School counselors' perceptions of the needs of children of incarcerated parents

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SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE NEEDS OF
CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Education Specialist

Sarah Wakefield
University of Northern Iowa
August 2008
ABSTRACT

Children of incarcerated parents are a population that have specialized needs. While previous research has explored the effects of parental incarceration on children and their needs, the current study evaluated schools' awareness of such effects and the resources they have to meet those needs. Because the majority of children attend school, schools are an appropriate setting for such interventions and services. The current study showed that school counselors are not aware of all of the students affected by parental incarceration, they need additional information concerning specific issues and needs associated with parental incarceration, and they believe their schools lack the resources needed to address these issues. Possible explanations for these findings, as well as implications for schools and further research will be discussed.
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Sarah Wakefield
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This Study by: Sarah Wakefield

Entitled: School Counselors' Perceptions of the Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the

Degree of Education Specialist in School Psychology

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LITERATURE REVIEW

There are currently over 1.9 million people incarcerated in U.S. prisons and the rate continues to rise (Beck, 2001). Mandatory minimum sentencing laws, a result of the war on drugs, and gender-free sentencing policies have contributed to this increase, especially for women. Approximately 2.1% of the nation's children have a parent in prison, resulting in 1.5 million children being affected by parental incarceration (Mumola, 2000). It is important to understand the issues related to parental incarceration in order to advocate and support the children affected by it.

Children of incarcerated parents face extreme challenges that have many consequences for their school success. Because many children of incarcerated parents are faced with multiple risk factors before and after parental incarceration, recognition of these factors is important for designing programs and interventions. Understanding the needs of these children is also a fundamental starting point for making accurate assessments and being able to effectively help these children deal with their parent's incarceration.

The present study begins to address the absence of literature regarding school-based interventions and supports for children of incarcerated parents by gathering information from school counselors regarding current needs and supports. The available literature regarding incarcerated parents, the effects of parental incarceration on children and their families, cumulative risks, substitute care arrangements, reunification of families, modifiers to parental incarceration, current programs, and services in the
schools will be presented. Next the results of a survey and a follow-up focus group with school counselors will be shared. Finally, implications and suggestions for future research will provided.

**Imprisoned Parents**

Over half of the State and Federal prison populations have a child under 18, resulting in 1.5 million children having an incarcerated parent (Mumola, 2000). Since the war on drugs began, the numbers of individuals imprisoned has increased dramatically (Golden, 2005) and is at a record high level (Travis, Cincotta & Solomon, 2003). The increase has been more dramatic for women than men, with the rate of increase between 1991 and 2000 for women being about twice that of men (Beck, 2001; Luke, 2002). During this time there was an increase of 98% for mothers but only 58% for fathers (Mumola, 2000). Mandatory minimum sentencing laws, a result of the war on drugs, have been the primary reason for the increasing rate of female incarceration. Dalley (2002) suggests that the increase in female incarceration is also due to policies that disregard gender in making sentencing considerations.

It is important to note that these numbers do not provide a complete picture of all the parents who have contact with the criminal justice system. Phillips, Erkanli, Costello, and Angold (2006) found only 16.7% of the mothers who had contact with criminal authorities had been incarcerated. About two thirds were either never charged, never found guilty or only received a fine. Their findings indicate that the number of children affected by issues related to parental involvement with crime may be greater than
estimates of those actually incarcerated. Parental incarceration is usually the worst-case scenario.

In order to have a better understanding of the children affected by parental incarceration, it is important to understand the characteristics of their parents. As a whole, the majority of incarcerated parents have had problems with substance abuse (Mumola, 2000). The majority have not completed high school (Mumola, 2000). Many incarcerated parents lack effective parenting skills and have higher proportions of substance abuse and mental illness. These problems can further impede effective parenting skills (Dannerback, 2005).

Profile of Incarcerated Fathers

Fathers account for 93% of incarcerated parents and on average, they have two children, many of whom are minors (Mumola, 2000). The majority (84%) of incarcerated fathers are not married to the mothers of their children (Martin, 2001) and in some cases they have children with more than one woman. Only 44% of incarcerated fathers actually lived with their children before incarceration, making it typically less disruptive to a child’s life than maternal incarceration (Martin, 2001). Only about six percent of mothers reported receiving child support or alimony payments (Mumola, 2000). Males tend to be incarcerated for different reasons than women with 46% being incarcerated for a violent offense. They are more likely to re-offend and have prior sentences than mothers (Mumola, 2000).
Profile of Incarcerated Mothers

Approximately 70% of mothers in the correctional system have a child under the age of 18. Women under correctional care overall have an average of at least two children, with an average rate of 2.38 children for those in State prison. About 20% of local, 12.5% of State and 9% of Federal women prisoners are under age 25. The majority has completed high school and 30-40% of the high school graduates have attended at least some college. They tend to have difficult economic circumstances, with only 40% of State prisoners reporting full-time employment prior to incarceration and 30% receiving welfare assistance (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

The most common problem amongst women offenders appears to be drug and alcohol abuse. Mothers in State prison have more serious drug histories than fathers. They were more likely to report using drugs in the month prior to their arrest, committing their crime while under the influence of drugs, and committing their crime in order to get drugs or money for drugs (Mumola, 2000). They are more likely than fathers to be incarcerated for drug offenses (35 percent vs. 23 percent; Travis & Waul, 2003).

Incarcerated mothers experienced multiple risk factors in their lives. One study found the majority of the incarcerated mothers were also cognitively developmentally delayed, thinking in very concrete terms and struggling with cause and effect relationships (Dalley, 2002). Often, the women in jail come from broken, single-parent homes and abusive families (Simmons, 2000). Dalley (2002) found that the incarcerated women in her study had significant histories with juvenile justice and foster care systems,
and experienced childhood physical abuse. Almost half were arrested before their 18th birthday.

Mothers may also expose children to criminal behavior other than that she committed. The 1987 American Correctional Association study showed that the majority of female offenders have family members in jail. Half of their family members and about half of their siblings are in jail (as cited in Simmons, 2000). For the children, this likely means additional exposure to people involved in criminal activities and further difficulty in finding temporary care during their mothers’ incarceration. About 62% of females’ violent offenses were against someone they had a prior relationship with, such as an intimate or relative. Children may themselves ultimately be the victims of violence. From 1976 to 1997, about half of the 11,000 murdered children were murdered by their mothers and stepmothers (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

Despite the increasing numbers of incarcerated parents, these children and their special needs have typically been forgotten. A lack of communication between the corrections system and child welfare agencies makes it not only difficult to identify affected children, but also difficult to understand how children are affected by parental incarceration and how to meet their needs. Often, children’s problems are not correctly identified as related to the incarceration of their parent (Wright & Seymour, 2000), but rather, as due to one of the other risk factors frequently associated with parental incarceration. The many domains that are impacted by parental incarceration need to be understood in order to be adequately addressed.
Emotional/Psychological Impacts

Children with incarcerated parents may experience a broad range of emotions related to their parent's incarceration. Some experts argue that children become inherently vulnerable when their parent is incarcerated (Seymour, 1998). Research has found that these children may lose the ability to feel emotion or affection and be unable to bond with their parent upon release (Childs, Wiszniewski, Pohlman & De Brennan, 2004). Mothers in Sharp and Mendoza’s (2001) study reported depression as being extremely common among all ages of their children.

Tiet, Bird, Hoven, Moore, Wu, Wicks, Jensen, Goodman, and Cohen (2001) conducted a study that examined whether certain psychiatric disorders were associated with certain adverse life events. They found that a parent being jailed was strongly associated with a number of psychiatric disorders, such as Conduct Disorder and Dysthymia in boys, and Conduct Disorder and Overanxious Disorder in girls. Parental separation, which accompanies parental incarceration, was associated with a fourfold increase in Dysthymia. Getting a new stepparent, which may also accompany parental incarceration, also had a strong impact on Conduct Disorder and Dysthymia in boys, and Overanxious Disorder in girls.

Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, and Robbins (2002) found that 43% of the 11-18 year olds receiving mental health services had experienced parental incarceration. Phillips, Burns, Wagner and Barth (2004) found that two out of every five children over the age of two with an incarcerated parent scored in the Clinical range on the Child
Behavior Checklist on at least one of the scales. This was a rate about 50% higher than observed with other children.

Behavioral Impacts

Phillips et al. (2002) found that adolescents who had experienced parental incarceration had significantly higher rates of disruptive behavior. It appears that a child’s behavior change varies depending on the gender of the parent who is incarcerated. If a child’s mother is incarcerated, the child engages in more “acting in” behaviors such as daydreaming, fearing school and crying. If a child’s father is incarcerated, it brings about “acting out” behaviors such as hostility, aggressiveness, drug and alcohol use, school truancy and running away (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981).

