

**MOTHERS IN PRISON:
COPING WITH SEPARATION FROM CHILDREN**

Emma Stanley
and
Stuart Byrne
University of South Australia.

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The incarceration of women and the impact on children, families, carers and the prisoner in terms of motherhood and parenting has become an increasingly prominent area of interest within the criminal justice and social welfare literature. In recent years an increase in the number of women in prison has been found in several jurisdictions (Campbell & Robinson, 1997). This trend has been noted in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in some Australian womens prisons (LeFlore & Holston, 1989; Carlen, 1998; Gursansky, Garvey, McGrath & O'Brien, 1998, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). These findings give rise to concern regarding the number of families adversely affected by incarceration and separation. A comparatively conservative study by Caddle and Crisp (1997) within the United Kingdom, established that 61% of female prisoners were mothers to children aged under 18 and/or were pregnant. Many of the children (71%) had been living with their mothers prior to her incarceration. For 85% of the children who had lived with their mother, her incarceration was the first time they had been separated for a prolonged period.

Further studies have revealed that women are commonly the primary and sometimes sole caretaker of their children prior to incarceration. Comparisons of male and female prisoners have shown the children of male prisoners tend to stay in the care of their mother whilst their father serves a prison term. Whereas the children of female prisoners frequently end up in the care of immediate or extended family (Gabel, 1992; Dressel & Barnhill, 1994; Sheridan, 1996; Gursansky et al, 1998; Healy, Foley & Walsh, 1999). According to Goldberg and colleagues (1996) many of the arrangements resulting from separation due to incarceration were made without the intervention of courts or child protective services. Rather, incarcerated mothers expressed a preference for their children to be placed with relatives, in an effort to minimise potential obstacles relating to contact with their children (Gursansky et al, 1998). Gabel and Schindlecker (1993) found approximately 75% of children of incarcerated mothers are cared for by the woman's parents or other relatives, with less than 10% cared for by husbands and 15% by friends or in foster homes.

The differences in the level of upheaval when comparing the lives of the children of male and female prisoners is suggestive of the potential variance in how the experience of a parent's incarceration impacts on the children involved. In reviewing the impact of a parent's incarceration on children, Shaw (1990) claimed, "*many of these children, it is clear, may suffer more pain than does their criminal parent in prison or even the original crime victim*". We know that children are significantly affected by the incarceration of a parent. Research looking at the impact of a fathers imprisonment on children has found a range of social, behavioural and psychological difficulties in children (Gabel, 1992; Dressel & Barnhill, 1994; van Nijnatten, 1997). Given the effects on children of paternal incarceration, one would surmise the incarceration of the child's mother, who is commonly the primary caregiver would have even further detrimental effects to the child's overall wellbeing (LeFlore & Holston, 1989).

Children who are separated from a parent due to prison suffer multiple problems associated with their loss. Disruption of the attachment bond between mother and child is particularly deleterious between the ages of 6 months and 4 years (Fuller, 1993). Other problem areas and behaviours exhibited by children of incarcerated parents include physical health problems, hostile and aggressive behaviour, use of drugs or alcohol, truancy, running away from home, disciplinary problems, withdrawal, fearfulness, bedwetting, poor school performance, excessive crying, nightmare, problems in relationships with others, anxiety and depression and attention problems (Lowenstein, 1986; Korbin, 1989; Gabel, 1992; Fuller, 1993; Dressel & Barnhill, 1994; McClellan, Farabee & Crouch, 1997). It is notes however, that each individual child may differ markedly in their reaction and the behaviours they exhibit.

Given these findings it appears entirely valid that an incarcerated mother would experience considerable difficulty and distress concerning her child's welfare and changes to their relationship (Fuller, 1993; Kingi, 1996; Sheridan, 1996; Caddle & Crisp, 1997). Gursansky et al (1998) found women incarcerated in a South Australian prison commonly expressed concerns about the effects that their sudden and traumatic separation had on their children. Further to the impact of separation on the mother and child relationship and the child's behaviour, is the rearing and maternal responsibilities of the incarcerated mother. According to LeFlore and Holston (1989) some of the parenting responsibilities for rearing children include:

- Provision of nurturance and physical care.
- Teaching and skill-training in language, perceptual skills, physical skills and self-care.
- Orienting the child to their immediate world, neighbourhood, community, and society and to their own feelings.
- Transmitting cultural and subcultural goals and values.
- Promoting interpersonal skills, motives, and modes of feeling and behaving in relation to others.
- Guiding, correcting, and helping the child to formulate their goals, and plan their own activities.

Incarceration would have a significant effect on the ability of the mother to fulfil many of the above parental tasks (Feldman, Weller, Leckman, Kuint & Eidelman, 1999). Still, studies have found that whilst the ability of the incarcerated mother to fulfil parental tasks is reduced, these mothers perceived that it was important for them to provide for the interpersonal, physical, emotional and spiritual needs of their children. Their perceptions were the same as mothers of equivalent socio-economic background, age and marital status, but who were non offenders (LeFlore & Holston, 1989; Fuller, 1993; Gabel, 1992; Goldberg et al, 1996). Greene, Haney and Hurtado (2000) also found mothers generally believed they were good mothers and wanted to provide supportive homes for their children. They also found that the mothers' level of emotional distress contributed to the problematic behaviour experienced by her children.

