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Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of parental incarceration on children, from the children's own perspectives. The sample includes thirty-four children interviewed regarding how having a parent in prison affected their family and peer relationships, school experiences, their reactions to prison visits, and perceptions of prison. The interviews explored both their challenges and their strengths. The children revealed a variety stresses around social isolation and worrying about their caregivers, but also demonstrated resilience in locating venues for support and self-sufficiency. Recommendations for policy, service, and community actions and interventions are presented.

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1. Introduction

As prisons nationwide fill to capacity and beyond, an ever-increasing number of children have an incarcerated parent and live with the consequences of that lost or limited contact with their parent (Travis & Waul, 2003). Their needs are not generally considered in the judicial process or sentencing guidelines, yet their lives are often affected by those decisions. Furthermore, as prisons become populated with larger proportions of ethnic minorities, the impact is disproportionately felt by families and communities of color (Mumola, 2000; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). There is also a price for the rest of society in terms of the monetary expenses of imprisonment and in public safety. This study was conducted as part of the collateral effects portion of the Minnesota Council on Crime Justice's Racial Disparities Initiative. Here the focus is on children with a parent in prison as told from the child's perspective, with an eye toward their resiliency as well as their challenges. This study is exploratory in nature, aiming to answer the following questions: From children's own perspectives, how has incarceration affected their lives, whether in a positive, negative, or neutral way? How have they coped with the incarceration? Where have they found support, if any?

Little is known about the impact of parental incarceration from the perspective of the children. The rare look into children's views exists largely in non-empirical venues such as newspaper accounts or support group websites. One of the more compelling efforts in this direction is a book by Nell Bernstein (2005) who presented their plight from the perspective of both adults and youth using her journalistic skills to share their stories. In the realm of research, however, the vast majority of studies have garnered information about children from adult sources, largely based on behavioral observations with little if any emphasis on the feelings, thoughts, and ideas formulated by the children themselves. With a burgeoning prison population, information is needed to understand not only the negative impact on the children but also existing individual and family assets that may shed light on how communities and service providers can capitalize on those strengths to alleviate some of the resulting hardships.

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2. Literature review

In the 1970s, the United States embarked on a “grand experiment in mass incarceration” that resulted in a fourfold increase in the rate of imprisonment per capita (Travis, 2004). The rate continues to increase, but at a slower pace in recent years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). As a result, there are over two million individuals under correctional supervision in both state and federal prisons, as well as jails (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). The racial composition of the state and federal prison population is grossly disproportionate; 44% of the prison population is African American and 35% Caucasian, while in the general population, African Americans make up only 12.8% and Caucasians comprise 80% (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; U.S. Census, 2006). The racial disparities are also reflected in parenthood among prisoners. African Americans are the largest group of incarcerated parents in federal and state prisons, 49% and 44% respectively. In Minnesota, the black-to-white imprisonment ratio is the twelfth highest in the nation, at nine to one (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005).

Many characteristics of the population of children with a parent in prison are still ambiguous due to limited research. Gabel and Johnston in 1995, in their book, *Children of Incarcerated Parents*, made an early attempt to comprehensively review and compile what was known to that date from the existing empirical research. While much was revealed about the issues the children faced from a variety of angles, some of the more concrete statistics regarding these children were unavailable. For example, accurate estimates of the number of children with a parent in prison were difficult to achieve because it was not required that prisoners release this type of information (Johnston, 1995). In the time since, many such questions remain unanswered or inadequately answered. Without a systematic way of documenting the number of children with an incarcerated parent, the precise number and rate of children affected is not known. However, it can be reasoned that as the number of inmates increases, the estimated number of children with a parent in prison likely increases as well. In 1991, 449,600 state and federal prisoners reported they were parent to a minor child and by 1999, there were at least 721,500 parents in prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). Counting the number of children by asking incarcerated parents still leaves some ambiguity. Some children maybe double counted when both parents are incarcerated, or undercounted when prisoners are asked if they have children but not how many or if they were adult children. Nevertheless, based on the parent information, it was estimated in 1999 that over 1.5 million children had a parent behind bars, as compared to 936,500 children in 1991. An estimated ten million children have experienced having a parent incarcerated at some point in their lives (Simmons, 2000).

In many cases, there are a host of family problems preceding incarceration, such as poverty, family discord, substance abuse, or other criminal behavior that led to eventual incarceration (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Phillips & Bloom, 1998). Adalist-Estrin (1995) noted that incarcerated parents are likely to have long histories of trauma and limited coping skills, hence finding it difficult to maintain relationships. Prison often diminishes these skills and creates or enhances estrangement between the child and the parent. Relationships may be further strained with awkward phone calls that consist of superficial conversations, avoiding painful or personal topics. The impact of the loss is also linked to how close the parent–child relationship was prior to the imprisonment. Edin, Nelson, and Paranal (2004) observed that among offenders with consistent contact with their child or their child's mother prior to incarceration, the event of incarceration yielded a pronounced negative effect on the incarcerated parent's relationship with the child and the child's mother.

Without access to their parent in prison, the children may face a rupture in the child–parent bond, enduring traumatic stress and inadequate quality of care which can, in turn, adversely disrupt child development (Johnston, 1995; Davies, Brazell, Vigne, & Shollenberger, 2008). Without intervention, children's responses to trauma, like fear, anxiety, sadness and grief, can be manifested in reactive behaviors such as physical and verbal aggression, withdrawal, hyper vigilance, or sexualized behavior. Reed and Reed (1997) summarized the plight of these children:

Minor children of parents under some form of criminal justice control are among the most at-risk, yet least visible, populations of children. Though rising incarceration rates suggest an increasing number of children who have lost one or both of their parents to incarceration, very little is known about this vulnerable population.

