

Incarcerated fathers: A research agenda

Recent estimates suggest that approximately two thirds of state and three quarters of federal inmates in the United States are fathers. In fact, 1991 U.S. Department of Justice figures confirm that approximately 500,000 men in state and federal prisons are fathers.

Clearly, it is important to identify issues of particular concern to this significant offender population to provide meaningful programming and intervention that will assist these offenders in the navigation of their prison and post-release environments.

Most of the research in the area of incarceration and family relationships focuses on mothers and the problems they confront as parents in prison. Further, studies that do look at incarcerated men typically focus on the offender's relationship with his family as a unit and how that association is linked with institutional adjustment or eventual rehabilitation. Fatherhood, in and of itself is rarely examined specifically.

Fortunately, a handful of research efforts have examined the incarcerated father. These studies focused on father-child interaction,(2) family characteristics and parenting experiences,(3) affective states(4) and parenting programs for incarcerated fathers.(5)

This article summarizes the findings of these studies and describes several U.S. programming efforts directed specifically at this offender group. Perhaps most important, the article sets out a research agenda for further study in this area.

Legal issues Many incarcerated fathers are concerned about maintaining their legal parenting rights while incarcerated. However, these fathers must confront two basic problems: finding competent legal representation and the perception that contact with an incarcerated parent is not in the child's best interest.

Still, incarcerated fathers do engage in legal visitation disputes, challenge adoption proceedings and litigate foster care issues, especially when their parental partner is deceased or also incarcerated. Incarcerated fathers are also often forced to confront legal challenges such as their parental partner moving out of state or attempts to legally terminate their paternal rights.

Economic issues Incarcerated fathers are generally dependent on friends and family outside prison for economic support. Offenders usually cannot provide for the daily needs of their family, much less provide financial assistance for other needs (such as travelling to the prison for visits or long-distance telephone calls). Some families are forced to turn to public assistance for survival.

Environmental issues One of the most difficult tasks for incarcerated fathers is explaining their incarceration to their children. This tends to be embarrassing for the father and the situation is often worsened by misguided attempts (by other family members) to protect the children from knowledge about their father's criminality.

Visiting conditions are also frustrating for fathers who want to have meaningful relationships with their children. Visiting rooms are uncomfortable, they lack activities to engage children and security concerns often lead to seemingly oppressive practices (such as no sitting on an offender's lap). The overall

environment is simply inhospitable to children.

These concerns relate to incarcerated fathers who are able to keep in contact with their children. However, incarcerated fathers often have no communication with their children either because of the wishes of the children's caregiver or because their whereabouts are unknown to the father.

Emotional issues Many incarcerated fathers have high levels of depression and anxiety, and little self-esteem. Feelings of loss, powerlessness and sadness afflict many men who are separated from their children by the walls of a prison. Fathers are also often concerned about their children being at home with someone who is emotionally unstable and about the potential for physical or emotional abuse in their absence.

Some fathers also feel guilty about the disruption they have caused in their children's lives. Many feel responsible for their children's problems at home, in the community and at school. Incarcerated fathers also tend to feel guilty about not having spent enough quality time with their children before their incarceration and about generally not their parental role.

Incarcerated fathers are also often confused about their seemingly contradictory roles as parent and offender. Many never see themselves as parents and accept instead more familiar roles such as addict or criminal. Other fathers long to be parents, but believe that prison keeps them from performing their parental responsibilities.

Relationship issues Some incarcerated fathers are concerned about being forgotten by their children, or about being replaced by another person (such as a stepfather). Some worry that their children will stop coming to see them and will be alienated from them by the time they are released, while others fear that their children will think their father abandoned them and worry about losing their children's respect.

As fathers near release, some worry about re-entering a home where their children and parental partner are fully independent and accustomed to living without them. Others are concerned about losing their relationship with their parental partner and, as a result, becoming isolated from their children.

Programming for incarcerated fathers It appears that prison officials generally take a "laissez-faire" approach to designing and implementing programs for incarcerated fathers. Many feel that parental issues are covered by other, more generic, programming.

Notwithstanding this decentralized approach, several parenting programs are currently in operation for male offenders (see the Carpentier article in this issue for a Canadian example). For example, the Tennessee State Prison's Parents in Prison program attempts to reduce offender child abuse and neglect. Program leadership is shared by offenders, community members and institutional personnel.

