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## Children of incarcerated mothers

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### Abstract

Since 1990, the female prison population has increased significantly. In the United States, there are 721,500 incarcerated individuals who are parents of minor children. Many of these parents are mothers who experienced drug use and came from single parent families living in poverty.

Since 60 percent of children are primarily cared for by their mother, maternal incarceration results in many children being removed from their homes, resulting in internal and external problems as well as academic concerns. In addition, this situation can lead to emotional issues, such as grief and loss, and problems related to social adjustment. Consequently, children of incarcerated mothers may alarm school counselors as well as other school officials.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss issues related to incarcerated mothers and the effects the incarceration has on the children, as well as to examine how school counselors can assist children of incarcerated mothers.

# CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS

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## Abstract

Since 1990, the female prison population has increased significantly. In the United States, there are 721,500 incarcerated individuals who are parents of minor children. Many of these parents are mothers who experienced drug use and came from single parent families living in poverty. Since 60 percent of children are primarily cared for by their mother, maternal incarceration results in many children being removed from their homes, resulting in internal and external problems as well as academic concerns. In addition, this situation can lead to emotional issues, such as grief and loss, and problems related to social adjustment. Consequently, children of incarcerated mothers may alarm school counselors as well as other school officials. The purpose of this paper is to discuss issues related to incarcerated mothers and the effects the incarceration has on the children, as well as to examine how school counselors can assist children of incarcerated mothers.

## Children of Incarcerated Mothers

The United States Federal and State Prisons are populated by an estimated 721,500 prisoners who are parents of minor children (Mumola, 2000). This number is increasing every year, along with the female inmate population. Since 1990, the percentage of female inmates has increased 106 percent, while the male prison population only grew 75 percent (Mumola, 2000). As a result, the number of children without a mother in the home due to imprisonment has doubled since 1991 (Mumola, 2000). According to Young and Smith-Jefferson (2000), children of incarcerated men are likely to remain in a home with continuous care from the mother, and 64 percent live with their mother rather than with their father prior to incarceration. Therefore, the dramatic increase in the number of female inmates has had a significant impact because children are dislocated.

The incarceration of a mother may cause multiple issues for children, such as adversely impacting their social relationships and emotional development. These children may exhibit internalizing and externalizing behaviors that may constitute short or long term negative effects. Negative behaviors are most likely to be revealed at school; therefore, school officials should be aware of the situation and understand how to better serve this growing population of children of incarcerated mothers.

The purpose of this paper is to examine incarcerated mothers and the effects the incarceration has on the children. The implications will focus on how school

counselors can assist these children and assist the people who care for them.

### Statistics

The number of parents serving prison sentences in the United States is beyond belief. More surprising is that many of the United States' inmates are parents of children under the age of eighteen. Although the exact number of children affected by maternal incarceration is not known, because correctional facilities do not compile this information, Timmons (2005) suggested that the data on the number of children affected by this increasing epidemic is testimony of their unseen profile.

According to a 1999 report (Mumola, 2000), "... there were an estimated 336,300 United States households affected by imprisonment of a resident parent" (p. 1). That leaves an estimated 1,498,800 minor children without a parent in the home which could possibly result in displacement from their home. This is a shocking increase of 500,000 from 1991. Mumola (2000) noted that in 1999, 721,500 inmates were serving sentences in the United States state and federal prisons. Fifty-five percent of state inmates reported having a child under the age of eighteen, while 63 percent of federal inmates reported having a child under the age of eighteen. Mumola (2000) asserted that in 1999 state and federal prisons combined had a total of 667,900 incarcerated fathers and 53,600 incarcerated mothers of minor children. This is an increase of 62 percent of the parental population of state and federal inmates. As a result, the number of incarcerated

parents increased significantly by over 250,000 from the estimated 452,500 in state and federal custody in 1991 (Mumola, 2000). Mumola (2000) also reported that there were an estimated 126,100 children affected by their mother's incarceration; this is an increase from 63,700 only eight years prior.

