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Holly Hernandez
Portland State University

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The Invisible Victims: Children of Incarcerated Mothers

by

Holly Hernandez

Faculty Mentors:

Patti Duncan and Carol Morgaine

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The Invisible Victims: Children of Incarcerated Mothers

HOLLY HERNANDEZ
PATTI DUNCAN, FACULTY MENTOR
CAROL MORGAINE, FACULTY MENTOR

Abstract

During the last several years the number of incarcerated mothers has steadily increased. Subsequently the number of children involved is also increasing. While substantial research has been done on the topic of children with incarcerated mothers, the voices of the children on the matter are often invisible from research. When a child's mother is incarcerated they are often placed into a relatives home, or into foster care. Children become vulnerable and many times do not know how to deal with these issues, and do not know how to express how they feel. Many times children are left to make sense of the situation on their own. The negative influences on children in regards to maternal incarceration are endless. The stories of how children of incarcerated mothers are affected by the matter need to be heard. Doing so may provide insight into how children deal with the issue of maternal incarceration, and what helps them, if anything, to overcome their struggles and address their feelings towards their incarcerated mother. Familiarizing ourselves of the struggles of children with incarcerated mothers may help in the development of more support programs that will ultimately make life for these children a bit easier to deal with.

Introduction

Currently, there are approximately 105,000 women in state and federal prisons (The sentencing project, 2004). Approximately 75-80 percent of these women are mothers (Beatty, 1997; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey 2001) to about 200,000 children under the age of 18 (Ascione & Dixson, 2002). This population is steadily increasing. Sadly, children who have an incarcerated parent are four to five times more likely to be incarcerated themselves (The Circle is round). The negative effects on children can be very detrimental. It is important that the influences on children be noted, and that support to these children continues to improve. Children are victims to their parents' incarceration, yet too often their voices are left out of the data. To date, very little has been done from the specific perspective of the children. Because it is imperative to listen to the point of views of children of incarcerated

mothers themselves, the purpose of this study is to get the perspectives of children on the matter of their mothers' incarceration. In doing this, my hope is to contribute to the existing research to better serve the needs of the children affected by maternal incarceration.

Literature review

This literature review will focus on three main areas:

1. Prison demographics.
2. Issues concerning children and their incarcerated mothers.
3. Effects of maternal incarceration on children.

Before looking at the ways children are affected by maternal incarceration, attention must first be focused on the demographics of prison systems within the U.S. It has long been known that our prison system has certain biases. It is important for this study to acknowledge those biases, as they are related to the incarceration of women. We can do this by looking at who is in prison, the duration of the sentence, and the crimes involved. Knowing who the mothers are will help us to see which children are being affected by this era of mass incarceration.

Prison Demographics

Many researchers, including Davis, 2003; Herivel & Wright, 2003; Reiman, 1990; and Bhattacharjee, 2002, have conducted research on the inequalities within the U.S. criminal justice and prison systems. They argue that there are great flaws in the way people are arrested, sentenced, and incarcerated. Also, studies indicate that our prison system works to further marginalize women, people of color, and people of low socio-economic backgrounds. (Davis, 2003; Herivel & Wright, 2003; Reiman, 1990; Bhattacharjee, 2002).

Although many people attempt to deny these biases, such biases cannot be denied when looking at data collected by the Sentencing Project in 2004, which documents that people of color are highly over represented within our prison system. Nationally, the rate of incarceration by race is 6.04; meaning one white person is incarcerated to approximately six African-American people (The Sentencing Project, 2004). Such disparity is extremely alarming since African Americans make up only 12.3 percent of the U.S population (Census Data, 2000). The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001). It holds five percent of the world's population but 25 percent of all the prisoners in the world (Bhattacharjee, 2002).

