

SILENT VICTIMS: THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN

WRITTEN BY: NATASHA H. WILLIAMS, PH.D., J.D., M.P.H.



Community Voices

Community Voices

Community Voices: Healthcare for the Underserved is working to make health care available to all. With eight sites across the country and managed by the National Center for Primary Care at the Morehouse School of Medicine, Community Voices is helping to ensure the survival of safety-net providers and strengthen community support services. Launched in 1998 by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the sites are part of a national effort to sort out what works from what does not in meeting the needs of those who receive inadequate or no health care.

SILENT VICTIMS: THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN

WRITTEN BY: NATASHA H. WILLIAMS, PH.D., J.D., M.P.H.

Introduction

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, of the 72 million children in the United States in 1999, about 2% had a parent in State or Federal prison. During that same year, there were over 700,000 parents incarcerated in State and Federal prisons. Black children were “nearly nine times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children and Hispanic children were 3 times as likely as white children.” (Mumola, 2000, p. 2). This is not surprising considering that the prison population is predominately comprised of people of color. These were parents to almost 1.5 million children under the age of 18. Twenty-two percent of those children were under 5 years old. In fact, 2.1% were less than 1 year, 20.4% were 1 to 4 years, 35.1% were 5 to 9 years, 28.0% were 10 to 14 years and 14.5% were 15-17 years (Mumola, 2000).

Considering that the number of men and women incarcerated in the United States has only increased since the time the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported its findings, it is likely that the silent victims or casualties of this race to incarcerate has increased as well. In 1999, there were over 2 million people incarcerated in the United States. Of these, 1,284,894 million were held in State and Federal prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). In 2006, there were approximately 2.2 million people incarcerated in the jails and prisons of the United States. This is about 1 in every 133 U.S. residents (Sabol, Couture and Harrison, 2007). African American men carry much of the incarceration burden of the United in the United States prison system. In 2006, of male inmates, Black men comprised 38%, followed by white men (34%) and Hispanic men (21%). Moreover, about 1 in every 33 black men was a sentenced prisoner compared to 1 in every 205 white men, and 1 in every 79 Hispanic men (Sabol, Couture and Harrison, 2007).

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

The comparative story among women offers an equally disparate story of imprisonment by race and ethnicity. The overall incarceration rate for black women was 3.1 times the rate for white women (Sabol, Couture and Harrison, 2007). Hispanic women were 1.7 times more likely than white women to be incarcerated (Sabol, Couture and Harrison, 2007).

The incarceration of a parent has a tremendous impact on the children. Even though research has been limited, though increasing, that which available information clearly shows that children experience social, emotional, and developmental problems as a result of a parent's incarceration. It is extremely important to recognize that much of the research to date in this area focuses on the incarcerated mother because they are predominately the primary caregiver. Moreover, as the rate of incarcerated women increases, the impact on their children will be more traumatic due to their fundamental responsibilities as the primary caregivers. However, more needs to be known about the men who are incarcerated that are fathers as well. There is a perhaps a presumption in the public perception that incarcerated men have not been and do not want to be involved in the lives of their children and families. However, research indicates otherwise. Male inmates are interested in their children and families, would like to play a significant role in parenting their children and contributing to livelihood of their families, and will participate in programs to improve their parenting skills and their relationships with their families. Men

in prison want to be active participants in the lives of their children and families (Mendez, 2001). Even though they may not be the primary caregiver, they play a role in their children's lives, either directly or indirectly, and their contribution needs to be more appropriately accounted for and considered. The impact of child support policies that may impact the ability of a man to remain free and working though he cannot meet the payments, and his inability to come home to his family if they are in public housing, coupled with extreme sentencing that exceeds that for whites convicted for the same crime all promote the perception that the men do not want to be involved. Contemporary social policy may make it virtually impossible for men to be present or visible in the lives of their children.

Who are the Parents?