According to Young and Smith-Jefferson (2000), in 1998 there were an estimated 83,000 women in state and federal prisons and another 63,000 in United States county jails, for a total of 146,000 incarcerated women. These statistics show that over six percent of the total state and federal prison population and over ten percent of the adult jail population is female.

Young and Reviere (2006) stated that two-fifths to four-fifths of all female offenders were mothers with at least two children under the age of eighteen, with the average age being eight years old. With this information, a major concern is the stability of the children in the home during the incarceration of their mother. According to Roberta Richmond, warden at Rhode Island Women's Prison, as cited in Young and Reviere (2006), "When you lock up a man, the family unit usually stays intact...When you lock-up a woman, you are destroying families"(p. 109).

Although females make up a small but growing percentage of the prison population, it would be beneficial to evaluate this population to illustrate the vital role women play in the lives of their offspring. It is clear that the number of incarcerated mothers is on the rise; what is not clear is who these women are, the



specific effects incarceration has on children, and how school counselors can serve these children.

### Profile of Incarcerated Women

Racial and ethnic minorities comprise a larger proportion of the female inmate population than they do the general United States population. According to Young and Smith-Jefferson (2000), people of color made up 64 percent of the United States female inmate population. Many of the United States imprisoned women come from a range of backgrounds, but many of them share characteristics.

According to Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, and Kennon (1999), many of the families affected by maternal imprisonment were at risk before the actual incarceration. Most of the women come from low income, single parent households and have low levels of education (Myers et al., 1999). Johnston and Gabel (1995) asserted that many of the incarcerated women tend to be high school dropouts, unemployed, and likely to have been a victim of sexual abuse.

Simmons (2000) reported that the history of physical or sexual abuse and substance abuse of incarcerated mothers is as follows: physical abuse at some time in their life was over 52 percent, sexual abuse was over 41 percent, and regular use of alcohol or drugs was 64 percent.

Due to the traumatic lives of many women who commit crime, the reasons for the conviction of women are significantly different than those for men.

According to Simmons (2000), men are more likely to be imprisoned for violent crimes. On the other hand, women are more likely to be convicted of non-violent, drug related crimes. According to Mumola (2000), 65 percent of female offenders serving time in state correctional facilities reported a history of serious drug use. Also, 32 percent of mothers in the state prison reported that the reason for committing their crime was to get money for drugs (Mumola, 2000). In addition, Myers et al. (1999) asserted that 77 percent of children of current or previously incarcerated mothers had been exposed to drugs or alcohol before birth. This exposure could negatively impact the child developmentally, emotionally, socially, and scholastically.

#### Impact of Incarceration

According to Johnston (1995), families impacted by incarcerated mothers are already typically high risk. There are several dimensions that add to the burdens of a family already struggling to overcome life's obstacles. For instance, many of the families have a single parent and are living in poverty. This could complicate the situation even before the incarceration happens because the children are in an unstable environment to begin with.

The impact of witnessing and living with the arrest and incarceration of one's mother is overwhelming for children and families. The children's home is disrupted and separation from their mother can be devastating. Timmons (2005) asserted that often social and economic burdens are placed on the family,

including the children. According to Green, Haney, and Hurtado (2000), the majority of these children may be solely cared for by their mothers. So, these children are then faced with the question of who is going to care for them while their mother is incarcerated. The displacement of the living situation and the imprisonment of their mother may result in feelings of grief and loss.

Children whose mothers are incarcerated often feel abandoned. This feeling may come from having a mother who is alive, but not in the home and not seen everyday because of the imprisonment (Timmons, 2005). Also, Timmons (2005) noted that these children may not develop the ability to establish a healthy attachment to others because they may not have the basic trust that most children develop while growing up in a stable home. Simmons (2000) reported that after the mother is incarcerated the children will move at least once and live with at least two different caretakers. Also, that same author noted that fourteen percent of these children move two or more times; eleven percent have three or more caretakers, and children of incarcerated mothers may live apart from their siblings. These untimely transitions could result in separation anxiety, poor social interactions, and significant emotional problems.