Katherine Gabel and Denise Johnston founded the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents (CCIP) in 1989 (CCIP, 2001). The CCIP developed a model for intergenerational behaviors, crime and incarceration which links the childhood trauma to the resulting criminal activity. The traumas described are not uncommon for children of incarcerated parents to experience. The model includes the following: physical abuse leads to anger, physical aggression and possible assault charges; parental separation causes sadness, that may lead to drug abuse and possible drug possession charges; witnessing violence can cause anxiety and hyper vigilance that leads to gang activity and possible “accessory to homicide” charges; parental substance abuse causes anger and leads to antisocial behavior, such as lying and stealing, and possible fraud charges; and sexual molestation causes fear and anxiety that can lead to promiscuity and possible prostitution charges (as cited in Gabel & Johnston, 1995, p. 81).
The social stigma associated with having a parent in prison can be embarrassing for children. At school and with friends, children are sometimes teased as a result of their parent’s incarceration. Hagen and Myers (2003) found that the more stigma children felt about their situation, the more externalizing behavior problems they reported.

**Academic Impacts**

Research is scarce in terms of the academic impacts parental incarceration has on children. This is likely because schools are often unaware of those affected by parental incarceration and the co-occurring risk factors make it difficult to attribute academic problems to parental incarceration alone. Stanton (1980) found that 70% of children with incarcerated mothers showed poor academic performance as compared to 17% of children with a parent only on probation. Teachers reported that half of these children have behavior problems as compared to 22% of the children with a parent on probation. Teachers also reported that some children with incarcerated parents became more distracted and moody, some became sullen, and others were more aggressive and displayed occasional tantrums. Phillips et al. (2002) found that youth with a parent who had been imprisoned were significantly more likely than other youth receiving mental health services to be expelled or suspended from school between when they entered treatment and the six month follow-up.

**Immediate Impact of Arrest**

It is not uncommon for children to be present when their parent is arrested and some children report flashbacks of their mother’s arrest or criminal behavior (Kampfner, 1995). Smith and Elstein (1994) surveyed child welfare, law enforcement and
correctional officials in 100 counties and found that most law enforcement officers are only required to contact child welfare agencies if the arrested parents are suspected of child abuse or neglect. For minor charges, it is usually up to the officer’s discretion to “cite and release” in order to keep from separating parents and children. The study also found that 97% of child welfare agencies had no specific policies on how to deal with such cases (as cited in Phillips et al., 2004).

Keeping Imprisonment a Secret

Some families are reluctant to tell children that their parent has been arrested. Keeping the child in the dark about the incarceration, however, can influence the child emotionally and psychologically (Travis et al., 2003). Children may have misconceptions as to what happened to their parent, such as abandonment, abduction or permanent separation. Letting them know the truth may ease their many worries and allow them to keep in contact with the imprisoned parent (Wright & Seymour, 2000).

Jorgensen (1986) discussed the pattern of deceptions that surround parental incarceration and how culture does not provide narratives to explain it, unlike death, divorce, and other socially acceptable separations. It is important to be honest with children because they are more likely to attribute parental absence as a choice and be more afraid of an unexplained absence. Deception also leaves children confused and distrustful of their own ability to perceive truth (Lange, 2000).

Cumulative Risks

Several studies report the number of risk factors as higher for children of incarcerated parents than for those without an incarcerated parent (Phillips et al., 2002;
Phillips et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 2006). Gabel and Shindledecker (1992) found that children with a history of parental incarceration were significantly more likely to have parents who have been drug abusers and have been involved in child abuse and neglect reports. Phillips et al. (2004) found that the most common risk factor was impaired parenting (61.4%). Phillips et al. (2002) found that in addition to having a greater number of risk factors over the course of their lifetimes, they were more likely to experience potentially traumatizing events in the six months prior to treatment.

Mackintosh, Myers and Kennon (2006) found that 60% of the children in their study had experienced four or more life stressors in the past year. Hagen, Myers, and Mackintosh (2005) also found four to be the median number of life stressors that the children of incarcerated parents reported having. Risk appears to increase when a mother is incarcerated versus a father. Children with an incarcerated mother have an average of 2.7 risk factors while children of an incarcerated father only have an average of 1.9 risk factors (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). A combination of risk factors may increase the base rates of children's problem behaviors (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

In a series of studies by Arnold Sameroff and his colleagues (1983), the following family risk factors were identified: a history of mental illness, high maternal anxiety, rigid beliefs about child development, head of household having an unskilled occupation, low educational attainment, minority status, single parenthood, stressful life events and large family size. Children with none of these risk factors scored more than 30 points above children with only 8 or 9 of these risk factors on a verbal IQ test. In a separate analysis, scores on a social competence measure decreased linearly as the number of risk
factors increased. Several of the risk factors in Sameroff's study are similar to those of children with incarcerated parents. We know that about 14% of incarcerated parents have reported symptoms of mental illness, the majority do not have a high school diploma, and only about 23% of parents in State prison and 36% of parents in Federal prison are married (Mumola, 2000). Many incarcerated parents lack effective parenting skills and have higher proportions of substance abuse (Dannerback, 2005). Many are also of a minority status. Of the parents in Federal prison, 44% report their race and ethnicity as Black, followed by 30% Hispanic and 22% White. In State prisons, those who report their race as Black make up 49% of parents, followed by 29% White and 19% Hispanic (Mumola, 2000).

**Effects on the Family**

The punishment enforced by the American criminal justice system often spreads itself onto the families of prisoners (Johnson, Selber & Lauderdale, 1998). Unlike with death, divorce or separation due to war, losing a family member due to imprisonment rarely elicits a sympathetic response from others (Martin, 2001). When a parent is incarcerated, the family undergoes many changes in terms of structure, finances, emotions, and dynamics, with each one impacting the other (Wright & Seymour, 2000). Since a supportive family environment is a protective factor (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001), it is important to look at the effects incarceration has upon it.

**Structural Changes**

With an absent parent, a hole is left in the family structure that other members may struggle to fill. Rules, roles, and relationships shift, and therefore, the entire family
must adjust to these changes (Wright & Seymour, 2000). Incarceration often leads to separation of siblings. Sharp and Mendoza (2001), found that one fifth of the women in their study had children in at least two places, likely as a result of incarceration. Children may find themselves living in a new home, which may also mean a new school. Tiet et al. (2001) found a strong association between school change and several psychiatric disorders in their study’s general population of boys. Even when controlling for age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and the cumulative effects of other adverse life events, boys who changed schools had more than a threefold increase in Separation Anxiety Disorder and Social Phobia, as well as more than a fivefold increase in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Depression, and Agoraphobia.

**Dynamic Changes**

Incarceration often leads to a change in family dynamics. In terms of power, Sharp and Mendoza (2001) found that many incarcerated mothers reported a loss of parental status and identity. The fathers in Arditti, Smock and Parkman’s (2005) study described the loss of control they felt over their children’s lives when they were imprisoned. For some, imprisonment was a catalyst for new fathering intentions. For others, the fear of being a bad influence on their children and the gate keeping of mothers lead to less and less involvement in their children’s lives.

**Financial Changes**

Incarceration occurs more frequently in families who already live in poverty and therefore creates further financial difficulties (Travis & Waul, 2003). If the father is incarcerated, child support may be interrupted and the mother may have to go to work or
pick up additional work. If a single mother is incarcerated, the children will likely be left with no financial support, except for what is provided by the substitute caregiver. Caregivers indicate stress associated with the extra financial responsibility (Mackintosh et al., 2006). In addition to the financial strain of caring for the children, families are often expected to financially support the imprisoned family member as well as accept expensive collect calls and incur the costs of visitation travel. Families are often put in a bind whether to maintain the prisoner or devote resources to the children and their lives in the community (Arditti, 2003).

**Emotional Changes**

Arditti (2003) recognizes how families are not only influenced by the actual contact with the imprisoned family member, but also through their interactions with those they come in contact with during the visitation process and the environmental conditions and policies of the specific prison facility. A participant in Arditti’s (2003) study described how losing a family member to incarceration is like losing a family member to death, except with death, they can grieve publicly and receive support. With incarceration, they are expected to keep this fact a secret. It makes it difficult for the family to support the child when they are under such stress.

**Substitute Care Arrangements**

Another important issue to consider is who looks after the child after the parent is incarcerated. The child welfare system continues to be significantly affected by the increasing number of children with incarcerated parents. If the prison population continues to grow as it has been (Beck, 2001), an even larger number of children will
need out-of-home care in the future. Lange (2000) notes that incarcerated parents and their children’s caretakers are not frequently natural allies. Caretakers may oppose allowing the children to have a relationship with their incarcerated parent by denying them visitation and other forms of communication. The impact that substitute care arrangements have on children will likely vary depending on whom the child was living with before incarceration, with whom the child is placed with during incarceration, and the quality of each setting.

