Children with Incarcerated Parents: The Role of Schools

As part of their university experience, students working in our Center at UCLA often want to explore topics related to personal experiences. This was what led Yuqiao Brigitte Cao to this topic. She indicated:

> "When I was seven, I had a friend: we were the same age, we lived in the same community, we went to the same elementary school, we sometimes came back home together, we always rode our bikes or played with the sand together . . . until one summer afternoon when police cars raged into the community and took his mother away.
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> From that day on, I heard people in the community gossiping: 'His mother was put into prison because of drug abuse; he was physically abused when his mother took drugs;' and I even heard people telling their children 'Do not play with him, he has a terrible mother and he will become a bad person too.'
>
> Eventually, he moved to live with his grandparents, and I never see him again. Since then, I have wondered about the impact parent incarceration on their children."

Some Facts

The following data for the U.S.A. are from the *Children and Families of the Incarcerated Fact Sheet* 2014 – https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/fact-sheets .

The fact sheet culled data from various sources; go to the above URL for citations.

>In 2010:
>>1.5 million people were in state or federal prison and in 750,000 in jails.
>>93% of Federal Prisoners were convicted of non-violent crimes, including 48% for drug offenses, and 11% for immigration offenses.
>>47% of State Prisoners were convicted of non.violent crimes, including 17% for drug offenses, and 18% for property offenses and 13% for Public Order offenses.

>92% of people in prison are male, 8% female (more than 60% are racial and ethnic minorities)

>Blacks are 12.3 percent of population and are 43.9% of the state and federal prison population. Latinos constitute 12.6% of the population, but make up 18.3% of the prison population. Whites are 69% of the general population with 34.7% incarcerated

>Including women in local jails, more than 200,000 women are now incarcerated

>Roughly two-thirds of women in prison are women of color, representing the fastest growing prison population.

>There are more than 120,000 incarcerated mothers and 1.1 million incarcerated fathers who are parents of minor children (ages 0-17).

>More than 2.7 million children have an incarcerated parent. That is 1 in 28 children.

>Approximately 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.

>One in 9 African American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%), and 1 in 57 white children (1.8%) have an incarcerated parent.

>Approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are under ten years old.

Note: The fact sheet cautions that "care must be taken with the data on disproportionate representation of children of color so as not to interpret them as an indictment of specific groups of people but rather as a reflection of the long-term impact of poverty, segregation, discrimination and urbanization."

*The material in this document was culled from the literature by Yuqiao Brigitte Cao as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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Impact on the Children

> Many students with incarcerated parents achieve positive outcomes through resilience, adaptability, and self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, parent criminality and incarceration can increase an adolescent's risk for a variety of negative outcomes.
>
> Eric Rossen

The impact of having a parent incarcerated varies with the child and surrounding supports, and the supports available to many of the children usually are quite limited. With respect to policy, advocates who focus on this population describe the children as marginalized to the point of invisibility. They point to the recent formal designation of parental incarceration as an "adverse childhood experience" as a step forward (http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm).

Aside from the relatively few youngsters who turn the situation into braggadocio, it is common for children of incarcerated parents to feel a sense of shame (and sometimes guilt), feel stigmatized and socially isolated, feel confused and abandoned, and manifest traumatic symptoms (e.g., anxiety, fear, nightmares). The situation can exacerbate learning, behavior, and health (physical and psychological).

And, given the racial and economic disparities with respect to the incarcerated population, the impact has significant implications for society at large of addressing. This includes perpetuating the cycles of poverty and racism and the problems associated with growing up in such circumstances (e.g., dropping out of school, abusing substances, delinquent behavior).

Note: Research generally suggests it is not the case that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be incarcerated than their peers or are predisposed to criminal activity.

Note: Those witnessing the arrest of a household member were 57% more likely to have posttraumatic stress symptoms compared to children not witnessing the arrest.

Note: Caregivers of children with parents in prison also can experience considerable physical, emotional, an financial stress and often need external supports.

To Tell or Not to Tell

Young children often are not told that their mother or father is incarcerated. And some children who know try to keep it secret. Most experts and authorities agree that children have the right to know the truth and not knowing the truth is unhealthy. The matter of sharing it with others has less consensus because of the unpredictability of how others will react. (Will they be supportive or rejecting.) All this has implications for relationships with caretakers, school staff, and peers and has special implications with respect to maintaining ties with the incarcerated parent and reconnecting when they are released.

What's being Done?