#### Effects of Incarceration of Mothers

Separation from a parent is likely to be traumatic, disrupt personal and family bonds, and worsen the family's social and financial situation. Lange (2000) stated that, "...many children experience the loss of a parent either through separation,

divorce, or death but parental incarceration presents unique difficulties to children” (p. 63). These children suffer emotionally and experience fear, anger, guilt, and shame because of their mother’s incarceration (Cunningham and Baker, 2003). In addition, Cunningham and Baker (2003) stated that, “these changes in emotions can manifest in acting out, problems in school, or substance abuse; or these children can prematurely adopt roles of caring for their younger siblings...” (p. 3). At any rate, the loss of a mother due to incarceration can result in feelings of disenfranchised grief, separation issues, and significant emotional issues.

#### *Disenfranchised Grief*

Children of incarcerated mother’s lives are affected by moving, having new caregivers, losing touch with friends, and separating from siblings. As a result, many of these children suffer from disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief is defined by Arditto (2005) as grief that occurs “when persons experience a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (p. 253). According to Johnston and Gabel (1995), the stigma of incarceration is a serious concern for many children, although the level of difficulty experienced may reflect the family’s presumptions about incarceration. For example, some families may disapprove of having a family member incarcerated; therefore, they may feel embarrassed by the incarceration, resulting in children feeling ashamed or guilty. These children may be teased at school but do not disclose their feelings. Also, since the family may feel embarrassed, they

may forbid the child to talk about the whereabouts of his or her mother or instruct the child to make up falsified accounts of the incarceration. This repression complicates the grieving process for children, because according to Sciarra (2004), truthful expression is crucial to the grieving process. As a result of these factors, children may experience negative emotional effects such as attachment and separation problems.

#### *Attachment and Separation Problems*

Many of the effects experienced by children of incarcerated mothers could be contributed to the impact of the arrest

According to Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002), children who witness the arrest of their mother suffer from nightmares and flashbacks of the arrest incident.

Although it is relevant to consider the presence of the child during the arrest, many children are affected by returning to an empty home after their mother has been arrested. They are left questioning the whereabouts of their mothers. These factors have a negative effect on the child's level of attachment.

The effect of incarceration on the development of children born while their mothers are incarcerated is not as easy to define. However, according to Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002), approximately six percent of mothers are pregnant at the time of incarceration. Yet, only a few prisons allow mothers to keep their infants during the course of incarceration. This leads to a lack of opportunities for the mother and child to bond and for the child to create a healthy attachment to

the mother. As a result, Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002) noted that the children may have emotional and behavioral problems that will manifest at school during social interactions with teachers and peers.

### *Emotional and Psychological Problems*

According to Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002), nearly 70 percent of children of incarcerated mothers had emotional and psychological problems that were both internalizing and externalizing disorders. Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002) suggested that internalizing problems included anxiety, withdrawal, depression, shame, and guilt. Johnston and Gabel (1995) asserted that withdrawal issues represented nearly 70 percent of such incidences in children of incarcerated mothers. Pollock (1998) stated that many children who are separated from their incarcerated mothers also have externalizing disorders such as increased levels of aggression, misbehavior, decline in academic performance, withdrawal, and running away. For example, after the mother is incarcerated, many children bounce from one caregiver to another, resulting in the lack of a healthy attachment to any of the caregivers. This could create separation anxiety for the child, resulting in problems at school. The problems at school due to separation anxiety create problems in building close relationships and interpersonal interactions with peers. This in turn could cause disruptions at school and school counselors may be called to assist in the situation.

### *School Problems*

Johnston and Gabel (1995) suggested that many children of incarcerated mothers exhibit aggressive behaviors, poor academic performance, classroom behavior problems, and truancy/attendance problems at disturbingly high rates. According to Johnston and Gabel (1995), children of incarcerated mothers have incidences of poor academic performance and classroom behavior as high as 70 percent and 62 percent, respectively. As a result, these factors affect the child's academic performance. Therefore, school counselors and school officials should be aware of these behaviors and know how to assist this special population.

