

Families and Incarceration: An Ecological Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article advances an ecological framework that emphasizes the context of parental incarceration and its impact on families and children. Particular attention is given to the disenfranchisement resulting from a family member's imprisonment, loss, and the experience of family visiting in corrections settings. Drawing from U. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) systemic approach to understanding development, the framework provides a basis from which to interpret existing scholarship as well as guide ecologically sensitive practice and policy.

Most research about prisoners and their families is largely the result of scholars working from either an institutional or macrolevel perspective within criminology, demography, or sociology or conversely, an individual behavior within a deviance perspective. The approach taken in this review is an ecological one, which is a useful framework for developing interventions aimed at addressing complex problems (Anderson & Mohr, 2003). The review begins with a brief description of the background and significance of current trends regarding incarceration and its effects on families. Particular attention is given to processes associated with the disenfranchisement resulting from a family member's imprisonment and the experience of family visiting in corrections settings. Drawing from ecological theory and conceptualizations of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, the review provides a basis from which to interpret existing scholarship, most of which is a theoretical or exploratory; this basis can also guide intervention and policy.

Background and Significance

Several legal and sociopolitical developments over the last 15 years have resulted in the application of harsh criminal sanctions for even nonviolent offenses. The resultant trends have given the United States the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the world (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Beck & Harrison, 2001). Furthermore, since 1970, the proportion of nonviolent offenders in prison has jumped from one half to more than two thirds of prisoners, and the proportion of drug offenders has increased from one tenth to one third (Cole, 1999). Current estimates indicate it is likely that at least 10 million children have a parent who is involved in the criminal justice system and that substantial portions of incarcerated women and men are parents (Reed & Reed, 1998; Seymour, 2001). Yet despite the scope of these trends, the social science literature has been remarkably devoid of theory and research that focuses on the experiences of families interfacing with systems of criminal justice. Exploratory

research suggests the experience of parental incarceration is complex and multifaceted, often involving emotional pain, changes in parent–child relationships, work–family conflict and shifts in labor force participation, the intensification of poverty and need for public assistance, and difficulties connected to visitation at corrections settings (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003).

Much of what one can infer regarding the effects of incarceration on families must be drawn from the field of corrections, 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 imprisoned individuals, studies have begun to document the nature of harms due to incarceration for offenders who are parents. These include traumatic separation and negative child outcomes, such as poor academic performance, alcohol and drug abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system themselves (Bilchik, Seymour, & Kreisher, 2001; Johnston & Gabel, 1995); uncertain and shifting quality of care resulting from parental loss (Bloom, 1995; Gaudin & Sutphen, 1993); and family dissolution (Carlson & Cervera, 1992; Western & McLanahan, 2000).

Ecological Models and the Importance of Context

Ecological models are sensitive to contextual factors in the environment and diverse family structures and residential patterns. This approach holds theoretical promise in terms of informing social work professionals' understanding of the experience of incarceration and how it impacts families. Ecological theory typically focuses on four nested systems that broadly compose the ecological environment—the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The microsystem is defined as the immediate setting and complex of relations between the developing person (for the purposes of this review, defined as the nonincarcerated family member or child) in time. Within the microsystem for example, proximal family relationships are seen as a primary force driving development. Parental functioning is thus a critical variable of interest.

Mesosystems involve interrelations between contexts containing the developing person. In short, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems. Thus, links between home and contexts containing the developing person that are unique to prison, such as visiting areas, are salient.

An exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem in that it embraces other contexts and community factors that influence development; however, these settings do not necessarily contain the developing person. This systemic level is particularly important in considering the implications of incarceration for family members and children who are left behind, as community factors at the exosystem level can interfere with access and utilization of services (Snell-Johns, Mendez, & Smith, 2004). Exosystemic issues of

interest relative to this review encompass the specific context of imprisonment for the family member who is incarcerated, the institutional practices associated with the setting, and the influence the incarcerative setting and subsequent reentry into the community poses for the family via the imprisoned family member. Of particular interest is how contexts of imprisonment impinge on, delimit, and even determine proximal microsystem processes in the home (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Finally, the macrosystem refers to overarching institutional patterns and cultural prototypes such as economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems. Macrosystems are ideological blueprints influencing development made manifest through other systemic levels. Such macrosystemic influence is of special importance in considering the impact of incarceration on families as it determines how children and their caretakers are treated and interact in different types of settings.

