



Characteristics of incarcerated fathers and mothers: Implications for preventive interventions targeting children and families

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ABSTRACT

The number of children of incarcerated parents in the U.S. has grown dramatically in recent years. These children appear to be at risk for various problems, and a number of family-focused preventive efforts have been attempted. The current study examines differences between incarcerated mothers, incarcerated fathers, and their families on factors that might be important to consider when creating the content and process of preventive intervention programs. Participants were 359 inmates (54% women; 41% minority) who were parents of children between the ages of 3 and 11 years and who parented their children prior to imprisonment. Mothers and fathers were similar on a number of dimensions including age, education-level, number and age of children, and family criminal history, but differences were observed on key variables relevant to outcomes for children and families, including employment history and income, substance use, mental health, trauma experiences and criminal history. Implications for prevention programs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, the most common societal response to crime in the United States has been incarceration (Raphael, 2011; Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1997). During this period, the number of incarcerated adults has increased five-fold, from 320,000 to nearly 1.4 million (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010). Of the inmates held in state or federal prison in 2007, over half were parents. These parents had an estimated 1.7 million minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Maruschak et al., 2010). The majority of these children live in situations where it is likely that their parent's incarceration has at least some direct impact on family functioning. From 30% to 50% of incarcerated parents lived with at least one of their children prior to their prison admission, and most report that their children currently live with the other parent or another relative. Most incarcerated parents will be released back into the community, and many will return to parenting roles with their children (see Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010).

1.1. Problems experienced by children with incarcerated parents

While an increasing amount of media attention has been given to incarcerated parents and their families, there remain few high quality studies available of these populations, and limited empirically based information. Based on preliminary findings, there is cause for concern, and this has been focused primarily on the children of incarcerated parents. Several studies have found that a significant number of children of incarcerated parents struggle with a variety of childhood problems that have long term implications for adult adjustment (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a, 2011b). For example, in some studies, up to 70% of children of incarcerated parents have emotional or psychological disorders (Jose-Kampfner, 1995; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008), up to 50% to 83% have problems at school (Hanlon, O'Grady, Bennett-Sears, & Callaman, 2005; Henriques, 1982; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Stanton, 1980), up to 24% to 52% have delinquency difficulties (Hanlon et al., 2005; Johnston, 1992; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Stanton, 1980), and up to 10% to 30% have been arrested and/or incarcerated (Myers et al., 1999). Murray, Farrington, Sekol, and Olsen (2009) put these numbers into context in a recent meta-analysis, finding that the children of incarcerated parents were about twice as likely as their peers to exhibit antisocial behavior problems. This finding remained even when other important risk factors for these problems were controlled for in the analyses. Childhood antisocial behavior is one of the strongest predictors of adult adjustment problems (Kohlberg, Ricks, & Snarey, 1984; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998).

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1.2. Child and family-centered programs for families with an incarcerated parent

The notion that the children of incarcerated parents are “at risk” for problems, has led to a proliferation of prevention oriented child and family-centered programs, such as mentoring for children (e.g., Eddy et al., in press-a; Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2006) and parenting programs for inmates (e.g., Eddy et al., 2008; Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010; Palusci, Crum, Bliss, & Bovolek, 2008). Prison-based parenting programs have been of particular interest, and the number of inmates participating in them has increased in recent years (Eddy, Kjellstrand, Martinez, & Newton, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2010; Palusci et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the limited information about incarcerated parents and their children and families places practitioners and researchers with an interest in prevention programs in a difficult situation, namely uncertainty about what should and should not be different about these programs for this population of families. A common response has been no response (Eddy et al., 2010). Existing programs developed for parents living in the community are often delivered to inmates either “as is” or with minimal, anecdotally based modifications (Eddy et al., 2008). Whether or not this is sufficient in terms of generating positive outcomes is unknown.

In this paper we provide information on the characteristics of incarcerated parents who participated in a longitudinal study of a prison-based parenting education program. We then explore how these characteristics and experiences are similar or different for incarcerated mothers and incarcerated fathers. Examining gender differences and similarities is a first step in understanding the contextual issues that surround incarcerated parents and their families, and provides information crucial to consider in the development of targeted, relevant, and effective preventive interventions.