### *Implications for School Counselors*

Although there are agencies and organizations that focus primarily on supporting youth and families, there are very few that directly assist children of incarcerated mothers. Therefore, it is the school counselor's responsibility to be aware of the needs of this special population and provide assistance to them. There are some specific goals that school counselors should want to accomplish when working with this population. For example, many times there is a cycle of incarceration within the family and the counselor should look for ways to assist the student in breaking that cycle (Timmons, 2005). In hopes of breaking the intergenerational incarceration cycle, school counselors should provide these children with a safe and secure environment and develop a support system for the child (Timmons, 2005).

According to Timmons (2005), children need to feel a sense of love, appreciation, and acceptance that could be given by their peers and supportive adults. In addition, support systems could encompass outside agencies and school personnel. Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2003) suggested interventions for this population could be in the form of individual counseling, small group counseling, or classroom guidance within the school setting, as well as through community organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters Incorporated. These support systems can give the child a sense of support and a safe place to discover and explore feelings.

#### *Individual Counseling*

Individual counseling would be appropriate and effective for children of incarcerated mothers in a variety of instances. In providing services, the school counselor should first take into consideration the student's developmental level. This is important because the counselor should not use words, activities, or assignments that are too complicated for the child to developmentally understand. After the developmental level is taken into account, the counselor should focus on rapport building interventions with the student and the family. Rapport building with the family could be in the form of professional communication about the student or home visits.

*Rapport building.* Rapport building with the child is very important and could include a variety of activities. One rapport building intervention would be the



student making a positive support list. The counselor would start by asking the student to write down everybody that could be of support to him or her. This list may consist of real people they know or people they have not met, but are an inspiration to them such as a singer or author. Also, their support list could include a book, a sentimental item, or a pet. Next, the counselor should ask for details of the kinds of support they may offer. This support list could be used in latter sessions to remind the student of their positive support team and combat the feelings of isolation. This intervention would be beneficial to the student and the school counselor because it helps the student identify his or her support system and in turn, the counselor would learn more about the people in the student's life. After rapport is established, the child has a safe place to express his or her feelings and the focus could turn to empowerment interventions.

*Empowerment.* When a mother is imprisoned, children experience feelings of shame and low self-esteem, as a result of peer and significant individuals' disapproval. Timmons (2005) suggested helping the child build skills to overcome a difficult period and to facilitate feelings of empowerment within the child by raising his or her individual potential. This could be done by recognizing the child's individual talents and strengths and not presuppose them to be like their incarcerated family members. Through individual counseling, the counselor can help empower children of incarcerated mothers by using certain techniques such as role-playing, writing activities, picture drawings, and self-affirmations.

*Role-playing.* Techniques using role-play could be used to assist the child in feelings of empowerment. During an individual counseling session, the counselor could play the role as the incarcerated mother; while the student plays the role of him or herself. This would allow for the student's feelings to surface concerning the maternal incarceration; because, they could act out certain roles of what the child would like to convey to their mother. The counselor should express that he or she is not responsible for their mother's negative actions. This would be effective because it places responsibility on the mother and not the child. Through role-playing the counselor could allow the student to express any anger or shame that may be present. This expression could be in written or verbal form depending on the student's developmental abilities. Some other interventions that could be combined with individual sessions are letter writing and picture drawing.

*Letter writing and picture drawing.* Letter writing and picture drawing are non-verbal therapies and are very helpful to young people and those who lack social and verbal skills to handle a "talking session." Letter writing could be an empowerment tool for children of incarcerated mothers. It consists of writing a letter to the incarcerated mother and expressing issues that the child wants to convey whether the letter is sent or not. By writing the letter, the child is expressing his or her feelings.

The counselor could ask the student to draw a picture of the family before their mother's incarceration and then draw a picture after the incarceration. Then, the

session could focus on exploration of the differences in the two pictures, which helps the child express feelings and deal with the loss.