The Other Parent

Assuming the parent is suitable and capable of healthy child rearing, parental care is preferable to out-of-home placement because it allows for continuity of relationships, schools, routines, etc. (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). The majority (80%) of incarcerated parents report that the other parent is caring for their children (Mumola, 2000). Ninety percent of children with incarcerated fathers live with their mother during their father’s incarceration, while only 28% live with their father when their mother is incarcerated (Mumola, 2000). Johnson and Waldfogel (2002) found that children with the least number of risk factors tend to be placed with the other parent, and as risk factors increase, the likelihood that they will be placed in foster care and other outside care raises.

Other Family Members

About 20% of inmate parents reported that grandparents and other relatives are their children’s current caregivers. More than half of these children live with a grandparent during their mother’s incarceration (Mumola, 2000). Some relatives are paid as foster parents and called “kinship foster parents” (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002).
Several studies indicate that kinship foster parents are older, have lower annual incomes, are less educated, and tend to receive fewer services than non-relative foster parents (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002).

Many inmates have experienced childhood physical and sexual abuse. Sharp and Mendoza (2001) found that the homes in which the inmates were abused as children were equally likely to be the placements of their children during incarceration as non-abusive placements. This places children at a high risk for abuse by their substitute caretaker.

Non-Relative Foster Parents

Ten percent of incarcerated mothers and two percent of incarcerated fathers have children in foster care (Mumola, 2000). Because little is known about children prior to their entry into care, it is difficult and unclear what the outcomes and differences would be had they not been in kinship foster care, non-relative foster care or foster care at all (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002).

Termination of Parental Rights

Many mothers who are incarcerated have an extreme fear of losing custody of their children and there is good reason for their concern. Recently, changes in Federal and State child welfare legislation have intensified these fears (Luke, 2002). According to the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, states are required to file termination of parental rights (TPR) for children that have been in out-of-home care for 15 of the last 22 months (Luke, 2002). Mumola (2000) found that parents expected to serve an average of 80 months in State prison and 103 months in Federal prison. Lee, Gentry and Laver (2005) found that when fathers were incarcerated and mothers were incarcerated, TPR
was granted 91.4% and 92.9% of the time (respectively). When both parents were incarcerated, TPR was granted 100% of the time.

Many states have supplemented ASFA with legislation that relieves the state’s responsibility for family reunification efforts when “aggravated circumstances” are present. In Alaska, California, Colorado, Louisiana, and North Dakota, parental incarceration is considered an “aggravated circumstance” (Travis et al., 2003). In other cases, it may be determined that a parent released from prison is not capable of providing an adequate home for their child, or at least not within a certain designated time frame. In such cases, a child welfare worker must gather and weigh a body of evidence to support the decision of permanent separation. The decision must put the child’s well-being first while recognizing and respecting the parent’s rights (Wright & Seymour, 2000).

Much of the legislation is due to the recognition that children’s experience of time is much different than that of an adult and that their developmental needs cannot be put on hold while their parent serves time (Wright & Seymour, 2000). For lengthy incarcerations, the idea is that TPR may provide more stability for the child, however, several problems with these decisions have occurred. First, guardians ad litem receive no formal training regarding children’s legal rights. Appointment of guardians ad litem is based upon available funding in each jurisdiction, and the poor legal definition of “child’s best interest” allows courts to interpret it based on available resources. Currently 29 states include parental incarceration as one of the criteria to be considered for TPR or adoption (Dalley, 2002).
Reunification of Families

If the best plan for the children after their parent’s incarceration is to return to their parent, reunification will not be easy. Reunification is yet another adjustment for the child and holds the risk of re-traumatization if the parent leaves or goes to jail again. However, based on ideas about attachment and bonding, reunification is always the goal. Most state laws, as well as Federal law (the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Family Preservation and Support Services Act of 1993) state this legal preference. Although reunification of the child and parent is the goal, judging the best interest of the child while honoring the rights of the parent can be difficult and is dependent upon many factors (Wright & Seymour, 2000).

Hayward and DePanfilis (2007) used logistic regression analysis to determine the factors that affect reunification. Having an incarcerated parent, being in kinship foster care placement, being African-American, being under the age of two at the time of incarceration, having a disability, housing problems, a single family structure, prior home removals and the length of time in out-of-home placements all decreased children’s chance of reunification with their parent. They also found that each year spent in out-of-home care decreased the chance of reunification by 11%.

Dalley (2002) found that the majority of mothers are in fact, reunited with their children, however, many of them will not be able to maintain a drug and crime-free life nor maintain stable relationships with their children. Hanlon, Carswell, and Rose (2007) discussed how mothers need to have a realistic perception of what life will be like upon their release, especially due to their lack of parenting experience, the stigma associated
with their past behavior, and the fact that their children have become accustomed to life in their current arrangements.

**Effects of Parental Incarceration at Different Ages**

Depending upon the child’s age, their response to parental incarceration may vary (Wright & Seymour, 2000), and the relationship between parental incarceration and psychiatric disorders may also vary with age (Tiet et al., 2001). While children of different ages vary in terms of coping ability, they are always traumatized by separation, regardless of their age (Wright & Seymour, 2000).

**Attachment**

In order to best understand the effects of parental separation on a child, it is important to understand attachment. Attachment is defined as “a pattern of organized behavior within a relationship” (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002, p.2). The relationship a child has with an attachment figure becomes the means by which they learn to communicate and regulate their emotions and arousal. The attachment figure becomes a secure base from where the child can explore and grow (Davies, 2004). Children who do not develop secure and loving relationships early in life will generalize their feelings of anxiety and insecurity later in life. When incarceration interferes with the attachment process, the insecurity a child develops leads to many other negative effects and may affect the child’s ability to become an effective parent in the future (Martin, 2001).

**Infants**

Approximately six percent of women entering prison are pregnant at the time of their incarceration (Task Force on the Female Offender, 1990, as cited in Stanton, 1980).
In prisons where they are only permitted a few days of contact before relinquishing their infant, there is little time for pregnant women to develop a bond, become familiar with, and form an attachment to their baby (Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). The process of bonding and attachment is a critical developmental task. Without a bond or attachment to a caretaker, future emotional and behavioral problems are likely to result (Stroufe, 1988 as cited in Childs et al., 2004).

**Young Children**

In 1999, 22% of the children with a parent in prison were under the age of five (Mumola, 2000). Young children are the least likely to have the developmental skills necessary for coping with trauma and are therefore are in the most need of intervention when trauma occurs (Wright & Seymour, 2000). The attachment to a caregiver allows a child to learn to cope with anxiety-provoking situations (Davies, 2004). Children who were judged as securely attached at 12 and 18 months had fewer behavior problems, sought attention from teachers in positive ways, effectively elicited teachers' support when distressed, showed less negative affect and more age-expected control of impulses, got along with other children well, and showed a capacity for empathy (Weinfield, Stroufe & Egeland, 2000).

Insecure attachments have been linked to poorer peer relationships and diminished cognitive abilities (Baunach, 1985, as cited in Childs et al., 2004). They have been shown to lead to emotional and psychological problems in 70% of young children with an incarcerated mother (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993, as cited in Childs et al., 2004). Children also may exhibit somatic problems such as eating disorders and constipation,
and externalizing behaviors such as aggression, violence and criminal behavior (Childs et al., 2004). Weinfield, Stroufe and Egeland (2000) found that attachment relationships are not always stable over time. Difficult and chaotic life experiences can make attachment relationships vulnerable to change.

**Adolescents**

It is estimated that about 42% of children with an incarcerated parent are between 10 and 17 with 14.5% between the ages of 14-17 (Mumola, 2000). In early adolescence (11-14 years), children often reject limits on behavior and exhibit trauma-reactive behaviors. The Trauma Recovery Assessment Prevention Services (TRAPS) website describes trauma-reactive behaviors as behaviors designed to protect from additional traumatic experiences, such as distrusting, having fear, displaying outbursts of anger, lacking commitment and avoiding accountability (TRAPS, 2005). In late adolescence (15-18 years), children may prematurely terminate their dependency relationship with their parent and continue a pattern of intergenerational crime (Gabel & Johnston, 1995).

