



Family Matters

Children of Incarcerated Parents

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A Family Impact Seminar Newsletter for Wisconsin Policymakers

New Study Shows Children of Incarcerated Mothers Experience Multiple Challenges

The United States incarcerates 700% more women than it did twenty years ago. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of incarcerated women are mothers of dependent children, and over 1.3 million children have mothers in the corrections system including jail, prison, and parole. Yet despite this new trend, little research examines the family impact of incarceration. What happens to children while their mothers are in jail or prison? How does incarceration affect the relationships between mothers, children, and caregivers?

A new study by Professor Julie Poehlmann of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies and the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is based on 60 Wisconsin families with children, aged 2½ to 7, who had a mother in a state prison. Almost two-thirds (60%) of the participants in Poehlmann's study were women of color, three quarters were single, and their mean annual income before incarceration was \$14,288.

Interviewers met with each woman in prison and conducted home visits with children and their caregivers. The majority of the children in the study lived with a grandparent (68%), 22% with their fathers, and 10% with another relative. While the research team is continuing to analyze their data, some of the major findings are listed below.

Children and mothers find incarceration painful

Mothers described their child's reaction to separation.

Her hair was falling out and she wasn't growing. She bit on her nails, she was still in diapers and had bad diaper rash, her nerves were shot—she was in shock.

She was very lonely. I think she was depressed and confused because she didn't know what happened...now she still goes to the window every once in awhile and calls out mama's name.

He was bad, being naughty. He knows his grandmother can't walk well and would stay out till 9:30, 10:00... taking money, today; he wants to be in jail with mom.

The separation was also difficult for mothers. In their words:

It was real hard for me, I got really depressed...so much pain, I don't have words for.

When we were talking on the phone in jail, I said I had to go, and she said "tell the police I said, 'let you go mama.'"

Children of incarcerated mothers are at risk for unhealthy development

Children of incarcerated mothers were subject to multiple biological and environmental risks. Sixty percent had been exposed to chemical substances before birth, 45% had complications at birth, and over 20% were born preterm.

The children's caregivers also faced risks, which could decrease the quality of the children's home environment. Three-quarters of caregivers were single, and 40% were unemployed, in poor or fair health, or had four or more dependents. Caregivers had a mean annual income of \$23,320, just above the federal poverty line for a family of five. Nearly two-thirds (60%) received public assistance.

On intelligence tests, about one third of the children scored below average, which is consistent with their high risk status,

and 10% scored in the delayed ranged, which is about 1½ times the number expected. About half appeared to have normal test scores despite the risks that they face.

Children of incarcerated mothers often have troubled attachments

Poehlmann's research team also assessed the quality of children's attachment relationships with mother and caregiver, an important index of many aspects of children's well-being. Only about one-third (37%) of the children had secure attachments with their mothers and caregivers, compared to about 60-70% among other children. The vast majority of children's relationships with both their mothers and their caregivers were either conflicted or detached.

In this sample of 2 to 7-year-olds, older children were more likely to feel secure and positive about their relationships than younger children. Children who lived with one stable caregiver following the mother's incarceration were also more likely to have secure attachments to their caregiver.

Interventions need to be carefully designed

Additional support from caregivers can counteract some of the risks children of incarcerated parents face. Resilience in these children was more likely to occur when the caregiver provided a safe, stimulating, stable, and responsive home.

Other results suggest that helping mothers, children, and caregivers develop secure attachments while the women are in prison may prove to be complex. Visitation with children is an important issue that has implications for mothers' mental health and children's attachment relationships. Poehlmann's research has found that the quality of the mother-caregiver relationship is a key factor in determining how much contact children have with their mothers during imprisonment. This finding suggests that interventions targeting mother-child contact should also include the caregiver.

Summary

Many incarcerated women have had a family member in prison (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999), which suggests the risk of a cycle of criminal behavior. If we don't pay attention to the needs of children of incarcerated parents and thereby jeopardize their chances of growing up into competent and caring adults, taxpayers and society may bear additional costs beyond that of their parent's incarceration. References are available from the Family Impact Seminars or Professor Julie Poehlmann (see below).

Connecting with UW Faculty

Questions about children of incarcerated parents? Contact:

Professor Julie Poehlmann

Julie Poehlmann is an Assistant Professor in Human Development and Family Studies at UW-Madison and is affiliated with the **Waisman Center on Mental Retardation and Human Development**. Her research focuses on risk and resilience in high-risk populations, including incarcerated mothers, their children, and the children's grandparents. Julie recently completed a **study of families affected by maternal incarceration** with the assistance of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections and the R. E. Ellsworth Correctional Facility. Contact her at: Poehlmann@Waisman.wisc.edu or (608) 262-1773.





