Saturday Morning at the Jail: Implications of Incarceration for Families and Children*

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Little is known about the experience of families affected by incarceration, yet current trends indicate that millions of children have a parent who is imprisoned. Using a conceptual framework that acknowledges the losses associated with a parent's incarceration, 56 caregivers visiting an incarcerated family member during children's visiting hours were interviewed. The interview gathered information about family, health, economics, and the legal aspects of the inmate's situation. Overall, families were at risk economically before incarceration, and the most vulnerable became even more financially strained afterward. Other problems believed to be created by incarceration included parenting strain, emotional stress, and concerns about children's loss of involvement with their incarcerated parent. Implications for family practice and policy are discussed.

The purpose of this study was to explore the implications of criminal sanction policies on the families of felony offenders. Specifically, we were interested in the social, health, and economic characteristics of parents and children visiting an imprisoned family member and how these factors are connected with incarceration. Upward incarceration trends have far-reaching effects on families and children, yet empirical documentation remains scant (Arditti & McClintock, 2001). Such documentation is crucial in grounding interventions and policy changes to address the needs of felony offenders and their families.

An Overreliance on Incarceration

A convergence of several legal and sociopolitical developments over the last 15 years has resulted in the application of harsh criminal sanctions for even nonviolent offenses (Hallinan, 2001; King & Mauer, 2002). A centerpiece of criminal sanction policy is the use of incarceration as punishment. Prison incarceration rates have risen sharply since 1990, and the resultant trends give the United States the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the world (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Beck & Harrison, 2001). Department of Justice survey results indicate that more than 1 million nonviolent prisoners are incarcerated in the United States and that 87% of federal prisoners, 53% of state prisoners, and 74% of jail inmates were imprisoned for offenses that involved neither harm nor threat of harm to a victim (Irwin, Schraldi, & Ziedenberg, 1999). Due in part to the large percentage of parents convicted of drug trafficking, incarcerated parents reported lengthy average sentences—more than 12 years in state prison and 10 years in federal prison (Mumola, 2000). Of particular concern are the millions of parents and spouses who are being imprisoned for nonviolent offenses, the majority of which involve illegal drugs, and the likelihood of their becoming estranged from their families given lengthy sentences. Indeed, there is considerable agreement among criminologists that drug control strategies account for most of the growth in the U.S. prison population, largely through the incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders (Austin & Irwin; Duster, 1995; King & Mauer; Lynch & Sabol, 2000).

A key contributor to spiraling conviction and imprisonment rates includes the increased power prosecutors hold through plea bargaining and conspiracy laws, especially at the federal level (Arditti & McClintock, 2001). Perhaps the most significant factor fueling the growth in prison populations today, especially among minorities and women, involves the use of mandatory minimum sentencing (Bales & Dees, 1992; Tonry & Hatiestad, 1997). Mandatory minimums are fixed, often lengthy, sentences handed down to the court via the legislature and applied largely to nonviolent drug offenders (Scalia, 2001). A variety of consequences have resulted from the use of mandatory minimums. For example, by reducing judicial discretion, mandatory sentencing limits the possibility that an offender's extenuating circumstances, such as his or her family situation, are considered by the court (Donziger, 1996; Wright & Lewin, 1998). Mandatory sentencing applied to nonviolent offenders also substantially contributes to prison overcrowding, and overcrowding is connected with health risks and victimization for inmates. Overcrowding also affects communities by heightening the possibility of dangerous criminality due to less prison space for violent offenders (Miller, 1996; Sabol & Lynch, 1997).

Incarceration and Families

Previous research suggests that family systems are stressed severely by even short periods of incarceration (Carlson & Cervera, 1992). Yet despite the scope of the trends outlined earlier, the family studies literature has been remarkably devoid of theory and research that focuses on the experiences of families interfacing with criminal justice systems. Lowenstein (1986) con-

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tended that empirical research studying families disrupted by incarceration is sparse because such families typically are perceived as pathological and the children of such families are viewed as nonexistent.

Similarly, Arditi (2001) pointed out that families affected by incarceration have virtually been left off the family preservation agenda, which is noteworthy given their significant and growing number. The most widely used estimates are drawn from 1991 Bureau of Justice figures, which conservatively indicate that approximately 1.5 million children have an incarcerated parent and another 3.5 million children have a parent on parole or probation (Seymour, 2001). Other scholars, however, estimate that it is more likely that about 10 million children are affected by parental involvement with the criminal justice system (Reed & Reed, 1998). No precise count exists for the number of children affected by their parents' involvement in the criminal justice system, and Reed and Reed based this estimate on the following: about 5 million children under the age of 18 have one or both parents under some form of criminal justice system supervision, of which about 1.5 million have at least one parent who is incarcerated. An additional 5 million children have parents who are not currently under such supervision but who have been in the past.