As we examine the impact of incarceration on minor children, it is important to know about their parents. As noted previously, these men and woman are predominately racial and ethnic minorities and many have limited education and financial resources. These parents play important roles in the lives of their children and their absence has emotional, social, developmental, and economic impact on their children. In 1999, parents in prison were predominately men (93%) and held in State prisons (89%) (Mumola, 2000). There were 667,900 fathers and 53,600 mothers of minor children accounting for 1.5 children that had a parent in prison. Of these

Community Voices: Healthcare for The Underserved

children 1,372,700 had a father in prison and 126,100 had a mother in prison (Mumola, 2000). The trend of incarcerated parents is very sobering when compared to 1991, when State and Federal prisons only held 452,500 parents with 936,500 children with a parent in prison, representing an increase of more than 500,000 children with a parent in prison (Mumola, 2000). This represents a further unraveling of families. The average age of the parents is 32 for those in State prison and 35 for those in Federal prison. (Mumola, 2000).

Racial Composition

In both State and Federal prisons, African Americans were the largest racial and ethnic group of parents with 49% in State prisons and 44% in federal prison. The racial distribution among whites was 29% in State prison and 22% in Federal prison, and with Hispanics, 19% in State prison and 30% in Federal prison (Mumola, 2000).

Education

Of incarcerated parents, 70% in State prison and 55% in Federal prison did not graduate high school and 12% in both did not complete school past 8th grade. Only 16% in State prison and 20% in Federal prison graduated high school. Of those parents that did attend college, 25% were in Federal prison and 13% were in State prison (Mumola, 2000).

Income and Employment Prior to Incarceration

Even though many of these parents had limited education, which can restrict employment opportunities, 59% of State inmates (60.5% males/39.2% female) and 62.7% of Federal inmates (63.7% male/49.4% female) were employed full-time during the month before their current arrest (Mumola, 2000).

Forty-six percent of the parents in State and 53% of parents in Federal prison reported a personal income of at least \$1000 in the month before their arrest.” Wages or salary were the most common source of income for parents in both State (66%) and Federal (68%) prison followed by income from illegal activities (27% of State, 31% of Federal), and income from families and friends (18% of State, 13% of Federal) (Mumola, 2000, p. 9)

These incarcerated parents not only contributed to the financial well-being of their families prior to their incarceration but a majority was also tax-paying citizens.

Type of Offenses and Length of Sentences

Many parents were imprisoned for either violent offenses or drug offenses. Specifically, 43.9% of State inmates and 11.9% of Federal inmates were in prison for violent offenses; 21.6% in State and 5.3% in Federal for property offenses; and 23.9% in State and 67.2% in Federal for drug offenses (Mumola, 2000).

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

In general, parents received sentences over 12 years in state prison and 10 years in federal prison for their offenses. Since were more likely to be violent offenders, they generally received longer sentences than mothers in both State and Federal prisons. Specifically, fathers in State prison received sentences of 150 months as compared to 94 months for mothers, a difference of almost 5 years (Mumola, 2000). In Federal prison, fathers were sentenced 124 months as compared to 83 months for mothers (Mumola, 2000). This disparity in sentencing can be attributed to the type of offenses that men are sentenced to as compared to women which were more likely to be violent offenses (Mumola, 2000). When looking at actual time served, parents in state prison served 80 months and 103 months in Federal prison. Fathers served sentences nearly 3 years more than mothers in both State and Federal facilities (Mumola, 2000).

Caregivers Before and During Incarceration

Overall, 46% of imprisoned parents lived with their children prior to being incarcerated. Of those, women were most likely to be living with their children (64% in state prison and 84% in Federal prison) as compared to men (44% state prison and 55% federal prison). While incarcerated, children were cared for by various entities including the non-incarcerated parent (80%), grandparents and relatives (20%), and foster care (2%) (Mumola, 2000).

Parental Contact While Incarcerated

While incarcerated, parents maintained contact with their children through telephone calls, mail, and personal visits with 69% in State prisons receiving letters, 58% telephone calls, and 43% personal visits. Likewise, in Federal prison, 84% maintained contact through telephone calls and letters and 56% received personal visits (Mumola, 2005). However, the distance in which parents are imprisoned away from their families was highly prohibitive to maintaining contact with their children. Over 60% of parents in State prison and 80% of parents in Federal prison and held more than 100 miles from there last place of residence (Mumola, 2000, p. 5). Since parents serve about 80 months in State prison and 103 months in federal prison, nearly 7 and 9 years respectively, these parents are separated from their children for long periods of time which are, coincidentally the most critical years for normal child development (Travis, 2005).

