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Highlights from

Childhood Disrupted: Understanding the Features and Effects of Maternal Incarceration

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Understanding the Features and Effects of Maternal Incarceration

In late 2009, Volunteers of America and Wilder Research collaborated on one of the nation's first, multisite qualitative studies of the strengths and needs of families affected by maternal incarceration. The study—featuring more than 200 structured interviews with incarcerated mothers, their minor children and their children's caregivers—provides a unique 360-degree portrait of the complex family dynamics and challenging social and economic conditions that often affect this population.

Rationale for the study

Volunteers of America and Wilder chose to focus on families affected by maternal incarceration because mothers represent one of the nation's fastest growing prison populations. Existing studies have already demonstrated that:

- Between 1991 and midyear 2007, the number of mothers entering federal and state prisons increased a staggering 122 percent. During the same period, the number of children with mothers in prison more than doubled, rising to almost 150,000 children nationwide.
- Mothers in prison are more likely than fathers to enter incarceration with an identified mental illness. They are more likely to be drug users, to live in poverty, and to be victims of physical or sexual abuse. These factors substantially increase the chances that their children will experience their own emotional and psychological difficulties.
- Children whose mothers are incarcerated are also more likely to witness their parents' arrests and to experience significant trauma and household disruption as a result of that arrest.

Study scope and methodology

The Volunteers of America/Wilder Research study consisted of in-depth interviews with incarcerated mothers and their consenting family members in five different states (Indiana, Texas, Illinois, South Dakota and Maine). A total of 76 incarcerated mothers were interviewed across all sites, along with 73 caregivers and 68 minor children.

Characteristics of participating family members

Incarcerated mothers:

- Fifty-three percent of the incarcerated mothers interviewed were white, 25 percent were black/African American, 12 percent were American Indian/Alaskan Native and 5 percent were Latina/Hispanic.
- Over half (57 percent) were “middle-aged,” falling between the ages of 31 and 45.
- Most were single and had never been married. In contrast, more than half of all caregivers reported being married (45 percent), divorced (17 percent), or widowed (8 percent), and another 7 percent reported that they were living with a domestic partner.



- The vast majority (91percent) suffered from a history of substance use.
- Approximately two-thirds had been in prison for less than a year, and most expected to be released within 12 months.
- Sixty-seven of the 76 mothers interviewed (88 percent) reportedly lived with their minor children prior to their incarceration.

Minor children:

- Participating children were fairly evenly divided between younger, elementary school age children (ages 5-10) and “young adults” (ages 11-18).
- More than 85 percent of the children had at least one sibling, and approximately 60 percent had multiple siblings. Some children were also in the custody of older siblings who were acting as caregivers in the incarcerated mother’s absence. Approximately one quarter of the children had siblings, step-siblings or half-siblings living in a different household. Children who are separated from their siblings may suffer a greater sense of trauma and disruption than other children—leading to more serious adjustment problems and a pressing need for counseling.
- A quarter of the children had physical disabilities or special needs such as ADHD—challenges that require inputs from parents, educators and health care providers, which can be difficult to meet within the context of a high-needs family.

The children’s caregivers

- More than 90 percent of primary caregivers interviewed in the study were close relatives of the incarcerated mother and her minor children (also known as kinship caregivers).
- The largest group of kinship caregivers was grandparents (mostly maternal grandmothers), who represented more than half of the caregivers interviewed.
- Despite the preponderance of grandparent caregivers, more than half of all the caregivers interviewed were 45 years of age or younger. Approximately 20 percent were over age 60.
- More than half of all caregivers reported being married (45 percent), divorced (17 percent) or widowed (8 percent), and another 7 percent reported that they were living with a domestic partner.
- Forty-nine percent were white, 30 percent were black/ African American, 10 percent were American Indian/ Alaskan Native; and 8 percent were Latino/Hispanic.



Family strengths and needs identified by the study

Strengths

The families interviewed exhibited a number of important strengths and signs of resiliency.

- Many families had extended informal support networks to draw on.
 - In about half of the households, there was more than one adult caregiver residing in the house and assisting with the day-to-day care of children.
 - Most caregivers and incarcerated mothers also said they had connections to faith-based institutions that provided them with support. Most children could identify a friend or family member they could count on for help in times of crisis.
- Most families had access to safe housing and formal supportive services:
 - All of the mothers interviewed received supportive services from Volunteers of America while incarcerated.
 - Sixty-two percent of caregivers received some form of public assistance.
 - Three-fourths of the caregivers said they had adequate health care for themselves and the children.
 - Caregivers expressed few concerns about their housing; 96 percent did not report any concerns related to hazards or other problems with their housing, and 90 percent felt they lived in a safe neighborhood. Most caregivers and children reported having strong stable relationships.
 - More than eighty percent (81 percent) of caregivers expected the children in their care to continue living with them following the release of the incarcerated parent, and 52 percent expected the incarcerated mother to live with them upon her release.
 - Eighty-four percent of children interviewed said they liked where they lived. The majority of children appeared to know where their mothers were and looked forward to being reunited with them.
- More than 80 percent expressed enthusiasm and excitement about their mother's release from prison.

