

Volume 7, Number 1 • January 2002

Children's Services Practice Notes is a newsletter for North Carolina's child welfare workers produced four times a year by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families and the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing recent research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!

If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please do so! Address your comments to:

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WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH PARENTS IN PRISON

There may be as many as 2 million children in the U.S. who have one or more parents in prison or jail. That's close to two out of every 100 children (Wright & Seymour, 2000).

Research indicates these children are traumatized by separation from their parents, confused by the parent's actions, and stigmatized by the shame of their parent's situation. Deprived of income and guidance, these children are vulnerable to poverty, to stressful shifts in caregivers, separation from siblings, and other family disruptions.

Because of all of this, the children of incarcerated parents should be of

special concern to North Carolina's child welfare workers. As a state and a profession, we are more focused than ever on ensuring all children have a safe, permanent home, one that maintains and promotes their well-being.

Yet when a child has a parent in prison, achieving this goal can be especially difficult. This issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes* aims to introduce you to the challenges of working with this population and to provide you with resources and information to enhance your work with children and families separated by incarceration. ♦

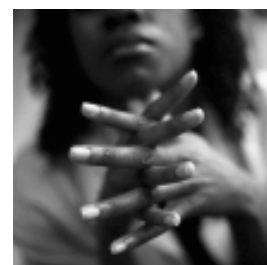
UNDERSTANDING PARENTS IN PRISON

As child welfare workers, our ability to establish and maintain a relationship with the parents of the children we serve is critical. If we know and understand the parents, if we can communicate with them, if there is some degree of trust between us, then assessing safety, moving toward permanence, and helping the child flourish are all much easier.

Of course, building a relationship with parents can be difficult when the parent lives at home. But what do you do when the parent lives in jail? How do you handle case management, permanency planning, and visits? How can you evaluate parent progress?

Unfortunately, a growing number of child welfare workers are facing these challenges. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that in 1997, 9.6% of the mothers and 1.8% of the fathers in state pris-

ons had at least one child in some form of out-of-home care (Mumola, p. 3). Given the trend toward larger prison populations that we saw in the 1990s, it seems likely that if you haven't worked with a child who has an incarcerated parent, you soon will. To provide you with back-



What do you know about parents in prison?

PARENTS IN PRISON *continued from page 1*

ground and enhance your work with families in this situation, this article presents you with some basic facts about parents in prison.

NUMBERS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

A great many of the people serving prison or local jail time in the United States are parents. In 1999, there were 1,284,894 prisoners in the custody of state and federal prisons. Of these, approximately 56% (or 721,500) were the parents to minor children (Mumola, p. 2). If this rate of parenthood holds true for the inmates in local jails, then it is safe to say that there were more than a million parents in jail in 1999. Their children accounted for between 2% and 3% of the children in the country.

The statistics for North Carolina are similar. In June 2001, there were 29,879 men and 2,020 women serving time in North Carolina's state prisons (NCDC). Of these inmates, approximately 17,500 were parents. Their estimated 36,000 minor children accounted for approximately 2% of North Carolina's 1.8 million children (Mumola, NCDC, NCCAI). It is important to note that these figures do not include estimates for the number of North Carolina parents in federal prisons or local jails, or for their children.

Most North Carolina counties capture information about parental incarceration in individual case records, particularly if the agency is attempting to terminate parental rights. However, things generally stop there—like most states, North Carolina does not collect statewide data on foster children with incarcerated parents.

EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE

On the national level there has been a recent surge of interest in parents in prison and the way parental incarceration affects children, families, and communities. This interest is reflected in a series of grants funded recently by the federal government for research in this area, as well as in publications by the Child Welfare League of America, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, and others (*for more resources, see sidebar, page 6*). Thanks to these efforts, we know the following about parent prisoners:

The prison population is growing. During the 1990s, the number of inmates (parent and nonparent) in federal and state prisons and local jails grew steadily. Although they make up a small minority of the prison population, growth rates



Nearly 20% of mothers in state prison had been homeless in the year prior to admission.

have been higher for women than for men. Since 1990, the annual growth rate for male prisoners has averaged 6.6%, while the increase in women prisoners has averaged 8.5% (Wright & Seymour, p. 6). Since mothers are much more likely to be the sole caregiver for their children, the incarceration of a mother is much more likely to result in her children entering foster care.

There are significant racial disparities in the prison population. African Americans are disproportionately represented in the prison

population, just as they are in the foster care population. In 1997 the incidence of incarceration (state and federal) of males per 100,000 among African Americans was 3,253; among Latinos, 1,272; and among Caucasians, 491 (Wright & Seymour, p. 7). As a result of this disproportionality, in 1999 black children were nearly 9 times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children. Hispanic children were 3 times as likely as white children to have an inmate parent (Mumola, p. 2).