Impact of Incarceration on Children

In general, a loss of a parent can cause emotional, behaviors, psychological and economic problems for a child. In particular, arrest and incarceration have a negative affect impact on the health and welfare of the child (Sack and Seidler, 1978). For example, Sack found that pubescent males exhibited anti-social behavior when a parent, the father, was incarcerated (Sack, 1977). When a parent is incarcerated, such a loss has been described to be as traumatic to a child as when a parent dies

Community Voices: Healthcare for The Underserved

or there is a divorce. However, when a parent dies or there is a divorce, there are opportunities to openly discuss that loss and receive sympathy from others. However, when a parent is incarcerated, the topic is often considered taboo and the stigma associated with it precludes open discussion and elicits little sympathy (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981). This inability to communicate or the failure to explain to the child what happened to their parent may create anxiety for the child and impact his or her ability to cope.

While involuntary separation due to death, illness, or other similar causes may serve to disrupt the family unit, they also provide a focal concern around which the remaining members can rally and mitigate the impact of their loss. Loss of a family member due to imprisonment, on the other hand, rarely elicits a sympathetic response from significant others nor is it the kind of crisis that serves to draw members of the immediate family closer together. Accordingly, the incarceration of either parent has dire consequences for all family members but especially so for the children. (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981, p. 84).

When a parent is incarcerated and removed from their child's life, it can have lasting social, emotional, and developmental impacts resulting in aggressive behavior, withdrawal, criminal involvement, peer isolation and depression. Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) summarize these impacts as strain, socialization and stigmatization.

Strain

Strain can be manifested as economic strain on the remaining family members. When a parent is removed from the home and when he or she provides financial support, the abrupt removal creates a financial hole that the other parent must compensate to fill (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). Families, which are already poor or on the edge of poverty, are pushed further into a hopeless financial abyss. As noted above, 59% of State inmates and 62.7% of Federal inmates were employed full-time during the month before their current arrest (Mumola, 2000). Moreover, forty-six percent of the parents in State and 53% of parents in Federal prison reported a personal income of at least \$1000 in the month before their arrest. Now, this income is gone. As a result, the remaining parent "may have less money and time to invest in their children." (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999, p. 124). Consequently, older children may become responsible for the care of younger children because the remaining care-giving parent may have to work longer hours or seek additional employment, therefore is not at home to care for younger children (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). In addition, the older child may need to enter the workforce him- or herself to help provide for the family, consequently, limiting his participation in school, athletics, or other social activities that define childhood (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999).

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

In short, children in families with a parent lost to prison seemed forced into making choices that require them to assume adult roles that may be detrimental to their social and emotional development.

Socialization

In the situation where the parent that was incarcerated provided positive role modeling, support and supervision for the family, the child may experience the emotional trauma associated with that loss. Moreover, children may become more susceptible to the antisocial behavior of peers (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999).

The impact may involve not only the loss of the supervision, support, and role model of the absent parent, but also the increased salience of the remaining parent, for example as a role model for single parenthood, and through the strengthened role of peers. Control and socialization theories tend to see children as situated in a struggle of allegiances between families and peers, with the absence of the parent shifting the balance of this struggle in favor of antisocial peers (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999, p. 126).

One of the most important factors in the development of a child is a strong attachment or bond to a caregiver during infancy (The Yale Law Journal, 1978).

According to researchers,

Through the relationship with an attachment figure, the child is afforded a secure base from which to explore. This relationship also

shapes child's "internal working models," which guide the child's engagement in, and interpretation of, interactions with others. Internal working models not only influence children's expectations and appraisals of social relationships, but also children's perceptions of their own capabilities and their ability to self-regulate. (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002, p. 2).

In short, this bond allows the child to relate to other people, and if formed and then removed, it can disrupt a child's emotional development resulting in socialization problems and the inability to form interpersonal relationships (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002).

Stigma

The stigma associated with imprisonment can cause feelings of shame, anger, and rejection in the child which can impact his emotional reaction to subsequent stressful life events (Hogan and Dinovitzer, 1999). Children are afraid that they will be labeled by their peers, teachers, other family members because they have an incarcerated parent (Hogan and Dinovitzer, 1999). According to the literature, the children of prisoners experience social and peer isolation, inner conflict over the imprisonment and separation from the parent, and either manifest antisocial behavior themselves or develop alternative pro-social behavior, rejecting the antisocial social behavior of the father (Travis, 2005; Hogan and Dinovitzer, 1999).

