
ALTERNATIVE PARENTING

From Prison to Parenting

Andridia Mapson

School of Social Work, Howard University, Washington, District of Columbia, USA

An estimated 1.5 million children have a parent held in a state or federal prison in the United States, an increase of more than half a million since 1991. Many of these children have disruptions in familial relationships such as growing up in foster care, with grandparents or other relatives, or moving around among an array of temporary caretakers. Incarcerated parents have few opportunities for parenting from the inside, and they worry about the impact of their separation on their children. Children of African American families are hit particularly hard. Nearly half the parents behind bars are Black; another 20% are Hispanic. As these parents struggle to make a fresh start, they will encounter myriad legal barriers that may make it extraordinarily difficult for them to succeed in caring for their children.

Keywords: Reentry, parenting, women offenders, male offenders

Across the country, an estimated 1.5 million children have a parent held in a state or federal prison in the United States, an increase of more than half a million since 1991 (Mumola, 2009). Many of these children have disruptions in familial relationships such as growing up in foster care, with grandparents or other relatives, or bouncing among an array of temporary caretakers.

The number of women under criminal justice supervision has increased dramatically. Although the rate of incarceration for women continues to be far lower than the rate for men (51 of 100,000 women, versus 819 of 100,000 men), the vast majority of female offenders are under community supervision (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2009). The increased incarceration of women appears to be the outcome of U.S. crime policy, government policies, punitive enforcement responses, federal and state mandatory sentencing laws, and the public's fear of crime. Most women in the criminal justice system are poor, undereducated, unskilled, and disproportionately women of color. Many come from impoverished urban environments, were raised by single mothers, or were in foster care placement. As a result of the dramatic increase in the number of women offenders, there is a need for strategies that are gender-specific and community-based.

African American mothers and fathers have been absent from their children's lives as a result of incarceration. More than 1 in every 100 adults in America is in jail or prison, with African American children nine times more likely than White children to have a parent in prison (Pew

Charitable Trust, 2008). Sixty-three percent of federal prisoners and 55% of state prisoners are parents of children under the age of 18, with the average age being 8. When parents are imprisoned, it has a negative impact on their children. As a result of parental incarceration, these children face financial instability, with problems being the most severe for already vulnerable families and caregivers who maintain contact between the incarcerated parent and their child. Family relationships become unstable, school behavior and performance suffer, and shame and social stigma are brought to the family (Pew Charitable Trust, 2008).

Incarceration rates doubled in the last decade as result of stringent policies geared toward punishing drug offenders. As a result, these policies resulted in a disproportionate amount of incarceration among less advantaged individuals, families, and groups (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Race continues to be a factor influencing drug policies, and sentencing is most severe for the use or distribution of drugs that some consider to be used primarily by minority groups.

Reconstructing relationships can be a source of healing, connection, and support that women exiting prison need. Healthy relationships become a crucial ingredient for a woman reconstructing her life after release from prison along with support for positive relationships. There must be attention to the other complicated weaves of women's lives that constrain their choices (Maeur, Potler, & Wollfe, 1999). We know who goes to prison and understand the many consequences of women's incarceration and the forced separation from families and communities but know less about how women exit prison and manage the process of reentry.

Relational theory is one of the developments that have come from an increased understanding of gender differences and specifically of the different ways in which women and men develop psychologically (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1998). Relational theory has three major concepts:

Cultural context: This concept recognizes the powerful impact of cultural context on women's lives.

Relationships: This concept focuses on the importance of relationships as the central feature in women's development. This theory focuses on women's connection with others.

Pathways to growth: This concept focuses on women's relational qualities and activities as strengths that provide pathways to healthy growth and development (Kaplan, 1984).

Relational theory affirms the power of connection and pain of disconnection for women. Most programs have been designed for men by men. In order to develop services for women, they need to be created for them based on the reality of their lives and what is known about female growth and development, taking gender-responsiveness into consideration (Kaplan, 1984).

We need to understand relational theory in order to develop effective services and to avoid recreating in correctional settings the same kinds of growth-hindering and -violating relationships that women experience in society at large. It is also important to consider how women's life experiences may affect how they will function both within the criminal justice system and during the process of their transition and successful reentry into the community. The importance of understanding relational theory is reflected in the recurring themes of family seen in the lives of female offenders. "Females are far more likely than males to be motivated by relational concerns. Situational pressures such as threatened loss of valued relationships play a greater role in female offending" (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1998, p. 16).

Incarcerated Mothers

The average adult female offender is a minority between the ages of 25 and 29 who before arrest was a single parent living with one to three children. She comes from a single-parent or broken home. About half of her other family members are incarcerated, which includes 54% of her brothers and sisters. She dropped out of high school, is unemployed, is likely to have been

the victim of sexual abuse, began using alcohol or drugs between the ages of 13 and 14, and has "... committed crimes for the following primary reasons: to pay for drugs, relieve economic pressures, or poor judgment" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999).