1.3. Characteristics of incarcerated mothers and fathers

Research on inmates in general has found that incarcerated women tend to have higher rates of unemployment and lower levels of income than men (Greenfield & Snell, 1999; McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997). Initial research on inmate parents has yielded similar patterns between incarcerated mothers and fathers. In a recent national assessment of incarcerated parents, Mumola (2000) found that the unemployment rate for inmate mothers (50%) was nearly twice that of incarcerated fathers (27%) prior to imprisonment. Despite this, mothers and fathers were equally likely to be the main financial support for their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Further, the study revealed that while half of state inmate fathers had earned more than \$1000 per month, only a third of mothers had earned that amount. This finding, combined with the finding that only 12.5% of inmate mothers were living in two-parent households, paints an especially bleak picture in terms of overall household income for families with an incarcerated mother.

In the area of substance use, preliminary findings indicate gender differences both in the prevalence and type of drugs used by inmates prior to prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; McClellan et al., 1997; Mumola, 2000). Research on inmates in general has found that past illicit drug use is significantly higher among women than men, especially in the use of hard drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine (Greenfield & Snell, 1999; McClellan et al., 1997; Peters, Strozier, Murrin, & Kearns, 1997). Inmate parents seem to have a similar pattern of past substance use. Mumola (2000) found that overall substance abuse was extensive among inmate parents, with a majority (58%) reporting using drugs one month prior to their arrest, and many reporting being under the influence of drugs (34%) or alcohol (37%) at the time of their arrest. However, a higher percentage of state inmate mothers (65%) reported drug use both in the month prior to their offense (compared to 58% of fathers) and at the time of offense (42% as compared to 33% of fathers). The prevalence of different types of drugs varied between the genders as

well. Mothers in state prisons were nearly twice as likely to report using cocaine-based drugs (45%) and opiates (16%) in the month prior to their arrest as fathers (26% and 9%, respectively). This pattern of drug usage was similar at the time of arrest. Fathers, on the other hand, were nearly twice as likely to report marijuana usage the month prior (40%) and at the time of arrest (16%) than mothers (28% and 9%, respectively). Alcohol use seems to differ between the genders as well (McClellan et al., 1997; Mumola, 2000). While inmate mothers and fathers reported a similar prevalence of alcohol-related problems (Mumola, 2000), a larger percentage of fathers (37%) incarcerated in state prison reported being under the influence of alcohol at the time of the offense than mothers (29%).

Mental illness is a third area where there appears to be a difference between inmate mothers and fathers. In prison populations overall, inmate women report more mental health problems than inmate men (Magaletta, Diamond, Faust, & Daggett, 2009). Two studies of incarcerated parents have found similar patterns. In Glaze and Maruschak (2008), state incarcerated mothers were 1.5 as likely to report medical problems and mental illness as incarcerated fathers. Another recent study (Dallaire, 2007) found similar results, with 15% of incarcerated mothers with minor children reporting an emotional or mental illness as compared to 7% of incarcerated fathers.

While there are only a few studies that have examined family backgrounds of incarcerated parents specifically, a significant percentage of inmates have a history of experiencing traumatic events. In a recently released Bureau of Justice Statistics report (James & Glaze, 2006), 32% of state inmates had parents who abused drugs or alcohol, 22% had a parent who had been incarcerated, and 19% had been abused either physically or sexually as a child. For women inmates, the likelihood of past trauma is greater particularly in the areas of physical or sexual abuse, where over half (56%) women in state prison reported a history of these types of abuse. In another study examining gender differences in inmates, McClellan et al. (1997) found that women inmates were more likely than men, both as children and as adults, to have been mistreated, abused, experienced mental/emotional abuse, or have felt unsafe or in danger. Initial research focusing specifically on incarcerated parents indicates similar traumatic backgrounds (Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000; Ventura, Lambert, White, & Skinner, 2007). Additionally, Glaze and Maruschak (2008) found that mothers in state prison were twice as likely as fathers to report homelessness in the year prior to their most recent arrest (and thus to have been in particularly vulnerable circumstances in regards to events such as abuse), and were 4 times more likely than fathers to report past physical or sexual abuse.

