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Mothers in Prison: Maintaining Connections with Children

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The significant increase in the number of incarcerated women ensures that many children must live without their mothers for some period of time. Women in prison were interviewed about their efforts to maintain relationships with their children. Mail and telephone contacts were more frequent than actual visits. Almost one half of mothers had never received a visit from their children. This article identifies challenges to the development and maintenance of contact between incarcerated mothers and their children. Recommendations are made for correctional agencies to enhance opportunities for incarcerated mothers to foster positive connections with their children.

KEYWORDS Mothers in prison, incarcerated women, female offenders, parent incarceration

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the needs of incarcerated women and their families have not been a high priority. The 1980s saw a dramatic increase in the number of female inmates, and the rate of incarcerated women began to rise faster than

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the number of male inmates. In 1986, 19,812 women were incarcerated in U.S. prisons, and this number increased to 38,796 by 1991 (Sabol, Couture, & Harrison, 2007; Snell, 1994). Each year has brought a steady increase, and today more than 115,000 women are incarcerated in state or federal facilities (West & Sabol, 2009).

Along with the significant national increase in female offender populations comes an increase in the number of children who have a mother serving time in a correctional facility. For example, in 2007, the national prison system held approximately 65,600 mothers who reported having 147,400 children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). This represents an 80% increase in the number of children with an incarcerated parent since 1991 and a 131% increase in the number of children with a mother in prison.

This article is part of a larger study released in 2008 by the Center for Women in Politics & Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston. This article draws on this earlier study to inform the criminal justice and social work scholarship on incarcerated women and their families. It examines the characteristics of a sample of mothers serving time in a state prison with a focus on relationships with their children. It also highlights the living situations of the children and the types and frequencies of contact between mothers and children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Incarcerated mothers face numerous challenges, even more than incarcerated men, when it comes to relationships with their children. Significantly more women than men are responsible for the care of their children prior to incarceration, and women have greater difficulty adjusting to separation from their children (Koban, 1983; Warren, Hurt, Loper, & Chuahan, 2004).

Women with children suffer more than men from the stigma of incarceration with a societal tendency to view women as unfit and indifferent mothers (Kauffman, 2001; Teather, Evans, & Sims, 1997). The difficult early life of many incarcerated mothers, coupled with their current circumstances, can often have a negative impact on a woman's self-esteem (Houck & Loper, 2002; van Wormer & Kaplan, 2006). When a mother is in prison, her difficulties can be exacerbated by the loss of influence in her children's lives (Halperin & Harris, 2004). Limited contact and few, if any, visits with her children contribute to stress (Houck & Loper, 2002; Warren et al., 2004). Adjusting to life without children is just one challenge of incarcerated mothers. They also may worry about the quality of care their children are receiving, whether they will be reunited as a family, and whether to share the reasons for their incarceration with their children (Houck & Loper, 2002).

Importantly, the status of "mother" offers incarcerated women the opportunity to think about a future with their children (Moe & Ferraro, 2006).

Prisons in many countries try to promote parent–child relationships whereas correctional policies in the United States do little to support mother–child bonding (Casey-Acevedo, Baskken, & Karle, 2004; Covington, 2002; Moe & Ferraro, 2006).

Law enforcement, courts, and child welfare agencies do not typically focus on meeting the needs of children of incarcerated mothers (Bernstein, 2005; Dallaire, 2007). The rights of women as parents are compromised when child protection and correctional agencies offer no assistance to mothers of children in foster care (Halperin & Harris, 2004). Shifting the focus away from reunification of families, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 placed priority on the safety of children with a history of abuse or neglect—a worthy goal. However, legal termination of parental rights for children cared for out of the home for 15 of the previous 22 months is required by ASFA (Luke, 2002). Women serving longer prison sentences may therefore not have the chance to work toward reunification. Research that highlights the negative consequences for children of women in prison is beginning to garner the attention of correctional and child welfare agencies and underscores the importance of identifying and serving children who have an incarcerated parent (Dallaire, 2007; Halperin & Harris, 2004).