As Reiman (1990) discusses, there are numerous explanations for why people of color and people of a lower socio economic background are over represented within the prison system. His argument lies within the idea that the majority of people of color are disproportionately poor, and therefore put in positions that differ highly from their middle-upper class counterparts. For example, a teenager may be more prone to getting into trouble based on their geographical location, as officers tend to patrol low income neighborhoods much more often than suburban neighborhoods. It can also be noted that the majority of incarcerated men and women live below the poverty level before incarceration. (Beatty, 1997; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001; Bhattacharjee, 2002; Schlosser, 1998). Thus, with officers placed more often in lower income neighborhoods, people from lower socio economic backgrounds are over-represented within the prison system.

Although the percentage of women incarcerated is relatively low, this population is growing at a faster rate than the entire prison population (Bhattacharjee, 2002). The number of women incarcerated increased threefold between 1985 and 1996 (Bhattacharjee, 2002). Women of color are also incarcerated at a much higher rate than white women. African

American women make up 48 percent in state prisons and 35 percent in federal prisons; Latinas make up 15 percent in state prisons and 35 percent in federal prisons; White women make up 33 percent in state prisons and 29 percent in federal prisons (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001). In the general population, African Americans (men and women) make up 12.3 percent of the U.S. population, people who are either Hispanic or Latino make up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, and White people make up 75.1 percent of the population (Census data, 2000). Bhattacharjee (2002) writes: “The two fastest growing incarcerated populations are women of color and immigrants of color.” (6). While women of color are highly over represented within the prison system, their children--children of color--are suffering. Also important to note is that mothers and fathers are incarcerated for different crimes; fathers are more likely serving time for violent crimes while mothers are more likely to be serving time for a drug-related crimes (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). The majority of women are serving a prison sentence because of a drug conviction or another nonviolent crime (Beatty, 1997; Bhattacharjee, 2002; Davis, 2003; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001). Drug convictions top the list of crimes women are imprisoned for, but strikingly, treatment program availability for incarcerated male and females has dropped by more than 50% since 1993 (Schlosser, 1998). With less treatment programs available, women, as well as men, are more likely to end up back in prison because of addiction, and away from their children (Schlosser, 1998).

The percentage of people incarcerated who are parents is an overwhelmingly high number. An exact number of how many people incarcerated are parents cannot be noted because there is no formal way to record this, instead estimates are available. Estimates say that about 75-80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers, and about 55 percent of incarcerated men are fathers (Beatty, 1997; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001). The extreme

difference that should be noted is that about 84.7 percent of mothers who are incarcerated had custody of their children prior to incarceration compared to about 46.6 percent of fathers (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001). The majority of people incarcerated are men, and therefore incarcerated parents are mainly fathers, but the number of mothers in prison has increased by 87 percent from 1991 to 2000, compared with a 60 percent increase for fathers (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003).

Issues concerning children and their incarcerated mother

An overwhelming number of children are being affected by parental incarceration. From the above statistics we know children of color are more likely to have an incarcerated parent; it is said children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be African-American (43%) than any other race (Wright & Seymour, 2000). Children of incarcerated parents were more likely to live with their mothers before incarceration than fathers, and most of their mothers (70%) were single mothers living in poverty (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2001). As mentioned earlier, exact numbers of how many children are affected by parental incarceration cannot be known because there is no formal recording system, but the U.S does rely on estimates. Estimates of how many children are affected by maternal incarceration are soaring at about 200,000 (Ascione & Dixson, 2002). The number of children with an incarcerated mother or father reached two million in 1997 (Census Data, 2000). Cunningham & Baker (2003) tell us that: “ In the United States, 2 of every 100 American children has one or both parents in prison in any given year, a number which has tripled in a decade.” (2). It is estimated that 42-46 percent of children who have a parent incarcerated are between 7-12 (Wright & Seymour, 2000). As the population of women in prison increases the number of children influenced will also increase.