*Self-affirmation.* This intervention would include making a self-affirmation list that could be used as a homework assignment. This assignment would consist of listing phrases the student could use for empowerment. The student would write down several positive affirmations about him or herself on seven index cards such as, “My mother loves me even if she is not here with me” and “I am okay even if my mother is in prison”. After all seven cards are complete; the student has a card for each day of the week and could use the cards for encouragement during the week.

Empowerment interventions are beneficial in individual counseling because these interventions can help children of incarcerated mothers learn that they have control over themselves, but not events. According to Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2003), individual counseling is a very useful technique; however, group counseling could also be particularly effective and powerful for children of incarcerated mothers.

### *Group Counseling*

Group counseling enhances students’ abilities to learn about themselves through interactions with their peers. Through these interactions, group counseling addresses the students’ feelings of isolation, self-esteem, and shame. Wickham and West (2002) noted that “in the group, children may engage in new

friendships, feel accepted and supported by their peers, which serves to increase their self-esteem” (p. 140). These group interactions would focus on interventions that address their emotional or behavioral problems in the form of team building and communication activities.

*Charades.* An intervention that could be used during group sessions would consist of members working as a group to identify their feelings towards certain situations and actions. The activity would help the group members express their feelings and increase their ability to notice other people’s nonverbal body language. In this team building and communication activity, children of incarcerated mothers will begin with a list of twenty feelings written on index cards such as happy, sad, frustrated, scared, angry, worried, rejected, and comforted to name a few. One person gets the list and another member acts out the feelings nonverbally, while the remaining members try to guess the feeling that is being portrayed. This intervention would initiate conversation about a time group members may have experienced these feelings.

In addition, this intervention would help the members articulate their feelings, resulting in positive expression of their feelings instead of negative outbursts. They would also learn to understand how others may be feeling through nonverbal body language while bonding with the other group members.

According to Baggerly and Parker (2005), group counseling assists students in developing healthy interpersonal associations by addressing emotional and

behavioral problems such as low self-esteem, grief, and depression. In a group counseling setting, the student can feel supported because the persons involved share common concerns and experiences. Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2003) asserted that group counseling could eliminate the sense of shame that often comes with maternal incarceration because the students learn that they are not the only persons with a mother in prison and that they may share some related experiences.

To achieve an effective group counseling setting, Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2003) suggested that the school counselor's main goal should be to assist the student in learning to deal with their interpersonal relationships and make positive choices. This could be accomplished by applying developmentally appropriate interventions that focus on personal and emotional topics. For example, bibliotherapy could be beneficial to a child in this situation by helping the child cope with their feelings and understand the mechanics of their mother's legal situation.

*Bibliotherapy.* Children of incarcerated mothers may experience trauma from witnessing the arrest and from being separated from their mother. As noted previously by Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002), children of incarcerated mothers suffer from nightmares or flashbacks of their mother being taken away by the police; therefore, these children need developmentally appropriate interventions. Bibliotherapy could serve as an avenue for these children because books could

explain the accounts of maternal incarceration in developmentally appropriate language. For instance, *"Mama Loves Me from Far Away"* by Brisson (2004) does not mention the incarceration, but focuses on the sadness of the separation from the parent. This book could be used as a tool to open the session to talk about grief and loss. Then, the group could discuss their feelings by writing their emotions or concerns in a journal. In latter sessions, the journal could be discussed among members, which could normalize their feelings, resulting in support and acceptance among members. Also, this book could be a good resource for caregivers in that they could use this book at home to help the family discuss the effects of maternal incarceration resulting in cohesiveness among family members and lessened embarrassment. Another book could be used to assist children of incarcerated mothers deal with the incarceration process.