Community Voices: Healthcare for The Underserved

Trauma of the Arrest

In some instances, the arrest itself is traumatic because the children may have been present when their parents were arrested, with no explanation provided to the child of what is happening. More distressing, children may be left by themselves after the arrest without a social support system and fall through the cracks. (Sacks and Seidel, 1978; San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 2005) There have been incidents where the parent is arrested and the child is left alone without systemic intervention from social services and the criminal justice system. In other cases, the child may be taken to a shelter, placed in foster care, or placed with relative (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 2005). However, there are no consistent protocols to determine the proper course of action to be taken.

Developmental Challenges

There is little research that critically examines the developmental challenges that children with incarcerated parents face. In his book, *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, Jeremy Travis (2005) provided a review of the existing child development literature and the impact that arrest and incarceration may have on the child's development and concluded, based on available data, the following:

Among infants (0-2 years), parental incarceration's major affect is likely a disruption of parental bonding, with the potential for later attachment difficulties. Research on this age group also

shows however, that infants can recover quickly from the loss of a parent if they experience a new, nurturing, caregiving relationship. During early childhood years (2-6 years), children have a greater ability to perceive events around them, but have not yet developed the skills to process traumatic occurrences. Children at this age have not yet completely separated themselves from their parents, so they tend to perceive threats or harm to their parents or caregivers as directed at themselves....In the middle childhood years (7-10 years), when children are developing their social skills and a sense of independence, separation from a parent creates a sense of loss because a role model has been taken....The impact of incarceration on adolescents (11 to 18) is quite different. Adolescence is a time when young people test boundaries, begin to navigate the world of romantic relationships, exercise more independence, explore the adult world of work, and develop a sense of self. The arrest and incarceration of a parent can derail those transitions to adulthood. These children may question the authority of the incarcerated parent and doubt the parent's concern for them. They may take on new roles as parent figures to fill the void left by the incarcerated parent (Travis, 2005, p.140-141).

When a parent is incarcerated, it has lasting social, emotional, and developmental impacts that manifests in economic strain, socialization and attachment issues, stigmatization from peers and other adults, and traumatic stress. Unless these impacts are addressed, these children will be lost.

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

Barriers to Reunification

One of the most important factors in helping a child to adjust to parental incarceration is the opportunity to maintain contact with the individual. Transition after incarceration and the return of the parent home is dependent upon the quality and duration of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration, contact with the parent during incarceration, and the availability of resources and social supports when the parent returns home (Travis, 2005). All of these factors are paramount to the emotional adjustment of child when the parent returns home. However, legislative policies and laws as well as the lack of social services and resources, act as barriers to the restoration and reunification of a healthy parent-child relationship.

Visitation

Research indicates that family contact during incarceration is important and may reduce recidivism as well because it decreases separation strain and increases family reunification (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005). Visitation has been identified as a substantial and necessary link to maintaining the parental bond. Even though parents maintain contact through letters and phone calls, visitation has been found to be therapeutic for the child, helping both the parent and the child to alleviate the stress of incarceration and maintain a connection (Sack, 1977). In short, "it seemed to help them come to terms with conflicts they experienced over this form of separation and perhaps "squared" the perception of the prisoner

parent in reality." (Sack and Seidler, 1978, p. 265).

As mentioned earlier, over 60% of parents in State prison and 80% of parents in Federal prison are housed more than 100 miles from their last place of residence (Mumola, 2000). Many of these inmates and individuals from urban areas are imprisoned in facilities in rural areas - nowhere near the parent's last place of residence. As a result, visitation by family members is nearly impossible. Distance is not the only factor that limits visitation. If caregivers and children are able to travel to see the parent, they may be restricted by when the visitation hours are scheduled, who may be allowed to visit, and restrictive visitation rules (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005; Parke and Clarke-Steward, 2002).

In addition, rules about who is eligible to visit, the number of visitors allowed at one time, appropriate behavior during the visit, lack of privacy, harsh treatment of visitors by correctional staff, and the physical layout of the visiting room often deter family members and caregivers from coming. Other problems include child-unfriendly visiting rooms, lack of privacy, and increased anxiety on the part of the visiting child (Parke and Clarke-Steward, 2002, p. 7).