When a parent is arrested the law does not require police officers to allow parents to make arrangements for a child. They may allow it, but it is not required (Resource Guide for Parents Incarcerated in Oregon, 2003). There are no social welfare policies for how to deal with children of incarcerated mothers when they are arrested (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Most often children of incarcerated mothers are placed with grandparents (Porterfield & Dressel & Barnhill, 2000; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). Children in these situations, who live with grandparents or another relative during their parents' incarceration, face additional financial hardships, especially when prior to incarceration, the parent had a steady income (Travis & Waul, 2003). Being placed with relatives as a permanent placement is desirable for many, but it does sometimes come with conflict. As Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2003) mention, additional financial difficulties occur when relatives make the effort to keep the incarcerated parent involved with the family. Costs such as legal fees, transportation for prison visits, personal items for incarcerated parent, and costs for the basic care of the children all have the potential to cause financial problems for the relatives caring for the children of the incarcerated parent. When children are not placed with a grandparent or other relative they become part of the foster care system. In Oregon, incarceration or passage of time are not reasons enough to terminate parental rights, even if the child is in foster care. If the parent does not make an effort to find a permanent placement, or does not remain in contact with the child, rights then can be terminated (Resource Guide for Parents Incarcerated in Oregon, 2003). In the U.S. the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 pushes states to file a petition to terminate parental rights if a child has been in state care for 15 of the last 22 months (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). This would be a traumatic experience for children of all ages. Children are often blind to the wrongdoings of their

parents. It is difficult for children to understand why they will not be allowed to live with their parents even after their parents are released.

Although there is much research on children of incarcerated parents, little has been done specifically from a child's point of view (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Typically, studies that have been conducted are done in an attempt to find the impact of paternal incarceration on children. Interviewing the incarcerated parent on how they feel their incarceration has influenced their child is what the studies have typically focused on. Few studies focus on the perceptions of children. It is important to focus on children because often they have very different perspectives on how their parent's incarceration has affected them. With so many children influenced, their voices should be central to the discussion.

Effects of Maternal Incarceration on Children

Many researchers have noted the long list of negative effects on children with incarcerated mothers, effects that can last a lifetime. Parental incarceration has been said to negatively affect emotional, social, physical, behavioral, psychological and cognitive development (Bloom, 1993; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Porterfield et al, 2000). As Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2003) mention there are certain things that should be looked at when determining how parental incarceration will influence a child. First, it is important to recognize the different relationships the child has with other family members including extended family. The stronger the relationships, the better off the child will be. Second, the child's developmental stage or age at the time of parental incarceration must be noted, as this plays a large role in how child will react. Third, it matters whether or not it is the mother or father being incarcerated, as it has been noted that separation from a mother has different effects on a child than separation from a father. Lastly, we must look at

the support networks available to the child, and to the family that is caring for the child while their parent is incarcerated. Every child will have a very different experience based on the things noted above with age, race, socio-economic status, and family support all being the determining factors to how a child copes with their mother's incarceration.

As I mentioned above, Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2003) suggest that children with positive family and community support are much better off as far as coping with the negative effects of parental incarceration than those who do not have the support. Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2003) also note that developmental stage is crucial when predicting what outcome parental incarceration will have on the child. Porterfield et al. (2000) suggest children under two years often face problems with emotional and intellectual development especially if it affects their bonding and attachment to a parent; children aged two to six often become confused as they cannot fully process the situation, they may have feelings of abandonment. Children between seven to ten often have trouble articulating their feelings and have trouble getting along with peers in the face of their parents' incarceration; early adolescents age 11-14 usually begin to internalize the issue, and may reject rules and authority. Finally, children in their late youth into early adulthood may have negative attitudes towards law enforcement, and may even begin to get involved with criminal activities themselves (Porterfield et al. 2000).

As mentioned before, the majority of children live with grandparents or other relatives during their parent's incarceration. While this may be desirable, many children still face negative consequences due to their parents' incarceration. Starting with the arrest, approximately one in five children witness their mothers' arrest. Of these children half are under age 7 (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). When children were interviewed after witnessing this traumatic event they reported having nightmares and flashbacks of the arrest

of their mother. Children are often left with little or no idea of what will happen to them or their parents (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Porterfield et al, 2000). Some long-term effects on children due to parental incarceration are: familial instability, poverty, child abuse/neglect, poor parenting, marital conflict, and parental absence (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003).