The majority of incarcerated women lived with their children prior to incarceration. At the national level, although both men and women prisoners were likely to be parents of minor children, women were far more likely than men to be living with their children in the month before arrest or just prior to incarceration, indicating the importance of focusing on women prisoners and their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

The impact of a mother's arrest and incarceration on a family is often more disruptive than that of a father's arrest and incarceration. That is because approximately two-thirds of incarcerated mothers were the primary caregivers for at least one child before they were arrested. About 60% of children live with grandparents (usually maternal) after their mother's incarceration, 17% live with other relatives, and a fourth live with non-relatives (often in foster care). In contrast, only half of incarcerated fathers were living with their youngest child prior to incarceration, and most of their children (nearly 90%) continued to live with their mothers after the incarceration (American Correctional Association, 1990).

It is difficult for parents to maintain contact with their children while they are incarcerated. More than half of incarcerated mothers do not receive any visits from their children while they are in prison. The single most significant reason for lack of contact is the children's distance from their mothers' prisons, many of which are located far from major population centers (American Correctional Association, 1990).

Incarcerated Fathers

A large percentage of African American fathers have been absent from their families due to high rates of incarceration. Some forget that these fathers in prison or jail are not just inmates but are also parents. This group differs from any other due to history of abuse, drug use, violence perpetration, low levels of education, and socioeconomic status (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2004). African American males are often challenged with proving themselves as contributors to the family but may experience strain as providers due to few employment opportunities. Fathering children from multiple relationships is common among incarcerated fathers but can have consequences for the children if the father did not reside in the home prior to incarceration. Research suggests that fathers who form new families; tend to have less contact with children from previous relationships (Logan, Manlove, Ikramullah, & Cottingham, 2006). As a result, fathers have different provider roles with their different children.

Fathers in prison seldom see their children, and their contact is often dependent upon their relationship with the child's mother (Modecki & Wilson, 2009). Any information they receive on the well-being of their children comes from family members. Incarcerated men who are married have more frequent visits from their children than single men. Incarcerated fathers do care about their children and how their children perceive them. They express concern and wonder whether another man in their children's life has replaced them (Modecki & Wilson, 2009).

Imprisoned fathers have unique challenges but have the same concerns as other fathers. While incarcerated, fathers are viewed as useless to their children by families and limited in parenting opportunities. Regardless of these barriers, there are those who try hard to be good fathers to their children even during periods of forced separation (Modecki & Wilson, 2009).

Children Affected

Children are impacted by the incarceration of a parent. They are likely to suffer from behavioral and emotional problems, poor academic performance, truancy, school failure, substance use,

and self-esteem issues and enter the criminal justice system (Bilchik, Seymour, & Kreisher, 2001). These affected children also experience poverty, parental substance abuse, and changes in caregivers in their environments. Research indicates that children with incarcerated mothers are at greater risk for environmental stressors than children with incarcerated fathers. Those children with incarcerated fathers are more likely to live with their mothers during their father's incarceration and may not be subjected to homelessness and mental and physical health problems. Children with incarcerated mothers are more likely to live with other family members or grandparents or in foster care (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Parent Education in Prison

Parent education programs can assist in reducing the negative consequences of children having an incarcerated parent. These programs can develop skills and behaviors that are necessary in reducing recidivism and help the process of reuniting children with their parent after release. Research suggests that incarcerated parents suffer from substance abuse, family histories of violence, and lack of role models and are victims of physical and sexual abuse (Feinman, 1994).

Parent education has been known to have positive outcomes for participants because they teach parenting skills, communication skills, and improve parent attitudes. They have also been found to increase knowledge of child behavior management and child development (Thompson & Harm, 2000). The purpose of these programs is to teach incarcerated parents new skills that can reduce the negative impact the incarceration has had on the child.

Studies have shown that participating in educational programs lowers recidivism rates compared to those who do not participate. Recidivism is also lower for those who maintain family contact while incarcerated. Parent education is beneficial because it teaches parenting skills, strengthens family bonds through visitation, and reduces recidivism rates (Chappel, 2004). Providing this program during a time of separation is crucial, particularly since most incarcerated parents plan to reunite with their children upon release.

Jail/Prison Policies

Jail/prison policies affect a parent's contact with a child during incarceration. The courts and child welfare systems developed laws that take into account the rights of the parents and the interests of their children. With the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the balance has become more stringent for incarcerated parents who have children in the foster care system (Adoption and Safe Families Act [ASFA], 2000). The ASFA requires child and family agencies to make efforts to reunify parents, but the focus is also on adoption, which could lead to permanent placement with others instead of with biological parents.