Government reports give little insight pertaining to families affected by incarceration, although they do provide demographic descriptions of inmate parents. The percentage of state and federal prisoners with minor children (56%) has changed little since 1991, and the majority of parents reported living with their children before admission (Mumola, 2000).

Thus, much of what we can infer regarding the effects of incarceration on families must be drawn from the corrections field, which focuses on inmates rather than the experiences of family members (Johnson, Selber, & Lauderdale, 1998). Despite the lack of systematic data on the families of prisoners, studies have begun to document the nature of harm due to incarceration for offenders who are parents. These include traumatic separation and negative child outcomes, such as poor academic performance, emotional suffering, alcohol and drug abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system themselves (Bilchik, Seymour, & Kreisher, 2001; Johnston & Gabel, 1995; Moses, 1997); uncertain and shifting quality of care resulting from parental loss (Bloom, 1995; Gaudin & Sutphen, 1993; Moses); and family dissolution (Carlson & Cervara, 1992; Lynch, Smith, Grazziadei, & Pittayathikun, 1994; Western & McLanahan, 2000). In one of the rare studies that examined the effects of paternal incarceration on the family by interviewing family members themselves, Lowenstein (1986) conceptualized the incarcerated family members as a temporary, involuntary single-parent system. The findings, based on Israeli mothers' perception of child behavior; point to emotional, interactional, and behavioral difficulties children experience due to incarceration. The ability of children to adjust to the incarceration and the demands of the new family system was related to mothers' familial and personal resources and the degree of stigmatization associated with the criminal event.

A critical empirical gap is the lack of data that portrays children's economic status within the context of parental incarceration (Arditi & McClintock, 2001). Little attention has been paid to the connection between a family member's incarceration and poverty, despite the likelihood that incarceration can be conceptualized as both an outcome of poverty and as a contributor to financial adversity (Watts & Nightengale, 1996). Female prisoners, in particular, report inadequate wages, transfer income, and fairly high rates of homelessness (18.6% for state-imprisoned mothers) before admission in correctional facilities (Mumola, 2000). Even reviews intended to be comprehensive, integrative, and interdisciplinary, such as Seccombe (2000), fail to acknowledge the overlap between incarceration and poverty. An obvious issue would be the creation of millions of single-parent families via a family member's imprisonment, given that the increase of single mothers is attributed to increases in poverty (Seccombe). Inmate parent data is suggestive of linkages between incarceration, single parenthood, and poverty. For example, although inmate parents reported personal incomes that were relatively modest (the modal category was $1,000–1,999 per month), the majority of state and federal prisoners reported being employed full time 1 month before their arrest and that wages or salary were their main source of income (Mumola). Beyond this information, however, we know virtually nothing about the economic situation of the family that the prisoner leaves behind and likely supported with this income. Although Seccombe contends that poverty remains a critical issue for the next century and specifies situations, such as job layoffs and racial discrimination, which pose the threat of impoverishment for families, no mention is made of trends in criminal justice and the implications of incarceration relative to economic risk.

Given the dearth of information about families affected by incarceration, this study is largely exploratory and descriptive. Based on the available literature, incarceration is conceptualized as a disruptive process associated with significant losses for families. Our conceptual framework acknowledges the primary loss associated with the incarceration of a family member as well as secondary losses, which have to do with the many things that the lost loved one could have contributed to the family (Harvey, 2002; Rando, 1993). For example, secondary losses heighten the possibility of financial difficulties or parenting strain for the "survivor" or nonincarcerated parent or caregiver. Due to incarceration, the losses to the family members who are left behind are significant, because the majority of incarcerated parents have the potential to contribute positively to the economic and emotional support of their children (Hairston, 1998). Furthermore, the loss connected to incarceration can be defined as ambiguous, because it remains unclear, indeterminate, and unvalidated by the community (Bos, 1999). Indeed, Brodsky's (1975) study of imprisoned men characterized the relationships between inmates and their family members as "uncertain." The issue of ambiguity and uncertainty is particularly applicable to the experience of family members visiting a jail setting, for many inmates held in jails are in the midst of adjudication, and conviction or sentencing has yet to be determined.

The stigma generally connected to involvement in systems of criminal justice intensifies the potential of harm for families. For example, Schoenbauer (1986) observed that unlike other contexts of loss such as death or illness, loss of a family member because of incarceration seldom elicits sympathy and support from others, forcing family members to face the difficulties of separation alone. Stigma is believed to spread from the stigmatized individual to those associated with him or her (Goffman, 1963; Western & McLanahan, 2000). The tendency for shame to extend to family members may contribute to a lack of social support and the avoidance of relations with the incarcerated family member.

This study was concerned generally with the broad experience of caregivers visiting an incarcerated family member and

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focused on two general substantive areas: economic risk and family relationships. The following research question guided the study: What are the economic and family characteristics of survivor (defined as nonincarcerated) family members and their children visiting an incarcerated parent?