Children are often left out of the discussion of why their mother is in prison and how long she will be there. Many children never visit their mothers, usually because of the location of the prison (Bloom, 1993). This can create even more resentment towards their mothers. Bloom (1993) also mentions that many children face a feeling of abandonment, especially when they are unable to visit. It is estimated about 23 percent of women have no contact with their children for the entirety of their incarceration (Johnston & Carlin, 2001).

Methodology

This section will discuss the methods used to collect data. It will also discuss the obstacles faced while conducting research.

This study uses a qualitative approach to gather children's perspectives of how their mothers' incarceration has influenced their lives. I will use the children's stories of lived experience for the basis of my research. Initially I planned on interviewing both mothers and children in hopes of finding out exactly how children of incarcerated mothers are influenced. However, I realized the perspective of incarcerated mothers on how their children are impacted by their incarceration may be somewhat distorted because they are not getting the entire picture of how their children are being impacted. For this reason, and because of time constraints I chose not to interview incarcerated mothers, instead I interviewed 5 children who have incarcerated mothers. I assume these interviews, and the

writing of this paper will help give a voice to a population that has had only minimal exposure.

Participants

A local program I volunteer with, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, that takes girls 5-17 into correctional facilities to spend a couple hours every other Saturday of activity time with their mothers provided me with an entry into the lives of many children who have mothers in prison. The director of this program assisted me with choosing the girls I would ask to interview, the boy I asked was a sibling to one of the girls in the program. I feel the perspectives of these children are important because they need a voice in all of this, and two, because perceptions are beneficial in finding any underlying problems. I interviewed four girls, one boy, and a staff member who has worked with children of incarcerated parents for years. The children all have had very different experiences; age, race, socio-economic background, and living arrangements of the children all vary.

Setting

With the exception of the staff member, my interviews took place at the homes of the children. I found that to be easiest both for the children and myself. I was required to get consent from parents/guardians, so visiting them at their homes permitted me to get consent from their guardians in a much more convenient setting.

Difficulties faced throughout study

One thing that caused a bit of a problem from the beginning was getting the consent forms filled out by the incarcerated moms who still had legal custody over their children. To

satisfy the human subject requirements, I needed consent from them (the incarcerated mothers holding legal custody), as well as their temporary guardians. This meant I needed to get the forms into the correctional facility, a task that took some time to gain approval from the correctional facility.

Initially when I brought it up to the girls, and the moms, some of the incarcerated mothers were concerned that I was trying to pin point the flaws of their decisions that landed them in prison. I assured them that my intentions were only to get the voices of their children out so that the affects of maternal incarceration could be better known, and so that better support could be targeted toward their child's needs. Most of the mothers understood and thanked me for my efforts.

Getting a hold of the girls is a typical problem we have with the program I volunteer with, so I was expecting it would not be the easiest thing to get in touch with these children. As the children move around, it does get pretty difficult to stay connected from week to week. I had some difficulty, but was able to get current numbers for all of the children.

Throughout my research I have had conflicting thoughts and emotions. As a volunteer for this program, working with these girls, they want us to be there for the girls, for the moms, but then when the day is over we are to leave it at that. For me, it wasn't that easy. Especially after really getting to know these children. I found it extremely difficult to just leave my feelings at the volunteer site, or at the place of my interview. While listening to these children, I wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. I went from excited for these children to outright irritated at what these children had been forced to go through. I was amazed at the resiliency of all of them. I have celebrated with these children, and have been sad with them. I can't keep myself from thinking about these children once I go home; I guess that may be something that has come up as somewhat of a difficulty for me. It is hard

for me to limit my research to a page number, there is so much to be said, so much to learn. This is a personal difficulty I will have to overcome.

Tools for collecting data

Interviews, and observations will all be used in collecting data. Like mentioned earlier, interviews are mostly taking place at the participant's home. The interview with the adult that directly works with children of incarcerated parents took place at Portland State University. The questions asked are listed below.

The child interview questions:

1. How has your life changed since your mother went to prison?
2. How do your friends react? Does that influence how you feel about the situation?
3. What have been your major challenges?
4. If you could do anything with your mother today, what would it be?
5. Do you have any suggestions that may help someone in a similar situation?