**Modifiers of Reactions to Parental Incarceration**

There are many different factors that mediate a child’s reactions to their parent’s incarceration. Internal factors, such as hopefulness, are associated with fewer behavior problems (Hagen, Myers & Mackintosh, 2005). Additionally, factors such as pre-incarceration conditions, the quality of substitute care giving, contact with the incarcerated parent during incarceration and repeat incarcerations greatly influence the way a child reacts to their parent’s incarceration.
Pre-Incarceration Conditions

The parent-child relationship is the most important predictor of how the child will adjust to parental incarceration because a positive relationship can serve as a protective coping factor (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). Also, the quality of the relationships with extended family and other social networks creates support for the child and eases the transition if they are to live with extended family during their parent's incarceration (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). Lawrence-Wills (2004) found that daughters who had more positive relationships with their incarcerated mother participated less in antisocial behavior. They also found, however, that over one-fourth of mothers reported that their daughter had been removed from their home due to abuse or neglect.

Quality of Substitute Care Giving

Although there are no comparative studies on child placements, it is assumed that living with the other parent is better than living with relatives, which is better than living in foster care because more continuity and familiarity makes adjustment easier for the child (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). When children are placed with caregivers that are unable or unwilling to provide appropriate care, they are at a higher risk for abuse and neglect (Gabel, 1992, as cited in Seymour, 1998).

Contact with Incarcerated Parent

Poehlmann (2005) found that over one-third of mothers had no visits from their children and just under one-third had no phone contact with their children. Telephone contact occurred more frequently than visits. Frequent visits and phone contacts were associated with more positive and warm relationships between mother and child, while
less contact was associated with more symptoms of maternal depression, more conflict and less warmth in mother-caregiver relationships. Mumola (2000) reports that most parents in State and Federal prisons (80% and 93% respectively) have at least some form of contact with their children, whether by phone, mail or personal visits. However, over half of both mothers and fathers had never been visited by their children (Mumola, 2000).

Children who continue to have frequent contact with their parent during their incarceration tend to experience less disruption (Sherman, 2005). Contact provides children with ongoing information about their parent’s well-being, as well as reassurance that their parent continues to care for them. Unfortunately, children face many barriers to visiting and having frequent contact with their parents.

Visitation facilities. Maintaining physical contact with family members in prison is difficult. Besides geographic distance and the cost of transportation, security procedures are often intimidating and visiting arrangements are often unfit for children and families. Hairston (1998) describes how prison visiting facilities are crowded, noisy, and dirty. Family members are often treated rudely, conditions that discourage families from maintaining contact. Participants in Arditti’s (2003) study echoed these concerns, also noting the distress participants felt with not being able to have physical contact nor privacy with their children. Another observation from his study was that showing up at a prison facility did not necessarily guarantee a visit. For those traveling great distances, this is a particularly disturbing uncertainty. Another problem was that children’s visiting hours were only during a three hour time span on Saturdays. While visitations allowed
family connections, they also caused additional emotional pain caused by the unpleasant visiting conditions and traumatic separations upon leaving.

**Distance.** It is assumed that regular contact is more likely to occur if the child lives with a family member and if they live close to the facility where their parent resides. However, over 60% of parents in State prison and 80% of parents in Federal facilities are more than 100 miles from their last place of residence, which is likely where, or near where their children are residing (Mumola, 2000).

**Length of incarceration.** Sentence length, or the amount of time the parent is actually in jail, greatly affects how incarcerated parents and their families maintain connections and can also affect the legal and emotional consequences for family reunification (Travis & Waul, 2004). As previously stated, the average sentence served in State prisons is 80 months and the average sentence served in Federal prison is 103 months (Mumola, 2000). In some states, as also previously mentioned, the length of the incarceration term can mean termination of parental rights.

**Repeat incarcerations.** Each time a parent is sent back to prison, sustained contact and reunification are less likely to occur. Since 75% of parents in state prisons have had a prior conviction and 56% have previously been incarcerated, this is a troublesome picture (Mumola, 2000). The U.S. Sentencing Commission (2004) found that men recidivate at higher rates than women (24.3% compared to 13.7%). Offenders who are African American have higher rates of recidivism than offenders who are Hispanic or White (32.8%, 24.3%, and 16%, respectively) and offenders who are 21 recidivate more frequently than those that are 50 (35.5% compared to 9.5%).
Current Programs/Interventions for Children and Families

Although there are an increasing number of children with incarcerated parents, there are few policies for protecting or supporting them (Seymour, 1998). Children of incarcerated parents have many needs that are different from other children and that make them a unique and difficult population to serve.

In a 1997 survey, the Child Welfare League of America found that only 6 of 38 states reported policies specifically for children with incarcerated parents and only two provided specific training for their staff (as cited in Seymour, 1998). Smith and Elstein (1994) found that more than half of foster care administrators reported placement needs for children of incarcerated parents, yet, as previously stated, 97% reported that their agencies had no specific policies for working with these children (as cited in Phillips et al., 2004).

Federal Outreach

The federal government has begun to acknowledge the needs of children of incarcerated parents. During George W. Bush’s administration, funding for targeted programs has been brought to a record high. In Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address, he made more than $45 million available exclusively to organizations for children of prisoners (Sherman, 2005). The Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families has made the grant money from Bush’s initiative available to 164 programs that mentor approximately 6,000 children of prisoners. These programs link children with trained mentors, provide guidance from
positive adult role models, and develop family plans that coordinate support services and connect the child with their imprisoned parent (Sherman, 2005).

Within the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Prisons provides inmates with opportunities to counteract negative family consequences of incarceration by providing programs, such as the family literacy program, and by making an effort to maintain and sustain family contacts for prisoners. The National Institute of Corrections, another agency within the Department of Justice, assists programs that help children of prisoners by granting awards, such as the three-year award granted to the Child Welfare League of America. The award was used to create the Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners which to engages in research, disseminates information, and assists agencies through training and consultation (Sherman, 2005).

**Community Outreach**

The high rates of incarceration in the U.S. would suggest that a number of communities are affected. These communities are typically already struggling with unemployment, crime, poverty and drug use (Travis et al., 2003), making it even more difficult to provide intervention services and successful programs. However, there are a number of feasible places for communities to begin.

**School programs.** Since 1955, schools have been the core setting from where services to children are provided (Johnson, Selber & Lauderdale, 1998). However, while public schools often offer counseling to students, they may not be aware that the real source of stress for the child is due to the incarceration of their parent (Travis et al., 2003). Head Start programs offer academic support to at-risk children, some of whom
have an incarcerated parent. The Head Start program in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania provides full-time services specifically to children ages three to five with incarcerated mothers (Sherman, 2005).

**Church and community programs.** There are a number of churches that have recognized the need to reach out to children of incarcerated parents. The close-knit community atmosphere of church provides a feasible means of support for children and their families and is conducive for mentoring, counseling, parenting courses and many other types of services. The *All People's Christian Center* in Los Angeles, California is a community program that provides resources for children of incarcerated parents and their families (All People’s Christian Center, 2005).

**Group support.** Group support and counseling are other recommended strategies for helping children with an incarcerated parent (Springer, Lynch & Rubin, 2000). One particular kind of group work helps connect children with other children of prisoners. Springer, Lynch and Rubin (2000) found that Hispanic children of incarcerated parents had a significant increase in self-esteem after group work treatment while no significant differences were found in the no-treatment comparison group. Groups can offer children a sense of belonging and feelings of “confirmation, affirmation, and acceptance” when they know others are having similar experiences (Kahn, 1994, as cited in Springer, Lynch & Rubin, 2000, p. 433). Another type of group work focuses on promoting emotional well-being and family stability. *Families with a Future* is an organization founded in 1996 that offers support groups for children of incarcerated parents in Berkeley and San
Francisco. It is a place where children can discuss and express their feelings about parental incarceration (Sherman, 2005).

Problems with Intervention and Evaluation Efforts

The general characteristics of incarcerated parents and their families pose several problems for interventions and evaluations. Typically, the biggest problem is the lack of communication between the corrections system and child welfare agencies. Currently, there is no formal method for information-sharing or coordination of services between the child welfare and criminal justice systems. The lack of communication and the structure of the criminal justice system make it difficult for agencies to plan for the children and organize connections to their families (Seymour, 1998).

Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2001) recognize three main problems with intervention and evaluation efforts. One problem is that mental impairment along with reading difficulties make materials hard for parents to understand. Another is that correctional institutions are not very supportive of inmate-family relationships or services. Still another set of problems comes from the frequent changes that families go through. Fathers may be involved with more than one family if they have children with multiple women and mothers may be involved with more than one male if they have children from multiple fathers. This also leads to instability in living arrangements and makes it hard for even the parents to keep up with current knowledge of their children. It may also mean that children are separated when a parent is incarcerated.
Services in Schools

Children of incarcerated parents face extreme challenges that have many consequences for their school success. Because many children of incarcerated parents are faced with multiple risk factors before and after parental incarceration, recognition of these factors is important for designing programs and interventions. Understanding the needs of these children is also a fundamental starting point for making accurate assessments and being able to effectively help these children deal with their parent’s incarceration.