Method

The Sample

A semistructured interview was administered to family members visiting an incarcerated individual at a local jail in a mid-Atlantic state. Permission to conduct research at this setting was granted by the local sheriff responsible for overseeing jail operations. Parents or caregivers who shared minor children with an inmate were targeted for participation. This effectiveness was done via purposive sampling; we conducted interviews between 8:00-11:00 a.m. Saturday mornings, which was the only time delineated by this particular facility for children to visit an inmate. Jail policy stated that children must be in the company of a custodial parent or caregiver when visiting. This local jail was a particularly attractive site to gather data because it is a holding facility for state and federal prisoners. It was anticipated that many family members were visiting a state or federal nonviolent offender who was being held at the jail to attend court or housed there because of prison overcrowding (Beck & Mumola, 1999). Only survivor caregivers, who were either legal guardians of the inmates' children or responsible for a significant portion of their care, were eligible for participation in the study.

Although we acknowledge that family configuration might affect the experience of dealing with a parent's incarceration, we did not want to limit our sample size unnecessarily. Rather than eliminate potential subjects based on their gender or relationship with the inmate, the overarching factor in terms of participation was whether they were bringing the inmate’s children to visit. Our rationale was that every caregiver has his or her “story,” and showing up with the children on Saturday morning was an important characteristic that all participants shared. Visitation generally involves a great deal of time, effort, and money, and we did not want to exclude anyone from talking with us. Aggregating the data in this way was not without its risks, however, given the possibility that parents and caregivers may have different needs and concerns depending on their relationship with the inmate. For example, some data suggest that inmate mothers and fathers have different experiences and needs relative to their children (Johnston, 1997; Kobar, 1983), and one can speculate that there could be diversity in survivor family members' reports depending on who they were in relation to the inmate and whether they were bringing the children to visit an imprisoned mother or father. To address this possibility, we chose to assess any significant statistical differences among participants sharing biological children with the inmate and caregivers who did not share biological children with whom they were visiting (usually they were a parent or sibling of the inmate) on key demographic, family, and economic variables. Because most of the study participants were women who shared biological children with a male inmate, we chose to keep the data aggregated and maximize our sample size. By and large, it appeared that the participants' experiences were more similar than different and that family configuration did not pose a threat to the integrity of the findings.

No significant differences emerged as a result of whether one was visiting an incarcerated mother or father, possibly owing to the small number of participants visiting incarcerated mothers. The few instances of difference that did emerge between those visitors that shared biological children with the inmate and those who did not are noted in the results.

Procedure

The research team consisted of the lead researcher and three female interviewers, two of whom were Caucasian and one of whom was African American. All three interviewers had graduate degrees and either clinical or human services backgrounds. Before entering the jail setting, interviewers underwent training whereby they were sensitized to issues connected to incarceration and considerations relevant to conducting research in correctional settings. In an effort to “get their bearings” and gain a sense of how the visiting process was structured at this particular facility, the interviewers initially entered the jail setting without conducting any interviews. After a 2- to 4-week training period and an initial visit to the jail, interviewing began.

A team of at least two interviewers went to the jail each Saturday morning during the spring of 2003. The lead researcher did not conduct any of the interviews. At least one undergraduate human services student accompanied the team with toys to play with the children during the interview. All children in the visiting area, including those connected to families who were not participating in our study, were invited to play. The play area was set up on the floor in a corner of the visiting room. Interviews were conducted in the waiting area of the jail that consisted of a small room with approximately 50 plastic chairs (bolted to the floor), a bathroom, and a secure “control” area where a deputy was available behind a glass window. Visitors waited approximately 30–60 minutes before being called to visit their family member. Upon having their name called, family members went through a locked door and a metal detector before entering an elevator. After getting off the elevator on their respective floors, family members went through another locked door and into an area with several unenclosed booths. Jail regulations at this particular facility allowed each family member a 20-minute visit seated in a booth, using a telephone to talk to the inmate who was seated facing them in a separate booth behind a sealed Plexiglas wall. Physical contact was prohibited and impossible between the inmate and his or her family members.

In accordance with university policy, all study participants were required to read an informed consent document with the interviewer before responding to the interview protocol. Emphasis was given to the participant's right to confidentiality and anonymity as well as his or her prerogative to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants also were given the opportunity to request an executive summary of the results. Parents and caregivers received a coupon for a Happy Meal at MacDonald's for their participation in the study. The number of participants recruited for the study was determined by budgetary considerations and reaching saturation. For our purposes, saturation was defined in terms of a lack of new substantive information (Bertaux, 1981) and of not having anyone new to interview (i.e., most individuals in the visiting area after 10 weeks had participated in our study). 56 interviews with caregivers had been conducted at this point.