Living arrangements of children are determined by whether it is the mother or father who is incarcerated (Sharp, Marcus-Mendoza, Bentley, Simpson, & Love, 1997/1998). In 2007, 1,706,600 children younger than age 18 had a parent in prison, representing 2.3% of the population (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In 2007, 147,400 children younger than age 18 had a mother in state or federal prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Almost 90% of the children were living with their mother prior to incarceration in 1991 (Snell, 1994). In 2004, this dropped to 46.5% of men and 64.2% of women in state prison who lived with children younger than age 18 before arrest or prior to incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). The majority of children went to live with their grandparents after their mother's incarceration. Krisberg and Temin (2001) found that children are 5 times more likely to be placed in foster homes when the mother is incarcerated than when their father is incarcerated. The majority of children not living with their mothers reside either with their mothers or grandparents after a father's incarceration (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2003). Not surprisingly, children of incarcerated women are at higher risk of placement in a foster home than children of incarcerated men (Hagan & Coleman, 2001; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2003).

Little research attention has been given to the effects of parental incarceration on children (Greenberg, 2006; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). The stigma attached to incarcerated parents is borne by their children as well, with the potential to cast a cloud over the children's future (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Travis & Waul, 2003). Anger, depression, anxiety, attention, and sleep disorders are some of the risk factors for children of incarcerated parent (Snyder, Carlo, & Coats Mullins, 2001). These risk factors can contribute

to behavior problems in school and poor grades (Sharp et al., 1997/1998). At greater risk for juvenile delinquency than other children, some of these children start on the trajectory toward their own incarceration in their adult years (Greenberg, 2006; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007).

There is no clear picture of the quality of care children receive while their mothers are incarcerated (Hagan & Coleman, 2001). Those children who have capable and loving caregivers while their mothers are incarcerated experience fewer behavior problems (Mackintosh, Myers, & Kennon, 2006). This positive experience may not be the norm. For example, Poehlmann (2005b) found that 63% of children had insecure relationships with their caregivers as well as their mothers. The quality of care given to children of incarcerated parents depends to some degree on sufficient financial resources. Caregivers may be less likely to receive financial assistance if they are relatives (Hagan & Coleman, 2001).

Limited contact with family members, especially children, during the time women serve long-term sentences may be contributors to behavior problems among inmates (Thompson & Loper, 2005). Long-term inmates may have more anger than short-term inmates who have the clear advantage in looking forward to returning to the community with their children and families. Longer sentences can put the inmate at risk of greater emotional distress, and there may be intense feelings about not being able to reunite with family and children. It is more of a challenge for family members, particularly children, to maintain relationships with incarcerated women when prison sentences are especially long.

There are important benefits to mother and children when regular contact is maintained (Poehlmann, 2005a, 2005b). Continued contact during incarceration can help ease the difficulty of parental separation for children. Child contact is associated with more responsible parenting, a challenge even under the best of circumstances (Supervised Visitation Network, 2002). A parent can lose motivation if contact cannot be maintained, and children may experience perceptions of the mother that are unrealistic or untrue (Johnston & Straus, 1999). If there is consistency in the parent-child relationship, the emotional bond can afford a sense of protection and security for both (Stern & Oehme, 2002).

National statistics reveal that 56% of mothers incarcerated in state prisons reported they maintained some form of weekly contact with their children; however, almost 58% of mothers never had a personal visit with their children after going to state prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). For mothers, frequent and flexible kinds of communication with children correlate with reduced parenting stress (Houck & Loper, 2002). Emotional and physical distress is more likely to be reported by mothers with limited or no contact with children. Communication with children can also help the adjustment of mothers in the community postrelease and reduce the recidivism rate (Adams & Fischer, 1976).

Not all women want custody of their children, and some acknowledge their children are better off living in a different situation. Child welfare professionals recognize it may not serve the best interests of children to visit their incarcerated mothers or make a reunification plan. This is a difficult issue because guidelines and policies are lacking for determining the situations in which children should be allowed to or prevented from visiting incarcerated parents (Greenberg, 2006). Child welfare experts are the most appropriate professionals to develop guidelines and must consider the abuse/neglect history of the child as well as the child's level of interest in maintaining parental contact.