School Setting

Because the majority of children attend school, schools are and appropriate setting for such interventions and services. While schools are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, they must meet the needs that directly affect learning (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2006). Parental incarceration is one such factor. Mental health care is at the core of helping children faced with parental incarceration. NASP believes that schools are the logical place for providing mental health services to youth. The NASP (2006) position statement on mental health services in the schools lists several advantages to providing such services in the schools:

(1) Mental health is directly linked to educational outcomes (2) Schools are the optimal place to develop psychological competence ... because schools are the only organization in our society in which virtually all children and adolescents are consistently exposed for extended periods of time (3) Schools are multidisciplinary entities, schools are the best place to integrate and coordinate
the efforts of … [many] (4) Accessible, affordable mental health services are most easily and consistently provided in school setting (5) Problems of transportation, accessibility, and stigma are minimized when such services are provided in schools (p. 2).

What Schools Can Do

There are a number of things that school personnel can do to effectively work with children of incarcerated parents and their families. Dalley (2002) notes that the delay in addressing pre-existing problems is often because they are not observed until they come to the attention of the criminal justice system. Therefore, an important role schools can take is to act as early identifiers. Adalist-Estrin (2005) suggests providing materials on the impact of incarceration to the child’s family and to all the staff; examining individual biases, perspectives, and experiences and understanding the influence they have on one’s assessment; creating an atmosphere of safety and trust; and outlining a plan for responding to the issues of parental incarceration. On a more personal level, Reilly and Martin (2005) suggest that school personnel help these children by first listening to them, answering their questions honestly, respecting their parental bonds, providing reassurance and consistency, and recognizing their negative reactions to parental incarceration.

Schools can also create specific programs such as individual counseling services, group support, family support, and social networks. To foster the growth of such programs they need to build linkages to the community and invest in technology and telecommunication resources. It may also be helpful for schools to encourage connections
with their students so that they can more appropriately individualize services to meet their students’ needs.

Given the increasing rates of children of incarcerated parents, what we know about their needs, and how they are affected in the academic setting, school personnel face a greater need for information on appropriate response services to help these children. It is important to explore what services are currently being offered, as well as the knowledge of school personnel about the needs and prevalence of this population. Lopez and Bhat (2007) specifically point to school counselors as playing a leading role in identifying these children, developing services for them, advocating for them, and further studying the issues related to parental incarceration.

Conclusion

Children of incarcerated parents tend to be a forgotten group of children that society has let fall through the cracks. Parental incarceration is a traumatic experience that profoundly affects children in many areas of life. Often the negative impacts of incarceration are concurrent with exposure risk factors such as poverty, minority status, physical and sexual abuse, parental mental health problems, low parental education, and parental substance abuse.

While research in the area of children of incarcerated parents is scarce and difficult to conduct, the increasing rate of parental incarceration suggests a need for effective interventions and research. The lack of research and information means that government programs do not target these children to provide needed services. Without intervention, many children of incarcerated parents will continue to suffer, will likely
take part in intergenerational crime, and will create further costs to society. With schools being the most appropriate setting, it is imperative that their personnel understand the needs of this population and provide intervention and preventative services to help them improve their lives and prevent intergenerational criminal behavior.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD

This research examines Midwestern counselors’ beliefs about the needs of children of incarcerated parents and how well their needs are currently being met in their schools and communities. Specifically, the focus of this research is on answering the following questions: (1) What do school counselors believe is the prevalence of children of incarcerated parents at their schools and what is their level of confidence in this estimate? (2) How well do school counselors believe their schools collaborate with outside agencies? (3) Where do school counselors typically refer students in the community? (4) What resources for children of incarcerated parents are currently offered in their schools? (5) What are school counselors’ experiences in working with children of incarcerated parents? (6) What are school counselors’ top concerns for children of incarcerated parents?

Participants

Participants included in this study are 23 school counselors currently working in an elementary, middle, or high school from two specified Midwestern public school districts. Approximately 74% of the participating counselors work in an elementary school and about 26% work in a secondary school. Over half of the respondents have been employed in the schools over 15 years.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. School counselors were invited to participate because their work is differentiated from other school personnel by their attention to developmental stages of student growth, along with the related needs,
tasks, and student interests (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005). They collaborate with a variety of service providers to provide prevention, early identification and intervention for all students (ASCA, 2005). The typical placement of a school counselor in one school, five days a week, allows them to get to know the individual students, school practices, and school services.

Every school counselor in two Midwestern public school districts was invited to complete a survey. One of the school districts has 21 schools and 28 counselors, 14 of which are in the middle and high school setting. All were invited to participate and 12 agreed to do so (39%). The other school district has 9 schools and 13 counselors. Of those, 11 participated (84.6%). Five counselors voluntarily participated in the follow-up focus group discussion.

**Procedures**

Data was collected using the “Children of Incarcerated Parents Survey” (see Appendix A for survey). These surveys were administered during each of the two district counselor meetings. At the meetings the primary investigator (PI) gave an overview of the study, shared the rights of participants and answered any questions. After all questions were answered, each counselor was given a manila envelope with a Survey Consent Form (see Appendix B for survey consent form), the survey, and a stamped envelope addressed to the PI. Counselors were given time to complete the survey during the meeting and return it to the PI in the manila envelope. Individuals who chose not to participate also returned the envelope, keeping their choice not to participate confidential. Counselors who wanted additional time to go over the Informed Consent form and/or
answer the survey questions were given the option of mailing in their survey. For those who mailed theirs, the return of their surveys served as their participation consent to avoid the possibility of connecting their identifying information with their responses. Those who completed their surveys at the meeting signed a separate consent form.

At the meetings counselors were also given the opportunity to learn more about participating in a focus group. The researcher described the focus group process and participant rights (see Appendix C for focus group participant script). Those who were interested in learning more about the focus group indicated this on their Focus Group Consent Form (see Appendix D for focus group consent form), as well as their preferred telephone number for follow-up contact. After signed consent forms were received, counselors who expressed an interest in the focus groups were contacted about the time, date and location of the focus group.

The focus group was scheduled at a convenient time for participants and took place at a familiar, nearby building. The focus group was conducted by the PI and faculty supervisor. The session was audio-taped and one of the researchers took notes. Questions for the focus groups were developed based on survey results (see Appendix E for focus group questions). Themes of the discussions were periodically summarized by the researchers to confirm accuracy.

**Measures**

Counselors completed surveys addressing the estimated prevalence of children of incarcerated parents at their schools, how well they believe their schools collaborate with outside agencies, where they typically refer students in the community, the resources for
children of incarcerated parents that their schools have available, their experiences in working with children of incarcerated parents, and their top concerns for children of incarcerated parents. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each question and written responses are summarized in the results.

The surveys required participants to answer in a variety of ways. The majority of questions were forced-choice that included an “other” category for which responses could be written in. Some questions asked participants to simply mark all responses that applied to them, others asked them to rank-order responses, and two questions were completely open-ended to allow respondents to share all that they wanted. A faculty member with experience as a school counselor examined the survey and determined its appropriateness for gathering the desired information.

A number of follow-up questions were developed based upon the survey results. At the focus group, each of the following questions were posed to interested participants to begin conversation: (1) What are children of incarcerated parents’ most significant needs at school and the barriers to meeting those needs? (2) What are children of incarcerated parents’ most significant needs in the community and the barriers to meeting those needs? (3) How are counselors identifying students? (4) What are the barriers and possible solutions to collaboration efforts with community agencies? and (5) What other supports and information do counselors need to help this population? Participants were allowed to take the discussion in whatever direction they wanted. The session was audio-taped and notes were taken.
Multiple techniques were used to search for themes from both the focus group data as well as the written survey responses. First, the researcher read through the data to see what themes immediately stood out and marked them with a code accordingly. Next, word repetitions and key words were used to find and mark further themes and marked. Finally, ideas that had not already been marked were further analyzed for sub-themes.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Estimate of Prevalence

According to the survey results, the average prevalence of children of incarcerated parents per school was 10.4%, with a range of 1% to 33%. The median and mode of the sample was 10%. Over half (56.6%) of the participants were “pretty sure” of their estimate on the prevalence of children of incarcerated parents in their school. To estimate the prevalence, 30.4% estimated based on a gut instinct, 13% estimated based on school records, 91.3% estimated by thinking about specific students, and 26.1% estimated their school’s prevalence in other ways. The other ways that were reported include: classroom teacher’s reports (2 respondents), whether or not the student told them (3 respondents), actual contact with families or the students themselves (2 respondents), and administering a group survey for 3rd-5th graders (1 respondent).

Some of the respondents left answers that could not be included in the average prevalence count. These were: “We have no way to tell because we don’t have information on a lot of these. Guess would be 20-30 students have had a parent incarcerated,” “Minimal but we do have incarcerated parents,” “33% this would be currently and previously incarcerated,” and “Low, as far as I know.”