By Prisons: While prevailing policy and research stresses maintaining incarcerated parents' connections to their children, not surprisingly prisons vary considerably in implementing relevant practices. The research suggests potential benefits for both the child (e.g., decreases in feelings of loss, maintaining a sense of connection) and parent (e.g., lower rates of recidivism, increased self-esteem, greater parental involvement with their children following release). At the same time, cautions have been raised that, when the quality of interaction is negative, outcomes also will be negative.

Examples of in-prison approaches:

- *Parent education courses* are the most widespread and popular approach in women's prisons (and some prisons for men). However, they are not always available to every prisoner.
- *Parent-child visiting programs*, where offered, are designed to maintain connection, but may not devote much attention to enabling positive interactions.
- *Child-in-residence programs* are offered by corrections departments in some states (e.g., New York, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska). The intent of these programs is to allow women to keep infants or young children with them while serving their time. The mothers and their children, housed in a separate wing or in a secure community setting, provide daily care, participate in special programs related to their parenting role, and carry our regular requirements for all prisoners. As of 2008, 9 states had prison nursery programs. Such programs are for non-violent pregnant inmates who will give birth while incarcerated but be released within 24 months or less after birth.
- *Reentry programs.* A recent example is the federal "Second Chance Act Strengthening Relationships Between Young Fathers and Their Children: A Reentry Mentoring Project." The aim is to rebuild the connections between young imprisoned fathers and their children, with a view to supporting successful and safe transition in returning to their families and communities. http://www.ojjdp.gov/grants/solicitations/FY2015/FatherhoodMentoring.pdf

An ironic policy twist resulted from passage of the "Adoption and Safe Families Act" (introduced in 1997). It allows for terminating parental rights if a child is in foster care for 15 out of 22 months. Since the average maximum prison sentence at that time was more than 22 months, this made incarcerated parents with children in foster care at risk of losing custody.
(see http://www.courts.mo.gov/hosted/resourcecenter/JO%20Published%20April%2019.2011/Juvenile_Generally/AdoptSafeFamAct.htm)

By Police. Police actions in arresting parents has come under fire for many years. Of particular concern has been theimpact of children who are present when an arrest occurs. As a result, the federal government has initiated a policy to safeguard the children (see below).

A Recent Policy Effort to Safeguard Children of Arrested Parents

On June 12, 2013, Deputy Attorney General of the United States James M. Cole announced that "the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), with funding support from the Department of Justice (DOJ) is developing a model protocol and training on protecting the physical and emotional well-being of children when their parents are arrested."

This project is described as part of an overarching White House Domestic Policy Council justice initiative focused on reducing trauma experienced by children who have parents in prison or jail. The intent is to develop a broad-based approach that accounts for "the myriad of situations in which parental arrest, incarceration, or both can have a negative impact on a child's physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being."

The policy led to development of a Model Policy and Concepts and Issues Paper to "assist law enforcement agencies in developing measures to safeguard children when a parent is arrested." The IACP is developing training to assist agencies with implementing the policy.
http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/documents/pdfs/Safeguarding%20Children%20of%20Arrested%20Parents%20-%20Final_Web_v2.pdf

For other policy examples, see the 2008 list cited by the Annie E Casey Foundation – http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-childrenwithincarceratedparentsresourcelist-2008.pdf .

By Organizations: Beyond public policy sponsored programs, a variety of organizations focus on helping with such concerns as improving coping ability, assisting with transportation for visits to incarcerated parents, and offering video visiting (most prisons are not readily accessible by public transportation). Considerable attention has been given to the need for support groups, mentoring, and professional counseling. Guides have been developed outlining processes (e.g., for screening and facilitation (e.g., see The Centerforce – http://www.centerforce.org/families/support.cfm).

Some Examples of Programs and Practices Offered by Organziations

From: Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2008 list of select resources.