Much of the recent research has implied that a considerable amount of distress amongst incarcerated women is a consequence of separation from family and children. Mothers in prison have reported feeling anger, anxiety, sadness, depression, shame, guilt, decreased self-esteem and a sense of loss when separated from their children (Keaveny and Zauszniewski, 1999; Pennix, 1999; Young & Smith, 2000). The degree to which the incarcerated mother experiences these types of distress has implications for both the child's emotional development and the mother's mental health (Hock and Schirtzinger, 1992). However, very little research interest has been directed toward distress as a result of separation from family due to imprisonment.

As most mothers intend to reunite with their children upon release it has been suggested that the strengthening and improving of family interactions during incarceration be of high importance (Young & Smith, 2000). According to Healy, Foley and Walsh (1999) "families can play a vital role in reintegrating prisoners into meaningful social lives. Positive ties between an inmate and their families, either family of origin or their current family, are strongly associated with reduced recidivism" (p.5). Similarly, a study by Harrison (1997) found those inmates who were assisted to maintain family relationships whilst in prison

returned to prison at the low rate of 2 to 4 %. In addition to post release success and decreased recidivism, prisoners who repair and maintain family relationships have indicated reduced disciplinary problems whilst serving their prison sentence, improved mental health during their incarceration and on release which is also evident in other family members, and an increased probability that families will reunite following release (Fuller, 1993; Klein & Bahr, 1996).

Prison provides an opportunity to work on distress levels and parenting skills if appropriate services are available. A number of initiatives to enhance parenting and contact with children have been developed around the world. Parenting programs emerge as the most common strategy to date. Some researchers have found positive effects in mothers' level of coping when they engaged in parenting courses. Others argue against parental training in favour of quality contact and privacy with their children (Gursansky et al, 1998). With this in mind programs such as the extended visits scheme, improving visitor processing and environments, and active involvement of family members in rehabilitation programs have been implemented within various prisons. Yet, the need for parental training remains an area of necessary investigation, for despite mention of parenting programs within the literature, little clinical application has occurred (Klein & Bahr, 1996) and even less is known about the effectiveness of family-focused programs in correctional institutions. Very few evaluation studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of programs designed to strengthen families affected by maternal incarceration (Young & Smith, 2000). Perhaps an explanation lies in that much of the present research in this area to has focused on the welfare of the child and on the wellbeing of those charged with their care. There remains a gap in the literature focusing on the needs of the mother and issues related to her parental role during her term of incarceration (LeFlore & Holston, 1989).

Whilst the responsibility for the care of children of imprisoned parents remains arguable between social welfare and criminal justice systems, the responsibility for the management of the inmate mother is not. Research into the needs of incarcerated mothers and how prisons can manage their issues would assist in the appropriate allocation of scarce services and resources. It would be useful to identify those prisoners likely to be badly affected by the experience of incarceration and to identify coping strategies which might be effective in reducing the impact of such stressors. Accurate identification would contribute to the development of strategies or programs to train prisoners in effective ways of dealing with stress due to the separation from family and reframe their parental role (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Cooper & Livingston, 1991). However, few correctional institutions worldwide keep data for statistical purposes on the number of parents in prison, what care arrangements are made for their children, or the number or age of their children (Gursansky et al, 1998; Healy et al, 1999; Women's Legal Service SA Inc, 2000; Young & Smith, 2000). Such limitations in data collection do not allow for the determination of the size of the need and make planning for services to accommodate the needs of mothers in prison difficult.

In conclusion, it has been stated:

“Correctional facilities must aggressively set into place programs and procedures that maintain and enhance connections between incarcerated persons - regardless of gender - and their children and families given the fact that many of these men and women plan to return to their families and the parenting role upon release”
(Sheridan, 1996, p.432).

Given the information presented, it appears evident, particularly in the area of maternal incarceration, further research is required before such '*programs and procedures*' are '*aggressively set into place*'. With research interest growing in relation to the numerous and varied issues facing female offenders and their differences from the male offender population, it is an exciting time to be engaged in research into the needs of mothers in prison. It appears research in the area of women in corrections will continue to grow. Through ongoing research we may increasingly learn more about women's experiences in the justice system, and allocate attention to the services offered to incarcerated mothers so they may better manage their own lives and the lives of their children. By determining the size of the problem, what the needs of these mothers are and the level of such need, correctional services would be better equipped to manage incarcerated mothers and provide appropriate resources and services. Such resources and services might help these women, whilst imprisoned and upon release, to raise their children in more positive environments, reducing not only their own offending but the potential for their children in becoming the next generation of offenders.

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