Incarcerated mothers may want to see their children; however, they have little control over the correctional visiting process (Hanlon, O'Grady, Bennett-Sears, & Callaman, 2005). Correctional policies and staff determine the visiting rules and dress code, both of which can be complicated and perceived as demeaning (Aiello, 2006; Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 2007). Prison policies may actually discourage visits, creating an unpleasant and even intimidating environment (Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004).

Overall, there are significant impediments to support children in visiting their incarcerated mothers. The fact that there are fewer prisons for women than for men means that families may have to travel greater distances. Of course, difficulties in arranging transportation and lack of financial resources further reduce opportunities for visits (Christian, 2005; Thompson & Loper, 2005). Telephone calls therefore can take on more importance although phone communication can be difficult to arrange (Poehlmann, 2005a). Hairston (2002) found that households receiving collect calls paid 5 to 10 times the cost of a call made from a home telephone. Although visits and phone calls may be difficult, letter writing is likely to be easier and afford another opportunity for women to feel more competent as mothers (Tuerk & Loper, 2006). In addition to letters, mothers and children can exchange drawings or pictures.

Children's emotional reaction to incarceration can be tempered by maintaining contact with their parent, and research reflects that children can experience fewer problem behaviors and overall improved life chances (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004; Klein, Bartholomew, & Hibbert, 2002; La Vigne, Nasar, Brooks, & Castro, 2005; Sack & Seidler, 1978; Stanton, 1980). In reality, mothers, children, and other family members, all have the opportunity to benefit from this contact (Adams & Fischer, 1976; Hairston, 2002; Klein et al., 2002).

METHOD

The data reported here were collected as part of a larger study conducted from 2006 to 2008 by the Center for Women in Politics & Public Policy at the

McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. In June 2008, the Center released a report to the general public, legislators, and policy makers titled *Parenting from Prison: Family Relationships of Incarcerated Women in Massachusetts* that examined a broad range of topics including the experiences of incarcerated women and their families, custody arrangements of their children, correctional programming and innovative practices, preparation for release, and the special issues women in prison face when pregnant (see Kates, Mignon, & Ransford, 2008). This article takes as its focus the relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children.

From July 2007 to September 2007, interviews were conducted with 48 sentenced inmates primarily to collect information about mother-child relationships and opportunities for contact. Researchers drew a random sample of the sentenced population from the state prison serving women (Massachusetts Correction Institution at Framingham), and 35 women inmates were interviewed. Thirteen women from minimum-security/prerelease facilities were also interviewed. These interviews provided data about the lived experiences of female offenders and their families as well as insights about the complicated issues related to maternal incarceration and the challenges of parenting from prison.

Furthermore, five key correctional administrators at the state prison serving women were interviewed regarding their insights and concerns regarding incarcerated women's connections to their family members, especially children. Finally, the visiting records of the women were analyzed to document the actual number of visits by family members; visiting records kept by custodial staff were available for 26 of the 48 women interviewed in the study. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Correction.

FINDINGS

Profile of the Women

Demographic data were collected on the women including age, racial and ethnic background, education, and marital status (see Table 1). The average age of the women at the time of interviews was 36 years, and the average age at incarceration was 33. Seventy-three percent were White, 17% were Hispanic, and 23% were Black. Almost 44% of the women were never married, and only 21% were married at the time of the interview. The highest percentage of women (33.3%) had 9 to 11 years of education, and another 29% graduated from high school or had a General Equivalency Diploma. Almost 15% had some college education.

TABLE 1 Selected Respondent Characteristics

Average age at incarceration	Years	Race	%
Minimum age	19	Black	22.9
Maximum age	59	White	72.9
Mean	33.3	Other	4.2
		Hispanic (may be of any race)	16.7

Average age at interview	Years	Marital status	%
Minimum age	22	Married	20.8
Maximum age	62	Divorced	18.8
Mean	35.9	Separated	4.2
		Widowed	4.2
		Never Married	43.8
		Missing	8.0

Education	%	# of Children	%
< 9th grade	2.1		
9th to 11th	33.3		
12th or General Equivalency Diploma	29.2	Mean	2.1
13/14 years	8.3		
4 years college	2.1	Has at least one child under 18 years of age	%
Master's Degree	4.2	Yes	69.0
Missing	20.8	No	31.2

N = 48.