The risk of the children eventually being imprisoned themselves is well-documented but with widely varying degrees of severity. In a recent study looking it, 1,427 incarcerated parents with an adult child, 21% of mothers and 8.5% of fathers had an adult child who had been in prison (Dallaire, 2007). Because youth in the juvenile justice system are disproportionately likely to have a parent in prison, and a high number of adults in prison report having another family member who has been in prison, there is a great deal of speculation and concern that not only is there an intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior, but also that for children raised in high-crime neighborhoods, incarceration loses its novelty, or even worse, becomes a sort of badge of honor for some (Krisberg & Temin, 2001; Reed & Reed, 1997).

The duration and distance of the parent–child separation contributes to the impact on the child. In a surveyed sample of 12,633 state prisoners across the country, 54% of those with a minor child had not seen their children since they were incarcerated (Hairston, Rollin, & Jo, 2004). In 1998, the average length of sentence for those incarcerated in a Minnesota correctional facility was approximately 3.3 years and more than doubled that over the following five years, due in part to changes in sentencing guidelines (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2004). The developmental changes that occur over that additional five years of childhood can be monumental, further exacerbating the difficulties separated parents have in staying connected to their children.

The distance between a child's home and the prison is also a significant obstacle in the child's ability to visit their parent. Hairston et al. (2004) found that among prisoners placed within 50 miles of their homes, 46% had no visits, whereas, among those placed 101 to 500 miles away, 70% had no visits. Sixty-two percent of state and 84% of federal incarcerated parents are held more

than 100 miles from their most recent residence, often in rural settings while the prison population is predominately from urban locations (Mumola, 2000). For many families already living in or near poverty, the distance proves too large an obstacle in getting to visits. While it is rare to find much in the way of transportation aid for these families, in some states such as New York and California, when the child has been placed in foster care, there are policies in place requiring extra efforts be made to ensure the child visits their parent in prison (Genty, 1998). However, even when resources are available to transport the child for a visit, some families report choosing to avoid visitation because of sterile or uncomfortable visiting rooms, child-unfriendly visitation rules, or concerns that prison is not the right place for a child (Krisberg & Temin, 2001; Slavin, 2000). Moreover, children sometimes are affected by caregiver gate-keeping (Davies et al., 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005). For example, in their study of 40 incarcerated fathers, Roy and Dyson (2005) found that about half of the men reported that the mothers of their children actively discouraged their involvement.

While the risks are evident, what is not clear is the story from the other direction: how many children with a parent in prison do not end up in trouble with the law. For those children who do reach adulthood well-adjusted, it is yet unknown what makes them resilient in the face of all these adversities. Research on resiliency in children despite adversity they face sheds some light on this. There have been some seminal longitudinal studies on risk and resiliency that followed children through much if not all of their childhoods, and while not looking explicitly at parental incarceration, have examined overlapping risk factors such as divorce or separation from parents, poverty, and living in a high-crime neighborhood (Garmezy, 1993; Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Bermann, Ramirez, & Neemann, 1993; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). The maladaptive outcomes associated with these risk factors include of those sometimes seen in children of incarcerated parents such as delinquency, early alcohol use, poor school performance, and aggressiveness. Some of the key protective factors include social support from non-family members, positive parent-child relationships, religiosity, a positive sense of self, and other external support systems that may reinforce a child's coping efforts (Grossman et al., 1992; Jenson, 1997; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). We might expect to see some of these protective factors among children with incarcerated parents who do not later have negative outcomes. Because it is the negative outcomes that draw action, the protective factors may be overlooked. In the present study, we enter into it knowing risk factors exist among these children by virtue of the selection process. In light of that we aimed to hear from the children both the negative consequences of having a parent in prison and any positive experiences or attributes they might share.

With the vast majority of available information about children of incarcerated parents arriving filtered through the adults who may or may not reflect what the children actually experience and feel, this study tells a story that is not told elsewhere: how imprisonment of a parent affects the children left behind, as understood through the voices and perspectives of the children themselves and exploring not only what is failing in their lives, but how they survive and even thrive at times.

3. Methods

The present study was designed to elucidate the impact of incarceration on both children and their caregivers. Although we interviewed both children and their caregivers, in this article, we discuss only the child portion of the study; the caregiver perspective will be presented in a forthcoming article. The study used qualitative methods to capture the depth and breadth of each child's experience through in-depth in-person interviews with the children. The study design, interview process, questions, and interpretation of findings were conducted with the input of an advisory board comprised of representatives from criminal justice agencies, academic institutions, community organizations, parents who spent time in prison, and other members from the community who have been directly impacted in some manner by this issue.

3.1. Sampling

The inclusion criteria for children's participation were the following: 1) age 8 to 17 at the study start, 2) had a parent in prison when the study began, and 3) both child and caregiver were willing to participate. The participants were recruited through a variety of means including: 1) targeting neighborhoods based on maps of incarceration and reentry concentrations from the county community corrections, 2) reaching out to community organizations and programs that had contact with families with an incarcerated parent and were willing to share the study information with the families, 3) posting flyers at a wide variety of public places such as community organizations that serve children in general such as recreational centers 4) posting flyers in public places parents or families frequent such as grocery stores, laundromats, restaurants, and libraries.