Collaboration and Referral Sources

The majority of the counselors (82.6%) believed that children of incarcerated parents are getting only “some” of their school needs met and 61% believe that only “some” of their community needs are being met. Additionally, 26% believe that
community needs are "not [being] met at all." Many counselors (56.5%) felt that schools are only collaborating "somewhat well" with outside agencies to provide services to the students in need. Counselors responded that they refer students to: Big Brothers/Big Sisters (47.8%), the Department of Human Services (DHS; 43.5%), the Boys and Girls Club (26.1%), church programs (13%), Family Service League (8.75), and 47.8% refer to some other place.

The "other" agencies they referred to included outside counseling agencies (7 respondents), family therapists (1 respondent), mentoring programs through the district (1 respondent). One respondent wrote that by the time they learn of the student, they already have help and are living with grandparents, foster homes, or single parent homes. Other comments written by participants included, "I don’t know if there are supports in the community specific to this need," and "We are seldom contacted by outside agencies regarding this issue. Usually it is a matter of confidentiality."

At the focus group this issue was revisited and discussion centered around information about the prison system. It was stated that information is important and that many of the families have misconceptions about prison visits and contacts. One counselor talked about a student whose mom is doing time at the state’s women’s facility. She looked at the prison website and the focus of the website was on what there is for adults. It was not helpful for the kids. The importance of supports and linking families with supports was stated.

In terms of collaborating with others, the group talked about how in many cases they don’t know who to collaborate with. One counselor went to a workshop and people
told her they would share information but never did. She understands that this is likely because people just get busy. At this time it was brought up again that this is a sensitive topic and sometimes the mom/caretaker does not want their child to talk or think about the dad or incarcerated parent. Sometimes kids share information at school and the mom or other parent does not know that the counselor knows.

**Services Offered in Schools**

Counselors were asked which services are currently offered in their schools as a resource for children of incarcerated parents. The services offered include: Individual counseling (100%), referral information available (78.3%), group counseling (52.2%), books/videos are available (34.8%), family counseling (4.3%), case management (4.3%) and some “other” service (13%). Those that responded that “other” services were offered indicated that family consultation/family support worker (2 respondents) and book sharing by the incarcerated parent for younger students is available (1 respondent).

**Experiences with CIP**

The survey also asked about counselors’ experiences with issues relating to children of incarceration. They responded that they: have dealt specifically with children of incarcerated parents (95.75%), have read about children of incarcerated parents (65.2%), have heard about specific impacts and challenges of children of incarcerated parents (56.5%), have worked with others who are experienced with children of incarcerated parents (52.2%), have attended a workshop or seminar about children of incarcerated parents (43.5%), and have had other experiences with children of incarcerated parents (17.4%).
Respondents were asked to specify the “other experiences.” Other experiences indicated by respondents were: working with families and foster family caregivers who have temporary custody of the children (1 respondent), visiting a prison and discussing the needs of the children with the counselors there (1 respondent), and working with students in guidance that have an incarcerated parent (1 respondent). One participant actually held a six week group specifically for children of incarcerated parents or incarcerated family members and handed out a flyer to the group about a books-on-tape program in which the incarcerated parent is taped reading a book so the child can listen to their parent read to them.

Resources Accessed

The counselors were asked about what types of things they have accessed in regards to children of incarcerated parents. They responded with the following: have accessed books (65.2%), have accessed journal articles (56.5%), have accessed workshops or seminars (52.2%), have accessed professional development (39.1%), have accessed websites (21.7%), have accessed an expert consultant (17.4%), and have accessed some “other” resource about children of incarcerated parents. The “other” items included consulting with other school counselors and with other family members of the incarcerated parents.

At the focus group, one counselor discussed how there are not a lot of good materials out there to provide kids with information. She has attended workshops, but not gotten good resources. She often pulls together pieces from divorce groups, loss groups, and children of alcoholics support groups. Another counselor mentioned that she has the
book, “My Daddy is in Jail” that she can use for bibliotherapy. Additionally, the counselor that held a group for children of incarcerated parents felt that she could have done a more effective job in working with them if she had the proper materials.

Top Concerns

When asked to rank-order their concerns given six choices, the school counselor’s top concern was emotional issues (73.9%). About half (52.2%) ranked their second concern as behavioral issues, an equal amount (39.1%) rated either academic issues or peer relationships as their third and fourth concerns, 47.8% responded that adult relationships was their fifth concern and 56.5% responded that legal issues were their last concern.

Other Concerns and Comments

Many other concerns were written in under “other concerns,” under “other comments,” and were brought up during the focus group discussion. Responses ranged from short sentences to lengthy paragraphs. They generally centered around the themes of problems with identifying students that have an incarcerated parent, living conditions of the students, the stigma associated with having an imprisoned parent and the complexity of the issues concerning children of incarcerated parents.

Issues with Identification

Identifying the students who have an incarcerated parent seemed to be the most consistent concern. One counselor wrote, “Children of incarcerated parents are sometimes hard to identify, for instance, I just learned that we have a student whose
parent is incarcerated off and on all his life. He’s been at this school the last four years and I just learned this, this year. You only know if people tell you.”

Another stated that, “Unless we have a parent or the students tell us, we often don’t know if a parent is incarcerated. Sometimes we get information from the elementary counselors, but often the family doesn’t tell us. May be dealing with shame. On the other hand, some families tell us everything so we can help “protect” their kids.” Again, another counselor wrote, “Many of the students are not known to me. It is not information given to the counselor. It usually comes out in a variety of ways.” Another counselor stated that the broken system with DHS is a contributing factor to many of the needs of at-risk students not being met. They did not clarify what they meant by the “broken system.”

This issue was again brought up at the focus group and one counselor mentioned how she had held a support group with six students from 3rd-6th grade and that many of the students with incarcerated parents were unaware that other students were in the same situation and dealing with the same issues. One of the problems mentioned with having a group is that counselors have to go through the caretakers to get permission to connect to the kids and have them in the group. Another issue mentioned was the need for a high level of trust in a group before students feel comfortable disclosing information. Many are afraid that the information they share will be taken out of the group. Students are more likely to talk about the separation issues, such as divorce and death, than they are about specific issues related to parental incarceration.
Living Conditions

Another concern listed was the housing and living conditions for children while their parent is incarcerated. One counselor wrote that sometimes a lack of money is a real issue. “We are dealing with a single parent, few skills and living conditions can range from living in a car to a motel room.” Another counselor had a similar response. At the focus group participants also talked about the pressures of the other parent to “hold down the fort.”

Stigma

A couple of counselors noted that stigma is an issue and concern. One wrote that, “In some schools, incarceration is considered a stigma. In other schools, incarceration can be a fact of life and sometimes is a badge of honor. Our school falls into the latter category.” At the focus group one counselor stated that she believes the stigma issues are an adult perception and not a kid perception. Another counselor who had held a support group for children of incarcerated parents dealt with informing the parents by sending a letter home indicating that their child voluntarily signed up for the group. It was stated that the counselor could be contacted with any questions or if the parent did not want their child participating and that otherwise, the group would begin on the indicated date. Another counselor shared the importance of the attitudes of school adults as contributing to stigma. She shared a story about another teacher interjecting about “bad guys” in reference to incarcerated people during a teacher education time. It was also shared how this stigma may lead children to fear that they are going to end up like their parent, or on the other hand, that they need to defend and align themselves with their parents. Another
person emphasized the importance of focusing on parental love with these children and helping them understand that people make mistakes.

**Communication**

One counselor wrote on their survey that they believe children need to have some type of relationship with the incarcerated parent, however, transportation seems to be a problem. At the focus group the issue of communicating with the incarcerated parent was also addressed. The group talked about how children may not know or understand that mail is censored. They also talked about how kids often want to write to their parent, but don’t know where to send their letters. Others give it to their mom or parent to send, but the parent may not actually send it. Another participant talked about how those who do not keep in contact (or even those who do), hold on to positive memories about the parent and may have unrealistic fantasies about when their parent gets out. Then the child has to deal with the emotions of the parent not being all they had hoped for. They related this to children who have parents in the military.

**Complexity of Issues**

One particular counselor had a lot to say and seemed to really understand the complexity of the issues for children of incarcerated parents. They noted how incarcerated parents can run the gamut of someone doing thirty days for a traffic violation to someone serving a life sentence for murder. This respondent described how a variety of things such as the strength of the parent-child relationship, the length of incarceration, the number of times a parent is incarcerated, and the stability of caregivers are all important factors to consider when determining what services are needed as part of a
treatment plan. They summed up the complexity issues by saying, “Seldom is incarceration the single issue. Compounding issues of poverty, family violence, sexual abuse, drug use, etc. all impact children’s reactions as well.” At the focus group people also talked about the multi-level problems that occur when mom or dad are seeing someone else and there are other people in the child’s lives that are incarcerated as well. One counselor shared that the majority of the parents involved in the legal system that they are aware of are there for drug related crimes.