Thus, ecological theories conceptualize human development in relation to context and the interdependent nature of multiple levels or systems of organization. Bronfenbrenner (1977) described this approach to understanding development as the scientific study of dynamic interrelationships between the changing person and the changing environmental contexts within which a person lives. From this perspective, biological, psychological, and social contextual levels are fused and constitute the process of developmental change (Lerner, Sparks, & McCubbin, 1999). This fusion or interdependence is of great significance with respect to incarceration because it points to multiple connections between contextual levels, such as the overlap between poverty and the creation of single-parent households via incarceration. Indeed, a critical gap in the literature involves not only the lack of empirical data that portrays children's economic status within the context of parental incarceration, but also an overall inattention 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 & Nightingale, 1996). Thus, an ecological framework provides interpretive power in terms of contextualizing the experience of imprisonment and highlighting the interrelatedness of social problems such as crime and poverty.

The systemic fusion is also important when considering how contextual levels shape the families' inner experiences with regard to dealing with loss as a result of incarceration. The prisoner, the nonincarcerated parent, and children are embedded in a broader sociocultural network that stigmatizes involvement in the criminal justice system, intensifying the potential of harm for families (Davies, 1980). Relative to incarceration, the macrosystemic context likely takes on a heightened saliency given the highly stigmatized nature of incarceration and powerfully shapes the emotional life of the family. For example, Schoenbauer (1986) observed that unlike other contexts of loss such as death or

TABLE 1. Overview of Contextual Levels, Constructs of Interest, and Protective Factors

SYSTEMIC LEVEL	CONSTRUCTS	PROTECTIVE FACTORS
Microsystem	Parent–child relationships Disenfranchised grief Ambiguous loss	Social support Individual and family resilience Ecologically sensitive casework
Mesosystem	Linkages between home and prison Family visitation	Family-friendly visiting Child-centered collaboration between CJS and child welfare
Exosystem	Prison/jail conditions Institutional practices Community response to reentry	Rehabilitation Alternatives to incarceration Community outreach
Macrosystem	Deep-break policy Stigma/disenfranchisement	Restorative justice Criminal justice reform

Note. CJS = criminal justice system.

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. Lowenstein (1986) also recognized the unique disruptive effects of incarceration on the family because of the demoralization and stigma attached to it. Stigma has been theorized as spreading 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 not only to a lack of social support, but also to the avoidance of relations with the incarcerated family member.

Table 1 provides an overview of systemic levels as delineated by ecological theory and the corresponding constructs of interest within the scope of this review (i.e., the implications of parental incarceration for nonincarcerated family members). Additionally, protective factors and respective points of intervention as they pertain to each level of organization and their related constructs are included in this table and will be further elaborated on in the final section of this review.

Parent–Child Relationships and the Family’s Inner Life

Doka’s (1989) discussion about disenfranchised grief has resonated with many researchers and provided conceptual meat for understanding the inner lives of families who are disrupted by incarceration. Disenfranchised grief is defined as occurring when persons experience a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Disenfranchisement can occur for several reasons, such as when the relationship is not recognized, as in the case of ties between the bereaved and deceased that are not based on socially sanctioned or publicly recognized kin ties. This is a likely possibility for many families impacted by incarceration and is most applicable to lovers and friends of the prisoner who are connected by informal bonds rather than legal or blood-kinship ties. Disenfranchisement is also characteristic of losses that simply are not openly recognized and not defined as socially significant. Incarceration is one of those circumstances in

which the reality of the loss itself is not socially validated. Furthermore, it is a significant loss whereby the object of the loss remains physically alive but is treated as dead (Sudnow, 1967). Indeed, like other forms of institutionalization, incarceration represents the social death of the loved one, and surviving family members may experience a profound sense of loss. The death feels complete, yet the loss cannot be publicly acknowledged because the person is still biologically alive. The experience of not being able to grieve publicly over the social death of a loved one is reflected in this account of a conversation with a grandmother who was bringing her imprisoned son’s children to visit:

She brought up ... that it was like the family was in mourning—they were grieving but had no body and couldn’t really grieve in public because going to jail is not acceptable. You are supposed to hide this fact, but if they had died then they could grieve publicly and get the support needed. But when someone goes to jail and you lose them from your daily life, almost like a death, you cannot grieve out loud, you have to grieve silently or else risk shame. (Arditti, 2003, p. 128).