Several barriers exist for incarcerated parents with a child in foster care when organizing visitation, mainly due to lack of coordination between the two systems. Fewer children live in foster care than with the other parent or another relative when a parent is incarcerated, suggesting that contact with an incarcerated parent is a decision made by a family member versus a judge (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). When a dispute does arise regarding contact between a child and an incarcerated parent, child and family courts will determine the type of contact that is in the best interest of the child. This decision becomes final until the incarcerated parent is released from jail or prison because an appeal is difficult.

Jail and prison policies affect the level of contact children have with an incarcerated parent. Some facilities have full contact visits, which allows physical contact; barrier contact, which occurs through Plexiglas; or open contact, which involves no barrier, but physical contact is not allowed (Sturges & Hardesty, 2005). The policy chosen by a facility is based on the level of

security and safety concerns, but jails offer fewer opportunities for physical contact for children and incarcerated parents than prisons.

Incarcerated parents have reported concerns about their children visiting them in jail or prison. Most of these concerns are due to the correctional environment, policies, and location (Clarke et al., 2005). A majority of incarcerated parents also do not want their children to visit due to the emotional effect the visit will have on the child. The environment and lack of contact have been correlated with emotional distress although the child has expressed interest in visiting the parent. An alternative to jail or prison visitation in order to decrease emotional distress could be telephone calls or written letters that allow the child and incarcerated parent to maintain some form of contact (Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009). A benefit of these forms of contact is an opportunity for the incarcerated parents to maintain a parental bond with their children while helping to maintain the healthy and emotional stability of the child.

Barriers to Reentry

Offenders who return to their communities from prison or jail must often simultaneously comply with conditions of probation or parole, achieve financial stability, access health care, locate housing, and commence the process of reuniting with their children. Without strong support in the community to help them negotiate the rules and regulations of public agencies, many offenders quickly spiral back into a life of substance abuse, prostitution, and related crimes.

Incarcerated women face unique problems on release, and they tend to need more support than male prisoners for several reasons. First, they are more likely to return home to child caretaking responsibilities, usually as single parents. Second, their earning abilities are far lower than those of most male prisoners, but they face the same financial obligations such as court costs, costs for required programs and counseling, and parole fees in addition to often being the sole provider for minor children. Third, many of these women were involved in the criminal justice system because of their relationship with a criminal male. If they are released into high-pressure situations with limited resources, many will return to dysfunctional relationships in order to provide for themselves and their children. Without adequate support, the likelihood of recidivism is quite high. As these mothers struggle to make a fresh start, they will encounter myriad legal barriers that may make it extraordinarily difficult for them to succeed in caring for their children.

The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families welfare reform legislation of 1996 (TANF) and the 1997 ASFA often present oppressive roadblocks to women leaving prison. The policies do not address the lack of adequate financial support for poor relatives caring for children whose parents are incarcerated and stipulate against financial support for poor parents with drug felony convictions who are the primary care takers for their children upon release from prison.

A second policy affecting former women prisoners is the 1997 ASFA. This Act had as its goal the reduction of children in foster care, increased permanent placement with relatives, increased adoptions, and the increased number of children safely reunited with biological parents. The negative unintended effects of this law include the increased terminations of parental rights; a limited increase in adoptive homes (especially for older children and children with disabilities); increases in both formal and informal kinship care—often without the necessary financial support for these kinship arrangements; and a lack of adequate time to achieve reunification with incarcerated parents and parents needing substance abuse treatment (Allard, 2010).

Last, disinvestment in communities and deterioration of housing stock have led to the displacement of lower income households in urban centers, the destination of most women leaving prison. In addition, the federal government's "One Strike Initiative" provided for under Section 9 of the Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act of 1996 allows public housing authorities to evict or refuse housing to applicants based on their personal use of an illicit substance or a felony drug conviction. The law holds particular risks for low-income women of color who are most often

the head of household in public and subsidized housing. Not only can a tenant be evicted due to her own drug use, but she can be evicted because a visitor possesses or uses drugs without her knowledge. States vary in the length of time the ban is in effect; in Illinois, for example, the bar on admission to public housing is 5 years for all felony convictions. This effectively precludes many released women who served a sentence for a drug offense from reapplying for public housing (Goswami, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Incarcerated parents care a great deal about their children and try to maintain contact regardless of the barriers set before them. The barriers to maintaining parent-child relationships when a parent is incarcerated vary from jail/prison policies, judges' orders, caregivers, and assumptions about the impact a visit can have on a child. Contact between incarcerated parents and their children can be extremely beneficial to the child. Being able to see and speak with their parents may reduce children's fears. Parent-child contact is most beneficial when parents plan to live with their child after release, but it can be beneficial in any situation where the incarcerated parents plan to maintain a relationship with their child. A recommendation would be child-friendly visitation areas at the facilities in order to minimize the trauma experienced by children. Correctional facilities may want to consider programs that enhance contact between incarcerated parents and their children. Another recommendation is to improve counseling services to the incarcerated parents and their children. It would be beneficial to provide counseling services while the parents are incarcerated and joint services to the entire family after release. Upon release, it is important to have assistance and support in locating and obtaining safe housing as well as finding employment that will allow them to meet the obligations that many of these incarcerated parents face. Therefore, reentry assistance is imperative.