Note. All data from the MA Department of Correction, 2007 and from inmate interviews, 2007.

This particular prison houses sentenced women and women awaiting trial. The women in this study were all sentenced with one half serving a state sentence and the other one half, a county sentence. In Massachusetts, a county sentence is 21/2 years or fewer with no minimum term whereas a state sentence has a minimum and maximum term. As shown in Table 2, the mean minimum sentence among the women interviewed was 49.7 months, and the maximum sentence was 38.5 months. Almost 48% were serving time for a crime against a person, another 31% for a drug crime, 23% for a property crime, and 2% for a sex crime.

The Children

Sixty-nine percent ($n = 33$) of the women were mothers, and 46% of the mothers had one child, 27.3% had two children, and another 27.3% had two or more children. The mean number of children was two (see Table 3). There were a total of 66 children younger than age 18 years among the

TABLE 2 Respondent Sentence Length and Offense Type

	%
Minimum sentence	%
Mean ^a (months)	49.7
Maximum sentence	
Mean ^b (months)	38.5
Offense type	
Person	43.8
Drug	31.2
Property	22.9
Sex	2.1
Other	0

N = 48.

Note. All data from the MA Department of Correction, 2007 and from inmate interviews, 2007.

^aExcludes life sentences and inmates with no minimum sentence.

^bExcludes life sentences.

women interviewed. Fifty-two percent of the children were between ages 10 and 18 years, 26% between 4 and 9 years, and almost 18% 3 years old and younger.

One half of the 66 children of respondents lived with their mother prior to her incarceration. Another 15.2% lived with a grandparent, 7.6% were in state-sponsored care, 4.5% of children lived with their fathers, and only 1.5% of children lived with both parents. Once the mother was incarcerated, almost 46% of the children who lived with their mother went to live with a grandparent, another 21% went into state care, and only 6% went to live

TABLE 3 Numbers and Ages of Children

# Children per woman ^a	<i>n</i>	%
1 child	15	46.0
2 children	9	27.3
3 or more children	9	27.3
Age of children ^b		
Younger than 12 months old	2	3.0
1–3 years	10	15.2
4–6 years	9	14.0
7–9 years	8	12.1
10–12 years	13	20.0
13–15 years	13	20.0
16 years and older	8	12.1
Not reported	3	4.5

Note. ^a*N* = 33 women.

^b*N* = 66 children.

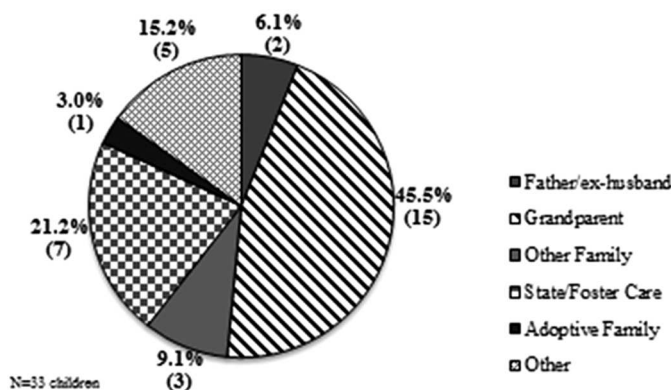


FIGURE 1 Living situation of children who lived with mother before incarceration.

with their father. Grandparents experienced the most dramatic increase in caregiving responsibilities regardless of where the children lived prior to the mother's incarceration (see Figure 1). There was a 24.2% increase in the number of children who went to live with a grandparent compared to a 9% increase in children who went to live with their father.

