated with separation from their parents may be challenging for this population of children. Oaklander (2000) has found that play therapy is often helpful in allowing children to effectively grieve with parents' deaths or absences. Unfortunately, when implementing play therapy, school counselors may face limitations because of minimal training opportunities, limited time with students, as well as other job responsibilities within the school day (Ray, Armstrong, & Warren, 2005). Despite these

challenges, school counselors may find that any form of play or unstructured activity, despite the brevity of time, may be beneficial for children to explore and express emotions they may find difficult to verbally express. In addition to working with the individual, student groups that allow children of incarcerated parents to openly share their experiences can provide these students with a support network of peers (Lopez & Suniti-Bhat, 2007).

Lastly, effective avenues that promote positive outcomes for children of incarcerated parents often require participation from children's caregivers and family members (Arditti et al., 2003; Dallaire, 2007; Murray & Farrington, 2005). In addition to providing in-school services, school counselors may need to refer children and their families to practitioners in the community or non-profit agencies. If families do not have insurance or are financially strained, the referral process may require school counselors to assist families in finding governmental assistance programs and/or community agencies with sliding scales. Thus, school counselors may better serve these families by obtaining knowledge in governmental policies regarding child welfare, foster or kinship care, and criminal justice.

### **Changing the School Environment**

In addition to meeting the needs of children of incarcerated parents individually, school counselors can reduce the stigma surrounding incarceration by promoting a positive environment in the school. These individuals can educate administrators, teachers, staff, and parents on children and families' experiences. Presentations, workshops, brochures, and parent/teacher meetings are avenues for school counselors to present this information. School counselors can also encourage members of the



school community to provide additional support for families and children of parental incarceration through donations of food, clothing, diapers, household amenities, and school supplies.

The ASCA National Model includes guidance lessons as a component in a counseling program's delivery system (ASCA, 2003). Specific lessons that teach awareness, acceptance, and respect among students from all backgrounds may contribute to a more positive school environment. For instance, school counselors can work with teachers and administrators to develop social justice curricula that promote positive interactions between children of incarcerated parents and other students. According to Bell and Griffin (2007), developing social justice curricula involves creating an environment that fosters various student learning styles and readjusts as student awareness and processing increases. In addition, administering curricula not only encourages more awareness toward societal oppression of marginalized groups, but also promotes student growth and requires the frequent evaluation of teacher "social identities, biases, fears, and prejudices" (Bell, Love, Washington, & Weinstein, 2007, p. 381).

Because issues of criminality and social class often overlap, Leondar-Wright and Yeskel's (2007) curriculum on classism can be applied to schools with children of incarcerated parents. In addition to developing an understanding of the basic foundations of social class, this curriculum aims to identify the relationships between this issue and other forms of oppression as well as examine how social class influences individual lives and culture (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007). Similar lessons can also challenge students to reflect upon societal factors that influence their feelings and

attitudes toward issues of incarceration along with the negative outcomes involved in engaging in criminal behavior. School counselors can also develop classroom curricula that encourage all students to challenge existing stigma toward incarceration and other societal issues in the school.

### **Advocacy in the Community**

School counselors can take additional steps to promote better outcomes for children of incarcerated parents and their family members as well as school staff, parents and students by becoming liaisons with community service agencies. Through partnerships with various agencies, these helping professionals can bring programs into schools that can be accessible to students, parents, and community members. For example, the U.S. Department of Education provides governmental grants to partnering schools and community agencies with prevention and academic enrichment efforts (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Such programs or Community Learning Centers offer parenting classes, before and after school clubs for students, and community meetings (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

School counselors can also partner with local law enforcement to promote community awareness and action toward safer neighborhoods. This activism may disrupt criminal activity in the community, preventing arrests and incarceration for parents and future offenders. These partnership can assist school counselors in developing programs that not only meets the needs of children of incarcerated parents and their families, but all students, parents, and community members.

In conclusion, school counselors serve as unique helping agents for children of incarcerated parents and their families. By learning specific interventions and

developing counseling programs that address this population's needs, change the school environment, and advocate within the community, school counselors can promote positive outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. They can also interrupt the generational cycle of crime by promoting the change of environmental factors in these children's lives that may contribute to criminal behavior. Most importantly, school counselors can give children of incarcerated parents a voice in a society that often overlooks them, teaching them to advocate for themselves, their families, and their incarcerated parents.

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