Visitation not only maintains the parental bond between parent and child but also provides the emotional support that the child needs in order to de-mystify the incarceration experience and what has happened to the parent and to begin the healing and coping process.

Community Voices: Healthcare for The Underserved

The Socioeconomics of Reentry

Those parents that are incarcerated and then reenter their communities upon release confront numerous obstacles including reintegration into the community, disenfranchisement, unemployment, limited housing, poor health, and lack access to health services (Williams, 2006) even though they have paid their legally requirement for their transgressions. These obstacles may prevent parents from reuniting with their children, especially if they are in foster care because they may not be able to meet the requirements, such as housing or employment, to regain custody (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005). Moreover, for those children that are in custody of the custodial parent, formerly incarcerated parents may feel shame if they are unable to provide financially for their children (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005).

In short, these parents are not given the tools to provide for themselves upon reentry much less for their families, making reunification a monumental challenge. However, according to the Urban Institute, “providing services to the families of recently released prisoners results in positive outcomes for the former inmates, including lower rates of physical, mental, and emotional problems, drug use, and recidivism.” (Travis, McBride & Solomon, 2005, p. 6).

In addition, reestablishing the family relationship may be a difficult undertaking especially if the former inmate is entering a different family structure when he or she returns home (Travis,

McBride, & Solomon, 2005). In his or her absences, the custodial parent may have remarried or has another companion or the child may have formed a bond with another representative caregiver (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005; Parke and Clarke-Steward, 2002).

Children, as well as their parents face a range of problems challenges and opportunities when the parent and child are reunited after the incarceration is over. In addition to the problems faced by the parent, such as finding a job and housing and reintegrating into the community, the child and parent face the formidable task of re-establishing their relationship. This task of reuniting is a complex one, because new relationships have been formed during the period of the incarcerated parent’s absence. The parent is reentering a revised family system, one that was formed or stabilized without clear roles or responsibilities for the returning parent. (Parke and Clarke-Steward, 2002, p.13).

Child Support Policies

Another barrier to reunification is child support payments. For those parents that are required to pay child support, their payments often accrue while they are incarcerated and they face insurmountable debt when they are released.

A study of 650 incarcerated parents with child support orders in Massachusetts found that the parents entered prison owing an average of \$10,543 in unpaid child support; if the orders remained at pre-incarceration levels, they would accumulate another \$20,461 in debt over time, plus 12% interest and 6% in penalty charges.” (Cammet, 2006, p. 329).

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

Parents who are subject to formal child support agreements are under additional pressure to find a sufficient source of income to start paying child support immediately upon release. (Cammet, 2006; Travis, McBride & Solomon, 2005). It is especially challenging to find employment with a criminal record because employers are reluctant to hire people with criminal records (Travis, McBride & Solomon, 2005). Equally difficult, in some jurisdictions, the failure to pay child support may be a criminal violation which would result in them returning to prison.

Nonpayment of debts can add another state misdemeanor or state or federal felony conviction and more prison time. In addition, failure to pay child support can create additional tensions between the supporting parent and the incarcerated parent who defaults on payments. These tensions can alter the balance of power in parenting relationships, making child visitation during prison and reunification after prison difficult. (Travis, McBride & Solomon, 2005, p. 8).

Under federal law, a parent's salary may be garnished "at the rate of up to 65% to recoup on child support arrears (Cammet, 2006, p. 327). As a result, parents may decide to work jobs that are off the books to prevent that government from garnishing their pay (Cammet, 2006). As mentioned earlier, many incarcerated parents did not graduate from high school and had limited incomes prior to incarceration, most probably relying on minimum wage jobs. For example, look at those incarcerated parents that made

only made \$1000.00 per month prior to incarceration. If they are able to find employment making the same wage before they were incarcerated, the child support obligation almost makes it impossible for someone returning home from prison to buy food and pay rent and transportation costs to work. It is creating a system for them to work off of the books or return to illegal activities to pay their obligations.