Women were given the opportunity to express their opinions about their children's living situation. Overall, their comments about the living environment of their children indicated that what mattered most to them were security, comfort, and access to a good education. Those women with concerns cited the lack of responsiveness of the caregiver to the needs of the child and/or mother, and dissatisfaction with adoptive situations. Women voiced regrets that included not knowing where the children were located, not getting appropriate medical attention for children (e.g., for an eating disorder), and children who had to grow up too quickly by having to care for siblings.

Many of the women commented about the dedication of the children's current caregiver, especially when the caregiver was a grandparent. These women seemed grateful that their children were well cared for in their absence. A few mothers were relieved that their children had a grandparent to live with so they did not have to go into state-sponsored foster care. On the other hand, the women whose children lived with their fathers had mixed opinions. One woman said her children were unsafe with their father and it would be better to place them in state care.

Women whose children were in state care had mixed perceptions. One woman was pleased her older child had been in the same family for over a year. Another mother was pleased both of her children, who were in state custody, were able to be in the same family. Conversely, another mother whose children were in a state-sponsored foster home was concerned that her children were not receiving the same level of care they would get from

her. A few women, whose children had been adopted by other families, referred to the loss of connection with them. One woman, whose son had been adopted, had no idea where he was living. Another mother indicated her child had been placed for adoption without her consent.

Women, regardless of the amount of contact they had with their children, said it was important to receive information about their children from the caregiver. Many of the women hoped to be a part of their children's lives when released, underscoring the importance of receiving such information. Women wanted to have information about the children's health, doctor and dentist appointments, and their mental health status. Many of the women wanted information about their child's school situation including behavioral issues, as well as their children's grades and activities such as sports, camps, and church involvement.

Sixty-four percent of the women received updates about their children, most often from the child's caregiver, and several received information through other family members or friends. A few mothers also stated that they received information directly from the children. Women who did not receive information about their children felt this was most often the decision of the caregiver. One mother of three claimed that members of her family felt that they did not need to give her any information because of her addiction. Yet another felt that the adults involved in her children's care did not do anything to strengthen the relationship between her and the children.

Contact with Family and Children

The three methods by which the incarcerated women stayed in contact with family and friends were mail, telephone, and visits. As can be expected, restrictions were placed on all three by the correctional administration. Mail was the least restricted and a limited number of envelopes and stamps were provided to those inmates who could not afford them. All outgoing phone calls had to be collect, and incoming calls were prohibited. The corrections department was planning to implement a prepaid calling card system, but it was not in place at the time of the interviews.

Contact with family other than children. As indicated in the literature, family contacts with incarcerated women are exceedingly important. These contacts can make the time in prison more tolerable, reduce feelings that the inmate has nothing to lose, and may contribute to good behavior.

The majority (87.5%) of women interviewed reported maintaining contact with family members other than children during their incarceration. Not surprisingly, mail was the most frequent method of contact with almost 93% of the women sending and receiving mail. Eighty-eight percent of women had phone contact with family members. Seventy-four percent of the women received visits with family members, the least common form of contact.

TABLE 4 Contact with Family Members

Any contact	<i>n</i>	%
Mother	37	80.4
Sibling	29	63.0
Close friend	19	41.3
Other family ^a	17	37.0
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	7	15.2
Father	7	15.2
Spouse/Life partner	7	15.2
Grandparent	6	13.0
Child older than age 18	1	2.2
Visits	<i>n</i>	%
Mother	21	45.7
Sibling	15	32.6
Other family ^a	7	15.2
Grandparent	6	13.0
Father	5	10.9
Close friend	5	10.9
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	5	10.9
Spouse	3	6.5
Child older than age 18	1	2.2

N = 46 (women who have contact with family members; total adds up to more than 100% because interviewees had contact with more than one family member).

Note. ^aincludes aunts, uncles, cousin, in-laws.

As shown in Table 4, the most frequent adult visitor was the inmate's mother, and 45.7% of the women received at least one visit from her mother, followed by 32.6% women who received at least one visit from a sibling. Visits from other family (including aunts, uncles, and cousins) and grandparents followed at 15.2% and 13%, respectively. Visits from father, friends, and boyfriends/girlfriends were less frequent at approximately 11% each.