Thirty-four children from twenty-one eligible families participated in the first round of interviews. Eighty-one percent were retained for the second interview and seventy-one percent of the original group participated in the third and final interview. Attrition was largely due to disconnected phone numbers and participants moving between interview times. The only formal decline to continue with the study came from a family that was no longer comfortable participating after the incarcerated father was released and returned home.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Qualitative open-ended interviews were conducted with each family over a period of 12 months. In recognition that the results would be largely unknown in this truly exploratory effort, we built into the design three waves of interviews to allow for follow-up and more in-depth investigation into topics the children raised on their own. The children were asked to share their stories and experiences on the impact of having a parent incarcerated. To provide some privacy, the children were interviewed

at the same time as their caregivers but in separate spaces. The interviews took place at a location selected by the participating family including their homes, public libraries, local parks, and the researchers' office. Because a standard interview procedure is unfamiliar and awkward for most children, the interviewers brought art kits so the children could engage their hands, avoid eye contact if they needed, and to help them feel at ease. Many of the children drew pictures and made clay sculptures while sharing.

The interviews were conducted by research assistants and trained interviewers who underwent extensive training before interviews took place. The interviews were semi-structured with pre-determined topics as guides and introductory questions to initiate the response, but allowed the interviewer to ask more probing questions to encourage the participant to present their story in more depth. Because each story was different, the follow-up questions varied to encourage the fullest possible responses.

The interview topics included 1) demographics pertaining to the child, caregiver, and incarcerated parent, 2) facts regarding the incarceration events, 3) perceived social, family, school, and personal changes that arose from it, and 4) coping mechanisms and support. For a small number of closed-ended questions, such as whether or not they visited their parent in prison, or what they understood the offense to be, we tallied and calculated percents. However, the substantive focus of the results is derived from the themes in their stories.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by an independent transcriber. A random subset of transcriptions were checked by the researchers for accuracy. The interview transcriptions were read by three independent reviewers. After each wave of interviews, they were analyzed for thematic content using a group process with the three reviewers. In this process themes were identified and then confirmed by identifying supporting evidence for them in the interview transcriptions. The results were then presented to and discussed with the advisory board and used to develop the subsequent wave of interview topics.

3.3. Limitations

This qualitative study is exploratory and intended as a starting point rather than an end point. The sample was not random and cannot be said to represent all children with incarcerated parents or even all the children in the metro area. While we opened participation to children of all ages, most of the children were 13 years or younger. It is possible, even likely, that the experiences of adolescents would reveal a different story than told here. Finally, only two of the children had a mother who was incarcerated so the views expressed are more closely linked to the experiences of children with an incarcerated father than with a mother in prison. What this study does accomplish is to offer a rare in-depth look into the thoughts and perceptions of some children with a parent in prison and provide some insight into directions for further research and actions.

3.4. Participants

Of the 34 children, 21 were boys and 13 girls, ranging in age from 8 to 17 years. Sixty-two percent of the children identified as African American, 19% as Native American, and 19% as 'white' or Caucasian. While the research team sought families with either parent in prison, all the responding families had a father in prison, and two also had a mother in prison. Their caregivers were all female relatives: mothers, aunts, and grandmothers.

The nature of the criminal offense that the parent was imprisoned for was asked of both caregivers and children. According to caregivers, the parental offenses were the following:

- 29% drug charges
- 15% robbery or theft
- 9% homicide
- 9% probation violation
- 32% mix of other charges (assault, sex offense, DWI, etc.)

The caregivers of 73% of the children stated that they believed the children knew what the offenses were. However, when we asked the children, 43% said they did not know. Another 38% said they were not sure or answered vaguely ("he did bad things," "he hurt someone").

4. Themes

There were five primary themes that emerged from the interviews. They are discussed here in detail, with examples provided in the children's own words. The themes were: 1) social challenges, 2) awareness and attention to adult needs, 3) the caregiver serving as a gatekeeper of the child–parent relationship, 4) conceptions of prison and feelings of fairness, and 5) resiliency.

4.1. Social challenges

Social challenges here refer to circumstances or factors that inhibit or interfere with the child connecting to those outside their families, having a sense of belonging to the neighborhood and community, or finding others like themselves. All the children faced social challenges arising from having a parent in prison. However, most also demonstrated their resiliency in navigating the difficult social situations they faced in school and their neighborhoods.

Contrary to the assertion that in some socioeconomic and racial groups, having a parent in prison has become normalized and even status symbol, (Hairston, 2002), none of the children in this study evinced any signs of this. The children in this study seemed keenly aware of negative assumptions that might be made about them because they had a parent in prison. Far from feeling normal, several children described facing the crossroads of deciding whether to reveal their situation or keep it private. One nine year old took the risk of being open about his dad:

Well, because you know how kids are? They like, oh where's your dad? We don't hardly see him as often. It's always mom picking you up. And then it starts...then I tell them well, he's in prison. And then they start being smarty pants, and then it turns into a whole conversation, and like, it takes me awhile to get the darn thing out of my head.

One young boy, when asked if there was anyone with whom he did not talk to about his dad, but wished he could, replied that he wished he could share with his friends, but was conflicted about it, "I just want to, but I just don't want them to know, so I don't tell them about my dad."