The Interview Protocol

The basic for the interview questions was connected to the existing scholarship on the experience of families affected by
incarceration and shaped by the insider status of the lead researcher. Although beyond the scope of this study, a full exploration of the implications of the lead researcher’s own experience visiting a family member at this particular jail facility is available (Arditti, 2002). Clearly, personal experience is a valued element of the new “convict criminology” (see, for example, Richards & Ross, 2001) and served as a key source of information in terms of knowing how to navigate the visiting room and deal with jail personnel, the recruitment of participants, and informing the study regarding what kinds of questions would be most relevant to the visiting families. Similar to an approach used by Schmid and Jones (2001), the three interviewers provided balance to the study in terms of being able to maintain a sense of detachment relative to the lead researcher’s personal experience, thus triangulating the data collection and interpretative process. Many elements of the interview were drawn from a preexisting instrument used to study family change and divorce (Arditti, 1992; Arditti & Keith, 1993). Modifications were made to gather information specific to incarceration, the inmate, and legal processes connected with adjudication. Areas of concern encompassed by the interview included demographic and background characteristics of participants and their incarcerated family member, child characteristics, visitation (see Arditti, 2003, for a complete analysis and discussion of visitation), finances, parenting, and the legal context of the family member’s incarceration. Further refinement occurred in the interview schedule subsequent to piloting with the research team and the first few participants. The majority of questions were closed-ended, Likert-type items or checklists or asked basic demographic or economic information. Sample Likert-type items are the following: “Since my family member has been incarcerated, (1) I have been sick a great deal, (2) I haven’t felt as good, (3) I haven’t noticed any change in my health, (4) I have been healthier”; and “Since incarceration would you say that financially you are (1) much better off, (2) somewhat better off, (3) about the same, (4) somewhat worse, (5) much worse off.” (The final protocol is available upon request from the first author.)

Analyses and Interpretation

A range of mostly descriptive and comparative quantitative analyses was performed, including frequencies, nonparametric correlations and tests of difference, and cross-tabulations. Stepwise multiple regression was used to explore variables explaining child health post-admission. Open-ended questions were asked about parent-child relationships and problems created and solved by incarceration to triangulate the data and add depth to global closed-ended items used in the interview. Coding, identification of major themes, and subsequent interpretation developed over time and reflected a series of modifications based on repeated readings of the data and discussions with the research team. This approach to qualitative analysis is consistent with methodology described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Gilgun (1992) whereby codes are developed through knowledge of previous research and theory, as well as by hunches developed during the process of data analysis. The qualitative analysis of participant comments involved the development of broad coding categories and management of the text using a software package (NUD*IST, QSR, 1997). This package helped maintain clarity, flexibility, and expediency during the coding process. Text connected with categories pertaining to “problems created by incarceration,” “benefits of incarceration,” and “parent-child relationships” then were content analyzed. Notes and summary concepts were written in the margins during the examination of “reports,” representing the entire group’s comments, extracted from each coding category. The first author reflected on and linked previous research findings with empirically grounded concepts developed here (Gilgun). Themes were then discussed with the research team as a means of confirmation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Participants and Their Incarcerated Family Member

The average participant visiting the jail was 30 years old (SD = 9.6) and had about three children from more than one union. Thirty-seven of the participants shared biological children with the inmate; additionally, eight mothers (14.5%) reported that their child was born at some point during the family member’s incarceration. Participants who shared biological children with the inmate were significantly younger (M = 27.7 years, SD = 7.5) than participants who were bringing the inmate’s children to visit but who did not share biological children with him or her (35.3 years, SD = 11.2), t(56) = −3.01, p < .05. It is noteworthy that very young children and infants were visiting at the jail. Children biologically shared with the inmate tended to be younger on average (M = 4.2 years, SD = 3.7) than children from other unions, many of whom also visited the family member at the jail (M = 8.3 years, SD = 5.2), t(15) = −2.7, p < .05. Participants lived an average of 18.4 miles from the jail (SD = 28.9 miles), and more than half (59.3%) of the study participants brought their children to visit the jail once a week. Most of the participants had resided with the inmate before incarceration (94.6%), and the average length of time they lived with the inmate was 7.4 years (SD = 7.8). Participants who shared biological children with the inmate, compared with those who did not, differed significantly in the length of time they reported residing with the inmate, averaging 4.8 years (SD = 5.4) and 12.9 years (SD = 9.5) respectively, t(56) = −3.86, p < .001.

Table 1 summarizes additional demographic information about the 56 participants. Half of the study participants were African American; 96.4% of visitors interviewed were female, and 46.4% were single. The majority of the participants had completed high school or received their general education diploma (GED; 48.2%). Most study participants were visiting boyfriends and husbands with whom they shared children.