Hostile, disapproving, or indifferent social attitudes most likely compound the pain of losing a family member to imprisonment, similar to the dynamics of loss in gay and lesbian relationships. The death of a partner may then be mourned in isolation when the situation has been kept secret or has been met with disapproval by other family members and/or the community (Walsh, 1998).

Another reason for disenfranchisement involves situations in which the characteristics of the bereaved disenfranchise their grief. Doka (1989) pointed out this is often the case for children who are typically perceived by others as having little comprehension of or reaction to the death of a significant other. In the case of a social death such as incarceration, the failure to recognize children’s capacity for grief is even more probable, and children tend to be invisible with respect to their loss. Sack, Seidler, and Thomas (as cited in Lowenstein, 1986) astutely observed:

“Society offers prisoners’ children no means of rationalizing or justifying their loss and many of them are forced to ‘go underground’” (p. 83). And yet, despite their lack of social recognition and the likelihood of invisibility, when one cares enough to pay attention and provide an outlet, one finds that the children themselves are very aware of their incarcerated parent’s absence. Arditti (2003) found evidence of not only family members reports of their children’s grieving, but children’s own acknowledgement of missing their incarcerated parent. Jonathan Kozol, author of *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope*, discussed life through the eyes of children in New York’s South Bronx. Kozol commented on “what has changed” in the South Bronx since he wrote his previous book in the early 1990s:

There’s less crime but more men in prison. About a quarter of the children I know see their fathers only when they visit them in prison. That’s one side of incarceration the press doesn’t talk about enough—the very high price on the children of the men in prison. There’s a little boy in the book named Elio who has spent years telling me every few weeks how much he misses his father who is in prison. That takes a high toll on the community. (“Jonathan Kozol,” 2000)

Psychologically, disenfranchised grief exacerbates problems and emotional reactions for the bereaved, an area yet to be explored carefully by researchers examining the effects of incarceration on survivor family members and children. The intensification of grief-related problems is grounded in the shame-based nature of disenfranchisement (Doka, 1989). Not only does society fail to recognize the survivor family members, but the bereaved themselves may fail to recognize their own grief, further compromising family functioning postadmission.

The lack of social validation and support is also evident at the macro level. For example, prison widowhood is not a recognized status. The widow (or widower) and her or his children are afforded no child assurance (e.g., child support or benefits) or recourse from the formal economy. Lowenstein (1986) contended that incarceration of a family member creates a temporary, involuntary, single-parent household. The involuntariness of single parenthood is often met with sympathy, supportive rituals, and child assurance in other contexts. Yet, the prison widow is typically denied these things. Indeed, being a prison widow is like “going to a funeral that no one attends” (Arditti, 2002). Levinger (1992) pointed out that the level of voluntariness is a theoretically important element in the analysis of grief and bereavement, with more irreversible forms of separation seen as more profound. It may be that although the family member defines the loss as *involuntary*, society defines it as *voluntary* in that the prison widow(er) is at fault and subsequently undeserving of help. Families, especially the surviving widow, are not considered blameless;

the behavior of the inmate is extended to the family. There seems to be little compassion not only for the prisoner, but also for the family that he or she leaves behind. The perception that somehow the prison widow is to blame because of a presumed awareness of the convicted family member’s illegal activities likely contributes to a belief that the resultant single-parent status of the family connected with the offender is voluntary, further contributing to the denial of social support and validation.

The special case of family visiting. In advancing a framework to understand the experiences of families impacted by incarceration, one must realize that it is particularly important to consider visiting areas at jails and prisons as significant ecological contexts with respect to loss and stigma. Families and children may spend considerable time in these areas, and they are important portals through which the family interfaces with the corrections system and their imprisoned kin because they are inextricably intertwined. Thus family visiting is of interest in terms of its microsystemic effect and the mesosystem linkage between home and prison. In visiting areas at jails and prisons across the country, families are influenced not only by the actual process of talking with and seeing their incarcerated family member, but also by their interactions with corrections staff, their interactions with other families that are waiting to visit, and their experience relative to the environmental conditions and policies connected to a particular jail or prison setting (Arditti, 2003).