Mothers and fathers tend to be incarcerated for different offenses. In 1997 forty-five percent of fathers in state prison were violent offenders, compared to 26% of mothers. Mothers were more likely to be sentenced for drug offenses and fraud (Mumola, p. 6).

Sentences tend to be long. In 1997 fathers in state prison reported serving sentences that were, on average, 5 years longer than those of mothers (12.5 years vs. 7.8 years). Because they tended to commit less serious of-

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CARE ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN WITH PARENTS IN U.S. STATE PRISONS, 1997

	Total	Male	Female
Child's current caregiver^a			
Other parent of child	85.0%	89.6%	28.0%
Grandparent of child	16.3	13.3	52.9
Other relatives	6.4	4.9	25.7
Foster home or agency	2.4	1.8	9.6
Friends, others ^b	5.3	4.8	10.4

^a Detail may add up to more than 100% because some prisoners had multiple children living with multiple caregivers.

^b Includes cases where parent reported that the child now lived alone.

Source: Mumola, C. J. (2000). *Bureau of Justice Statistics special report: Incarcerated parents and their children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice [August 2000, NCJ 182335].

fenses than fathers, 48% of mothers in state and federal prisons were serving sentences of less than five years (Mumola, p. 6).

Substance abuse is a major problem. Like many of the other parents involved in the child welfare system, those in prison tend to have problems with substance abuse. “More than 4 in 5 parents (85%) in state prison reported some type of past drug use, and a majority (58%) said that they were using drugs in the month before their current offense” (Mumola, p. 7). Drug use is particularly serious among mothers—one in three mothers in state prison committed her crime to get drugs or money for drugs (Mumola, p. 8). It is important to note that an incarcerated parent’s access to effective substance abuse treatment can vary a great deal.

Mental illness and poverty are also a concern. Among parents in state prison, 23% of mothers and 13% of fathers reported an indication of mental illness. More than half of the parent inmates in state prison reported income of less than \$1,000 in the month prior to their arrest (Mumola, p. 9).

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

These statistics may give you a better sense of the parents behind bars, and perhaps even help you feel more prepared to work with them. But numbers can only take a person so far. They cannot describe the guilt and remorse felt by nearly all parents who must leave their children to serve time in prison. They cannot tell us what decisions a particular parent will make about his future, or his child’s future. They cannot tell us if he will change for the better.

To find this out, someone must meet and build a relationship with each individual mother and father in prison. When there is a child in foster care involved, that person will be you. In this way, working with prisoners is no different from working with non-inmate parents: both require us to join with parents and families to overcome obstacles, and both offer the same reward for success—a secure future for children and their families. ♦

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REUNIFYING FAMILIES AFTER PARENTAL INCARCERATION

In an ideal world, says foster care supervisor Jamie Hayden, incarcerated parents would have unlimited visits with their children and be offered family therapy and classes in peer parenting and anger management. But in the real world, Hayden says, “We just don’t have the resources.”

Hayden, who works for the Salt Lake City Department of Human Services, has handled hundreds of cases where one or both parents are incarcerated and the children were in state custody. Most vital, she emphasizes, is developing a post-release plan to help parents do all they need to do to reunite with their families.

But it’s a balancing act. “They come out of prison with no resources,” she says. “Very few of them have a support system, let alone a car.” Yet so many demands are put on newly released inmates by probation and child welfare that “they can’t do it, especially if they’re drug- and alcohol-involved. We set them up to fail.”

A more sensible approach, she says, involves making fewer demands on the ex-prisoner initially, then later dropping some requirements and adding others. She practices what she preaches, insisting that her newly released clients concentrate first on drug and alcohol rehabilitation and compliance with probation.

In returning kids to parents, timing is critical, she says. Returning a child too soon can overwhelm a parent struggling with so much else. Dragging it out can demoralize an ex-offender and risk her doing something foolish.

Among the advice she offers child welfare professionals working with these families:

- Don’t let personal biases toward convicts and minorities keep you from doing what’s best for the child, “which is to be with the family.”
- Establish a rapport with your client’s case manager in prison so she takes a personal interest in him.
- Work with a client’s probation officer to develop a combined probation and treatment plan.
- If a family drug court is available, use it.

Source: Slavin, P. (2000). Children with parents behind bars. *Children’s Voice*, 9(5), 4–37. Reprinted by special permission of the Child Welfare League of America, Washington, DC (<http://www.cwla.org>).

