

## **CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS: HELPING THE SILENT VICTIMS**

**By Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell**

**ATLANTA** – When Katia Dukes was nine, her father was arrested for killing her mother and sentenced to a minimum of 20 years in prison. As her father was escorted from the courtroom, young Katia became another silent victim – a child with an incarcerated parent.

Authorities estimate that about 1.2 million inmates, men and women, have children struggling to cope outside the prison walls. Frequently, these children live in foster homes or with an un-incarcerated parent or relative facing severe financial and social strains.

In recent years, the problem has been escalating as the number of women in prison increases. Studies show that about two-thirds of female inmates are mothers of young children. And just like the overall prison population, there are a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic parents behind bars. In total, authorities estimate there are as many as 1.5 million children of incarcerated parents in the country.

Many of the children suffer as Katia did. She and each of her four brothers and sisters was placed under the guardianship of the state and housed separately with different relatives. Alone and feeling angry, Katia suffered physical and mental abuse, compounding her emotional issues. Despite undergoing counseling that did more harm than good and reaching such a desperate state she contemplated suicide, Katia survived the experience. “I decided that I was going to live and get through this,” Katia, now the mother of three, says years later.

Unfortunately, the pain and suffering hasn’t ended for the many other children of incarcerated parents. This is a widespread problem that receives little notice or attention. Headquartered at Morehouse School of Medicine, the National Center for Primary Care recently published a study concluding that parental incarceration has both short- and long-term impacts that adversely affect the emotional health, economic status and development of the children left behind.

The study, entitled “Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children,” found that the immediate impacts include a sense of shame, social stigmatization, loss of financial support, weakened ties to the parent, changes in family compensation, poor school performance and increased risk of abuse or neglect. Meanwhile, longer-term effects include mistrust of authority, inability to cope with stress or trauma, and criminal activity.

Oftentimes, a major problem is the lack of communication between incarcerated parents and their children.

Once incarcerated, parents are often shut out of decisions regarding their children. While 80 percent of the children of incarcerated mothers live with grandparents or other relatives, those households are usually more than 100 miles away from the prison, making family visits difficult.

Moreover, the strains on the parent-child relations are even more severe for the children forced into foster care. Federal laws require that states seek to terminate parental rights after a child lives in foster care provided by an unrelated person for 15 out of 22 months. So a prison term of two years can result in an inmate's loss of parental rights. The average term for a mother incarcerated in a state prison is 49 months.

The Community Voices program, which also is housed at Morehouse School of Medicine, is focusing attention on the parental incarceration issue, making it a central theme of its 2009 Freedom's Voice Conference, which will be held April 30 to May 1 at the Renaissance Waverly Hotel in Atlanta. Key speakers, such as Donna Brazile, a noted political analyst, will discuss how to reform the criminal justice system and social networks to provide more support to these children.

The "Silent Victims" study offered several recommendations, including:

- Law enforcement agencies should develop protocols that protect children when a parent is arrested.
- Prison-based re-entry programs should be mandated to prepare parent-inmates for family unification and to help them improve their parenting skills.
- Prisons should upgrade their parental visitation rooms so they are child-friendly and family-focused.
- Children with incarcerated parents should have access to professional and culturally-sensitive counseling.
- Transportation should be provided that allows children and their guardians to visit parents incarcerated more than 50 miles away.

It's imperative that these and other measures be swiftly adopted. The barrier to family reunification must be removed, so that children and their incarcerated parents can enjoy healthy relationships. Our criminal justice system seeks to punish and, it is hoped, reform those who break laws. Their children should not be victims.

*(Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell is director of Community Voices of Morehouse School of Medicine working to improve health services and health-care access for all Americans.)*