Many children have questions about prison. *"When a Parent Goes to Jail: A Comprehensive Guide for Counseling Children of Incarcerated Parents"* by Yaffe and Hoade (2000) discusses the prison process from the initial court hearing to the realities of prison. This book could be used in individual or group setting to explain the process of prison to children in this type of situation. It could be a resource for caregivers to use when the child have questions or concerns about their mother. Also, it is noted in this book that it is not the actions of the child that caused the mother to be incarcerated. This could help eliminate feelings of

guilt from the child. In addition, the book combats the myths about prison and could facilitate conversation about the process.

Bibliotherapy is a great tool to use to answer difficult questions children of incarcerated mothers may have. Using bibliotherapy in group settings help children identify situations similar to their own while other children empathize with families dealing with these circumstances. After understanding is developed through bibliotherapy, feelings could be discussed concerning each group members' situation. Also, these books mentioned above could be helpful in classroom guidance to help unaffected students empathize with different family situations.

Writing or drawing exercises could also be effective by using incomplete sentences with words or pictures. Some sentence starters could be "I feel sad because", or "it is a difficult situation because"... This activity could begin the process of confronting painful truths about the members mixed feelings and current situation.

### *Classroom Guidance*

To reach large amounts of students, large group counseling is presented in the classroom. Sciarra (2004) noted that research has proven that large group counseling/classroom guidance has a positive effect on students' achievement and multicultural awareness. As proven in research, large group counseling may be

the best vehicle to assist in creating a positive and accepting school climate to help support children whose parents are incarcerated.

Through large group counseling, the counselor can focus on particular problems by using lessons for intervention as well as for prevention. In addition, the school counselor could go further than the noticeable context to respond to underlying dynamics in the classroom. For instance, when considering children of incarcerated mothers needs, the counselor could teach lessons pertaining to family differences to promote understanding and acceptance. There are many activities that could cover family differences such as family portraits or family sculpting exercises.

*Family portraits and family sculpting.* Family portraits and family sculpting activities would assist students in realizing differences in families and relationships among family members. For example, family sculpting requires students to represent their families by standing next to other students and explaining the relationships among them. Not only does this activity describe family relationships, but it could reveal many commonalities among families. This would bring about acceptance and understanding of different family situations. Although the students are the only people serviced in a school setting, the school counselor may assist the family system in finding community resources that could be beneficial.



### *Family Assistance*

As previously stated, a mother's incarceration will most likely have a negative impact on the child's well-being. When providing assistance to this population, the school counselor must keep in mind the network of family members and caregivers that may support the child outside of school. According to Timmons (2005), many family members, including the children, feel emotionally incarcerated during the prison term of a loved one, despite not actually being imprisoned. For this reason, school counselors should encourage positive and healthy relationships among the non-incarcerated family members, resulting in facilitating a healthy bond that could assist with the homecoming of the imprisoned mother. For instance, school counselors could enlist the help of community agencies to sponsor family counseling services to assist in re-establishing the child and incarcerated mother's relationship. Community agencies could assist the family in resources such as financial and housing assistance while supporting their counseling needs. This assistance would not only help the student, but it would also help the family as a whole.

### Conclusion

While prison officials concentrate on assisting and securing the 146,000 mothers incarcerated in the United States' prisons and jails, the estimated 126,100 children affected by the incarceration are literally being ignored by communities and schools (Mumola, 2000). The increasing statistics of maternal incarceration

are alarming, and many children are suffering the repercussions of their mother's choices. These children are being displaced from their stable homes and suffer due to separation from their mother. This untimely disruption in living situations can lead to grief and loss issues and separation anxiety among other things.

Unfortunately, many of the children exhibit behaviors such as anger and aggression, which impact their emotional, developmental, social, and academic well-being. Since many of these issues are displayed in the school setting, they should be considered by the school counselor and other school officials because they provide these children with needed services.

As the liaison between the student, family, and other community agencies, school counselors should be aware of how to effectively serve this population by finding ways to build support systems within the school and community. In addition, school counselors should be knowledgeable about techniques to assist and empower children of incarcerated mothers in counseling sessions. As a whole, the family unit would benefit from utilizing support systems including available community resources and relationships with school officials to enhance the reunification of the family.

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