The majority of children also had extremely positive, optimistic visions of the future.

Needs

Despite these potential assets, it was clear that many families were “high needs” and confronted serious challenges on the road to reunification.

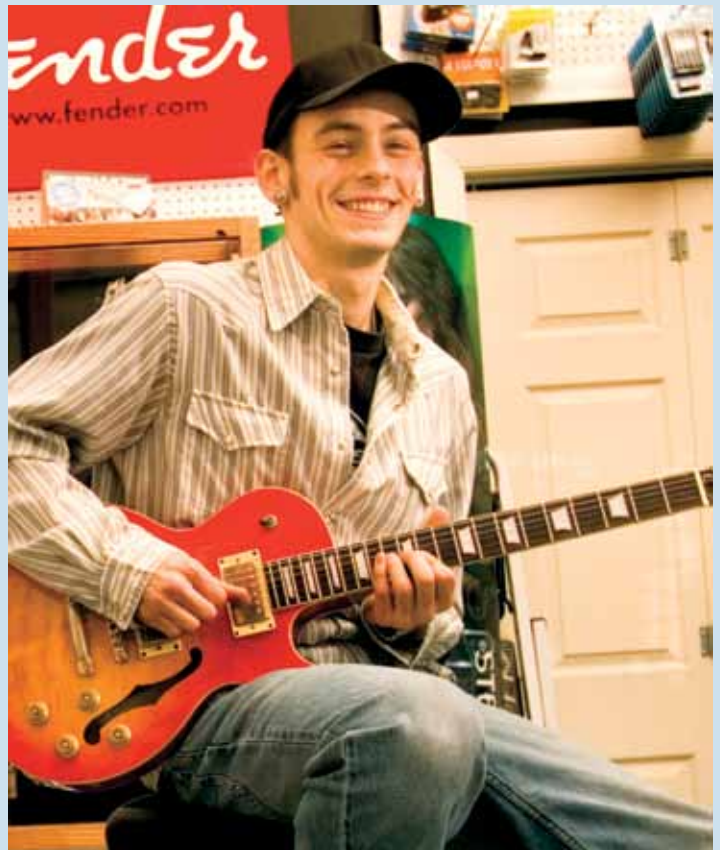
- Most incarcerated mothers expressed concerns about their ability to support their children post-release, and had only vague plans concerning employment post-release.
- Most mothers appeared to have unrealistic expectations about the prospects for recovery from substance use. (Although 91 percent of mothers reported having a problem with substance abuse in the past, only 9 percent said they expected it to remain an issue post-release.)
- Despite the fact that more than half of the caregivers interviewed worked outside the home, 39 percent felt their income was not sufficient to meet their household needs.
- Many families were having problems meeting children's basic needs, including the need for food, clothing, rent, utilities and beds. Several families in Maine also reported having difficulty paying their heating bills.
- Forty-one percent of caregivers said they had unmet transportation needs (e.g., no gas money, lack of working vehicle, not enough funds for bus passes). Lack of access to public transportation was particularly severe for families living in rural areas. As a result of insufficient funds, lack of transportation or family obligations, many children were unable to participate fully in healthy recreational activities.

- Some children had both parents in jail or had lost multiple family members to the criminal justice system. Several had also clearly been affected by domestic violence.
- As a result of their complex family situations, many of the children in the study had unmet mental health needs. Approximately 20 percent of mothers and 30 percent of caregivers thought their children could benefit from counseling following the mother's release.
- A number of caregivers surveyed were suffering from serious physical disabilities and mental health needs of their own.
- Despite their many challenges, most families appear to have engaged in little, if any, group planning for the future and some families are expecting children to play an inappropriate role in the planning process.
- Not surprisingly, approximately 20 percent of children expressed strong ambivalence towards their mother's release, conveying doubt, as well as hope, about the future.

Such ambivalence—hopes paired with fear, optimism laced with trepidation—is a hallmark of the experience of children with incarcerated parents and provides challenges to children's sense of security; their ability to make sense of both present and future; and their emotional attachment to the most important people in their lives.

Study conclusions and issues to consider

- Families affected by maternal incarceration clearly need help navigating the period of incarceration, as well as planning for reentry. Programs that incorporate family group conferencing or some other form of family-based planning could be especially beneficial in helping family members work through their conflicting expectations for reentry and reunification.
- Because family structures are complicated and often in flux, programming should be flexible and adaptable. Among the families interviewed for this study, there were a host of household structures and care-giving arrangements, making it virtually impossible to adopt a one-size fits all approach to meeting household needs.
- Volunteers of America's existing pilot project for families affected by maternal incarceration, Look Up and Hope, does appear to be responsive to most family's needs and holds significant promise as a model for working with families affected by maternal incarceration. For more information on the Look Up and Hope pilot program, visit <http://www.voa.org/LookUpandHope>.





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