The sentence length of the women had a major impact on the amount and frequency of family contact. The women with sentences that ranged from 10 to fewer than 20 years had the least overall contact with family. These women reported no phone contact whatsoever with family members. Women serving sentences of 2 to fewer than 5 years had the most family contact with almost 40% who indicated they had visits, 37.8% reported phone contact, and 35.9% said they exchanged mail with family members.

Obstacles to contact included problems with phone access, financial concerns, and physical distance of family members. Many women said their family did not have the money to buy gas or pay the phone bill, and one woman said neither she nor her family had the money for stamps to mail letters. There is the added factor that many of these women had

family members who were in prison or had criminal records, both of which prohibited visits.

There were a few women who indicated that relationship problems with family members contributed to lack of contact. Several women seemed to feel the full force of the stigma associated with being in prison. This stigma was perpetuated by the fact that some family members chose to keep knowledge of the mother's incarceration from the children. This speaks to the shame and embarrassment family members can experience. The data also suggests that it was the mothers of the incarcerated women who were most likely to express anger and disappointment. Consequently, this often translated into less family contact with the incarcerated women.

Key correctional administrators confirmed that family visits were very important to inmates. However, there was little awareness on the part of administrators as to how often women had phone or mail contact with family members, including children. One administrator said that most women used the phone daily. Another responded that inmates have phone contact at least once a week, and another administrator had no knowledge about the frequency of phone contact. This same lack of knowledge extended to mail contact. For example, two administrators responded that inmates received mail more than once a week, and three responded they had no knowledge about the frequency of mail contact.

Custodial staff was responsible for maintaining the visiting records of all inmates. However, it was clear that visiting information was not necessarily shared with treatment professionals in the prison. Thus, treatment staff was not aware of visits the women received and therefore could not use this important information when treatment plans were developed.

Contact with children. Mothers were asked about the frequency of mail contact, telephone contact, and visits they have had with their children since being incarcerated. As shown in Table 5, 80% of the mothers had some form of contact. Mail was the most frequent type of contact with almost 79% of the women sending letters, 61% reported phone contact, and only 15% stated they had visits with their children.

Among the 26 mothers who had mail contact with their children, 42% exchanged letters at least once a week, 12% at least once a month, and 6% almost daily. Even though letter writing was the most accessible form of contact, 21% of the women reported never having exchanged a letter with their children. Limited access to envelopes/stamps and the child's inability or unwillingness to write letters were reasons for limited mail contact.

Following mail, telephone calls were the next most employed contact method. Thirty-six percent of the women said they had daily or almost daily phone contact, 18% had phone contact at least once per week, and 6% reported less frequent phone contact (once a month or 1 to 11 times per year). Eighteen percent had no phone contact with their children. Reasons given for the lack of or infrequent phone contact included incoming calls

TABLE 5 Types and Frequencies of Contact between Mother and Child

Any contact	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	29	88
No	2	6
Not reported/NA	2	6
Type of contact ^a		
Visits	15	45.5
Phone	20	60.6
Mail	26	78.8
Mail		
Daily or almost daily	2	6.1
At least once per week	14	42.2
At least once per month	4	12.1
1 to 11 times per year	2	6.1
Never	7	21.2
Other	4	12.1
Telephone		
Daily or almost daily	12	36.4
At least once per week	6	18.2
At least once per month	1	3.0
1 to 11 times per year	1	3.0
Never	6	18.2
Other	7	21.2
Visits		
At least once a week	2	6.1
At least once a month	9	27.3
1 to 11 times per year	4	12.1
Never	16	48.5
Other	2	6.1

N = 33 women.

Note. ^aAdds up to more than 33 because women may have different contact situations with more than one child.

were not allowed, and all outgoing calls had to be collect. In some cases, issues with the child's caregiver prohibited or limited contact.

Fewer than one half (45.5%) of the women reported visits with their children. Of this 45.5%, only 6.1% said they saw their children at least once a week, 12% saw their children 1 to 11 times per year, and 27.3% saw their children at least once a month. Reasons given for limited or no personal contact included the cost of transportation to and from the facility, caregiver's or child's lack of time, mother's poor relationship with the caregiver, and child protection agency plans that prescribed a specific number of visits.