The adult interview questions:

1. In your experience, what are the different ways that the everyday lives of children 4-17 are being influenced by having an incarcerated mother?
2. What are some of the deepest concerns, from your perspective, of children with incarcerated mothers?
3. Assuming that having an incarcerated mother deeply influences the daily lives of children, what are some resiliency factors?
4. How often are children resentful towards their mothers? How does age play into this?

5. How are children treated by their peers when peers have knowledge of a child's incarcerated mother?
6. What are some of the main problems children face socially? Emotionally? Physically? Academically?
7. How does living arrangement (foster care vs. relative) play into the child's general attitude towards their incarcerated mother?
8. What programs are available to these children? Are they helping? In what way? Do you have any suggestions for the betterment of support programs?

Observations

In my situation I feel observations are extremely beneficial. While working with this group of girls in the program I volunteer with I have experienced numerous situations in which I was able to observe the relationships of the girls and their incarcerated mothers. Through the interviews with the boy and girls, and while working with the girls in the context of the program I volunteer with I feel I've been let into a population of children many know little about. Observing while I volunteer allows me the opportunity to watch these mother/daughter interactions as an insider. The mothers and daughters know me, so they are not nervous, nor do they look at me as an outsider. With this I have been able to see a truth in their lives, I can see the real interactions between these women and their daughters, because I am there as a mentor and as a friend, not just a researcher.

Profiles of participants

Due to the high degree of sensitivity of this population ages, names, specific situations/experiences, and specific living arrangement have all been slightly altered to

prevent identification of the families interviewed. Common problems and general issues faced by children with incarcerated mothers will be outlined in my results. Suggestions the children had/have will also be included.

I was able to interview four girls and one boy. The four girls, whom will remain nameless, range in age from 11-15, the boy is 10. Two of the girls are African American, one is bi-racial (African-American/White). The last girl is Mexican. The boy is also bi-racial. Two of the girls live with their fathers, and two live with relatives. The boy lives with relatives. All but one of the children lived with their mother prior to her incarceration.

I also interviewed a woman who is part of the staff with the local program I volunteer for, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars. Interviewing her gave me the perspective of an adult that these children know and trust.

Results

The staff member I interviewed has worked with children with incarcerated mothers for several years now, and has worked in the context of this program for two years. She feels that children in situations where their parents are incarcerated need support programs so that they can heal; also she feels it to be very beneficial when children are able to maintain the relationship with their incarcerated mother. The interview that I conducted with the staff member provided me with the basis for my interviews with the children. The issues she was able to outline assisted me with creating questions that would best reflect what I wanted to find out. Her input also helped me to come up with the major themes for this section.

As I conducted my interviews, there were many similarities with the answers the children gave. Many of the children I interviewed are facing similar issues so I will base my results on the following four themes:

1. Social Influences at School, and with Friends.
2. Living Situation.
3. Missing Mom
4. Nobody to Listen

Social Influences at School, and with Friends

Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2003) have said that children go through getting teased and ostracized by peers at school because of their parents' incarceration. My findings were similar. All of the children had stories to tell about being teased, or losing friends. When asked how their friends reacted, one girl replied: "My friends were like: I saw your mom on the news, what did she do?" Another girl replied: "They were like oh! Some of them didn't care, but some of them wouldn't or couldn't talk to me, because their parents wouldn't let them." Like this girl, other children also said that there were times when their friend's parents restricted their friends from hanging out with them. The boy I interviewed told me that he went from being liked by everyone to having only one friend. He stated: "I went to school after my mom went to jail and everyone knew about it, they didn't want to talk to me anymore, they thought because she messed up that I was bad too." Most shocking to me was that many teachers did nothing to conceal the fact that a student had an incarcerated mother, and would in some instances speak openly about it with the student inside the occupied classroom. One girl told me that her teacher repeatedly would tell her to do her homework and mind so that she did not end up like her mother. One girl stated when referring to her teachers: "They think I'm a bad kid because of what my mom did".