It is not uncommon for children whose parents are incarcerated to demonstrate a strong desire for privacy. In one study, professionals leading a support group for children of incarcerated parents noted that confidentiality was a central desire of the participants and that in casual conversation these children would go out of their way to avoid revealing the nature of their participation in the support group (Weissman & LaRue, 1998). Many of the children in the study indicated that it was important to keep one's family business private. This was a value that was strongly expressed by several of the caregivers and reflected in the children they cared for as well. A 12 year old, when asked if he told his close friend about his father's imprisonment said,

No, because I like to keep my business private. Sometimes I talk to her, sometimes I don't. I don't like to talk about my business because it's private to me.

It was striking that nearly all the children and youth understood their need or desire to reveal their secret with others and the risks associated with doing so. Another boy said that he never shared about his father's whereabouts because that was the family expectation. He said he would tell his friends "my dad was at work because my mom said I'm supposed to keep everything that she tells me and that my dad tells me to myself."

The importance of privacy was expressed the most among the older children and proved difficult to sustain. One teen shared about her privacy being violated after her school counselor learned about her father's imprisonment,

I went down to her office and my friends are all trying to look through the cracks through the door. And then she just started talking to me about it. And then I just started crying and I was really angry. Then I stormed out of her office and I just went and cried in the bathroom. And all my friends were like what's wrong, oh my gosh... If I was standing in the hall she [the counselor] would come up to me and ask 'so...how is you feeling today? How is everything going?' Right in front of everyone.

Once the secret was out, it could be difficult to control, as a pre-teen girl explained,

My best friend promised she wouldn't tell anyone but then she told the other three girls in our group, and their parents and then, like it got out of control and just, like everyone knew about it all of a sudden.

Some children sought others like themselves with a parent in prison. This was a delicate matter because it required one child to be the first to reveal their secret. About a quarter of them shared that they knew of other children with a parent in prison and had spoken with them about it. Some of them referred to that connection as a catalyst for a new friendship. One child remarked, "Well, my friend, his dad is in prison. That's why we're such good friends. Everything is so similar about us." Another remarked, "my best friend, me and her talk about everything and we talk about our parents... and my friend's uncle is in prison. We talk about everything."

One teen girl described it much like finding another family member. In middle school she had met a girl who expressed anger about her dad. Finally when asked directly why she was so angry, the girl explained her father was in prison. This sparked a friendship in which the girls shared their experiences, with the friend concluding, "oh my gosh, you're my sister."

Not all the children found this sort of connection and companionship. One child learned of another whose father shared a cell with her own father. However, the two did not get to know each other after that, or talk more of it, but rather seemed uncomfortable with that knowledge. The majority of the children, however, stated that they did not know others outside their own family with a parent in prison.

In light of the isolation felt by some of the children, we asked them who they looked up to or saw as a role model. Some did not have difficulty identifying someone, most often naming their mother or other close family members, even in one case the parent in prison. Almost none of the boys could name a male role model. Some struggled with this question and concluded that they could not think of anyone they looked up to in their families, neighborhood, or elsewhere in their lives. One child thought a long time and finally said, "I don't really have anybody to look up to. I have nobody to follow in their footsteps." Another child simply answered, "A role model? No one."

The children who suffered from social stigma and isolation were at times able to locate some supportive resources, but on the whole, they were without role models, unable to connect to others like themselves, or to find trustworthy people who would help them feel less marginalized in general.

4.2. Child's awareness of adult needs

The loss of a parent to prison may have the effect of an increased importance of the remaining parent (Hagen & Dinovitzer, 1999). The stresses faced by the caregivers as well as the incarcerated parents did not go unnoticed by most of the children. The children were remarkably sensitive to, and attentive of their caregivers' needs and emotions. Their concern often stretched simultaneously in two directions, to the caregiver and also the incarcerated parent. In situations where the caregiver had a good rapport with the incarcerated parent, this presented little conflict. However, when there was a strained relationship between the caregiver and incarcerated parent, the child sometimes faced the dual stress of worrying about both parents, while feeling pressured to conceal or understate the concern over the incarcerated parent.

Even when the caregivers shared in their interview that the children were unaware of their own strains, the children revealed that they were in fact keenly attuned to their caregivers' stress and often worked to ease it by taking on adult responsibilities. These efforts surfaced when we asked the children to share what they appreciated the most about their caregivers and what they would change, if anything. The children expressed a great deal of appreciation and gratitude for the caregiver's efforts in raising them in the face of challenges. The children were observant of their caregiver's emotions, reflecting their understanding of the caregiver's needs with precocious clarity and empathy.

While most of the children were very connected to their caregivers' emotions, there was variation in how vulnerable they felt. One young child expressed concern over the welfare of his mother. When asked what, if anything, he would change about his family, he replied, "Well, you know, I wish that she could, you know, she breaks herself a lot. I wish she wasn't as fragile." Similarly, an older boy was able to see past his mother's angry behavior and understand from where it stemmed,

My mom kind of got more aggravated and she started yelling more because she's so stressed out. I think [it is due to] finding out that my dad did all that stuff and that she wasn't able to stop it or do anything about it.

Some of the children fell into adult-like roles for the caregiver, the incarcerated parent, or both. Some explicitly saw the need to fill in the role of absent father while others took on responsibilities in a more subtle way. An eight year old assumed the role of protector,

I really don't really like to snuggle with my mom anymore, but I still love her a *lot* and if anything happened, like robbers came in the house, they would have to go through me first to get to her.

One set of siblings were permitted to go to their father's house between prison terms and care for him while he suffered from cocaine withdrawal. They went so far as to wash him, feed him, and do his laundry. A girl, after hearing reports from a friend who saw her father being arrested while looking thin and underdressed for the cold weather, asked her mother to buy him clothes and get him food. Worries about food and clothing were stated by other children as well. Several asked their caregivers if they could send their incarcerated parent socks, food, and other basic items to ensure their needs were met.