Visiting an incarcerated family member has bearing on the family’s inner life in that it reflects the ambiguous nature of loss for families impacted by incarceration. Boss (1999) discussed two types of ambiguous loss: in the first type, people are perceived by family members as physically absent but psychologically present—“because it’s unclear whether they are dead or alive” (p. 8). In the second type, a person is perceived as physically present but psychologically absent. Parents and children visiting an incarcerated family member most likely experience both types of ambiguous loss, fluctuating back and forth from visiting behind the fence, to life on the outside. Away from the jail or prison setting, the loss could be characterized as the first type; the incarcerated family member is physically absent but may be psychologically present in the home. This type of ambiguity was poignantly illustrated in the recent documentary *A Sentence of Their Own*, which depicted one family’s experience (Barens, 2001). At home in Georgia, the survivor single mother continually made reference to her husband, who was imprisoned in New Hampshire, to the couples’ children. On the basis of the family’s dialogue, it seemed almost as if the imprisoned father was at home with them, certain to come through the trailer door at dinnertime rather than serving a 9-year prison term almost a thousand miles away. The mother went so far as to use her husband’s psychological presence as a means of disciplining errant behavior and as an incentive for the boys to do well in school. And yet, it is unclear what type of experience

one has while visiting at a corrections setting—the incarcerated family member may be physically present for a period of time but perhaps psychologically absent (i.e., a “different person” to use Boss’s words) because of his or her own pain and experiences connected to imprisonment.

Suffice it to say that in both types of ambiguous loss and their effects, those who are experiencing it are dealing with something very different from “ordinary, clear-cut loss” and may have profound difficulty (Boss, 1999, p. 9). Ambiguous loss is often devastating because it remains unclear, indeterminate, and unvalidated by the community. Brodsky (1975) described relationships with an incarcerated family member as “uncertain.” The ambiguity or uncertainty can then breed emotional ambivalence—which involves a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from pursuing a line of action (Weigert, 1991). Ambivalence was evident in recent research of parents and caregivers visiting an incarcerated family member. For example, more than half (55.6%) of the study participants admitted that there were times they did not feel like coming to the jail to visit. Yet the majority of participants were visiting frequently (Arditti, 2003). Ambivalence creates a tension or agony, which is likely characteristic of families impacted by incarceration.

In the end, it seems that formal and informal social processes that label and stigmatize the prisoner and his or her family lead to repulsion as the predominant aspect of any ambivalence. Over time, infrequent visits and contact, deterioration of closeness, and an avoidance of the incarcerated family member may all be seen in this context (Brodsky, 1975).

Barriers and obstacles associated with visitation may further undermine any therapeutic value of visiting for family members and could potentially exacerbate loss-related trauma. Indeed, the extent to which an environment is promoting or inhibiting is ecologically significant and has developmental implications for families and children (Lerner et al., 1999). Of particular concern are environments that restrict exploration by children and put pressure on parents to provide regulation (Garbarino, 1995). It is not uncommon, for example, in many federal prisons to restrict the inmate to his or her seat (bolted to the floor), subsequently limiting visiting children’s movement with few or no options in terms of play activities. Results from one of the few studies examining family visiting at a local jail also highlight the prohibiting developmental conditions of the setting. On a typical visitation, children and their caregivers could expect to wait for 30 to 60 minutes

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before getting called to have their turn for a 20-minute, no-contact visit with their family member. During the wait in the visiting area, children were bored, restless, and had little to do but hang on their mothers or lie down between the bolted plastic seats on the hard linoleum floor. Upon being called by the deputies to line up, the family then passed through a locked door, a metal detector, an elevator, and another locked door that eventually led to a row of small cubicles to visit the incarcerated parent. Children were required to sit on a small stool and use a telephone to talk to their family member who was separated from them by a Plexiglas wall (Arditti, 2003).