Another potential area of importance in terms of differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers is the degree to which and duration that a child was in contact with the incarcerated parent prior to imprisonment. This, in turn, has implications for the level of disruption the child experienced due to the parent's incarceration. Incarcerated mothers were far more likely to have lived with their children in the month prior to incarceration than incarcerated fathers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000). Of these mothers, over 40% were single parents (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000). During the incarceration of their parents, the majority of all children remained with a member of their family. For those children with an incarcerated father, most (over 88%) continued to live with their mother. In contrast, children with an incarcerated mother lived with their fathers only a third of the time; most lived with a grandparent or another relative (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000).

The largest study to directly examine incarcerated mothers versus fathers was the U.S. Department of Justice Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, which included 6146 parent inmates, including 1014 women. Recent analyses of these data yielded several key findings related to outcomes for adult children of parent inmates (Dallaire, 2007). Most notably, the adult children of incarcerated mothers were 2.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than the adult children of fathers. Further, parents with more risk factors were found

to be more likely to report that their adult children have been incarcerated, especially mothers. Finally, the risk of incarceration for the adult children of women who used drugs regularly was particularly high. This study also found that mothers reported significantly higher rates of familial incarceration than fathers, and that mothers of minor children reported that their children were in non-familial care at higher rates than fathers. Potential differences between inmate mothers and fathers in terms of their backgrounds, characteristics, and current family situations are likely to translate to differential experiences, risks, and needs for the families and children of the inmates.

1.4. Research questions

The current study expands on existing research by examining differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers who were involved in parental roles with their children prior to incarceration and expect to be involved after release. One difficulty with the existing studies on mothers and fathers is that parents are included who may have had, or will have, little or no contact with their children. Our focus here is on parents who parented their children in the past and who expect to play some role in parenting their children in the future. In a time of limited resources in the public and non-profit sectors, focusing on this particular subgroup of incarcerated parents seems particularly appealing. We investigate how this group of incarcerated mothers and fathers is similar and different in terms of three key areas: their backgrounds and experiences, where their children are living during their sentences, and their current contact with their children.

2. Method

2.1. Design

Data are from the first, “baseline” assessment of the Parent Child Study, a randomized controlled trial of a prison-based version of an evidence-informed parent management training program called *Parenting Inside Out* (see Eddy et al., 2008, in press-b, for further information). Participants were recruited from all state correctional institutions operated by the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC). However, the parent management training program, and the study, were only conducted within four “releasing” institutions (3 for men, 1 for women), where inmates were sent prior to discharge from lock-up. These institutions are located within or near the major urban population center of the state. Once an inmate expressed interest in study participation, eligibility was determined. If a potential participant who met all other eligibility criteria did not reside in one of the participating releasing institutions, a transfer was requested. After transfers were complete, to ensure demographic diversity in the sample, women and minority participants were oversampled from the eligible pool, with targets of 50% women and 50% racial/ethnic minority participants. Participants were then randomized into the parent management training condition or to a “services as usual” condition. Assessments were conducted with the full sample at baseline (prior to the start of the intervention), at 3 months (following the intervention), and then again at six months after release from prison. Official records data were collected at various points during the study. The study was approved both by the federal Office of Human Research Protections and by the Oregon Social Learning Center Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Recruitment