Adoption and Safe Families Act

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed in 1997 expedite adoption and parental rights proceeding to place children in foster care in permanent homes. Once a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months, the ASFA requires the state to file a petition to terminate parental rights unless:

(1) the child is cared for by a relative; (2) if the state has a compelling as to why to file for termination is not in the best interest of the child; and (3) that state has not provided the necessary services to return the child safely to the home" (McIntyre, 2007, p. 286).

In addition, the state must make reasonable efforts to preserve and reunify families except in instances where "a parent has committed a violent crime against his or her child, subjected her child to "aggravating circumstances" such as abandonment or chronic abuse, or the parental rights of a sibling have been terminated. (McIntyre, 2007, p. 286).

Community Voices: Healthcare for The Underserved

This law has unduly impacted mothers because their children are more likely to be in foster care (10% in State prison; 3 % in Federal prison) than fathers (2% in State prison; 1% in Federal prison) The impact is that mothers, the primary caregivers are in jeopardy of losing their parental rights because they serve about 49 months in State prison and 66 months in federal prison (Mumola, 2000).

Call to Action

In order to minimize the emotional, social, economic, and developmental impact of parental incarceration on children; to promote the restoration of parent-child relationships; and to remove barriers to reunification for the parent returning home with their children and families, we recommend:

Law enforcement agencies must develop protocols that protect children when a parent is arrested that involve child welfare agencies.

Prison-based reentry programs that prepare the inmate for family unification and provides skill training, educational assistance and parenting skills must be mandated as a pre-release requirement. These programs must also be culturally sensitive.

Community health workers must be utilized as a bridge for those reentering into their communities to link them and their families to community resources.

Prisons must have parental visitation rooms that are child friendly and family-focused and develop policies that do not alienate and stigmatize those that visit.

Children that have an incarcerated parent must be provided with validated professional, culturally sensitive as well as competent counseling.

Individuals with children must be provided with free phone that they can maintain a social and parenting relationship with their children and with the child's caregiver.

Transportation for a prisoner's family to visit those held more than 50 miles from home must be provided to the family without charge. This quid pro quo is reasonable and rational given the decision to displace individuals far away from their homes.

Child support obligations must be suspended during incarceration. Even though some states already practice this policy such a policy must be national in scope. Once the former inmate is released, child support payments must be based upon the amount that the parent can reasonably pay or upon a sliding scale for repayment of the obligation.

Reentry planning must begin before release ensuring that the parent receives a medical health card, housing, and referral to employment. While incarcerated, parents must receive a GED, vocational job training, and parenting classes.

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

Any foster care policies and laws such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act that terminate parental rights must be reexamined, removed, and rewritten to promote family reunification. Research and data collection systems must be established not only to capture parental data but also data on incarcerated children. Public housing authorities must be held accountable for collecting and reporting data on the denial of housing assistance. In 2005 the Government Accountability Office (GAO) responded to a request from two Congressmen on the impact of several post-incarceration civil disabilities. Fewer than 20 PHAs answered the GAO's survey. (Randolph-Back, 2007).

Conclusion

Parental incarceration has lasting impact on the emotional, economic, and developmental on the children left behind. The immediate impacts are: shame, social stigma, loss of financial support, weakened ties to the parent, changes in family composition, poor school performance, increased risk of abuse or neglect, delinquent behavior, and ostracism by other children. The long-term impacts are: mistrust of authority, the inability to cope with stress or future trauma, and involvement with the criminal justice system. These children are, by all accounts in the data reported in this document, in pain and many suffer in silence because they are needlessly ashamed at the hands of bullies both young and old, are forgotten or never heard. These silent victims will be our legacy as a society if we fail to create programs, interventions, and laws that remove the barriers to reunification

which are not only sensitive to the plight of these children but also to the parents that return not just to community, but to those that are trying to find their way home to their loved ones in general, and especially to their children.

The Katia Dukes Story

When the Parent is Guilty, They Act Like the Children are Guilty. -Katia Dukes

(Atlanta, GA) The mother of three, Katia Dukes is terrified at the thought of not always being around for her children.

"I wish that I could live forever for them," she explains. "I know what it feels like not having parents and I just don't want them to have to go through that."

At nine-years-old, Katia's father was sentenced to 20+ years in prison for killing her mother.

"In one day I lost my mother, father and family," she says.