While it cannot be denied that the children's awareness of their caregiver and imprisoned parents' needs added additional stress in many ways, being tuned in to family needs and willing to assume more responsibilities has a positive side as well. For some children, it gives them a sense of purpose and ability to contribute something to the family. For others, it brings out a nurturing side of them. The information gained here, though, is that the children knew much more about what was happening, what was needed, and what caregiver and parent concerns were than the adults often realized.

4.3. Caregiver as gatekeeper of child–father relationship

Caregivers, whether they choose to or not, become gatekeepers of the child's relationship with their incarcerated fathers. Caregivers are in a pivotal position as they may facilitate a relationship between the children and their father, or prohibit it both in terms of direct communication between the two and in terms of how they talk about the incarcerated parent to the child. The children, in turn, are dependent on their caregiver's actions to nurture or inhibit that relationship. Either position may be healthy or not depending on the situation. In some cases, limited contact was the healthier choice as it protected the family from further abuse or other damaging consequences of various criminal activities, some of which involved maltreating the children themselves. We learned that even when a caregiver wished to remain neutral, she ultimately had to be involved, even orchestrate, the relationship because there was translating to be done on both sides. That is, the child depended on the caregiver to interpret the incarcerated parents' behavior, to explain nuances pertaining to prison life, or to even coach the child in how to communicate with the parent.

There was a great degree of awkwardness in phone communications and in-person visits which increased with the length of incarceration or distance between communications. We heard stories in which incarcerated fathers asked older children questions that felt babyish to the youth such as a reference to a cartoon the child enjoyed long ago, leaving the child embarrassed or frustrated. During visits it was not unusual for the father to want an enthusiastic or affectionate welcoming from a reluctant child. One father stormed away from the visit in anger when his young daughter would not give him a hug on demand. The child in this instance relied on the caregiver to help her understand why her father left during a rare visit.

Nearly all the children indicated that they wanted to maintain an active relationship with their incarcerated fathers, even when they held hurt, angry, or fearful feelings toward them. Much like divorced parents, the primary care provider has a great deal of influence over the child's perception of the non-custodial parent. However, this group of families differs in that there is a

stigmatizing event (incarceration and the charges that led to it) that must be explained, as well as externally controlled physical distance has been forced upon them, regardless of whether they find it appropriate or not. Contact, even when desired by all parties, was difficult at best because of transportation obstacles, visitation and phone regulations, and the child-unfriendly visiting spaces and rules.

When we asked the children about their contact and communication with their imprisoned parent, the caregiver's gate-keeping decisions were reflected in their answers. Some children were keenly aware of their caregiver's feelings about their father and internalized those feelings themselves. Others expressed knowledge of their caregiver's feelings but did not fully agree with or understand them.

One of the youngest children in the study did not know where his father was or even know what his father's name was, but maintained that he missed him. When asked why he did not see his father, he answered, "my mom don't like my dad." Another child whose mother was in prison told us,

I would like to see my mom more but my auntie don't like me seeing her...she's clean, but I don't know why my auntie don't want me seeing her.

One girl mentioned siblings on her father's side whom she rarely saw because of her mother's reluctance to sustain those relationships. She disclosed a plan to use an older sister on her father's side to slip her phone number to her father so that she could reach him,

My mom doesn't want me to give them [dad's side of family] my number. But I want to give it to them because they will give it to my dad and he can call me.

In some instances, the father had been violent or aggressive to the caregiver prior to imprisonment and the caregiver expressed intense fear around the impending release from prison. In these families, we saw the children's reaction to the caregiver's fear and anxiety. One boy described a time when his father had been released from prison for a short period,

Mom knew but she wouldn't talk to us because I think it scared her more. Because she was scared... sometimes she like shakes or she has tears in her eye, so we don't talk about it as much because it hurts her. He did really bad stuff to her.

When asked if he had seen his dad recently, he replied "Mom's too scared to even let us see him. Mom tells us that he's close to getting out."

Some children responded to their caregiver's fears by internalizing it themselves, even when they had very few of their own memories of their father. Often these children vacillated between feeling afraid and feeling the urge to protect their caregivers, the latter most often among boys. One child who had shared that he was afraid of his father was only a toddler when his father was incarcerated, but his choice of words regarding his own feelings were remarkably similar to his mother's in our interviews with her. When asked what he remembered about his father, he described his memories through his mother's stories,

I would try to protect my mom by pushing [dad] away [when they fought]. I didn't remember that. My mom told me I was always pushing him away.

Throughout the interviews, this child continued to express anxiety about his father's impending release and fantasies of protecting his mother throughout the interview. In his mother's interview, she had expressed a fear that the police would provide their address to the father upon release; the boy observed this as well,

I knew I was going to be scared when I grew up. And actually it scares me to even remember these things. I just feel scared because, you know, I know the cops wouldn't do this, you know, like tell him where we were, but if he were to find out then that would be bad because I think he would try to hurt mom again.

Another young child spent much of his interviews discussing his conflicted emotions about his fear of his father's release, yet simultaneous feelings of longing for him,

I don't know when he's going come out, but I know he's going get us. He probably... I think he's going to get a new house. We don't see his house though, but my mom wants us to have a person around, like my [maternal] grandma and stuff because she doesn't want us to... want us to like let him steal us. My [paternal] grandma thinks he wasn't bad... but he was bad. She says, 'don't worry' and stuff like that. But, my mom says he's going come out in a few weeks. Deep in my heart I miss him, but outside of my heart I don't. He's mean, mean, mean and my brother protect, protects my mom when he was in the protecting position. Well, least we got a picture of him. I really want to show you him.