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING FOSTER CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

Good child welfare workers try to learn all they can about neglect, abuse, and the many other conditions that affect the children and families they serve. Given the increasing number of children with parents in prison entering the child welfare system these days, it should come as no surprise that workers want to know more about this population. Specifically, they wish to understand the extent of this trend, how children are affected, and how to support them.

NUMBERS OF CHILDREN

There is a lot we don't know about foster children with parents in prison. In a 1994 national survey, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services identified "incarceration" as the presenting problem of the primary caregiver in 4% of the cases of children and families who received child welfare services (Seymour, 1998). Unfortunately, this does not translate easily into reliable, verifiable numbers

of children. There is little other aggregate data on this population, so we don't really know how many foster children fall into this category.

We do know the three basic routes through which these children enter the child welfare system:

- As a result of abuse or neglect prior to the parent's incarceration,
- As a direct result of the primary caregiving parent's arrest, or
- As a result of disruptions in the living arrangements (most often with a relative) made during a parent's incarceration (Wright & Seymour, p. 14).

But again, not enough data has been collected nor enough research conducted to tell us which of these avenues is the most likely route of entry



Children of incarcerated moms may be at higher risk than the children of incarcerated dads.

into the system, or which types of children are likely to enter by which route.

EFFECTS ON KIDS

We do know with certainty that parental incarceration has an impact on children. Yet the specific effects of incarceration can be difficult to isolate from other challenges and risk factors. For example, most

children of parents in prison have been subjected to a variety of risk factors before the parent's incarceration. These include poverty, family involvement with alcohol and other drugs, intrafamilial violence, previous separations, and crime.

Cynthia Seymour, General Counsel for the Child Welfare League of America and an expert on children with incarcerated parents, notes that "the extent to which a child will be affected by parental incarceration de-

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CHILD REACTIONS TO PARENTAL INCARCERATION

- Identification with incarcerated parent, awareness of social stigma
- Change in future orientation and intrusive thoughts about their parents
- Concerned about outcomes of case, unsure and worried about how to live without mother, concern about an uncertain future
- Flashbacks to traumatic events related to arrests
- Embarrassment
- Fear, anxiety
- Anger and hyperarousal
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Low self-esteem
- Loneliness, feelings of abandonment, emotional withdrawal from friends and family
- Depression
- Sleeplessness
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Attention disorders and developmental regression
- Diminished academic performance, classroom behavior difficulties and truancy
- Aggression, acting out, antisocial behaviors, and trauma-reactive behavior leading to early crime involvement

Source: Wright, L. E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with children and families separated by incarceration: A handbook for child welfare agencies*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

depends on a large number of variables, including the age at which the parent-child separation occurs, length of the separation, health of the family, disruptiveness of the incarceration, child's familiarity with the placement or new caregiver, strength of the parent-child relationship, number and result of previous separation experiences, nature of the parent's crime, length of the prison sentence, availability of family or community support, and degree of stigma that the community associates with incarceration" (Seymour, 1998).

Independent of these factors, the separation inherent in parental incarceration is almost always a traumatic experience for the child. Children with parents in prison often exhibit many of the responses we see in other foster children who have experienced trauma. These include:

- **Developmental delays.** Instead of devoting energy to important age-appropriate developmental tasks (e.g., walking, talking, social development) children must focus deal with the parent's absence and the difficulties this may pose.
- **Maladaptive coping strategies.** These include regression (soiling and clinging), emotional numbness, and antisocial behaviors.

For a listing of additional negative reactions to parental incarceration, see the sidebar, page 4. It is important to note "that these reactions are interconnected, as feelings may spring from thoughts, and behaviors may result from feelings" (Wright & Seymour).

According to the Child Welfare League of America, children who have parents in prison are at increased risk for poor school performance, dropping out, gang involvement, early pregnancy, and drug abuse (Slavin, 2000).

The children of incarcerated mothers may be at a higher risk of trauma than the children of incarcerated fathers. According to Pat Vincitorio, a prison social worker at the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women in Raleigh, "Most children of incarcerated moms have only known the mom as the primary caregiver. The children of incarcerated moms suffer the trauma of abandonment, loss, and devastation at a greater intensity than if their father goes to prison. In fact, I believe the child of an incarcerated mom is at the highest risk level of all children in North Carolina."

Statistics collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics support the assertion that the incarceration of a mother may have more severe effects on children. In 1997, mothers (58%) in state prisons in the U.S. were much more likely than fathers (36%) to report living with their minor children prior to arrest. Thirty-one percent of the mothers in prison had been living alone with their children, compared to 4% of fathers (BJS, 4). Certainly, to the children from these households, the loss of a mother is deeply disruptive.

