

SEPARATION OF INCARCERATED MOTHER FROM CHILD: THE IMPACT ON CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND THE CALL FOR GREATER CLINICAL AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

By Alana Gunn

Many children live in physical and emotional poverty during and after the incarceration of their mothers. This deprivation can impact their academic performance, ability to handle stress, receive and give love, or abstain from delinquent and violent behavior. This article argues that the separation of mother and child, as a result of imprisonment, can have a detrimental impact on a child's life. Social workers and policy makers must implement alternatives to policies and practices that perpetuate harm to these victims.

While the overall prison population in the United States has swelled, the rise in the population of incarcerated women has been most alarming. From 1990 to 2002, the number of women in state and federal prisons increased 121 percent, to 97,491 from 44,065, while the number of men rose 84 percent in that period from 729,840 to 1,343,164 (Butterfield, 2003). Also significant to note is that the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000) reports that over 75 percent of female inmates are single mothers, and 66 percent of their children are under the age of 18. In this population, 75 percent of the women had legal custody of their offspring at the time of arrest (Enos, 1997). These statistics indicate that the majority of women in prison are not only mothers but also the primary caregivers of their children at the time of arrest. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the incarceration of mothers, because their imprisonment will certainly have an overwhelming impact on the lives of their children. To fully contextualize why these children are at risk, we must briefly address the lives of their incarcerated mothers and the circumstances in which these children grow up.

THE LIVES OF INCARCERATED WOMEN
WITH CHILDREN

In general, incarcerated women face a great deal of adversity, but females of color make up most of the prison population. Only 26 percent of the U.S. population is nonwhite and non-Hispanic (Morash and Schram, 2002). By contrast, 46 percent of the females behind bars are African American, and 15 percent are Latina (Enos, 1997). Almost 66 percent of the female incarcerated population are women of color; clearly, they are overrepresented. This situation is compounded by the lack of education among incarcerated women and the absence of employment opportunities in their communities. Sixty-two percent of incarcerated women have less than a high school education (Watterson, 1996). Generally, long periods of unemployment and poverty are a way of life for these single mothers; prior to incarceration, they earn an average of \$3,000 to \$10,000 a year (Watterson, 1996). This suggests that incarcerated mothers leave behind children who face serious economic hardships.

While financial hardship poses a great barrier to their well-being, these women also experience emotional and physical afflictions that are just as damaging. Eighty-five percent of all the women in prison have experienced physical or sexual abuse, either as children at the hands of adults or as adults from their mates (Watterson, 1996). In a survey done by the American Correctional Association, empirical evidence reveals that over half of female inmates questioned reported physical abuse, and 36 percent reported sexual abuse (2000, in Watterson, 1996). Unfortunately, abusive experiences can lead women to turn to drugs and alcohol. In turn, substance abuse can lead to trouble with the law (Watterson, 1996).

When considering the crimes that these women commit, it is important to note that approximately 25 percent of women in state prisons are serving sentences for violent offenses (Watterson, 1996). The remaining three-fourths of women behind bars committed non-violent drug offenses to support a drug habit or their families. Such offenses include petty theft, welfare fraud, larceny, forgery, and prostitution (Watterson, 1996). As is evident from the frequency of experiences of poverty, unemployment, and physical and sexual abuse, these inmates have suffered greatly. Through an examination of their lives, it is possible to see how the intersection of race, class, and gender plays a major role in leading incarcerated women to their present circumstances. Such circumstances are also significant factors in the present circumstances of their children.

THE LIVES OF CHILDREN
OF INCARCERATED WOMEN

As of October 2003, over 2 million American children had an incarcerated parent; approximately 10 million have experienced the imprisonment and separation from a parent at some time in their lives (San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, 2003). This separation from a parent has more than just a physical impact on these 10 million children. Separation can also have tremendous consequences for children's psychological development (Reed, 1997). To fully understand the emotional and mental ramifications of separation, we should examine the attachment between mother and child.

ATTACHMENT BETWEEN MOTHER AND CHILD

Attachment is a developmental process in which an individual forms a specific emotional bond with another (Newman and Newman, 2003). The attachment or bond formed between mother and child can have a great impact on the consequent stages of child development (Hazan and Zeifman, 1994). This bonding process is particularly important to children in unstable environments filled with crime, poverty, and violence. Unfortunately, such environments are characteristic of many of the communities where children of incarcerated mothers are raised (Watterson, 1996). When a child's mother becomes imprisoned, not only is a child left in the adverse environmental circumstances, but according to Diane Reed (1997), the bond that has been created becomes damaged. A parent's absence and severance of the parent-child bond may cause children to act out or behave delinquently (Reed, 1997).