To be eligible, an inmate was required to: (1) have at least one child between the ages of 3 and 11 years old, (2) have the legal right to contact their child, (3) have had some role in parenting their children in the past and an expectation of playing some such role in the future, (4) possess contact information for the caregiver of at least one of his or her minor children, (5) have not committed either a crime against a child or any

type of sex offense, (6) have less than 9 months remaining before the end of his or her prison sentence, and (7) reside in a study institution or to have the DOC be willing to transfer him or her to a study institution. Recruitment took place over a three year period. During this time, the study was advertised through a variety of means, including advertisements in institutional newspapers and on bulletin boards, announcements during institutional club meetings, and informational meetings about the study. To encourage the participation of racial and ethnic minorities, a bicultural, bilingual team developed recruitment strategies for participants from the major racial and ethnic groups represented in the corrections system. Inmates were invited to send a letter through prison mail if they were interested in participating in the study. Of the 1483 inmates who expressed interest in the study and who participated in an in-person screening interview, 453 were eligible. The most common reasons for ineligibility were having no children in the appropriate age range and having a planned release date that was greater than 9 months in the future. Of eligible inmates, about 80% consented to participate in the study. While participation rates were high for both men and women, women were significantly more likely to participate in the study (i.e., 92% of eligible women versus 68% of eligible men). The majority (66%) of men who did not participate refused because they did not want to transfer to a study institution. The DOC accepted most transfer requests.

2.3. Sample

Participants ($N=359$) included 161 incarcerated men (45%) and 198 incarcerated women (55%). In terms of race/ethnicity, 60% of participants were White, 13% African American, 11% multi-racial, 8% Native American, and 8% Latino (versus 76% White, 10% African American, 2% Native American, and 11% Latino in the DOC population at large (DOC, 2006), and 86.6% White, 1.6% African American, 1.3% Native American, and 8% Latino in the Oregon population at large (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Just over 26% of participants could speak a language other than English. Men were significantly more likely to have been sentenced for a person crime (61% versus 40%). The typical participant was the parent of three children. For each inmate, one child who met eligibility criteria (i.e., between the ages of 3 and 11 years of age) was chosen as the child of interest for the study. The average age of this child was 8 years old. In the month before the inmate was incarcerated, 34% of parents had lived with their children full-time, 9% part-time, 18% visited with their children at least once a week, 14% less than once a week, and the remainder had little or no contact. Men and women did not differ in terms of prior contact.

2.4. Measures

The baseline parent interview, conducted in two separate in-person sessions, contains self-report questions focused on the life of the parent and his or her child and family before and during prison. The first session included questions about the parent's family of origin, childhood memories, intimate relationships, friendships, systems experiences, health and life experiences, spirituality and religion, culture, and expectations around the future. The second session focused on the parent-child relationship, including child health, the child's upbringing, child behavior, child friends, the relationship between the parent and caregiver, parenting strategies, and the future outlook for the child. The constructs of interest in this report are measured with one item questions, and the items have face validity.

2.5. Analytic strategy

Pearson chi square tests of differences among proportions, Goodman and Kruskal's gamma, and independent sample t -tests for equality of means were utilized to compare males and females in the sample. In

Table 1
Background characteristics of incarcerated men and women.

