
Service Provision for Inmate/Parolee Families

A Review of the Literature

California State University, San Bernardino
Center for the Study of Correctional Education
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Introduction

The first [prisoner aid] society...was formed in Philadelphia, on the seventh day of February, 1776, and is just 5 months older than the nation.... The occupation of Philadelphia two years later by the British troops put and end, for the time bring, to the labors of the society; but in 1787...the same association was revived, with the slightly altered title of 'The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons.' In its revival many of the chief citizens took part, and among them the illustrious Benjamin Franklin and the venerable Bishop White. (Wines, 1880, p. 121)

This is both an important and useful work, as it prevents a great deal of unnecessary expense to the public, a great deal of unnecessary detention to the accused, and a great deal of unnecessary suffering to their families. (Wines, 1880, pp. 121-122)

His mind was further impressed with the amount of punishment needlessly inflicted on innocent wives and children by very long sentences of imprisonment passed upon their husbands and fathers—sentences which involved also unduly lengthened pecuniary burdens upon the honest taxpayer, whilst, in many cases, also greatly injuring the criminal by an unnatural and cruel separation from the ties of kindred and the softening influences of parental and conjugal relationships. (Tallack, 1896, p. 126)

Rarely mentioned in the literature, providing services to those recently released from prison is as old as the prison itself. The City of Philadelphia erected what would become the world's first penitentiary, Walnut Street Jail, in 1773 to house the City's offenders. The people of Philadelphia formed the Society mentioned above to alleviate the worst of the human suffering caused by this new institution. In continued existence for over 200 years, and now known as the Pennsylvania Prison Society, their website proclaims their advocacy "on behalf of prisoners, formerly incarcerated individuals and their families" (PPS, 2009a, p. 1).



Walnut Street Jail near the end of the 18th century

Among the services currently offered by the Society is the Support for Kids with Incarcerated Parents (SKIP) program. SKIP provides a 12-week curriculum “structured around games and activities that engender sharing, help children identify and describe their feelings, build self-esteem and develop coping skills” (PPC, 2009b, p. 1). This program is based upon current research showing children of incarcerated parents face increased risk of delinquency (Murray & Farrington, 2006; Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007; Phillips et al., 2006; Kinner et al., 2007; Connors et al., 2005).

Further research recommended service provision to prevent these children from becoming incarcerated themselves (Murray & Farrington, 2006; Nordic, 2005; Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007; Johnston, 2006; Crain, 2008). The range of difficulties faced by these children are troubling: sadness, aggressive behavior, truancy, and delinquency (Murray & Farrington, 2006; Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007); substance abuse, increased likelihood of physical health issues such as asthma or hearing and vision problems (Connors et al., 2005); and poverty (Dalliare, 2007).

One study found that children of prisoners are six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated at some point in their lives (Favro, 2007). Of these same children, one in ten will be confined in a correctional facility before reaching adulthood. Furthermore, half of all juveniles currently incarcerated in correctional institutions have at least one parent who is or has been in prison. The number of children who experience the negative effects of parental incarceration is substantial. “As many as 10 million American children, or 14 per cent of all children in the US under age 18, have had an incarcerated parent at least once during their childhood” (Favro, 2007, p. 1). Families affected come mostly from poor urban neighborhoods already struggling with poverty, discrimination, social instability, and violence (Favro, 2007). The racial disparity inherent in correctional systems worldwide is evident in these statistics as well. “African-American children are much more likely to have an incarcerated parent. Seven per cent of all Black children in the United States have a parent who is currently incarcerated, compared with fewer than one percent of white children” (Favro, 2007, p. 1). Prisoners are more likely than others to have been unemployed, come from low social class, have mental health problems, experience marital difficulties, and experience abuse and neglect (Murray, 2007).

The State of Family Programs

In 2002 the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) implemented a survey of U.S. criminal justice systems to examine the current state of services for families of the incarcerated. Only 35% of responding agencies reported having formal, agency-wide policies or programs in place that “specifically focus on benefiting the children of inmates” (NIC, 2002, p. 2). The same survey also found that 24 agencies (almost half of respondents) did not, as a matter of policy, assign inmates to facilities near their homes and families. In fact, Mumola (2000) stated more

than 60% of parents incarcerated in State prisons were held in facilities over 100 miles from their last place of residence. This practice of placing offenders in facilities far from home hinders the already burdensome visitation process and is in direct violation of the guidelines adopted by the Council of Europe. The European Prison Rules (EPR) outline standards for the operation of European prisons. Recommendation number 17.1 states “prisoners shall be allocated, as far as possible, to prisons close to their homes or places of social rehabilitation” (COE, 2006, p. 4). This practice allows prisoners to maintain ties to their families, allowing for easier visitation and a smoother transition back into free society, no doubt lessening some of the negative effects on their children. As an intriguing corollary, inmates in many European countries maintain their right to vote while incarcerated. Although to the American mind this idea may seem improbable, it is thought that the right to vote is the most fundamental social right and taking it away from offenders would mean they are no longer a part of society.

Several criminal justice agencies offer some type of family services to incarcerates. In addition to the Pennsylvania program outlined above, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice implemented the GO KIDS (Giving Offenders’ Kids Incentive and Direction to Succeed) initiative in fall 2004. GO KIDS actively promotes “the importance of preserving family ties and providing positive prevention and intervention services to the high-risk children of parents involved in the Texas criminal justice system” (Crain, 2008, p. 65). The GO KIDS program offers counseling, family preservation, therapy, and crisis intervention to offenders on probation and parole.