The most common caregiver of children is their mother, who in turn, almost by definition, has a current or historic relationship with the incarcerated parent. This makes it nearly impossible for the caregiver not to have their own set of emotional reactions to the incarcerated parent that will influence how they handle the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent. The influence may unfold to be encouraging of a healthy child–parent relationship or not, but either way, what makes this situation unique is how dependent that child–incarcerated parent relation is on the caregiver's feelings and decisions.

4.4. Perceptions of prison and fairness in sentencing

Most of the children had not visited a prison. Fifty-seven percent said they had never visited their parent in prison. Another 14% were unsure, in part because the last visit was when they were a baby or toddler. Of those who had never visited, they cited three reasons for not visiting: 1) their caregiver did not want them to see the parent (30%), 2) the child did not want to see the parent while in prison (20%), and 3) they did not have either the necessary documentation for a visit or enough information about how to go about visiting (10%).

We asked them what came to mind when they heard the word, "prison." Most of the children answered immediately and assuredly as if this was a question they had previously pondered. Those who had visited a prison drew from their direct observations during visits. For these children, fear was a common theme. Some spoke of feeling afraid on the drive there. Others expressed fear of the other prisoners during the visits. One boy disclosed that he did not feel safe during his visits,

It wasn't safe there because there were a lot of people that just looked like, just looked real bad and this and that. There was a lot of arguing with other people.

Another boy's perception of prison centered around the security rules,

It's got a lot of doors you can't open. There's this desk with two guards. They call us over. And you can hug him [dad] and go and sit down. You can't get up, but if say you had to go to the bathroom, you can't go back in there.

A girl noted the physical appearance of prisons and how it must influence the mood of the place,

Well, you could tell nobody's happy there, because there's a lot more iron bars. When you're driving up you can see the windows cover the bars.

Children who had never visited their parents in prison had only their imaginations, their imprisoned parent's stories, or movie images to help them create a vision of prisons. They revealed a wide range of images of prison, from frightening to almost enjoyable. One child shared an image that he pieced together from nuggets of information from phone conversations with his father and his own imagination,

You have to stay in a cave. Metal doors and they are kind of like a stick, but it's metal. They have no bathroom. In their rooms, they just have a toilet. And they don't have no clothes to wear. They only have that orange stuff that they wear everyday. And they eat bad foods. And that's it.

Others imagined their father's actions, "[prison is] bad because I think he screams and yells so that he can get out." Another responded with hope, "He'll sneak out jail, like he said that he could, if they said that he could go on vacation then he'll just stay out." The perceptions were not always negative. Some imagined a more pleasant place,

"There is a gym there, and that there is a basketball hoop there. And fun stuff there. And yeah, they used to have a college."

Another responded,

"They have to do everything they ask you to do. They have cable there. And they get letters from people and Christmas presents."

Most of their perceptions made it clear that there was little opportunity for children to learn accurate and balanced information about what prison is like and what it is about. In the absence of information, children will turn to their imaginations.

Throughout most of the interviews, the issue of fairness around the parent being in prison surfaced. Many, though not all, of the children indicated they understood their father committed some type of crime and as a consequence had to go to prison while simultaneously sharing that they missed and loved their parents and did not want them in prison,

"Yeah...because he broke the law... I love him but it's fair."

Others were adamant that it was not fair because their parent, they argued, only committed a minor crime or that it was unfair because their parent was being taken away from their home,

I don't think it's fair, but he had to do it. [It is unfair] because they take him away from his family... he's not around his family and he just can't be able to walk out of the house and just be able to talk to his friends.

It was evident that this presented a dilemma for many of the children at a time when they were starting to recognize that there should be consequences to illegal behavior, yet those consequences also negatively affected them by denying them access to the parent they loved.

4.5. Resiliency and coping

Perhaps the most striking observation during the interviews with the children was their resiliency. Most did well at school, with several excelling beyond their peers. Fifty-three percent of the children described themselves as doing “well” or “really well” in school with most of the remainder doing, “okay”. One child was severely academically struggling. Only two of the children reported significant behavior problems at school, which was confirmed by caregivers, and one child had engaged in delinquent behavior.

Most of the children spoke of their lives in a positive light despite the adversities they confronted. On the whole, they spoke lovingly of their families and friends, described things they looked forward to or were excited about, and held a positive view, albeit not always realistically, about what their lives would be like when their parent was released.

Yet, all the children in the study experienced stress in one way or another as a result of having a parent in prison. For some, the imprisonment was a loss of an actively or at least partially engaged parent from the child's life. Others experienced it indirectly through the strain of their caregiver who lost emotional, financial, or other support. For a few of the children, the incarceration was the culmination of a string of dysfunctional behaviors that were already stress-inducing. Because these children are more likely to come from families and communities already struggling in other ways, it can be difficult to tease out what stress belongs to incarceration and what belongs to poverty or family discord, etc. Hagen and Dinovitzer (1999) discussed this in terms of a *selection perspective* which suggests that incarcerated parents and their children have differences from other families long before the incarceration and that the impact of imprisonment is critically linked to those differences. In the end, while it is difficult to ascertain what the additive effect of imprisonment is on what may already be a strained family situation, it is evident the children are in need of support.