The impact of maternal separation from a child is clearly illustrated in the article entitled, "Like mother, like daughter" (Locy, 1999). In Toni Locy's report, an 18-year-old African-American girl shares her experiences as a child of an incarcerated woman. Star, 18, follows in the footsteps of her mother, taking up the same lifestyle: school truancy, teen pregnancy, drug use, and later, imprisonment (Locy, 1999). She was separated from her mother at the age of 11, but the desire for a bond between child and mother could not be easily broken (Locy, 1999). Because she could not satisfy her emotional and physical needs, she started drinking, stealing, and being promiscuous, just like her mom (Locy, 1999). While it is important to understand the psychological effects of maternal incarceration on a child's development, it is also essential to comprehend how children are affected by the larger society and environment.

APPLICATION OF SYSTEMS THEORY

The systems theory conceptualizes the importance that factors, such as family, community, school, or society, can play in the development of the individual and his or her consequent life activities (Newman and Newman, 2003). "The system can not be wholly understood by identifying each of its component parts... the relationships of those parts make for a larger coherent entity" (Newman and Newman, 2003, p. 84). Through an application of systems theory to the life circumstances of Joyce Dixson and her sons, it is possible to clearly demonstrate the role that the environment plays in shaping a child's ability to cope.

In 2001, Joyce Dixson, founder and director of Sons and Daughters of the Incarcerated (SADOI) gave a personal account of the hardships resulting from her incarceration (Joyce Dixson, personal communication, March 9, 2001). In August of 1976, Ms. Dixson was convicted of killing her husband and imprisoned for 17 years. Ms. Dixson described her husband as the sort of person who could "beat up old people and sell drugs to young kids" (personal communication, March 9, 2001). While in prison, Dixson focused her energies on acquiring an education and transforming her life. She became the first incarcerated woman to earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan. After receiving this degree and enduring 17 years of arduous struggles with legal appeals and letter-writing campaigns, an appellate court overturned her conviction. But for Ms. Dixson, the victory was bittersweet: her two sons, who did not have any contact with her while she was in prison, were grown. The two young boys whom she left at 6 and 12 years of age were now 23 and 29 years old. The traumatic experiences endured during their mother's incarceration were a direct result of the separation (personal communication, March 9, 2001).

"Children who played with my kids previous to my incarceration, no longer wanted to be bothered with them," said Dixson (personal communication, March 9, 2001). Neighbors ceased to welcome the children of a "prison mommy" into their homes (personal communication, March 9, 2001). In essence, the children were ostracized from their community and were made to feel like criminals themselves. This ostracism was also evident at school. Ms. Dixson was constantly informed that her older son frequently fought other children in the streets and on school grounds. Classmates excluded her sons from participating in a variety of activities, including eating together at lunch and involvement in group activities (Joyce Dixson, personal communication, March 9, 2001).

When she was incarcerated, her sons were at a very impressionable stage. Peer and clique acceptance can be crucial to the development of children. Barbara and Phillip Newman (2003) note the importance of peer groups in stating that “[Cliques] hang out together, know about each other’s families, plan activities together....Within cliques, intimate information is exchanged” (p. 308). This peer recognition is an essential component of childhood development. Not gaining approval from peers can create feelings of alienation and a lack of belonging to a group (Newman and Newman, 2003).

While the children were experiencing these events in interactions with their peers, they also faced difficulties resulting from the way in which their school chose to address their problems. Dixon explained that, although there were counselors for children experiencing divorce or abuse, no professionals in the school were trained to deal with issues facing children of incarcerated parents (personal communication, March 9, 2001). School officials did not recognize the unique problems created by separation of a child from an incarcerated parent. Instead, officials responded to the situation as they would to any loss of a parent (personal communication, March 9, 2001). Failure to recognize the unique problems confronted by these children complicated their needs and silenced their voices (personal communication, March 9, 2001).

The presence of poverty and violence in the community can also play a role in a child’s development (Newman and Newman, 2003). The children of incarcerated mothers are disadvantaged, not only because of the loss of their mother, but because of their economic situation. The children typically live in poverty before, during, and after their parent’s incarceration (Reed, 1997). Because the average annual income of a single mother is between \$3,000 and \$10,000, poverty is a substantial obstacle (Watterson, 1996). “In these communities, the loss of an economic base with few people in stable, high-status occupations leads to takeovers by gangs and other organized criminal activities, especially drug traffic” (Newman and Newman, 2003, p. 284). In these impoverished communities, these children experience a lack of positive role models and support systems. Because of the presence of gangs and other criminal activities in their communities, adolescents become more susceptible to experiencing violence, either as a victim or a perpetrator (Newman and Newman, 2003).