Amachi Mentoring Provides one-to-one mentors to children with parents who are incarcerated or recently released. www.amachimentoring.org

Angel Tree/Angel Tree Camping Provides religious ministry, mentoring, and support to the children and families of prisoners. Distributes holiday gifts to children of prisoners and provides a children's camping program. www.angeltree.org

Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents Provides services in four components: informational, educational, family reunification, and therapeutic. www.e-ccip.org

Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM) Provides legal aid on family law issues for incarcerated mothers and their children's caregivers in Illinois and representation on *Cook County cases involving child custody.* www.claim-il.org

Fathers Behind Bars, Inc. Provides publications and technical assistance on self-help support groups for incarcerated fathers. fathersbehindbars2@msn.com

Foreverfamily Provides gifts for children, group activities, after-school programs, mentoring and tutoring services, parent/child group activities, and supervised family visitations. www.takingaim.net

Girl Scouts Beyond Bars Provides scouting activities for incarcerated mothers and their children. Provides family reunification support, support groups, mentoring to mothers and daughters by volunteers. www.gscm.org

Long Distance Dads Provides training and technical assistance on parent education for incarcerated fathers. The Long Distance Dads curriculum is used in over 145 correctional facilities in 24 states of the USA as well as in Canada, Great Britain, and Africa. Provides extensive fatherhood resources and publications. www.fatherhood.org

U.S. Dream Academy Provides children in grades 3 through 6 daily after-school programming that includes online academic enrichment, healthy lifestyles instruction, homework assistance, values training, and mentoring. Provides video-visiting to support communication between prison and home. www.usdreamacademy.org

Volunteers of America Provides literacy and family strengthening programming for incarcerated parents and their children. Parents take a class then read and record books. The recordings are given to the children along with a book bag, personal tape player, and other supplies. www.voa.org

Recommendations for how schools might support children of incarcerated parents have focused mainly on the using support staff such as school psychologists, counselors, and social workers in traditional case-oriented ways. The recommendations stress understanding the problems such students may be experiencing and taking steps to help them address any personal and interpersonal problems they are experiencing. For a variety of reasons, such recommendations represent a serious disconnect with the imperative for schools to move in new directions with respect to equitably addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Schools Must Address the Many Students Who Need Support

Schools are confronted with students who bring to school many overlapping problems. This includes children of incarcerated parents. Clearly, such children may manifest a range of behavior, learning, physical, and emotional problems. Of course, the same is true for children in homes where there is domestic violence and a variety of other conditions associated with dysfunctional families. And the same is true for children growing up in poverty and those experiencing institutional racism.

The reality is that schools must address a full range of factors that are barriers to learning and teaching if they are to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at schools and beyond. Another reality is that schools cannot mainly address problems using traditional student and learning support approaches. The need is for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

This is not to say, schools can't do more to understand the causes of the problems manifested by students and include such understanding in efforts to transform student and learning supports. Such a systemic transformation stresses a full continuum of classroom and school-wide interventions that (a) continuously promote whole child development, (b) prevent additional learning, behavior, and emotional problems, and (c) carefully monitor for any additional problems that arise in order to address them as quickly as feasible. All this encompasses daily student and learning supports, supports for transitions, response to personal crises, and personalized student and family special assistance if necessary.

- A first focus is on enhancing the promotion of healthy social and emotional development (for students and staff). This encompasses a major emphasis on appreciating individual and group differences and problems, empathy for others, and how to be supportive of anyone whose problems require special assistance.
- The next focus is on ensuring the school environment establishes ways to counter and buffer against the problems being experienced by student and can build resilience for students to handle such negative experiences.
- Finally, for students suffering the effects of the negative experiences, personalized student and learning supports need to be available, including referral for specialized assistance if necessary.

Properly implemented, a comprehensive system of student and learning supports can prevent many students from suffering the negative effects of stigma, can provide relief for others, and can facilitate student learning, performance, relationship building, and overall well-being. And all this helps with the emergence of a more positive school climate.

Concluding Comments

Clearly, schools must understand the impact on a student who has an incarcerated parent. But, the response must not be to establish yet another separate initiative. As with all mental health and psychosocial concerns, efforts to address the needs of such youngster must be embedded into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. Trailblazing transformation work already is underway (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm). And, the 2015 *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* is designed to help others move in this direction http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html).

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For more references and resources see the references cited in the above resources and also see the following:

A Caregiver's Guide on How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children – www.starsmp.org/PDFs/explaining_prison_final.pdf

Arizona Stars – www.starsmp.org

Assisting Families of Inmates, Inc. – http://www.afoi.org

Center for Mental Health in Schools online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Incarcerated Parents and Supports for their Children* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/incarceration.htm

Family and Corrections Network (FCN) – http://fcnetwork.org

Project Resilience – www.projectresilience.com/tgintro.htm

Family to Family, California – www.f2f.ca.gov/res-YouthParents.htm

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated – http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources

The Osborne Association – www.osborneny.org

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents – www.sfcipp.org