The youngest of five siblings, Katia remembers vividly the last day that she saw her father as a free man.

"We were at the courthouse and I was waiting outside, I just remember them taking my daddy out in handcuffs," she tearfully explains. "I just ran to him screaming, 'I want my daddy. I want my daddy. I wanted the man back who played with me, who watched television with me, who gave me everything that I needed.'"

"My father, perhaps still trying to be a strong parent just told the guards to get me out of there because he did not want me to see him like that (in handcuffs)."

Community Voices: Healthcare for The Underserved

They had little to no time to say goodbye.

With their mother deceased and father incarcerated, Katia and her older siblings were left with no one. Under the guardianship of the state, the children were awarded to their maternal family; each going their separate ways.

“My whole life just changed,” she says. “I was the baby. I was used to getting all the attention and just like that I lost everything.”

Placed in a home where she suffered physical, mental and verbal abuse, Katia felt alone and angry at the world.

“I began to act out,” she says. “I felt all of this rage inside of me. I wanted to do good things but I would hear these voices telling me to do bad.”

After three years of dealing with the horrible realities of her mother’s death, father’s incarceration, the separation from her siblings and the psychological affects of everything that she’d been through, the state finally arranged counseling sessions for Katia.

“I remember every time I went, the woman counselor (who happened to be white) would always ask me ‘so tell me what happened to your mother,’” she explains. “Why did she have to ask me the same thing over and over again and make me revisit that tragedy and terrible loss? Did she forget what I already told her previously? Did she have any idea of what she was doing to me? And, the medications made me feel so bad but nobody cared. I just stopped taking the medicine.”

Unable to continue reliving the tragedies of her life, Katia stopped attending her sessions.

“I couldn’t trust anyone,” she says. “I felt like everyone was out to get me. Everyone brought more pain to my life.”

With no guidance and the inability to trust, Katia’s rage and problems increased. She found herself always fighting and was arrested several times. The psychological affects of the situations in her life also began to consume her. Waking up became harder for Katia to handle.

“I tried to get help but no one seemed to care. It’s like when the parents are guilty, the child is guilty too,” Katia explains. “I was put in this home where they abused me; but the social workers never did anything about it.”

After several failed attempts to be placed in a shelter, Katia took matters into her own hands.

“I tried to kill myself,” she says. “I didn’t see any other way out.”

Unable to go through with suicide, Katia realized that she did have an option.

“I decided that I was going to live and get through this,” she said. “I knew that God had a plan for me.”

Now with three children, two sons and a daughter, Katia has even more to live for.

“Even though I lost my family, ‘family’ was instilled in me,” she says. “I teach my children how to be young men and a young lady. I teach them about choices and consequences. I think that if my parents had thought about their consequences, they would have made different choices.”

Katia feels that even with the loss of her parents, her life could have gone differently had the state more closely monitored her placement and transition into her new home.

Silent Victims: The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

“When [the state] puts kids into these homes, they need to follow up with them and listen to what these kids tell them,” she explains. “We even had options as a part of the foster care/wards of the state programs for food and clothes available to us and we didn’t even know about it. My grandmother raised me for awhile. She didn’t know and nobody told. And, the counseling could have been better too. Why did it take three years before my first session?”

father because I can’t take leaving him behind those bars. I just wish that I could bring him home with me. I want to be held by him so bad and hear him tell me everything’s alright. That’s what I miss most. People don’t understand that no matter what he did, to me he’s still my father.”

Statistics show that children of incarcerated parents are more inclined to wind up incarcerated themselves. Katia is not surprised by this and feels that the resolution is simple.

“[The children] don’t have stability in their lives,” she explains. “You have to have stability and guidance or you will fall into the cycle. But it seems like after the state takes you away, they just forget about you. You feel like ‘no one else cares so why should I?’ I was angry at everyone and nobody sat down and talked to me.”

Much stronger now than she was at 12-years-old, Katia now works right across the street from the location where her mother has killed years ago. She even serves as a mentor to a young daughter of incarcerated parents.

“I understand what she’s going through,” says Katia. “I’ve been there and I’m still there. It’s still hard for me today. I have good days. I have bad days. But I know that I have to keep living for my children.”

Katia constantly finds herself thinking about her father and even visits him often.