Many would agree that a huge part of growing up is social interactions, peer-to-peer relationships. These children are often judged for their mothers' mistake. For these

children social life became very negative with their mothers' incarceration. As one girl put it: "My best friend since elementary started telling everyone, my best friend let me down, she was the only one I could count on, now I don't really have anyone, besides my family."

Living Situation

Children with incarcerated mothers tend to face a larger disruption in living situation than do children with an incarcerated father because children are more likely to live with their mothers (80-85%) prior to incarceration, than their fathers (5 in 10 children live with fathers prior to incarceration) (Wright & Seymour, 2000). Not to say that children with incarcerated fathers suffer less, just that when it comes to living arrangements, the disruption is greater when it comes to incarcerated mothers.

Luckily for the children I interviewed all of them were able to live with a relatives rather than go into foster care. The girls residing with their fathers expressed a couple main challenges with their situations. Both girls did not live with their fathers prior to their mothers' incarceration, but were put into their fathers care when their mothers were arrested. Both girls expressed to me that the biggest difficulty for them is that there is no women around to talk to about girl issues. One girl said: "She's not around to teach girlie things, she can't help with homework, my dad doesn't know that kinda thing, and I can't just call her whenever either. Also my dad doesn't cook, so we eat out too much." Both girls are not very comfortable discussing issues such as menstruation, and boys with their dads. Another girl said: "I barely know my dad, I'm just getting to know him, but talking to him about girl things would be like talking about it with a stranger, I don't want to do that, my mom should be here for these kinda things." Overall both girls did say that it was better living with their dads than having to go to a complete stranger.

The other three children I interviewed all lived with relatives. One of the girls expressed how hard it was living with so many other people. She stated: "One of the biggest challenges for me has been moving into my auntie's house. All my little cousins are always around, I feel like I don't even have the space to think, it's a lot different from living with just my mom and my brothers". The boy also was concerned with no longer having his own space: "It's hard now because I don't even have my own room, when I get angry I have no where to go let it out." One girl I interviewed has lived with her grandparents since birth, she feels comfortable in her home, and with her relationship with her grandparents. She stated: "I've lived with them (her grandparents) for as long as I can remember, they're my parents, my real mom is my parent too, but in a different way, I'm glad I could live with my grandparents, some kids aren't so lucky." These children have had disruptions with their living arrangements but they mostly consider themselves lucky, as many of them know someone in a harsh foster care environment. They are all glad that they are with family, that they are loved, and that their caretakers let them visit with their mothers.

Missing Mom

Like mentioned previously, it is a challenge for the girls to not have their mothers around to discuss girl issues, One girl stated: "I know she'll be out when I get married, so that makes it not so challenging, but not having her around when I need her now is really hard." The boy I interviewed expressed a deep sense of loss when talking about his mother's absence. He stated: "Everyone thinks boys are tough, my sister gets to go see my mom all the time with Girl Scouts, I never get to do that, I'd really like to do those activities with my mom too, just to see her you know." Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2003) have said that the effects of incarceration are dependent on gender, in a way that boys tend to externalize

their feelings, while girls tend to internalize them. I did see a bit of this, as the boy I interviewed did tell me that he often got so mad that he wanted to hit things, and the girls I interviewed seemed to be depressed or anxious more than anything. Although true in some instances, one of the girls did tell me that she often gets in physical fights at school, and the boy I interviewed voiced his feeling of depression at times, so the generalization is not true in all instances. In whichever way the children chose to demonstrate the stress of the separation from their mothers they with no doubt missed their mothers, all for different reasons, and all demonstrated those feelings in different ways. One girl stated: "I miss my mom so much sometimes that I just want to go to sleep so that I might dream about her" another girl said: "I hate waiting, constantly for my mom to call, but I always wait because I miss her so much, and I only see her a couple times a month".