	Men		Women		X ²	t	p	df
	n (%)	M (SD)	n (%)	M (SD)				
N	161 (46.5)		198 (53.5)					
<i>Education at time of arrest</i>					1.791 ^a		.408	2
Less than high school	54 (33.5)		80 (40.4)					
High school or equivalent	53 (32.9)		58 (29.3)					
Post high school	54 (33.5)		60 (30.3)					
<i>Employment</i>								
Had a job in the year prior to arrest	120 (75.5)		102 (51.5)		21.522 ^b		.000	1
Average number hours worked per week		48.07 (15.4)		39.7 (11.3)		−4.421	.000	210
Approximate monthly income from jobs		2664 (2442)		1756 (2063)		−2.838	.005	203
Approximate household income from all sources		5793 (9073)		5097 (11,973)		−.576	.565	322
Parent households receiving one or more types of government aid 6 months prior to incarceration	113 (71.1)		158 (79.8)		3.674 ^b		.055	1
<i>Mental health and substance use</i>								
Parent ever experienced drug and/or alcohol abuse or addiction	137 (86.7)		183 (93.4)		4.467 ^b		.035	1
Parent ever been diagnosed with mental health/behavioral/learning problems	69 (43.4)		103 (52.0)		2.627 ^b		.105	1
Parent ever experienced mental health problems	43 (27.2)		89 (45.2)		12.112 ^b		.001	1
<i>Parent alcohol use 3 months prior to incarceration</i>					27.373 ^a		.009	6
Never	66 (45.2)		87 (51.2)					
Once	7 (4.8)		14 (8.2)					
2 to 3 times	17 (11.6)		13 (7.6)					
1 time per week	10 (6.8)		8 (4.7)					
2 to 3 times per week	7 (4.8)		11 (6.5)					
4 to 5 times per week	9 (6.2)		12 (7.1)					
Daily	30 (20.5)		25 (14.7)					
<i>Parents marijuana use 3 months prior to incarceration</i>					5.955 ^a		.428	6
Never	66 (45.2)		87 (51.1)					
Once	7 (4.8)		14 (8.2)					
2 to 3 times	17 (11.6)		13 (7.6)					
1 time per week	10 (6.8)		8 (4.7)					
2 to 3 times per week	7 (4.8)		11 (6.5)					
4 to 5 times per week	9 (6.2)		12 (7.1)					
Daily	30 (20.6)		25 (14.7)					
<i>Parents use of other drugs 3 months prior to incarceration</i>					27.373 ^a		.000	6
Never	49 (33.6)		36 (21.2)					
Once	5 (3.4)		1 (0.6)					
2 to 3 times	13 (8.9)		5 (2.9)					
1 time per week	10 (6.8)		11 (6.5)					
2 to 3 times per week	12 (8.2)		15 (8.8)					
4 to 5 times per week	12 (8.2)		6 (3.5)					
Daily	45 (30.8)		96 (56.5)					
<i>Life trauma</i>								
Parent ever hit by a romantic partner	97 (61.4)		152 (77.2)		10.405 ^b		.001	1
Parent ever been physically hurt by a romantic partner	49 (31.0)		140 (71.1)		56.501 ^b		.000	1
Parent ever been sexually assaulted	20 (12.8)		94 (51.4)		56.058 ^b		.000	1
Parent ever experienced living on streets	76 (48.1)		96 (48.7)		.014 ^b		.906	1
<i>Contact with target child</i>					2.646 ^a		.754	5
One month prior to incarceration, parent's contact with target child								
Lived with child full time	53 (34.0)		68 (36.6)					
Lived with child part time	14 (9.0)		17 (9.1)					
Visited more than 1 time per week	28 (17.9)		36 (19.4)					
Visited once a week or less	20 (12.8)		29 (15.6)					
Phone or mail contact	11 (7.1)		11 (5.9)					
No contact	30 (19.2)		25 (13.4)					
<i>Parent's prison/criminal history</i>								
Average sentence (years)		2.22 (1.9)		1.46 (1.2)		−4.498	.000	354
Average number of times in lock up as an adult		14.24 (17.8)		9.82 (13.1)		−2.456	.015	295
Average number of times arrested as an adult		20.27 (29.1)		13.43 (16.8)		−2.736	.007	345
Ever arrested as a child/teen	111 (69.8)		91 (46.7)		19.149 ^b		.000	1
<i>Family history</i>								
Biological parent arrested	91 (71.7)		124 (73.8)		.079		.779	1
Biological parent in jail/prison	76 (61.8)		112 (67.5)		.769		.381	1
Biological parent with AOD problem	101 (74.8)		129 (75.4)		.000		.999	1

Table 1 (continued)

	Men		Women		X^2	t	p	df
	n (%)	M (SD)	n (%)	M (SD)				
Caregiver of child					62.113 ^a		.000	4
Biological parent	118 (74.2)		66 (33.5)					
Grandparent	23 (14.5)		80 (40.6)					
Other relative	4 (2.5)		20 (10.2)					
State custody	8 (5.0)		10 (5.1)					
Other	6 (3.8)		21 (10.7)					

Note. AOD = alcohol or other drug.

the t -tests, the Levene's test of significance was used to take into account whether equal variance could be assumed in each bivariate relationship.