Another counselor wrote about how Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is an issue for “children who have witnessed an arrest, drug raid or meth house raid. Some children have been held at gunpoint by police for hours or forced to be face down on the floor while the home was searched.” At the focus group people also talked about the other issues involved and the trauma related to seeing their parent handcuffed.

**Current Knowledge**

When asked about their perceptions of their knowledge of children of incarcerated parents, 78.3% responded that they “need to learn more” while 21.7% responded that they feel they have “sufficient knowledge.” One counselor noted, “This is an area that I need to do more preparation.” At the focus group, topics that counselors said they wanted to know more about included: knowing contacts or websites for information and information about corrective justice and prison systems, including institutional rules.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study suggest the needs of children of incarcerated parents in the districts studied are not being met. Further, schools do not have the resources they need to meet those needs. School counselors indicated that they need to learn more and have better communication between service agencies in order to help these children.

Prevalence

With an average prevalence of 10.4%, parental incarceration was pervasive among the schools represented in this study. Over half of the participants felt “pretty sure” about their estimates. Because children with an incarcerated parent are so difficult to identify, as supported by this study, it is likely that the true prevalence is actually higher than the results indicate. Nation-wide, approximately 2.1% of the population’s children have a parent in prison, 42% of whom are school-aged children between the ages of 10 and 17 (Mumola, 2000). School counselors in this study indicated a substantially higher rate in their districts than one would expect given the national prevalence rates. However, the survey used in this study did not limit incarceration to those in prison, so it is difficult to compare these results to national prison rates.

Needs

Almost all (95.8%) of the participants in this study have dealt specifically with children of incarcerated parents and the majority of them felt these children are only getting some of their needs met in the schools and the community. One-fourth of them
felt that their needs in the community are not being met at all. This means that in almost every school, counselors have children who need help whose needs are not being met. These results are likely due to the lack of research and knowledge about interventions and children’s needs, as well as the lack of resources available to the schools. The shame and stigma families feel may also prohibit children from getting their needs met. If families are reluctant to share the parent’s incarceration with school personnel, it makes it difficult for those children to be identified and treated.

Overall, the needs that the counselors in this study felt were most important were emotional and behavioral needs. Research has supported a need for these concerns with a number of studies indicating higher rates of disruptive behavior and mental health issues (Childs et al., 2004; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Gabel & Johnston, 1995; Phillips et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; Sharp & Mendoza, 2001; Tiet et al., 2000). Again, the lack of resources and information may contribute to these needs not being sufficiently met.

Many of the counselors’ other concerns centered around living conditions, stigma and communicating with parents. Concerns about living conditions are consistent with the research on the high number of risk factors experienced by children of incarcerated parent (Gabel & Shindledecker, 1992; Phillips et al., 2002; Mackintosh, Myers & Kennon, 2006; Hagen, Myers & Mackintosh, 2005). The most common risk factor in one study was impaired parenting (Phillips et al., 2004). Stigma is also a concern because children may be teased and embarrassed in front of their peers. Hagen and Myers (2003) found that greater feelings of stigma are associated with more externalizing behaviors. Additionally, the public may be less willing to support the needs of children with families
involved in crime. Finally, collaboration is a concern because the complex issues these students have require a variety of services and collaboration is necessary to provide all of the services effectively.

Knowledge and Resources

While the estimates of prevalence must be interpreted carefully given the broad measure of parental incarceration that was used, there are several observations about school counselors' knowledge and resources worth noting. First, the majority (78.3%) felt that they needed to learn more about children of incarcerated parents. Second, many counselors felt that there aren’t good resources available. Specific resources they wish they had included a list of contacts or websites with information and information about correction and prison systems, including institutional rules. Third, many counselors were unaware of the community resources available and over one-fourth of them felt that schools and outside agencies are not collaborating well “at all.”

It makes sense that the majority of counselors report they do not have sufficient knowledge about this population. There is a general lack of research on interventions for these children and counselors report that their schools lack sufficient resources. While schools may be addressing some of these children’s needs, they are not being appropriately attributed to parental incarceration. Instead, schools, such as those involved with the focus group, may approach these issues using materials frequently used for divorce, death, abuse, poverty, and other more common issues rather than addressing issues specifically related to parental incarceration. They need to have tools and interventions that specifically address parental incarceration.
Implications

The results indicate that school counselors believe there are many children of incarcerated parents in the school system that are not getting their needs met. We know that long terms outcomes for children of incarcerated parents likely include criminal involvement, mental health issues, and problems in school. Therefore it is important that intervention start early. Without intervention, these children will not only continue to suffer, but are more likely to engage in criminal behavior and become greater costs to society (Gabel & Johnston, 1995). Schools have the opportunity to provide children with the supports and services that will make a difference, however, the schools in this study were unaware of the true prevalence, what the needs of the children are, and how to meet those needs.

It is likely that the lack of research on this population contributes to school personnel’s lack of understanding these children’s needs. With confidentiality issues and the associated stigma, research is difficult to conduct. The lack of research makes it difficult to inform training for school personnel. The other factor contributing to schools’ lack of knowledge and resources is the poor collaboration between correctional facilities and outside agencies. Again, this is likely due to confidentiality issues.

Mental health care is at the core of helping children faced with parental incarceration. Because the majority of children attend school, schools are an appropriate setting for such interventions and services. NASP believes that schools are the logical point of entry for providing mental health services to youth. Lopez and Bhat (2007)
specifically point to school counselors as playing a leading role in intervening with these children, however, they will need support and resources in order to do so.

**Limitations**

There are a few limitations to the current study. First, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Only 23 schools were included in this study. However, this sample was specifically chosen to inform the current community. Second, the sample was taken from only one small area of the Midwest. Again, this limits the generalizability, however, it serves the purpose of this study. It is hypothesized that the prevalence of children of incarcerated parents would be even higher and the resources even more scarce in areas with a lower socio-economic status. A third limitation is that the measure of parental incarceration used in this study was very broad. It did not specify length of incarceration, multiple incarcerations, or children who may have previously had an incarcerated parent. It also did not measure children who have other relatives or close friends who have dealt with incarceration. It would have been very difficult for counselors to estimate such specific numbers.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

In order to help children of incarcerated parents, there needs to be further research to fill in the gaps in our understanding of their needs and on effective interventions to help meet those needs. Specifically, schools need interventions to help children stop the intergenerational cycle of crime and cope with the array of issues they may encounter during parental incarceration. Interventions should focus on the developmental needs of
these children and take into account the many other risk factors often associated with parental incarceration.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Schools need to provide training on what these children’s needs are and how to meet those needs so that they are prepared to provide appropriate and responsive services to these children as they are identified. Specifically, teachers need to understand the complex issues these children face and how these issues affect them academically, behaviorally, socially and emotionally. Counselors need to understand these issues, as well as ways they can work with students to help them make sense of their situations and understand that they are not the only one with an incarcerated parent.

Schools need to have more resources available such as books, journal articles, good websites, and information about other workshops and seminars related to professional development. Access to an expert in the system for consultation would also be beneficial. Open and frequent communication with families would aid in identifying students affected by parental incarceration and provide information about the complexity of their current situations.

The complex needs of these children require many types of services. Public agencies, such as the DHS, mental health agencies, medical providers and social services; schools; the legal system and prison facilities, need to create specific policies for working with this population and better ways to communicate and collaborate with each other. They also need to come together to advocate and help create a public awareness of the needs of these children.
Conclusion

While previous research has evaluated the effects of parental incarceration on children and their needs, the current study evaluated school counselors’ awareness of such effects and the resources they have to meet those needs. Because the majority of children attend school, schools are an appropriate setting for such interventions and services. This study showed that several counselors have an awareness of the complex issues involved with parental incarceration, however, they believe they are not aware of all of the students affected by parental incarceration, they feel they need more information concerning specific needs and issues, and they believe the schools lack the resources needed to address the needs of these children.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS SURVEY

Sarah Wakefield and Kerri Clopton, Ph.D.
University of Northern Iowa

School:

____ Elementary School    _____ Secondary School

Years employed in schools:

____ 1-5     ____ 6-10     ____ 11-15     ____ 16-20     ____ 21-25     ____ 26-30     ____ 30+

The estimated prevalence of children of incarcerated parents in your school is:


How sure are you of the above estimate?

____ Not at all Sure   ____ Not Very Sure   ____ Pretty Sure   ____ Certain

What do you base your estimate on?