We learned from the voices of the children themselves that have been shared here thus far that many of them struggled with feelings of isolation, anger, disappointment, and worry both directly and indirectly about the incarceration. This is the side of the story that is most often anticipated and consequently heard. However, there is another, equally important aspect of their stories and that is their resiliency. Some of the children had strong supportive people and resources to help them, an asset that is well-documented as important in later-life resiliency (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Even children who did not have another adult to turn to often sought or found creative venues to help them cope. The concern, naturally, is that if the resiliency of the children and their caregivers is emphasized too much, then the hard-won sympathy for these families will be at risk.

It was impressive how many of the children found healthy outlets for their feelings or creative coping mechanisms to get them through hard times. The most common way of coping was getting involved in activities like sports, theatre and church. This turned out to serve several purposes for the youth: 1) they were able to engage in something that built some confidence through new skills, 2) it was an outlet for anger or frustration, 3) it provided a focus beyond the stress at home, and 4) often it opened them to new opportunities for friendship. One youth explained it succinctly,

...I've been caught up in basketball and boxing. So, I haven't had no free time... it gives me something to do. It's a way to get out my anger.

Another child turned to theatre when news of her father's incarceration spread. Through theatre, she found a new group of friends who accepted and even appreciated her for what she'd experienced,

I have a lot of good friends and theatre is fun. And a lot of people talk to me now. Like at first, everything with my dad, someone found out and told everyone... and I was like ok, I don't care any more. But then, everyone started finding about that, [and said] 'oh well if you went through all that how are you so normal?'

Church and faith was important to many of the children. Church offered an immediate support group while their faith helped them feel that their struggles had a deeper meaning. One boy presented a particularly poignant parallel as he related his life to that of the Biblical character Job:

One that I kind of remember is the story of Job. Where God let Satan take things from Job... but Job never curses God. Job gives everything back tenfold. I'm kind of hoping that will fall through a little bit. I mean my dad being gone is something that's really good. And football is something that is really good. And I have a lot of fun at church and I have friends from there.

Others turned to prayer,

I pray. It helps me calm down, because I have to talk sometimes and I say a prayer and it just goes away or I start laughing. Laughing and laughing and I don't stop laughing, and then I forget about it.

Many of the children showed remarkable maturity for their age, for some, according to their caregivers, a function of having more responsibilities on their shoulders and of rising to the challenge of being more self sufficient. One adolescent youth shared how he looked to the future and an emerging sense of his own independence and power to help him cope,

I think I have learned to think for myself a little bit more. Because I did that [when dad was around] he would get mad if I didn't do what he told me to do. I don't think I am as afraid to do what I feel I need to do. Like college is coming up. I don't just want to do something because somebody else thinks it's good for me. I want to be able to do a job that I would want or something like that.

For many of the children, they simply needed a place or an outlet to feel 'normal,' that is some place where they fit in and could excel in a skill. Although not all the children found healthy avenues for handling their feelings, overall, they were remarkably creative and resilient. The children in this study were, on the whole, quite resourceful in finding healthy outlets to help them cope with the stresses they faced as a result of having a parent in prison.

5. Policy, service, and community action and alternatives

Addressing the needs of children with incarcerated parents may be best accomplished by both policy changes and community action. Recommended policy changes include instituting a plan for considering children's needs at the time of sentencing and changing prison visiting policies to be more child-friendly. Recommended community actions include efforts aimed at increasing public awareness, collaboration between services and agencies serving these children, and finding mentors for children during their time with an absent parent.

Adjusting judicial procedures is an important venue for change. Current judicial procedures do not typically consider children's or families' needs. Inserting consideration of children's needs in the form of a 'family plan' into the sentencing process is one way to address this. It could take the form of expanding pre-sentencing investigations to look at the family unit and the potential impact on the children and caregivers. It would establish a process in court or prison to review visitation and parent rights upon sentencing or arrival to prison facilities. Part of this would include considering the distance between the child's home and the prison when selecting the facility. On a broader level, there are currently efforts in the form of a Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents to move federal legislation forward that will protect the children. The Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice is one of fourteen partners across the United States working on this, focusing most of their energy to create arrest protocols that take into account children's needs, encourage family-friendly visiting policies, and develop training for police officers, schools, and correctional facilities to be sensitive to children's needs.

Perhaps the most telling and consistent issue for the children in this study centered around visits in prisons that have rules and physical space that are not conducive to children's needs, as well as obstacles to having visits at all for some of the children. Children will likely cause fewer disruptions in a setting that has toys or other activities for them to do with their parents, and with rules that recognize their needs such as physical contact with their parent and space to move in for younger children. Funding for a regular bus service that transports families to prisons for visits may accomplish two tasks at once: allow for more consistent parent-child visits, and provide an opportunity for families with parents in the same prisons to meet, communicate, and support each other. There have been some successful efforts in this direction. In Minnesota, the Council on Crime and Justice ran a family visiting bus to prisons until the funding was ended. Girl Scouts Beyond Bars helps girls in 17 states achieve weekly visits with their mothers (Block & Potthast, 1998; GSA, 2008).

Educating the public to increase awareness of the existence of children with a parent in prison and their needs may help reduce some of the isolating stigma as well open new resources. Many of the children in this study revealed an effort to keep their parent's incarceration secret and an anxiety about the secret being revealed. Some who found a way to share their secret learned they were not as alone as they had anticipated. The more that children and youth are educated on parental incarceration in general, the more freedom they will have to open up to each other and meet others in similar situations. Public education may lead to greater awareness which in turn may lead to more collaborative advocacy on children's behalf.