California organizations providing services to incarcerates and their families include Centerforce, The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, and The Chowchilla Family Express, among others. It is doubtful that these important programs reach enough families to have a system-wide effect. California, with the largest incarcerated female population in the U.S. does not maintain records of family information from arrested or convicted persons. More than half of incarcerated California mothers receive no visits from their children while incarcerated. The main reason for this is the great distance between incarcerated mothers and their families (Simmons, 2000). California has the two largest women’s correctional facilities in the world. With 30 million people, our State incarcerates 11,250 women. Germany with 80 million holds 800 women (California Prison Focus, 2007).

Limited information on the family situations of local parolees is available from a 2008 needs assessment conducted in the City of San Bernardino. The assessment collected 179 surveys over the course of one month on the various needs of parolees returning home. The parolees, 88% of whom were male, reported being responsible for 325 children at least part time (1.8 per parolee) (Rennie, Eggleston & Riggs, 2008).

Evidence Base for Service Provision

The government takes responsibility for the family when it takes custody of a parent. (Vermont State Representative Lorber in Mason & Williams-Mbengue, 2008, p. 32)

Given the likely harms of parental imprisonment, intervention programs are needed to prevent adverse outcomes for children of prisoners. (Murray & Farrington, 2006, p. 721)

The children of prisoners need the best scientific evidence on the effectiveness of programs that might mitigate the harmful effects of parental imprisonment. (Phillips et al., 2006, p. 730)

Because of their increased vulnerability to the development of deviant activity, these children are particularly in need of preventive interventions. (Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007, p. 350)

One of the most widely cited and scientifically rigorous studies to date on the effects of parental incarceration was written by Phillips et al. in 2006. They found that parent involvement in the criminal justice system is significantly related to children's exposure to certain types of family risks. The conclusions from their research have implications for correctional programming and service development for children of offenders. Parenting programs need to be "coupled with rehabilitation efforts that target parental substance abuse, mental health problems, and inadequate education" (Phillips et al., 2006, p. 677).

This "wraparound" approach to effective interventions is echoed by other researchers. Conners et al. (2005) found that "Programs are needed to address the full array of immediate, transitional, and long-term needs of these children as individuals or members of a family" (p. 755). Johnston (2006) stated that circumstances surrounding this issue are complex and that responses "will require high levels of coherence in design and implementation, a high intensity of services, and the highest quality practitioners" (p. 712). Johnston found that substance abuse and mental illness among parents also contribute to negative outcomes in their children. Programs should "address those conditions through sentencing reform and the provision of drug treatment and mental health services to parents under court and correctional supervision" (Johnston, 2006, p. 712). Bloom and Steinhart (1993) found the children of incarcerates would benefit from family reunification programming and increased inter-agency cooperation. One study found that European prisoners had trouble helping their kids with homework, were embarrassed by their inability to read and write, and worked to conceal that weakness (Nordic, 2005). Literacy is a powerful self-esteem booster and, in instances such as this, can help to reunify broken families. Additionally, Nordic non-profit organizations maintain their work has a

general crime prevention effect through their positive preventative impact on children (Nordic, 2005). Dalliare further illustrated the need for comprehensive services.

Effective interventions need to include services for the incarcerated parent, their child(ren), as well as the caregiver. Skills training in parenting education, drug rehabilitation, and job training could benefit the family, as could teaching children effective, developmentally appropriate coping strategies. (2007, p. 451)

Miller found that service provision to families is both important and necessary.

Provision of services promoting innovative and relevant interventions is imperative to ensure that service providers are equipped with the essential tools to employ appropriate and effective strategies to alleviate parental incarceration's impact on children. (2006, p. 484)

Several aspects of parental incarceration contribute to children's risk factors. One longitudinal study found parental incarceration to be associated with behavior and mental health problems throughout "the course of life" (Rodriguez, Smith, & Zatz, 2009, pp. 181-182). Having a mother incarcerated raises the risk of child incarceration by 2.5 times over a father's incarceration (Dalliare, 2007, p. 449). Risks associated with substance abuse abound. Children of substance abusing parents face increased risk of biological, developmental, and behavioral problems (including substance abuse of their own) (Connors et al., 2005). Adult children of women who used drugs may be at especially high risk for incarceration. Having a mother in prison also increases the chance of a child being placed in non-familial care situations (foster care or orphanages) (Dalliare, 2007). Children who experience parental incarceration and other traumatic childhood events are more likely than their peers to engage in delinquent activities or be incarcerated (Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007). Foster and Hagan (2007) found that the stigma of imprisonment adds to the risk factors facing children of incarcerated parents.

Implications

Thirty years of increasing incarceration rates in the U.S. have resulted in unprecedented numbers of American citizens spending time under correctional supervision or behind bars. One out of every 100 American adults is currently serving time (Pew, 2008). In their newest report, the Pew Center on the States contends that one out of every 31 Americans is currently under some form of correctional control. Furthermore, Pew reported "the rates are drastically elevated for men (1 in 18) and blacks (1 in 11) and are even higher in some high-crime inner-city neighborhoods" (Pew, 2009). During a five year period in the mid 1990s, California's prison population grew by 30%—about 270 inmates per week (JPI, 2000). We now have the world's

largest prison population and a larger percentage of our population in prison than any other country in the world. The negative social effects of this imprisonment binge are now coming to light. The increase in correctional spending in the past 30 years must come from somewhere—higher education, welfare, and other pro-social programs have suffered budget cuts while corrections budgets have risen dramatically. The children of prisoners are at increased risk of becoming incarcerated themselves. To break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration, programs are needed to lower the prison population. One way to do this is to provide services to the families of our prisoners, as they bear the brunt of the negative effects resulting from having a caregiver placed in prison.

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