A majority of incarcerated women were neglected or abused as children and need intensive therapy and support (Covington, 2007). As a result of their parents' being incarcerated, children continue to move around frequently, staying with more than one caregiver and being separated from siblings. This can lead to attachment issues in small children and alienation in older children. A thorough assessment of the children themselves would be beneficial in order to determine what services they might need. Last, it is recommended that the children be assessed at the time of their parent's incarceration and then at regular intervals to determine their ongoing needs.

REFERENCES

- Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, Public Law No. 105-89, 111 Stat. 2115, 65 FR. 4020 (2000, January 25).
- Allard, P. (2010). *Life sentences: Denying welfare benefits to women convicted of drug offenses*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.
- American Correctional Association. (1990). *The female offender* (p. 6). Arlington, PA: Kirby Lithographic Co., Inc.
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (1999). *Partnerships between corrections and child welfare*. Baltimore, MD: The Women's Prison Association & Home, Inc.
- Bilchik, S., Seymour, C., & Kreisher, K. (2001). Parents in prison. *Corrections Today*, 63(7), 108–111.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2009. *Incarcerated parents and their children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Chappel, C. A. (2004). Post-secondary correctional education and recidivism. A meta-analysis of research conducted 1990–1999. *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 55, 148–169.
- Clarke, L., O'Brien, M., Godwin, H., Hemmings, J., Day, R.D., Connolly, J. . . . & Van Leeson, T. (2005). Fathering behind bars in English prisons: Imprisoned fathers' identity and contact with their children. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice About Men as Fathers*, 3, 221–241.

- Covington, S. (2007). The relational theory of women's psychological development: Implications for the criminal justice system. In R. T. Zaplin (Ed.), *Female offenders: Critical perspectives and effective interventions* (2nd ed.). Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett.
- Feinman, C. (1994). *Women in the criminal justice system* (3rd ed.). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Glaze, L., & Maruschak, L. (2008). Parents in prison and their minor children. In *Bureau of Justice statistics special report* (NCJ 22984, pp. 1–25). Washington, DC: US Department of Justice.
- Goswami, S. (2002). *Unlocking options for women: A survey of women in Cook County jail*. Chicago, IL: Coalition for the Homeless.
- Johnson, E. I., & Waldfogel, J. (2004). Children of incarcerated parents: Multiple risks and children's living arrangements. In M. Pattillo, D. Weiman, & B. Western (Eds.), *Imprisoning America* (pp. 97–131). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kaplan, A. (1984). The self-in-relation: Implications for depression in women. Work in Progress No. 14. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center, Working Paper Series.
- Logan, C., Manlove, J., Ikramullah, E., & Cottingham, S. (2006). Men who father children with more than one woman: A contemporary portrait of multiple-partner fertility. *Child Trends Research Brief* (pp. 1–8). Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- Loper, A. B., Carlson, L. W., Levitt, L., & Scheffel, K. (2009). Parenting stress, alliance, child contact, and adjustment of imprisoned mothers and fathers. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 48, 483–503.
- Mauer, M., Potler, C., & Wolf, R. (1999). Gender and justice: Women, drugs, and sentencing policy. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project. Retrieved from <http://www.sentencingproject.org> to order)
- Modecki, K., & Wilson, M. (2009). Associations between individual and family level characteristics and parenting in incarcerated African American fathers. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 18, 530–540.
- Mumola, C. J. (2009). Incarcerated parents and their children. *Bureau of Justice statistics special report* (NCJ 182335). Washington, DC: US Department of Justice.
- Pew Charitable Trusts. (2008). *1 in 100: Behind bars in America 2008*. Retrieved from www.pewcenteronthestates.org.
- Steffensmeier, D., & Allen, E. (1998). The nature of female offending: Patterns and explanations. In R. T. Zaplin (Ed.), *Female offenders: Critical perspectives and effective intervention* (pp. 5–29). Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen.
- Sturges, J., & Hardesty, K. (2005). Survey of Pennsylvania jail wardens: An examination of visitation policies within the context of ecosystem theory. *Criminal Justice Review*, 30, 141–154.
- Thompson, P. T., & Harm, N. J. (2000). Parenting from prison: Helping children and mothers. *Issues in Comprehensive Pediatric Nursing*, 23, 61–81.
- Western, B., & Wildeman, C. (2009). The Black family and mass incarceration. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 621, 221–242.