DISCUSSION

At a time when the number of incarcerated women continues to rise, it is especially important to provide services to strengthen family bonds during

a woman's absence. Interventions can be provided on varying levels to meet the needs of women, their families, and correctional facilities. Overall, correctional facilities can take many steps to help mitigate the challenges women in prison face, particularly in regard to developing and maintaining family connections.

Contact with family members during a woman's incarceration can make prison time more tolerable. Communication with children can also facilitate positive reentry plans for women and reduce the recidivism rate. Many opportunities exist for correctional systems to facilitate these connections, sometimes with only minor policy adjustments.

Upon admission into a correctional facility, a thorough psychosocial evaluation of incarcerated women offers the best opportunity to identify the issues of individual inmates. This type of in-depth needs assessment should include information on women's specific needs, including family, medical and educational history. The needs assessment also should include information about children, the nature of the relationships with the children, and a framework for resuming or maintaining the relationships, when desired and appropriate. An example of this type of needs assessment is the Women's Risk/Needs Assessment developed by the Corrections Institute at the University of Cincinnati (Van Voorhis, Bauman, Wright, & Salisbury, 2009). The needs assessment serves as the basis for determining the most appropriate services for women while incarcerated and offers a window into the services they are likely to need upon release. The needs assessment is best completed through a team approach that allows input from the professional staff as well as the custodial staff. This provides staff the tools they need to match inmates with the correctional programs and services they are most likely to benefit from, including benefits that are likely to extend to their children and family members.

Departments of corrections can develop policies and procedures to maximize opportunities for family visits. This should include gathering information on all inmate visits, especially the visitor's relationship to the inmate and the ages of visiting children. Visits facilitated by the state child protection agency need to be documented as well. Comprehensive visitor information can serve as a rich data source for research on family relationships among the incarcerated.

Furthermore, correctional facilities for women should encourage greater participation in existing programs that have a family focus. A successful introductory parenting course can spawn more specialized kinds of parenting courses, for example, classes that address parenting children of specific ages, such as young children or teenagers. Women can then practice the skills they may have acquired in parenting courses during supervised visits with their children. Trained staff members can assess inmate progress and encourage the acquisition of new parenting skills. In this way, all children regardless of age need to be afforded adequate opportunities to engage in age-appropriate

activities with mothers. Programs should be evaluated at regular intervals to ensure they are generating the desired outcomes. Regular program evaluation encourages broader and bigger changes as well as minor improvements in correctional programming.

Importantly, prison programs help to prepare inmates for release. The quality of participation in a parenting program can be a determinant in whether a mother and child are likely to be reunited (Luke, 2002). Planning for reentry should be part of the overall plan for a woman while she is serving her time rather than a task to consider just prior to release (Covington, 2002). Additionally, the challenge of obtaining employment is one of the many barriers women face as they transition back into the community. A criminal record can be a major barrier to employment especially in jobs related to health and human services. Eligibility for entitlement programs and public housing can also be restricted, exacerbating difficulties in community reentry (Legal Action Center, 2004).

A well-coordinated continuum of care is needed for successful community reentry, especially for women with substance abuse and mental health problems (Collins & Howe, 2006; Covington, 2002). This continuum of care for women should be expanded to include meeting the needs of inmates' children through an organized and collaborative service network.

As research has demonstrated, mother and child can benefit when regular contact is maintained. In fact, the National Institute of Corrections, in its August 2009 report, *Inmate Behavior Management: The Key to a Safe and Secure Jail* (Hutchinson, Keller, & Reid, 2009) underscores the importance of maintaining family contacts: "This means providing for inmates to receive mail; have access to a telephone; visit with family, friends, and others who are significant in their lives; and interact positively with other inmates and staff" (p. 7). Correctional facilities need to enhance visiting and other types of contact between incarcerated mothers and their children. Specific mother-child visitation guidelines need to be developed by child welfare experts in collaboration with correctional personnel. Transportation alternatives for visiting are critical and could include bus, train, and/or taxi vouchers for visiting family members and children, paid for by the corrections department or local social service agency.