3. Results

3.1. Similarities between incarcerated mothers and fathers

Incarcerated mothers and fathers in this sample were similar to each other in a number of significant ways. They were roughly of the same age (approximately 32 years on average), had similar racial/ethnic distributions, and had comparable education levels (approximately 30% to 40% had neither graduated from high school nor earned a GED). In terms of children, both incarcerated mothers and fathers had on average three children and the mean age of all of their minor children was 7 to 8 years old. Lastly, circumstances of their families of origin were alike for mothers and fathers, with approximately 70% having had a parent arrested, 60% to 70% having had a parent who had spent time in jail or prison, and roughly 75% having had a parent with a history of substance use problems.

3.2. Differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers

Incarcerated mothers and fathers differed on a number of key issues related to employment, income, substance use, mental health, trauma, and criminal histories (see Table 1). Similar to the findings in other studies, fewer mothers (52%) had been employed than fathers (76%), and those who had been employed had earned less money per month ($M = \$1756$) than fathers ($M = \2664). Of the families with an incarcerated mother, nearly half (45.6%) were living in poverty prior to incarceration (based on the 2006 poverty threshold guidelines), versus a third (31.7%) of families with an incarcerated father. Families with an incarcerated mother were also more likely to be receiving one or more types of government aid six months prior to incarceration.

In terms of drug and alcohol abuse, inmate mothers (93%) were more likely to report a prior drug and/or alcohol abuse or addiction than fathers (87%). While there was no significant difference in marijuana use, men tended to drink alcohol (specifically beer and wine) more frequently than women, while women used hard drugs more frequently than men and were almost twice as likely to report daily use of these drugs in the 3 months prior to their incarcerations (56%) than men (31%). Women were nearly twice as likely to report a mental health problem (45%) than fathers (27%). As seen in other studies, the incidence of physical abuse (71%) and sexual abuse (51%) was higher for inmate mothers than inmate fathers (31% for physical abuse and 13% for sexual abuse).

Personal criminal histories also differed between the genders, with inmate fathers being more likely to have longer criminal histories, including any involvement with the juvenile justice system (70% versus 47%), a younger age of first arrest as an adult (19.5 years versus 24.5 years), and greater past and expected future involvement with the adult criminal justice system, including currently being sentenced to a significantly longer time period (2.2 years versus 1.5 years). Fathers had significantly more adult arrests ($M = 20$, $SD = 29$) than mothers ($M = 13$, $SD = 17$), and experienced more individual incarcerations (jail or prison; $M = 14$, $SD = 17$) than mothers in the study ($M = 10$, $SD = 13$).

Finally, while there were similar proportions of incarcerated mothers and fathers living with their children prior to prison (a finding that reflects elements of the sampling strategy and requirements for participation), where children lived during their parents' incarceration differed. As found in other studies, during their parents' incarceration, the children of incarcerated fathers were more likely to be living with a biological parent (74% for fathers, 33% for mothers) and the children of incarcerated mothers were more likely to be living with a biological grandparent or great grandparent (14% for fathers, 40% for mothers).

4. Discussion

In light of the growing number of incarcerated parents and the detrimental effects that incarceration may have on children and families, it is critical that more research-based information be gathered and disseminated. Interventions grounded in such data need to be developed and tested to try to assist inmate parents and their children as they navigate the real dangers posed to their well-being. This study takes a step towards meeting such a goal by providing background information on the characteristics and experiences of inmate mothers and fathers who are likely to parent their children once they return to the community.