____ Gut instinct

____ School records

____ Thinking of specific students

____ Other (specify):


The needs of children of incarcerated parents in your school are:

____ Not met at all    ____ Some needs met    ____ Most needs met    ____ All needs met

The needs of children of incarcerated parents in the community are:

____ Not met at all    ____ Some needs met    ____ Most needs met    ____ All needs met

Where do you typically refer the children of incarcerated parents when their needs cannot be met within the school?

____ Department of Human Services

____ Boys and Girls Club

____ Family Service League

____ Big Brothers/Big Sisters

____ Church programs

____ Other (specify):


How well does your school collaborate with outside community agencies to meet the needs of children of incarcerated parents?

_____ Not well at all  _____ Somewhat  _____ Fairly well  _____ Very well

Our school offers the following for children of incarcerated parents:
(Mark all that apply)
_____ Individual counseling  _____ Referral Information
_____ Group counseling  _____ Books/videos
_____ Family counseling  _____ Case management

Other (specify): ____________________________________________________________

Please order from 1 to 6 what you believe are the top concerns for children of incarcerated parents:
_____ Academic issues
_____ Behavioral issues
_____ Emotional issues
_____ Legal issues
_____ Peer relationships
_____ Adult relationships

Are there any other concerns you have that we have not identified?

Mark all that you have had experience with:
_____ I’ve read about children of incarcerated parents
_____ I’ve dealt specifically with children of incarcerated parents
_____ I’ve attended a seminar/workshop about children of incarcerated parents
I've worked with others who are experienced with children of incarcerated parents

I've heard about specific impacts/challenges for children of incarcerated parents

Other (specify): ____________________ 

Mark all that you have accessed regarding children of incarcerated parents:

- An expert consultant
- Books
- Journal articles
- Professional development
- Websites
- Workshops/seminars
- Other (specify): ____________________

Do you feel you have sufficient knowledge about children of incarcerated parents or do you feel you need to learn more about this population?

- Sufficient knowledge
- Need to learn more

Other comments you would like to share:
APPENDIX B

SURVEY CONSENT FORM

Invitation to Participate and Description of Project: You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. We are asking you to be involved because of your role as a school counselor. The University requires that you give your signed consent agreement to participate in this project. Before agreeing to participate, please read the following information carefully and feel free to ask the researcher any questions you might have.

Description of Procedures: The study involved you filling out a brief survey regarding your perceptions of the needs of the children of incarcerated parents in your school. Specifically, questions are focused on your ideas about the prevalence, needs, concerns, and the services currently available in the schools and community. The data are being collected in order for the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the needs of incarcerated children, available services, and unmet needs. The information will be used for future program planning.

Participation in this study involves filling out a one-time survey. The surveys are confidential. You will not be asked to include and specific identifying information about yourself or the students in your school on the survey. The surveys take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete, and will be completed during one school counselor meeting. You may also return the survey in the provided envelope if you would like additional time to consider participation or your responses.

Risks and Inconveniences: Risks to participation are minimal. If you feel uncomfortable responding to any personal questions that may be included in the survey, you may skip them.

All surveys will be completely anonymous. Your name will not be recorded or collected by the researcher. The summarized findings with no identifying information, may be published in an academic journal, presented at a focus group with other school counselors, presented to district administrators or educators, or used in meetings regarding program planning and implementation.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all.

If you have questions about the study you may contact Sarah Diana Wakefield at ***.***.**** or the project investigator's faculty advisor Dr. Kerri Clopton, at the Department of Educational Psychology and Foundations, University of Northern Iowa ***.***.****. You can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at ***.***.****, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.
Please read the following statement: I have read the information on this consent form, and I understand what is being asked of me. I understand that I will be asked to share my perceptions of the needs of children of incarcerated parents. I further understand that I may refuse to grant consent.

I have decided that I will be in this project. I am 18 years or older. My signature below also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant

Name (please print) ___________________________ Date ______________________

Signature of person obtaining consent: ____________________________

Name (please print) ___________________________ Date ______________________

You can ask questions of researchers about this project at any time. You may reach Sarah Wakefield at ***-***-**** or Kerri Clopton at ***-***-****.

This research study was approved by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board (for the protection of human research subjects) on ********. You may contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at ***-***-****.

**Focus Group Participation**: The researchers will be conducting focus groups following the analysis of the survey data in order to gather additional information. Focus groups will be conducted by the above named researchers and will occur at the University of Northern Iowa. Focus groups will be audiotaped and transcribed without identifying information. These groups are voluntary.

If you are interested in learning more about participating in the focus group, please indicate so below and provide your preferred contact information. Indicating an interest and providing a phone number is not consenting to participate, but consenting to learn more about the opportunity.

_____ Yes, I would like to learn more about participating in a follow-up focus group.

I prefer that you contact me at ______________ (phone number).

The best times to reach me at this number are: ____________________________
APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT SCRIPT

Hi ______________________. This is (Sarah Wakefield or Kerri Clopton). I am one of the researchers involved in the children of incarcerated parents study. I am calling because you expressed an interest in participating in a focus group. Is now a good time to talk? (If not, when would be a good time for me to call?)

Focus groups are a way for us to get more information about the needs and available services for children who have incarcerated parents. (Sarah Wakefield/Kerri Clopton) and I will bring together a group of counselors to talk more about some of the information from the surveys. Our hope is that we will get more in depth information and some ideas for meeting the needs of these youth. The discussion would be recorded and one of us will take notes. The notes and the transcription of the tapes will not include any identifying information shared during the discussion.

If you are still interested, I would like to send you an Informed Consent form and a return envelope. If you agree to participate after reading the form, sign it and return it to us and we will give you a call about setting up a meeting. If you decide you are not interested, please mark the appropriate box on the form and return it to us so we know not to follow-up with you.
APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Invitation to Participate and Description of Project: You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. We are asking you to be involved because of your role as a school counselor. The University requires that you give your signed consent agreement to participate in this project. Before agreeing to participate, please read the following information carefully and feel free to ask the researcher any questions you might have.

Description of Procedures: The study involves you participating in a focus group about the needs of children of incarcerated parents and related services for these youth. The data are being collected in order for the researchers to gain a greater understanding of these issues with a focus on program development to meet unmet needs. Your participation in a focus group is completely voluntary.

Participation in this study involves attending a 1-hour focus group with other school counselors. The group will include follow-up questions formulated from the information obtained from the “Children of Incarcerated Parents” surveys completed by school counselors. You will not be asked to include any identifying information about yourself or the students in your school during the focus group. The researchers will not identify you as a participant to school administrators.

Focus groups will be audiotaped and one of the researchers will take notes during the meeting. No personally identifying information will be recorded in the field notes. Audiotapes will be transcribed by one of the researchers. Following transcription, the tapes will be destroyed. Any identifying information that may have been shared during the meeting will be excluded from the transcript.

The researchers will not share identifying information of those participating. Because there will be other school counselors present during the focus group, we can not guarantee that your participation and comments will be kept confidential.

Risks and Inconveniences: Risks to participation are minimal. You may choose not to respond to any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and/or leave the meeting at any time. Other school counselors will be present during the focus group, so there is some risk of them sharing your views with others.

The summarized findings, with no identifying information, may be published in an academic journal, presented at a focus group with other school counselors, presented to district administrators or educators, or used in meetings regarding program planning and implementation. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all.

If you have questions about the study you may contact Sarah Diana Wakefield at ***-***-**** or the project investigator’s faculty advisor, Dr. Kerri Clopton, at the Department of Educational Psychology and Foundations, University of Northern Iowa ***-***-****. You can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at ***-***-****, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.
AUTHORIZATION

Please read the following statement: I have read the information on this consent form, and I understand what is being asked of me. I understand that I will be asked to share my perceptions of the needs of children of incarcerated parents during a focus group with other school counselors and the researchers. I further understand that I may refuse to grant consent.

I have decided that I will participate in this project. I am 18 years or older. My signature below also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant

Name (please print) __________________________ Date __________

Signature of person obtaining consent:

Name (please print) __________________________ Date __________

I have decided that I will not be involved in this project.

Name (please print) __________________________ Date __________

You can ask questions of researchers about this project at any time. You may reach Sarah Wakefield at ***-***-**** or Kerri Clopton at ***-***-****.

This research study was approved by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board (for the protection of human research subjects) on 10/18/2006. You may contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at ***-***-****.
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

(1) What are children of incarcerated parents' most significant needs at school and the barriers to meeting those needs?

(2) What are children of incarcerated parent's most significant needs in the community and the barriers to meeting those needs?

(3) How are counselors identifying students?

(4) What are the barriers and possible solutions to collaboration efforts with community agencies?

(5) What other supports and information do counselors need to help this population?