Regardless of whether the inmate is a mother or a father, prison employees can attest to the negative effect parental incarceration has on children. "Many times, kids are victims as much as the actual victims of the crimes these men have committed," says Reverend Billy Stewart, Chap- *cont. p. 8*

UNDERSTAND YOUR FEELINGS



Child welfare workers are experienced in dealing with the most horrendous acts against children, and while they never lose their sensitivity to these acts, chances are they do establish an internal mechanism for handling their feelings. However, because workers have less experience with other crimes, their feelings and reactions cannot be taken for granted. Some may see crimes such as murder and drug trafficking as less upsetting than child maltreatment, whereas others may have particularly negative reactions. The worker's honest critique of his or her own reactions is the best strategy for ensuring that negative feelings aren't unintentionally communicated to the child, making it more difficult for the child to maintain a positive view of the parent.

Because a high percentage of incarcerated parents, particularly mothers, have substance abuse issues, workers should also recognize and evaluate their feelings about addiction and their beliefs about an addict's ability to recover.

Excerpted from Wright, L. E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with children and families separated by incarceration*.

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PRISON VISITATION BASICS

Visits between children in foster care and their parents are important for many reasons. They maintain important family relationships, give social workers a chance to assess and document birth family progress, and are strongly correlated with successful family reunification (Hess & Mintun, 1992; Simms & Bolden, 1991).

But what does one do when one or more of the child's parents are in prison? Most social workers, especially those new to the job, have questions and uncertainties when it comes to working with the prison system, preparing the child, and knowing what to expect. The following, based on conversations with experienced social workers, supervisors, and information from Wright & Seymour (see sidebar below), is intended to give you a leg up on this daunting task.

Locate the parent. Call the NC Department of Corrections Combined Records Office at 919/716-3200.

Get the prison contact information. To obtain the phone number for the prison, call the NC Division of Prisons at 919/733-3226, or use the prison locator on their web site <<http://www.doc.state.nc.us/dop/index.htm>>.

Contact the prison. Unless you already have working relationships with individuals at the prison, you may want to begin by speaking with the assistant superintendent of custody and operations. This person will refer you to the inmate's case manager (all inmates in the NC prison system have a case manager) or prison social worker. This person will help you arrange a visit and explain prison procedures to you. The visit may be planned for an inmate's official visiting hours, or special arrangements may be made to accommodate a family visit of this type. Generally, correctional institutions for women will have better visiting facilities than those for men.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Want to know more about working with children of incarcerated parents? A most comprehensive and current work on this subject, and a crucial resource in the creation of this issue of the newsletter, is Wright and Seymour's *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. To obtain a copy, visit the Child Welfare League of America's web site at <<http://www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated/handbook.htm>>.
- Additional information and resources can also be found at the *Practice Notes* web site, <http://www.sowo.unc.edu/fcrp/Csnp/vol7_no1.htm>



OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Your ability to support parent-child bonds, assess parent progress, and make an informed decision about permanency will hinge in part on the personal relationships you are able to form with prison staff, on your knowledge of the prison system, and on your understanding of the obstacles you are likely to face. Therefore, we suggest the following:

Visit the prison at least once before taking a child on a visit. "The physical structure of the prison, combined with prison security procedures and armed security personnel, create a strict and intimidating environment. An initial visit on your own will ensure a more controlled emotional reaction and give you some time to think about how to explain this setting and its procedures to the child" (Wright & Seymour, p. 57).

Be prepared for disappointments. Just like ordinary visits, things do not always go as planned. For example, you may travel to the prison and then be unable to visit the inmate because of security concerns unrelated to the inmate you're visiting (Wright & Seymour). Or, visitation privileges may be taken away or reduced because of the inmate's behavior.

Be prepared for other challenges. These include: Distance. In state prisons in the U.S., more than half of all inmates are housed more than 100 miles from their homes (BJS, p. 5). This is even more common among women inmates, since there are fewer institutions for them. Logistics. It can be difficult coordinating transportation for sibling groups, especially if they are living with different caretakers (Wright & Seymour, p. 61). Long waits. These are often connected with security, and may be punctuated by searches that visitors find uncomfortable or humiliating.