Community factors such as these can significantly increase the chances that children of incarcerated parents will also commit criminal activities. Data from the Bureau of Statistics indicate that children of incarcerated mothers are five to six times more likely than their peers to engage in delinquent behavior, such as alcohol or drug use, truancy, and theft (Reed, 1997). All of the afore-

mentioned environmental factors can aggravate the situations of these children and cause harm to their psychological development (Reed, 1997). The stigmatization faced by children of incarcerated parents can also be perpetuated by family members. Joyce Dixson's sons went to live with their maternal grandparents when she was imprisoned. The grandparents told her children their mother was dead; they eventually learned that was false (personal communication, March 9, 2001). This situation is entirely different from one involving an actual death of a loved one. For a child who does not know what has happened to his or her mother, the ambiguity can be extremely devastating. Clearly, it was painful for her sons to hear their family members denying the life and existence of the mother, and virtually the origin and value of theirs.

An adolescent female with an incarcerated mother told a similar story of hardships endured because of an unsupportive family structure. Leah (the name has been changed to protect her identity) is a 13-year-old girl who was told to forget about her incarcerated mother (personal communication, March 9, 2001). Members of her family constantly reminded her that "the apple did not fall far from the tree," causing her to distance herself physically and emotionally from the woman who cared for her from birth (personal communication, March 9, 2001). Leah was led to believe that her mother's criminal activity was evidence of her own potential to behave pathologically, and this caused a great deal of trauma in a situation that was already devastating (personal communication, March 9, 2001). Family structure and community can exacerbate the problems faced by children with incarcerated parents, but the community and family can also provide important supports and encouragement.

In contrast to the other examples discussed, a highly supportive family structure greatly facilitates the ability of a child to cope with a mother's imprisonment. Adrian (her name has been changed to protect her identity) was 12 years old when her mother was sentenced to 10 years in a correctional facility for conspiracy to sell drugs. Like many adolescents at this age, Adrian was at a crucial period in her life. The love and presence of her mother seemed to be necessities (personal communication, March 9, 2001). During her mother's incarceration, Adrian lived with her maternal grandmother, who became a great source of comfort. Adrian's story differs from those reported above because she was encouraged to love and remain in contact with her mother (personal communication, March 9, 2001). Adrian was taught that, although her mother committed an unlawful deed, this act did not diminish her mother's value as a person or Adrian's value as

her daughter. In church and at other community activities, when Adrian's mother's name was mentioned, it was more of a way to remember her important place in Adrian's life than as a means of degrading her mother's value (personal communication, March 9, 2001). This method of identifying with her mother helped Adrian to develop positive esteem and to cope with her mother's incarceration. Although Adrian still sought counseling to deal with her mother's absence, she was supported throughout the process. The familial nature of these interactions allowed Adrian to thrive in spite of her mother's incarceration. Such a nurturing environment is ideal, but not all children have that good fortune.

In the event of parental incarceration, if children cannot be placed with a suitable and stable relative, children enter the foster care system. "Unlike most children who enter child protective services system due to parental neglect, children of arrested parents become dependents of the juvenile court and are subsequently placed in foster care if no relative is available" (Reed, 1997, p. 155). "Fundamentally, the kids are punished along with the mother as they are shuttled through an odyssey of makeshift care arrangements, separated from siblings, yanked out of schools, and left alone to struggle with the turmoil of disrupted lives" (Huie, 1993, p. 2). However, whether placed in foster care or with relatives, they will experience adversity. The school, community, and even family members can have far-reaching effects on the child's development.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN PROMOTING CHANGE

Social workers can play an important role in addressing the dilemmas faced by the children of incarcerated mothers. In the schools, social workers can promote sensitive environments where counseling opportunities can facilitate a child's healing. In discussing students' unique concerns, social workers can tailor intervention approaches to meet the needs of this special population. The dilemmas of these children should be addressed differently from those of a child suffering from divorce or the death of a parent. School social workers should also serve as a resource, connecting the child with appropriate services in the community. In addition, social workers can also facilitate awareness of these issues among other school staff, such as teachers, counselors, administrators, and other students.

As greater numbers of economically disadvantaged parents experience incarceration (Watterson, 1996), it is important to increase the dialogue concerning the many issues that contribute to disadvantage and incarceration.

Academia should promote the study of imprisonment through a more comprehensive curriculum. Research should continue to investigate the rise of incarceration, examining the impact of this trend on families and communities. The prison industrial complex must also be evaluated, especially with respect to how it affects the social work discipline.