“I love my father and I forgive him. No matter what he did or didn’t do, he’s still my father. Maybe he did what they said; maybe not. But I have forgiven him. I have this hole in my heart that gets to my soul because I miss both my parents,” she explains. “It’s hard to go visit my

References

- Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000). *The nation's prison population growth rate slows*. Retrieved May 28, 2007 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/press/p99.pr>
- Cammet, A. (2006). *Expanding collateral sanctions: The hidden costs of aggressive child support enforcement against incarcerated parents*. 13 Geo. J. on Poverty L. & Pol'y p. 313 -339.
- Fritsch, T.A. and Burkhead, J.D. (1981) *Behavioral reactions of children to parental absence due to imprisonment*. Family Relations, Vol. 30, No. 1. (Jan., 1981), p. 83-88.
- Hagan, J. and Dinovitzer, R. (1999). *Collateral consequences of imprisonment of children, communities and prisoners*. Crime and Justice, Vol. 26, Prisons. p. 121-162.
- Sabol, J.S., Couture, H. and Harrison, P.M. (2007). *Prisoners in 2006*. Retrieved December 10, 2007 from <http://ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p06.pdf>
- Hirsch, A.E., Dietrich, S.M., Landau, R., Schneider, P.D., Ackelsberg, I., Bernstein-Baker, J., and Hohenstein, J. (2002). *Every door closed: Barriers facing parents with criminal records*. 2002 by Community Legal Services, Inc., and the Center for Law and Social Policy.
- Johnson, I. E., & Waldfogel, J. (2002). *Children of incarcerated parents: Cumulative risk and children's living arrangements*. – New York, NY: Columbia University School of Social Work. jw205@columbia.edu
- McIntyre, A.S. (2007). *Isolating past unfitness: The obstacle of In Re Gwynne P. for incarcerated parents in Illinois*. 27 N. Ill. U. L. Rev. p. 281-312.
- Mauer, M. (2004, May/June). Disenfranchising felons hurts entire communities. *Focus*, p. 5-6.
- Mendez, G. (2001). *Incarcerated Men and Their Children – Study Report*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. NCJ 189789.
- Mumola, C. (2000). *Incarcerated parents and their children*. Retrieved May 28, 2007 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/iptc.pdf>
- Parke, R and Clarke-Steward, K.A. (2002). *Effects of parental incarceration on young children*. Conference Paper U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on January 30-31, 2002.
- Randolph-Back, K. (2007). *Public Housing Policies that Exclude Ex-Offenders*. Community Voices, Morehouse School of Medicine.
- Sack, W. (1977). *Children of imprisoned fathers*. Psychiatry, 40, p. 163-174.

References (cont'd)

- Sack, W.H. and Seidler, J. (1978) *Should children visit their parents in prison?* Law and Human Behavior, Vol. 2, No. 3. (1978), p. 261-266.
- San Francisco Children of Incarcerates Parents Partnership (2005). *Children of incarcerated parents: Bill of rights*. Retrieved May 28, 2007 from <http://www.sfcipp.org/right1.html>
- The Yale Law Journal, *On prisoners and parenting: Preserving the tie that binds* Vol. 87, No. 7. (Jun., 1978), pp. 1408-1429.
- Travis, J. (2005). *But they all come back: Facing the challenges of prisoner reentry*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press.
- Travis, J., Cincotta, E., & Solomon, A.L. (2003). *Families Left Behind the Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/books/prisoners/>
- Travis, J., Waul, M. (2005). *Prisoners once removed*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press
- Williams, N. (2006). *Where are the Men?: The Impact of incarceration and reentry on African American men and their children and families*. Community Voices, Morehouse School of Medicine

U P O N

The National Center for Primary Care (NCPC) has the unique distinction of being the only congressionally sanctioned center in the country dedicated to promoting optimal health care for all, with a special focus on serving underserved communities. Headquartered at the Morehouse School of Medicine, the NCPC is committed to the pursuit of a healthier nation.

Editor In Chief:
Henrie M. Treadwell, Ph.D.
Director, Community Voices
Associate Director, Development
National Center For Primary Care
Morehouse School of Medicine
720 Westview Drive, SW
Atlanta, GA 30310
Office: 404-756-8914
Fax: 404-752-1198