Education should not be aimed only at adults, however. All children need access to accurate age-appropriate information about their peers who have a parent in prison and, for those with a parent in prison, information that gives them more than their imaginations from which to draw their images of their parent in prison is necessary. For children who are about to embark on a first visit, it is imperative that they are given information about what to expect, the more detailed the better. If there are rules, such as how much they can touch their parent, they need to know this ahead of time. A description of the visiting process and space will help them to accurately visualize the impending experience and reduce unexpected surprises. Debriefing with children after visits will give them an opportunity to clarify anything they may not understand or have already misunderstood. Finally, education is needed for parents in prison that extends beyond discipline practices and basic parenting tenets to include information about child development to help them understand the changing needs of their children while they are gone.

Existing community services aimed at children can be tailored to meet some of the more specific needs of children with a parent in prison, or collaborate with other agencies. There is currently a new interagency initiative for youth announced by President Bush in February of 2008 aimed at supporting communities and organizations that serve youth, particularly at-risk boys, to "motivate caring adults to connect with youth in three key areas: family, school, and community" (Bush, 2008). Community recreation centers and other programs serving children, especially in neighborhoods with high numbers of incarcerated adults, may already be working with children who have a parent in prison. There may be opportunities here to reach out to children and families through support groups or special activities designed for them. Schools certainly encounter children with incarcerated parents and may be a neutral place for these families and children to meet each other and support each other, if the either school staff or other service providers were permitted to meet with families there.

More than offering a space to meet or formal support groups, community organizations can be encouraged to establish mentoring programs for children of incarcerated parents. The U.S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families currently funds some programs that serve children to target mentoring services toward those with a parent in prison. Examples of funded programs include Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), Girl Scouts, Volunteers of America, The Salvation Army, and other community-based programs (Mid-Atlantic Network, 2003). The BBBS located in the metro area of the children in this study is a grantee as well. BBBS saw that a large proportion of the children they served had a parent in prison and sought federal funding to develop a

mentoring program specific for this population of children. This is not without barriers. Any mentoring program needs mentors; they often have a shortage of male volunteers and of men of color in particular (BBBS, 2007). While existing mentoring programs are well established in these efforts, some possibly untapped mentor sources may include retired individuals with available time, corporate sponsors of mentoring, or college students.

Turning to the resilience seen in some of the children in this study, for many it was their faith in God that supported them. Engaging the faith community to specifically reach out to children with a parent in prison and their caregivers and give them a welcoming place to talk without fear of being ostracized may help reduce some of the isolation felt by the children as well as the caregivers. Finally, an overlooked mentoring resource is children themselves. Again, looking to their resilience, many of the children in this study were well-adjusted, well-connected, and were comfortable sharing freely with peers about their parents' incarceration. This is an untapped resource to other children. Some of the older children might be open to participating in a panel or group discussion with other less-connected children who have a parent in prison thereby bringing down some of the walls of stigma and isolation.

6. Summary

The impact of parental incarceration on children is a complex and delicate issue. For some children, the separation from their parent while incarcerated may be beneficial, as when the parent was a destructive force or otherwise detrimental to the child's well-being. For most however, it is vital to maintain the connection even throughout the incarceration. This study represents the opinions, thoughts, and experiences of a small group of mostly pre-teen children. Drawing conclusions from such a small sample of convenience should be done with caution. That said, their stories do offer some insight into the effect of incarceration on their lives and give some hint of directions that can be taken better meet their needs.

In general, a key to supporting children is supporting their parents and caregivers. We learned that all of the children in this study were keenly aware of their caregiver's stresses and many went to great lengths to alleviate them. Providing tools and support to help parents and caregivers cope emotionally, mentally, and financially may make these burdens less visible and overwhelming to the children. Caregivers specifically need access to information about helping their child cope with a parent in prison. As the children here revealed, when a child does not have adequate information about his or her parent, the child is left with only their imagination.

We also observed that many facets of the children's relationships with their incarcerated parents were heavily influenced or dependent on the caregiver. When prison visits are realistic and accessible, it allows the child and incarcerated parent to have a direct relationship rather than one filtered through the caregiver. The more direct communication a child has with their incarcerated parent, the less the caregivers must fill in missing details. A child who has more access to their incarcerated parent may have the opportunity to feel more connected and perhaps less worried about the parent. When incarcerated parents can see their children regularly, particularly in light of longer sentencing practices, the more they will be aware of their child's developmental changes and sustain a meaningful connection with them. Finally, when children can speak directly with, or see in person, their incarcerated parent, it gives them a more accurate understanding of what prison is about and what they can expect from their parent and the penal system.

The children in this study, by and large, were remarkably resourceful in finding outlets for their feelings and avenues to fit in with peers. Even so, some children remained isolated and fearful of social stigma. Children who do not have adequate coping mechanisms need more direct support such as a person they can talk with, or a support group. There are efforts to establish mentoring programs explicitly for children of incarcerated parents such as the 2003 federal grant program discussed earlier. However, while a number of mentoring programs are underway, there is still a shortage of African American male mentors who represent the greatest need, yet are in the shortest supply. In keeping with the notion that we can support children by supporting their parents, a mentoring program for caregivers may also be important, especially for those parents in need of an outlet to express their concerns other than in front of the children. The stories and experiences shared by these children only touch the surface of all they face and all they surmount. We have much yet to learn from them and hope that this is only the beginning of opening an ear to their perspectives and experiences.

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