Information about the inmate also was collected from participants (not reported in table form). Because the focus of the study was on the family member and not the inmate, our rationale in collecting this information was to provide some context for the study rather than collect indisputable facts about the inmate. We caution the reader that the accuracy of the inmate data is unknown. The average inmate was reported to be a 28.6-year-old man (SD = 6.7 years) and had been held at the jail at the time of the interview for an average of 4.2 months (SD = 3.1). Five of the inmates were women. Few inmates (16%) receive postsecondary education: 22% of inmates were reported to have completed “some high school,” and 52% of the inmates were reported to have completed 12th grade or a GED. Fifty-six percent of the inmates were African American, and almost two thirds of the inmates were ineligible to post bond. Forty-three percent of the inmates were reportedly incarcerated for a drug offense, and the majority of these were apparently nonviolent.

In addition, the survey had a list of 19 types of "other of-
Table 1
Participant Characteristics in Frequency and Percent (N = 56)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>94.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest year of schooling completed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or GED</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to inmate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent visiting adult</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family members</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former spouse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: GED = general education diploma.

Table 2
Income Pre- and Postadmission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Preincarceration</th>
<th>Postadmission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $5,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5,000–$9,999</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000–$14,999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000–$19,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000–$24,999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000–$29,999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000–$34,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000–$49,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 and above</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: χ²(7, N = 51) = 26.6, p < .001.

Economic Risk

At the time of the interview, almost two thirds of participants worked outside the home, with a substantial decline since the family member’s incarceration (from 88.5% to 63.5%). The result of a Wilcoxon signed ranks test, which compares the distributions of the two variables (i.e., Do you work now? Did you work before incarceration?) indicated that the decline was significant (z = 3.15, p < .001). More than half (53.5%) of the participants in our study were on public assistance, 72% of whom began receiving benefits during their family member’s incarceration. Forty-five percent of the participants also indicated they were receiving other financial help. Fully two thirds of family members reported they were financially much worse off or somewhat worse off since the incarceration. Results of the qualitative analysis also revealed financial strain resulting from a family member’s incarceration, and participants lamented the “loss of money” or the fact that postadmission there was “no money coming in.” Compounding financial difficulties was the lack of child support reportedly received by participants (only 10 participants reported receiving child support from their children’s biological father, and several of these participants lost child support as a result of incarceration), as well as the onset of expenses connected to incarceration. Examples of such expenses include attorney costs, receiving collect calls, and sending money to the inmate. Three fourths of the study participants (76.5%) reported sending money to the inmate, and the average amount sent was $75 per month ($SD = $60, range = $5–$350 monthly). The likelihood of sending money was not connected to whether the participant shared biological children with the inmate; however, the amount of money sent to the inmate monthly differed significantly by family configuration, τ(56) = −2.6, p < .01. Family members who did not share biological children with the inmate sent approximately $107 per month, and participants who shared biological children with the inmate tended to send less money monthly (about $59 per month) possibly owing to variations in age and financial demands (although cross-tabulations on income and financial strain did not show significant differences between groups).

As Table 2 illustrates, most families visiting at the jail were disadvantaged economically before the incarceration. After their
family member’s admission to jail, the majority lived well below the poverty line. The poverty line for a family of four is $18,100 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). The most vulnerable appeared to become even more financially strained after their family member went to jail. Family income dropped significantly postadmission, $2^\text{nd}$, $N = 51) = 26.6, p < .001$, with approximately 29% of participants and their children reportedly living on less than $5,000 a year.

Although almost half of the participants were African American, cross-tabulations on public assistance, race, and marital status indicated that race, by itself, was not associated with financial disadvantage. Married women were less likely to go on public assistance, however, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 6.44, p < .01$. African American women in the study were less likely to be married than White women $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 8.62, p < .01$.

In summary, the profile that emerged was one of financial vulnerability prior to the family member’s imprisonment. Economic risk was probably intensified by incarceration for a number of reasons, including the loss of income provided by the incarcerated family member, the enhanced likelihood of mothers leaving paid work outside the home, the unavailability or loss of child support, and new expenses associated with incarceration including the sharing of scarce financial resources with the inmate.

Family Relationships

Selected characteristics of participants’ parent-child relationships are summarized in Table 3. Of participants interviewed, 42.3% believed their relationships with their children had been affected by their family member’s incarceration, and 30.2% reported spending more time with their children before their family member went to jail. Half of the study participants used child care, with 46.0% of this care provided by a relative.

Of particular interest was the fact that 48% of participants reported declining health since their family member’s incarceration, and 27% reported that their children’s health had declined. When compared with caregivers who did not share biological children with the inmate, visitors who shared biological children were more likely to report declining health, a finding that approached significance, $\chi^2(2, N = 52) = 7.37, p < .01$, suggesting that incarceration may pose more dramatic changes in the family situation that have an impact on caregiver health. An exploratory stepwise multiple regression analysis revealed that declining maternal health ($\beta = .53, p < .01$) and the use of nonmaternal care ($\beta = .28, p < .05$) significantly predicted declining child health, $F(2, 47) = 7.33, p < .01, R^2 = .21$. Because of the small sample size, we were limited in the number of variables that we could enter into the equation (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001). Based on the correlational data, only these two independent variables were entered into the equation to ascertain their ability to explain variance in child health.