VISITATION AND JAILS

"While jails are generally closer to home than prisons, they may be even less child-friendly. Unlike prisons, jails almost universally require that visits be noncontact, with communication restricted to use of a phone through glass or mesh. In addition, because the anticipated stay is shorter, they are less apt to be attuned to child/parent relationship needs or to have special programs that support parenting" (Wright & Seymour, p. 63). ♦

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A PRISON SOCIAL WORKER FROM A WOMEN'S PRISON TALKS ABOUT VISITATION

To help you learn about working with social workers in North Carolina's prison system, *Practice Notes* talked with Pat Vincitorio, MSW, who has worked with adult women offenders for the past 23 years. Currently she is the Social Work Manager at North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women (NCCIW) in Raleigh, the largest women's prison in the state.

CSPN: Do prisons support parent-child visitation?

Yes. In the case of women's prisons, we have found it is in the best interest of the child to have as frequent contact with the mom as possible. Contact with their mom reassures children they have not been abandoned and that their mom did not leave them because they were bad children, which is a common assumption kids make.

Knowing her children are okay also helps the mom serve her time in an appropriate manner. Mother/child contact is an incentive for the mom to participate in programs which will help her be a better parent and a law-abiding citizen upon release. Visits can also have a positive impact on substance abuse treatment.

CSPN: How do prison social workers contribute to visitation?

When a family service worker wishes to bring the child to visit, the visit can be coordinated and supervised, if requested, by one of the prison social workers. Prison social workers also support visits by helping to clear up misunderstandings and false information prior to a visit. For example, in many cases the child has been told the mom is away at school or on vacation. We work with the mom to help her explain to her child where she is and why she is in prison.

Outside of visitation, prison social workers can assist child welfare social workers by seeing that the mom is meeting the objectives of the Family Services Case Plan, by helping obtain temporary guardianship papers, and by providing parenting classes, anger management groups, drug treatment, family counseling, and court testimony in custody cases. Prison system social workers also support pregnant inmates, providing them with perinatal counseling and making arrangements to place their babies.



Pat Vincitorio

CSPN: What are visits like?

At NCCIW, we try to arrange for the visit to take place in our MATCH (Mother and Their Children) center.

The MATCH center is child-friendly (there are no Correctional Officers), bright, and colorful, with large play area, couches in sitting area, and a kitchen. All visits in the female facilities are "contact" visits, which means there are no restrictions on hugging, lap sitting, holding, etc.

CSPN: More than half of all parents in prison receive no visits from their minor children. Why?

I believe the reason is usually economic. Most of the parents in prison are from poverty- or subsistence-level economic backgrounds. The people taking care of their kids simply cannot afford to take children to the prison. For some families, the prison is too far away, they do not have dependable transportation, and it is too costly to pay someone to bring the children. Some of the caregivers cannot take time away from work to bring the children on regular visitation days. And sometimes, families are angry with the mom for getting herself in prison and want to punish her more by not bringing the children.

CSPN: What would you like to say to child welfare workers about working with incarcerated parents and with the NC prison system?

I would like to invite them to get to know the social workers in the prison system. Let's pool our resources to assist these moms and their children. We must all work hard to break the cycle of children following their parents to prison. I believe it can be done. ♦

Distance of prison from last place of residence, 1997	State Inmates	Federal Inmates
Less than 50 miles	17.4%	7.5%
50-100 miles	20.7	8.5
101-500 miles	51.2	40.7
More than 500 miles	10.7	43.3

Source: Mumola, C. J. (2000). *Bureau of Justice Statistics special report: Incarcerated parents and their children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice [NCJ 182335].

SUPPORTING FOSTER CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS from page 5

lain at the Avery Mitchell Correctional Institution in Spruce Pine, NC. "They go through grief that I think is different in some ways from other grief. They have to explain to their classmates at school and the people they know that their dad is in prison, and they have to put up with the negative things that get said about them, their dads, and their families as a result."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are many things child welfare social workers can do to support foster children with parents in prison:

Understand and acknowledge your own feelings about incarcerated parents and substance abusers (see sidebar p. 5). Unless you take this step, you may undermine your own efforts to help.

Understand the child may be grieving. Explain the stages of grief to the child in an age-appropriate way.

Alleviate the child's uncertainty. When a parent is incarcerated, a child's basic life issues are called into question—she will want to know what has happened, when she will see her parent again, what will happen next, and a thousand other things. Answer her questions as best you can.

Reassure the child, especially if she is young, that the parent did not leave the child because of something the child has done.

Honor and preserve the child's connection to the parent. Regardless of the parent's past actions, he or she plays a central role in the child's world and influences her well-being and future

development. Maintain this connection by every means possible, including visits, mail, and phone calls. ♦

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Often, kids are told their parents are at college or on vacation, when in reality they're in prison.

IN THIS ISSUE: WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH PARENTS IN PRISON

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