The current study found that incarcerated mothers and fathers were similar in a variety of ways of importance to preventive intervention programs. Consistent with other studies, many of the incarcerated mothers and fathers in this study have had lives characterized by little education, low incomes, and histories of personal and family difficulties in the areas of substance abuse, domestic violence, and sexual violence, in addition to criminality. Thus, regardless of whether a parent is a mother or father, there are many issues that are shared that pose serious threats to successfully reintegrating back into the community and nurturing a child. Given this, "parenting" programs for incarcerated parents need to consider not only how to assist parents in developing or refining parenting skills in general and how to be a parent in the context of incarceration, but also on skills and strategies to positively re-enter and engage with their communities, families, and children after release. This includes addressing such critical topics as securing housing, pursuing education or job skills training, finding a job, refraining from destructive use of drugs and alcohol, avoiding abusive or detrimental relationships, and attending to mental health issues (Eddy et al., 2010). Meeting these challenges is part of successful parenting.

The key differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers found in this study highlight gender specific areas that may warrant more extensive attention within parenting programs. Incarcerated mothers might especially benefit from programs with a more in depth focus on three especially debilitating areas: drug abuse, mental health issues, and past trauma from physical and sexual abuse (see Eddy et al., 2010; Laux et al., 2011). These are major disruptors to parenting, and parenting programs that focus solely on teaching parenting skills are unlikely to have much of an impact on parents facing these types of issues. In fact, based on these findings as well as our collective clinical experience, we feel that addressing these individual health and safety needs are not only important but essential in assisting incarcerated mothers develop positive and effective parenting skills.

In contrast, incarcerated fathers might benefit from multimodal programs that help them overcome the legacy of more ingrained criminal lifestyles, including longer bouts of incarceration. Both of these issues serve as disruptors of parenting, as well as inhibitors to the accomplishment of successes in life that set a stage for fathers to parent in more positive manners. Programs that assist fathers in ending their involvement in long established patterns of criminality, such as drug and alcohol treatment, cognitive behavioral treatment, job skills training, and the facilitation of reconnection to the family, may be vital to helping incarcerated fathers develop positive and effective parenting skills.

Programs in these regards and that are offered to parents while they are in prison may be helpful to mothers and fathers in a number of these areas. In fact, results from a recent study (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2012) suggest not only a need but also an interest from inmates to focus on these exact issues. However, interest in these more contextual areas becomes more pronounced as ex-offenders transition from prison to home and face these day-to-day issues of living in the community. Services that continue to work with and support inmates as they reintegrate into life outside of prison could be especially beneficial, and might be crucial to success for some individuals. More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of these enhanced parenting programs and the optimal times (i.e., pre-release versus post-release) for providing interventions that address these various issues.

5. Limitations

While this study expands on existing research focusing on gender differences of incarcerated parents, there are limitations that reduce its applicability to all inmate parents. First, the study focuses on a subgroup of inmate parents. To be in the study, participants had to have a child between 3 and 11 years old, have the legal right to contact their child, have parented their child prior to incarceration and hoped to be involved with their children post-release, and have at most 9 months remaining on their sentence. These selection criteria target a particularly involved and influential group of parents who were likely to be spending more time with their children post-release. However, these criteria limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, past studies have usually focused on all children in a family, rather than a specific child within a given age range as was done in this study. While this is helpful in understanding behaviors towards a targeted group of children, it limits our understanding of parenting patterns across all children of an inmate. Third, while the current study includes a more racially and culturally diverse sample than the geographic recruitment area, it does not reflect the profile of diversity found across the United States. For example, the sample includes a smaller proportion of African Americans and Hispanics than national samples (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000). Despite these limitations, the study contributes additional information that will hopefully aid in our understanding of gender differences in inmate parents, and especially those parents who are likely to be actively parenting their children post-release.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that researchers and clinicians developing programs for incarcerated parents and their families would be wise to look beyond traditional parenting topics and also work to address wider issues in the lives of parents and their children. Further, programs should be explored that take into consideration the needs and issues that affect incarcerated mothers and fathers and their families differentially. Doing so may increase the likelihood that prevention efforts are both more relevant and effective for the inmates in ameliorating distress, improving family and child functioning, and successfully reintegrating former inmates into their communities and families. The situations surrounding parental incarceration are

complex. Our responses need to recognize this complexity, and address the needs in as cost-effective way as possible.

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