In addition, global survey items indicated that the majority of participants interviewed (81.6%) believed that incarceration had created problems for their family, whereas only 29.8% of participants believed incarceration had solved problems for their family. Of the 36 participants, 30 (83.3%) reported that there were times when they “didn’t feel like coming” to the jail, heightening the difficulty of visiting or the possibility in the future that family members might simply avoid coming to visit altogether.

The results of a qualitative content analysis provided some insight regarding the nature of these problems. Seventy-nine percent of the parents and caregivers provided text related to “problems created” by incarceration for a total of 329 text units (or 9.8% of all text). Major themes in terms of family difficulties believed to be connected to incarceration were: emotional stress, parenting strain, work-family conflict, and concerns about children.

The experience of emotional stress and parenting strain were characterized by social isolation. Comments such as “I’m struggling all by myself to handle this,” “I feel like I’m in jail myself,” “Everything is harder,” and “It’s rough” were common among participants. The perceived lack of support for participants was an area of concern and reflected in statements such as “I’m doing it by myself.” One mother summed up her parenting experience since her husband’s incarceration in this way: “No peace, no break, no patience, and no help.”

For those parents who remained in the paid labor force, work demands intensified time pressures with several mothers indicating that “I hardly have time for myself.” The lack of time was intertwined with the fatigue associated with parenting (“I’m just tired, I don’t have time to get sick”). Indeed, Hodgson, Diemhart, and Daly (2001) explored the experience of “time-press” among single mothers, giving voice to the unremitting and ever-present responsibilities connected to work and parenting. Oftentimes these responsibilities conflicted, resulting in difficulties in finding time for self-care or recreation during an illness.

In addition to a lack of social support and work-family conflict, worries about the effects of incarceration on children also might contribute to survivor parents not taking good care of themselves. Discussing her daughter, one mother admitted the following: “I don’t take care of myself worrying about her.” In fact, our participants were deeply troubled about the effects of incarceration on their children, often becoming quite emotional.
when discussing the nature of their concerns. For example, beyond generalized worries about family dissolution ("the family has been torn apart") and children "not being themselves," parents were particularly concerned about their children's responses to the loss of involvement with the incarcerated parent, usually the father. Parents were painfully aware of their children's grief, sharing comments such as "The children cry for him," "I see what her dad [being in jail] does to her," and "She really misses her father." Participants also commented on changes in their children's behavior since the incarceration. Such changes included difficulties in school ("It's affecting her school"), depression and irritability ("The children are angry," "They fuss all the time"), and behavioral regression ("She used to be toilet trained").

Participants also were given the opportunity to provide information regarding any benefits they associated with incarceration. Although the data regarding problems created by incarceration was more extensive, 32% of participants indicated that they believed incarceration had solved problems for their family (for a total of 105 text units or 3.1% of all text). Content pertaining to the kinds of problems perceived to be solved by incarceration tended to revolve around beliefs that jail time would stop drug or alcohol addiction or "straighten out" the inmate. Several family members perceived the jail as a "safe haven" for the inmate, because he was off the streets, prevented from drinking and driving, or "not getting into trouble" related to an addiction. Indeed, analyses on much larger prison populations often reveal that many prisoners have chemical dependency problems and often commit offenses under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Beck et al., 1993). Other participants focused on incarceration as an appropriate form of discipline, hoping that the inmate might "teach him a lesson" or keep him away from "the wrong crowd." In addition, two interviewees also believed that incarceration had improved family functioning by enhancing closeness ("more communication") via weekly visiting.

Despite some potential benefits, a rather dismal picture emerged with regard to the context of family relationships post-admission, suggesting an accumulation of risk directly and indirectly connected to a family member being sent to jail. Of particular concern was the sense of burden and struggle reported by some participants in terms of their experience of sole parenting.

Discussion

It has been pointed out elsewhere that diverse types of parental absence have differential effects on families and that a distinction is especially necessary between those disruptions that are socially approved and those that are not (Lowenstein, 1986). This study recognizes that distinction and sought to describe and examine the economic situation and family relationships of caregivers visiting their children's incarcerated parent. Our findings contribute to the literature by beginning to make visible the experiences of this largely ignored population of families and children. It is unknown how generalizable our results are; based on the comparability of reported inmate characteristics with nationally representative data sets, we speculate our results have some degree of external validity. In corrections settings, however, sometimes nonprobability samples with limited generalizability are the "best that can be done" (Pope, Lovell, & Brandl, 2001, p. 13). Our findings should be considered within the context of self-report in that family members may see themselves as victims of the criminal justice system, along with the inmate (Sturges, 2000), subsequently using the interview as a means to vent about their problems and the perceived injustice of their situation. Interviewer field notes revealed that many participants seemed surprised that anyone was remotely interested in talking with them about their situations and responded positively to what they perceived as a sympathetic ear in an otherwise hostile social climate. Thus, difficulties might be more obvious than resiliencies and family strengths. We recognize the importance of research that taps family assets of low-income families, and it is likely that they exist for many of our participants (see, for example, Ortner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2001).