Similarly, Project Helping Incarcerated Parents in the state of Maine and Parents and Children Together at the federal correctional institution in Fort Worth, Texas are also collaborative efforts that target reduced offender child abuse and recidivism.

Offenders have also developed parenting programs for men. The Eastern Fathers' Group in New York was designed to assist all offenders, regardless of sentence length, by providing information and coping strategies to help them deal with the loss of family relationships. New York State's Parent Occupational

Program was also designed by offenders and strives to strengthen relationships between incarcerated fathers and their children.

Although never implemented, the proposal for a Prisoners' Parenting Centre in New York was one of the most comprehensive and ambitious program models ever developed for incarcerated fathers. The program was developed by offenders and was designed to assist in the voluntary socialization and moral development of incarcerated fathers, as well as to improve the quality of life of children whose fathers are in prison.

A research agenda An important first step in future investigation would be to accurately assess the number of incarcerated fathers. Additional research could compare incarcerated mothers and fathers, and examine any differences among parents of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Future study should also explore the importance placed by incarcerated fathers on their parental role. This research should assess the incarcerated parent's current and pre-incarceration relationships, as well as looking at the impact of varying lengths of separation on the father-child relationship - focusing particularly on the effects of long-term imprisonment.

Other questions remain unanswered. Incarcerated fathers should be tracked during and after their incarceration to examine any connection between the status of the father-child relationship and institutional adjustment and recidivism. Another study should focus on how (or if) parents jointly deal with child-care issues while the father is incarcerated, as well as looking specifically at the family's perceptions about maintaining a relationship with the incarcerated parent.

The nature and scope of available offender parenting programs for men should also be assessed. This study could ultimately establish a directory of available programs that identifies key components such as program goals, activities, length and participation criteria, as well as the address and contact person for each program.

Finally, the attitudes of correctional officials and personnel should be examined. The perspectives of these individuals on the problems confronting incarcerated fathers is a critical component in the development and implementation of viable programs for this offender population.

So many positives... A comprehensive and thorough research (and, ultimately, programming) agenda would help correctional personnel better manage their institutions and facilities by meeting the special needs of this large offender population. Further, focusing on parental roles and obligations should help in the management of increasingly diverse offender populations by capitalizing on a common concern for a large number of offenders.

As well, many parental programs are offered by community agencies and could be provided to offenders at relatively little effort and expense to the correctional system. These programs could help all family members -incarcerated fathers could receive the support they need, their children would benefit from improved relationships with their father, and mothers (by association) would benefit as well.

Encouraging incarcerated fathers to focus on their parental roles may also increase their potential for personal, reflective decision making. They may begin to consider the ramifications of their actions not

only on their own lives, but on their children's lives as well. An institutional focus on, and approval of, the parental role of offenders may therefore help to foster socially constructive values in incarcerated fathers who may then pass them on to a future generation.

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(2) C. S. Lanier, "Dimensions of Father-Child Interaction in a New York State Prison Population," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 16, 3/4 (1991): 27-42.

(3) C. F. Hairston, "Men in Prison: Family Characteristics and Parenting Views," *Journal of Offender Counselling, Services, and Rehabilitation*, 14, 1 (1989): 23-30. See also P. Morris, "Fathers in Prison," *British Journal of Criminology*, 7 (1967): 424-430.

(4) C.S. Lanier, "Affective States of Fathers in Prison," *Justice Quarterly*, 10, 1(1993): 51-68.

(5) C. F. Hairston and P. Lockett, "Parents in Prison: New Directions for Social Services," *Social Work*, (March/April) (1987): 162-164. See also "Parents in Prison: A Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Strategy," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 9 (1985): 471-477. And see C. S. Lanier and G. Fisher, "A Prisoners' Parenting Centre (PPC): A Promising Resource Strategy for Incarcerated Fathers," *Journal of Correctional Education*, 41, 4 (1990): 158-165. And see "The Eastern Fathers' Group: An Educational and Mutual Support Program for Incarcerated Fathers," *Yearbook of Correctional Education: 1989*, Stephen Duguid, ed. (Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 1989): 155-173.