Along with promoting awareness, social workers should expand their advocacy efforts to include participation in programs that facilitate visitation between children and their incarcerated mothers. The need is great. A recent study by the San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents reports that when “the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted its own survey, 54 percent of mothers in state prisons reported never having a single visit from their children” (2003, p. 32). One promising effort is run by the Children with Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP) at the New York City Administration for Children’s Services. CHIPP administers a program that enables children in the foster care system to visit their mother’s incarcerated at the Riker’s Island Women Facility. The program is run by social workers who also offer counseling services to the visiting children and their mothers. Programs such as these are extremely important for counteracting the effects incarceration on children. Social workers can play an essential role in addressing these issues.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY IN PROMOTING CHANGE

Like social work, public policy is essential in promoting change. Current laws and policies, such as the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), must be challenged. ASFA gives states the authority to begin terminating parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 out of the past 22 months. For children under 3 years of age, states can begin the termination proceedings after just 6 months (San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, 2003). With the average term for state prisoners being 2 and a half years, it is evident that this adoption policy creates requirements that are problematic for many incarcerated mothers to meet (San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, 2003). Even if a mother is released before the termination proceedings begin, she must meet the requirements of a reunification plan. Such a plan requires her to complete a drug treatment program and secure a stable residence within the time the time regulations (San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, 2003). Under the new welfare reforms, any individual with a felony drug conviction is ineligible for benefits, including housing (San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, 2003). This diminishes the

chances of meeting the requirements. While these conditions aim to create a stable and secure environment for the child, they can be difficult to satisfy within the inflexible time frame. This rigidity, in turn, perpetuates an additional form of punishment; incarcerated mothers do not receive the opportunity to prove themselves capable of regaining custody of their children.

Concerns have been raised regarding whether some incarcerated mothers, such as those convicted of murder, pose a threat to their child's well being and, thus, should not have visitation rights (Watterson, 1996). Kathryn Watterson (1996) reports that while nonviolent drug offenses make up the largest proportion of crimes committed by women, 30 percent of incarcerated women do get charged for committing violent crimes. Among women incarcerated for violent offenses, 66 percent knew the victim. It is also noteworthy that a study reported by Watterson (1996) finds 90 percent of the women imprisoned for murder in New York State murdered men who had long histories of abusing them. Because the vast majority of incarcerated women commit crimes as a result of defending themselves or their children from a paramour, husband, or ex-husband (Watterson, 1996). Thus, it is important that murder cases be examined on a case-by-case basis in order to understand the specifics of the crime and the appropriate punishment. Murder should not be the determinant for eliminating visitation rights; these cases should be examined individually.

More programs are needed to provide consistent visitation. While programs such as these have been created, they are too few in number and too limited in scope. Programs such as Mothers and Their Children (MATCH) aim to bring the child and mother together every weekend and holiday in a nonthreatening, somewhat jovial environment. Prison MATCH volunteers use facilities in San Francisco County Jail No.7 to create a nursery school. Similar centers are present in 14 facilities across the country, providing comfortable, toy-filled environments in which mothers and children interact (Huie, 1993). The Prison MATCH program in North Carolina also offers visitation between mothers and their children. They have an 8-week parenting skills class, in which incarcerated mothers discuss relevant issues, such as conflict resolution, the substance abuse cycle, and prenatal and infant care (Prison MATCH of North Carolina, n.d.).

Another creative initiative is The Girl Scouts Behind Bars program. This endeavor unites children with their incarcerated mothers on a weekly basis to engage in activities reminiscent of a Girl Scouts model. Activities focus on arts, crafts, math, sciences, fitness, and health, as well as on more important topics, such as self-esteem, drug abuse, and relationships (Moses, 1995). Programs

such as these try to ameliorate the circumstances of both the mother and the child. Such programs recognize that these inmates are also parents. More of these programs are needed if the relationships between children and incarcerated mothers are to be saved.

In addition, policy changes should be sought through greater advocacy and the creation of broad coalitions. For example, the Illinois Task Force for Children of Prisoners, Children of Promise has brought together administrators from the Illinois Department of Corrections, faith-based organizations, substance treatment facilities, skills development and job training programs, and child advocacy organizations. The coalition discusses the needs of these children and the ways to create policy alternatives. Their mission, as stated by Lydia Watts of the PUSH Coalition, “is to prevent the harm done to children by parental incarceration, and promote healthy relationships between children and their parents through implementing policies and providing needed services and programs” (personal communication, November 21, 2003). More such initiatives are needed to promote interagency cooperation on these issues.

In the efforts to raise awareness of the problems facing children of incarcerated mothers, dialogue must focus on transforming theories and suggestions into practice. Poor families of color are disproportionately affected by this mass incarceration and separation. The family structures disrupted and the emotional bonds severed are primarily those between impoverished mothers of color and their children. If the effects of such separation are not addressed in this population, they may have a detrimental impact on the quality of our society as a whole. It is crucial that the psychological, social, biological, and cultural aspects of incarceration be understood. The impact of incarceration on the bond between parent and child must be elucidated. So too, the role of social work and public policy initiatives will also be essential. This process of change will be challenging, but the task is both imperative and promising. ■

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