Vulnerable Families and the Accumulation of Risk

We penetrated a "hidden pocket" of families that are vulnerable on a variety of dimensions due to an accumulation of risk stemming from conditions that may have predated incarceration and were further intensified by incarceration. The accumulation of risk not only jeopardizes child development but is also connected with the loss of opportunity (Garbarino, 1995). It is noteworthy that one third of the incarcerated population (approximately 605,943 inmates) is housed in local jails similar to the one we visited (Beck, 2000) and that the number of families and children passing through jail visiting rooms across the country is exponentially larger.

Survivor family members experience risk on several dimensions: via emotional stress, parenting strain, work-family conflict, financial strain, social stigma, and structural parameters (e.g., gender, race, and marital status). The resultant situation at the time of the interview was extremely precarious in terms of the likelihood of poverty, fragile parenting, declining family health, and the onset of changes in children's behavior. The implications of poverty and vulnerable parent-child relationships are widely documented (e.g., Garbarino, 1995; Lerner, Sparks, & McCubbin, 1999). Thus, the portrait emerging from our data does not suggest positive developmental pathways for children.

Parental incarceration seems to intensify risk in a number of ways due to the absence of the incarcerated parent (usually the father) and the creation of single-parent households. Caregivers in our study characterized their experience as struggling to fulfill their family obligations and responsibilities. Significant losses were generated by a parent's incarceration with regard to the provision of economic support and child care. Perhaps one of our most provocative and unexpected findings was the likelihood that a mother would leave paid labor after her family member's incarceration. The other parent's unavailability to provide child care may "tip the scale" and contribute to increasing work-family conflict for her, creating a need for her to either leave her job, or possibly lose her job because of her single-parenting status. Much of our sample was on public assistance, and an overlooked factor contributing to the need for welfare benefits could be the tendency of such parents to leave the paid labor force. Other research has demonstrated that mother's wages along with child support are strongly predictive of financial viability (Edin & Lein, 1997).

Another area of vulnerability involved the emotional stress and parenting strain that participants reported. We wondered how children were faring under these conditions, because they had to contend both with the primary loss of a parent and changes in their relationship with the survivor parent, and because most survivor parents were poor and overwhelmed with responsibilities. We speculated that children were having a difficult time
(Lerner et al., 1999; Seccombe, 2000), and the concerns participants had about their children were linked with incarceration. Although we do not necessarily embrace the idea that child outcomes in single-parent homes are always negative (see Arditti, 1999), the context of single-parenting due to incarceration (rather than other contexts such as divorce or death) presents additional challenges that may have a negative impact on children.

Poverty undermines a caregiver’s ability to parent effectively in multiple ways. Studies (e.g., Jones, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2002; Simons, Johnson, Conger, & Lorenz, 1997; Wilson, 1987) reveal the connections between inadequate income, maternal depression, parenting competence, and the negative effects on children of these cumulative risks within the context of single-parent homes. Indeed, Garbarino (1995) discussed the depletion of energy that is needed to raise children and noted the fragility of single-mother households that results from financial adversity and competing demands. Energy depletion is further intensified for families affected by criminal justice systems due to cultural stigma and a subsequent lack of sympathy and social support (Davies, 1980; Lowenstein, 1986; Sturges, 1999). According to Garbarino, a family system that cannot find a way to “right itself” when pushed over is in “deep trouble,” and we were particularly concerned that this was or would be the case for many of our families. We believe that incarceration pushes many families over, ripening conditions related to “rotten outcomes” for family life and child development (Schott, 1988, p. xviii).

We theorize that our findings, particularly those related to social isolation and problematic aspects of the incarceration, highlight the involuntary nature of the single-parenting arrangement (or increased caregiving burden) from the participants’ perspectives, as well as the demoralization attached to having a family member in jail (Lowenstein, 1986). Furthermore, family problems associated with incarceration may be related to its ambiguous context, connecting with situations beyond the family’s control or outside constraints that block coping and grieving processes (Boss, 1999). For example, participants expressed a lack of clarity and understanding about the charges made against their family member, the inmates’ legal rights, and the adjudication process. Most family members reported limited communication with attorneys and probation officers, and several were not even certain about whether the inmate was being held on state or federal charges—a significant factor affecting sentencing and placement after jail transfer.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Families interfacing with systems of criminal justice could benefit from sensitive family practice that recognizes the risks, losses, and ambiguity connected with incarceration. It is our hope that these findings can inform family practice and stimulate outreach for this underserved population. Lack of resources and social support systems may deepen feelings of isolation stemming from a family member’s incarceration. Our findings show that parents suffer financial hardships confounded by stigma connected to incarceration, and also potentially by societal stigmas associated with public assistance. Because parents were unable to maintain financial viability, they often relied on welfare as a resource, thus decreasing personal autonomy and independence. The personal effects of these stigmas and feelings of disempowerment have been succinctly outlined by Seccombe (1999).