Departments of corrections can expand collaborations with local social service agencies to develop visitor services. These services could help families negotiate the visiting process and assist in locating appropriate transportation. Social service agencies can provide a bridge back for women into their local communities and assist in setting up services to prepare for reentry.

Beyond the traditional visitation, facilities need to offer several enhanced visitation options. Enhanced visitation gives inmates a chance to parent in a controlled environment. Examples of enhanced visitation include overnight visits for children in a visiting facility on the prison grounds, day camps held

at the prison, mother-teen days and other special programs that involvement mother-child interaction. These may be done in conjunction with parenting classes to give mothers a chance to practice what they have learned. These types of visitation provide an opportunity to help mothers assess their own skills while learning from their peers. Mothers and children can interact in groups where children can receive the benefit of spending time with other children who are in similar circumstances.

During visits, trained correctional staff members need to be available to facilitate and monitor the interactions between mother and children and help foster a safe and secure environment of the children. Children may have been traumatized within the family environment/setting or household, as it once existed and therefore, a predictable environment needs to foster a child's sense of safety and control (Johnston & Straus, 1999). A plan to introduce children to the staff is important and must ensure that staff is available to children during and following visits (Stern & Oehme, 2002).

Departments of corrections can develop opportunities for cyber-visiting using video conferencing as another alternative to connect mothers with their children. Access to computers could also allow for electronic mail and Internet telephone services such as Skype. Computer technology is likely to offer expanded communication options that may come close to simulating in-person visits. Specific sites for computer access can be established in collaboration with community social service agencies for use by families who on their own do not have computer access. Regular schedules for cyber-visiting can be established ahead of time. This cyber-visiting can be also combined with a reading program so mothers can read stories to children while being viewed on camera by their children.

Support services for the caregivers and children can foster a healthier and more stable environment for children. However, caregivers may be reluctant to ask for help from outside organizations (Hairston, 2002). Some may be concerned about the stigma of having a relative in prison and feel this will negatively affect their eligibility for services. To respond to this concern, an outreach program coordinator could collaborate with community agencies to assure that families obtain the services they need. Transportation services for visits, family therapy, parenting classes for caregivers, and activities for the children can be provided through these connections.

Child protection caseworkers can have an office located within prisons to monitor all state child protection cases. Collaboration among correction and child welfare professionals can be enhanced by physical proximity of office space. Finally, suggestions of family members and children's caregivers can help to improve services to incarcerated mothers. This type of input can be obtained through focus groups or short questionnaires and can result in practical suggestions that foster positive relationships among family.

Continued research will help determine the effectiveness of these recommendations and other innovative practices available for incarcerated women

and their children. Correctional programs themselves should undergo regular evaluation to determine the kinds of programs most useful to women. State child protection agencies can implement strategies to track placements of children after the mother's incarceration. This effort should include identifying adults and other children with whom the child is living, monitoring school performance, as well as monitoring the health, including mental health, of the children. The maintenance of records on the children of incarcerated mothers can provide a fuller picture of the challenges children face over time.

This study alluded to the negative impact some of the children experienced as a result of their mother's incarceration. Therefore, further research into the actual experiences of the children of incarcerated parents will make a strong contribution to understanding their physical and emotional needs. Future research will help to determine the most appropriate ways to respond to these unique needs and enhance the services provided directly to the children.

To expand programs and opportunities for women, state departments of corrections need to have the financial resources to further develop existing programs and services that help foster family relationships of female offenders and to implement innovative practices. Benefits can result from increased contact between incarcerated women and their child on many levels. Correctional staff benefit when there is a reduction in inmate behavior problems and an overall less stressful environment that focuses on rehabilitation of prison inmates. Federal, state, and local correctional policies that assure the comprehensive needs of incarcerated mothers and their children are met can go a long way to reduce recidivism and give women the best chance of success upon their return to the community.

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