All of the children, when asked what the biggest challenge was, expressed that not having their mom around was by far one of the biggest challenges. Many of the children expressed that they missed their moms so much and said that if they were given a day with her, they'd just want to talk to her, hug her, and love her. When asked what she would do with her mother one girl said: "Just hang out, I miss her so much thats all I'd wanna do, maybe watch movies too, but most of all just talk about things I could never talk about over the phone because the calls are all recorded, and I don't want to reveal my personal stuff to the world." Another girl said: "I'd go to the beach with her, rent a sweet, ride horses and talk, talk all day, cuz there is so much to talk about.." The boy I interviewed stated: "I'd just want to go eat with her or something, so I could talk to her again by myself, and get to know her again." It is apparent that these children miss their mothers very much. They may miss them in different ways, but it is clear that they feel the pain of separation from their mothers.

Nobody to Listen

My intentions for this study were to make sure that the voices of children were clearly heard. It is my understanding that although there may be a substantial amount of research on children with incarcerated parents, few have interviewed children on their perspectives of the matter. Some of the children I have interviewed told me that no one listens to them, that they were not asked if they wanted to attend support groups, or counseling, they were just put into those situations. I feel children are valuable people in our society, as they will be the adults of tomorrow. I feel it is never too early to let children speak for themselves, permitted they have positive guidance. I am dedicating this section to the children I interviewed, and to children who other people took the time to listen to.

One of the questions I asked the children was to provide some sort of advice to others in a similar situation to their own. They were all very excited about this question, as they are rarely asked to give advice, as the experts. This is what they said: “That it is hard people are going to make fun of you and wont be able to talk to you but you will get threw it.” another said “My advice is to go see her (your mother) every second you get, because time is precious. Love her; pray for her till she gets out. Stand by her, and be strong.” Some one else said: “I would say just to stay strong, and talk to somebody if you can, if you can’t writing really helps.” Another child said: “Just to realize it is not your fault, your mother does love you, and just to keep living your life, don’t put it on hold.” The last child stated: “Don’t forget her, she may have made a mistake, but she wouldn’t forget about you if you made a mistake, treat her the same because I know that moms really love their kids.”

When asked what the ideal support program would look like for children of incarcerated mothers, one child replied: “It would be a bunch of people in similar situations, who are able to talk openly about their problems. It would be a place where everyone can be

comfortable and not feel stupid or bad for what their moms did. It would be people that you get to know in a loving setting.” Another child replied: “Um...It would be a bonding time and you could do things together with your mom and just be able to spend time with other kids in the same situation and have time to talk with your mom and the other kids, and just to spend time with your mom.”

The following is a poem from the anthology *I Touch Your Face In MY Dreams* (2004) done by an eight-year-old girl:

“When I visit my mom I feel very happy. When I heard my mom was in prison I was crying. It took 1 year until I could see my mom because I can’t see her because she had drugs in her purse when we got in a bad car accident and me and my brother were hurt badly. I’m going to visit every two weeks. It’s been really hard for me. Sometime I get angry. When I started visiting my mom I meet other girls like me and it made it easier for me and it changed my life.”

Future Research Ideas

I feel like this study gave me the opportunity to get a taste of what it is like to do research. Through out this study many questions have come up that would be good for future research. For my study I wanted the voices of the children, this though, made it difficult to see how their behavior may have changed as a result of their mother’s incarceration. For future research it would be beneficial to interview teachers, and guardians that knew the children prior to and after their mothers’ incarceration to see what changes took place behaviorally. I would also like to find out some evidence of why children are affected differently dependent on their gender. I read into this briefly but for the future it would be something worth looking at deeper. For future research I feel it would also be

extremely beneficial to conduct a study with a much larger pool of participants, including interviews with children, incarcerated mothers, and caretaker families.

Conclusion

When a child's mother is incarcerated, the child is left as the invisible victim. The children have long been invisible to research. To make it so children are getting the support they need their voices need to be heard. I hope that this study provided a bit of insight into the perspectives of children influenced by maternal incarceration. In this era of mass incarceration, more and more children are going to continue to fall victim to this system. The more that is known makes for stronger support systems for these children, and therefore makes for stronger children. These children are tomorrow's leaders. For them to succeed, someone must understand their situation, take their hands, and walk with them to success. Prevention is the key. More support to these children will make for a better society for all.

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