Providing information and training to parents regarding resources and education about normative effects of incarceration on family members could assist in the development of preventative strategies. Programs should be aimed at enhancing relationships for youth and families across “the breadth of the system” (see for example, Lerner et al., 1999) and be responsive to families’ involvement in the criminal justice system and the resultant parenting challenges. Perhaps the most likely area of intervention involves enhancing naturally occurring networks of support for these families. For example, Gottlieb (2000) emphasized the effectiveness of efforts to mobilize support from within the natural network (as opposed to outside intervention) when the presenting problem, in this case incarceration, is highly stigmatizing. Because parents are able to utilize support systems, levels of stress and social isolation might be reduced, thus increasing parenting competence (Furstenberg et al., 1993; Loukas, Piejak, Bingham, Fitzgerald, & Zucker, 2001; Sampson, 1992). Corrections settings are an understated but important point of entry for human services delivery and family outreach. Supportive on-site interventions during family visiting hours, which include the dissemination of information and resource and referral, are particularly applicable to this population of families.

Fostering a sense of community and social support may help not only to reduce feelings of isolation, alleviate emotional stress, and enhance parenting competence, but also may lessen a family’s economic vulnerability. Othner et al. (2001) discussed the need for more attention to interventions in the area of social support for the poor, reasoning that the isolation of low-income families increases their economic vulnerability and potentially threatens their internal family strength. Clearly, in addition to family support, family practice and policy efforts should be integrated into a more coherent and comprehensive approach that recognizes the disruptive economic effect of incarceration and preexisting financial inadequacies. Elements of such an effort might include alternatives to incarceration, such as home confinement with work release, as well as greater social welfare resources directed at supporting families affected by incarceration.

Our findings, however tentative, provide documentation that incarceration does social and economic harm that goes well beyond the individual inmate and extends to his or her family. Difficulties connected to the experience of a family member’s incarceration include increased economic risk, strain associated with single parenting, and adjustment problems for children. In light of these negative outcomes, we believe that overreliance on incarceration as a means to punish is poor family policy, particularly for nonviolent offenders. Fundamental policy shifts must occur whereby incarceration is considered a last resort rather than a first choice. Institutional resistance to such a shift is formidable, however, given the nature of bureaucracies, the powerful crime control infrastructure, and the political popularity of “get tough” approaches to crime.

Ironically, despite welfare policy aimed at putting single mothers to work, criminal sanction policy seems to connect with a disturbing scenario for families that includes potential loss of wages, an absence of child support, and the reliance on public assistance. Our findings provide empirical support for positing the negative economic effects of incarceration and its interrelatedness with poverty (Watts & Nightengale, 1996). We suspect that criminal sanctions aimed at the inmate have far-reaching effects in terms of contributing to families’ financial adversity, and that the reappearance of widespread child poverty (Lerner et al., 1999) is associated with historically high rates of incarceration.
We emphasize in our analysis the harm caused by a “penal response” to families and children, supporting a need to adopt alternative approaches to dealing with crime, especially nonviolent offenses, as a framework for reform. Such approaches include public health models of harm reduction (see Arditi & McClintock, 2001, for a full discussion) and restorative justice.

Harm reduction holds great promise with regard to dealing with offenders who have drug or alcohol addictions, and it involves shifting the definition of a problem from one that emphasizes law enforcement to one of treatment. From a harm-reduction perspective, it is essential that the intervention (i.e., incarceration) does no more harm than the drug use (Denning, 2000). Harm reduction also places significant emphasis on the well-being of children, families, and communities that are indirectly affected by incarceration. Fundamental principles of restorative justice incorporate this perspective as well, emphasizing the need to attend to issues that evolve from the offense as well as to issues related to the cause of the offense, such as poverty, addiction, or a lack of a moral or ethical base (Claassen, 1996).

In conclusion, recognizing the impact of incarceration on surviving family members supports the need for policy that acknowledges the links between crime, poverty, and family life. Public policies that treat these conditions independently may inadvertently worsen economic and crime-related problems (Watts & Nightengale, 1996). Specific policy recommendations include the use of nonprison sanctions when possible, replacing the war on drugs with public health policy aimed at harm reduction, and greater support for community anti-poverty efforts. Our findings also suggest several research directions, including longitudinal, in-depth explorations of the context of solo parenting and child development in the context of incarceration, as well as the development of causal models that explicate the connections between incarceration and economic risk.

References