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Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars

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Family Matters is a newsletter for state policymakers published by the **Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars (WISFIS)**. WISFIS connects research and policymaking, and examines the impact of policies on families. The seminars provide objective, state-of-the-art information on a range of policy options. WISFIS is a joint effort of **University of Wisconsin-Extension** and the **Center for Excellence in Family Studies in the School of Human Ecology** at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This newsletter was written by Bettina Friese, Beth Gross, and Karen Bogenschneider, and produced by Mari Hansen. The director of WISFIS is **Professor Karen Bogenschneider** and the state coordinator is Ross Collin.

For further information, contact the Family Impact Seminar Office at (608)262-5779, fis@ssc.wisc.edu, or Karen at (608)262-4070, kpbogens@wisc.edu. You can access WISFIS briefing reports on the web at: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/wisconsin.htm>

Family Matters is on the web at:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/newsletters.htm>

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The Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars Present

The 19th Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar

Corrections Policy: Can States Cut Costs and Still Curb Crime?

Thursday, October 16, 2003

Wisconsin State Capitol
GAR, 417 North

8:15-10:00 a.m. – Seminar

10:15-11:30 a.m. – Optional Discussion Sessions

To register, contact Mari Hansen by mail at 1300 Linden Drive, Rm. 120, Madison, WI 53706, by phone at (608) 262-0369 or by email at fis@ssc.wisc.edu

What Programs Exist to Support Family Ties of Children of Incarcerated Parents?

More than 75% of Wisconsin's 17 adult correctional institutions have at least one program in place to help children of incarcerated parents maintain family relationships. In Wisconsin, as in the United States, the majority of the programs were formed in the absence of state statutes or litigation. Because they are not legislated, the availability of these programs varies from facility to facility.

Programs for children with incarcerated parents are beneficial in a number of ways. By helping children develop a closer attachment relationship to their parent, programs may lessen emotional problems related to separation. Also, parents who are allowed regular visitations develop closer relationships with their children, which often lowers rates of recidivism.

Program developers face many challenges including children's geographic distance from the prison, transportation, non child-friendly visiting areas, and caregivers' reluctance to take children to the prison. According to Hairston (1991), there are five main types of programs for children of incarcerated parents, as described below.

Parent Education Courses: The most popular programs are parent education, which focus on child development, parenting techniques, and self-improvement. For example, *The Motherread/Fatheread Program* is a national program that teaches both parenting techniques and literacy skills by teaching parents to read children's stories aloud. In prison settings, the parent can be videotaped reading a book, and the book and video can be sent to the child. Three fourths of Wisconsin's correctional facilities offer parenting classes, including *Fatheread*. One Wisconsin juvenile institution offers "Baby, Think it Over," a program that teaches parenting skills by using a life-like infant doll.

Special Parent-Child Visits: These programs provide opportunities for parents and children to spend extended time together, sometimes through video technology. All Wisconsin institutions offer approved child visits, and 19% offer special

parent-child visits. For example, one female institution provides extended visits for mothers and newborns, as well as special visits to help prepare incarcerated parents for reunification with children who have been placed in foster care. Another program, *Breaking Barriers with Books*, combines parent education with child-oriented visiting activities.

Child-Oriented Visiting Activities: These programs focus on improving child visits to the prison. One Wisconsin correctional facility is developing a location where parents and children can get together in a more family-friendly atmosphere. Another correctional facility works with the Salvation Army to provide gifts for inmates' children.

Parent Support Groups: Parent support groups meet regularly to deal with self-help issues. In Wisconsin, one correctional institution conducts *Fatherworks*, a support group that gives inmates an opportunity to explore relationships with their own parents and to develop a healthy relationship with their children. Another facility conducts *ParentShare*, a parent support group for families with young children.

Custody and Parent Rights Services: These services include legal assistance to help incarcerated parents maintain custody of their children, and assistance for staying in touch by providing transportation or phone call privileges. Phone calls from prison can be more expensive than other collect calls. Some Wisconsin correctional institutions offer incarcerated parents the opportunity to meet with social workers from county human service agencies.

For further information on family support programs in Wisconsin prisons, contact the correctional facility directly or the Department of Corrections at (608) 240-5055. For references contact the Family Impact Seminars at 262-5779. This article is based on data from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections and the Michigan Family Impact Seminar briefing report on children of incarcerated parents available at <http://www.icyf.msu.edu/publicats/briefng1/incarc.pdf>.