Hairston (1998) discussed the problematic nature of visiting at correctional facilities. She described prison visiting as both psychologically and physically demanding for children and adults, and the visiting conditions in most facilities as poor. For example, while visiting in crowded, noisy, and dirty facilities, family members often have to withstand humiliation and rude treatment by correctional officers. Sturges (1999) also noted that on the basis of the scant studies that address this topic, visitors feel a sense of degradation and stigmatization when visiting due to their association with the inmate. Such

situations can lead to permanent rather than temporary severance of family ties due to a lack of meaningful contact to support an enduring bond between children and parents (Hairston, 1998). It is likely that many visiting areas in jails and prison can be described as developmentally inhibiting because of their restrictiveness and environmental conditions.

Deep-Break Policy

Critics argue that family-hostile prison practices have largely contributed to the difficult context of parental incarceration and subsequent problems prisoners have reentering the community. Nurse (2002) labeled these policies the “deep break.” In this way, incarcerated parents are purposively isolated from community and family as a punishment strategy. From an ecological perspective, the deep break represents an essential aspect of the macrosystem relative to the survivor family in terms of its pervasive ideological influence. Deep-break policy also is of interest in terms of its exosystemic manifestations in terms of prison institutional practices and community response to prisoner reentry. An in-depth discussion of prison conditions and community factors and their effect on the

inmate is beyond the scope of this review. However, parenting capacity is likely diminished as a result of incarceration; thus parental incarceration has profound exosystemic effects on families. Harsh institutional practices, lack of family preservation policies, determinate sentencing practices, and cultural emphasis on punishment preclude the possibility of parental presence for significant periods of time and undermine the possibility of responsible parenting upon reentry.

In short, deep-break policy has transformed prisons from a focus on reentry preparation to custodial containment and serves to reinforce and enhance the likelihood of disenfranchisement. Indeed, an emerging body of literature addresses the disenfranchisement of the inmate, defined as the deprivation of rights and privileges (Mish, 1994) during and after incarceration. In considering the issue of disenfranchisement, it is worth emphasizing that the majority of prisoners are persons of color, many of whom are also impacted by AIDS (e.g., see Stockdill's 1999 discussion), which intensifies their marginalization and exclusion from social justice (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Barak, Flavin, & Leighton, 2001; Donzinger, 1996; Shelden, 2001). A recent article in *The Economist* described the outcome of going through the prison system as a "stigma that never fades," ("Prison and Beyond," 2002, p. 25) which effectively locks out ex-convicts and even those felony offenders who did not serve time from important opportunity structures and viable employment opportunities (Kleinfeld, 2002; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Most critics agree that opportunities for training, education, and/or rehabilitation in prison are limited or incoherent, and the habits learned in prison are often inconsistent with family and work routines on the outside (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Ross & Richards, 2003).

Evidence is emerging that assesses how concentrated increases in incarceration and release can impact families, neighborhoods, and communities. Lynch and Sabol's (2000) research documents the destabilizing effects on communities that high incarceration rates can have—disrupting social networks, affecting family formation, and reducing the informal control over children, particularly parental supervision of young adolescent males. Specifically, admissions and releases from incarceration have been shown to be related to increases in unemployment and female-headed households.

Furthermore, under certain conditions high concentrations of admission and release can contribute to higher

crime rates in disadvantaged communities via the intensification of poverty in a given geographic area and the weakening of kin networks. Subsequently, these communities may have little capacity to address the needs of their residents, contributing in part to the likelihood of criminal activity and recidivism (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Indeed, given the conditions discussed thus far, high rearrest rates and parole/probation violations postrelease are common, leading to repeated terms of incarceration (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Donzinger, 1996).

Empirically, very little is known regarding how the prisoner's disenfranchisement specifically impacts his or her family during incarceration and after release. Ex-prisoners often have difficulty in terms of reintegrating into the community and adjusting to family life. Returning prisoners serve longer sentences than in the past, making them less likely to be attached to their families and communities when they return. Austin and Irwin (2001) noted that despite the odds against them, many prisoners are able to refrain from further law vio-

lations after release but remain completely dependent on their families. Others speculate that because of the prisoner's disenfranchisement, their families are unenthusiastic about their return ("Prison and Beyond," 2002). At the very least, the prisoner's disenfranchisement seems to create additional economic burdens for the already financially compromised (e.g., see Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003) survivor family postrelease.

In summary, deep-break policy stigmatizes involvement in the criminal justice system via disenfranchisement. The scope and implications of this disenfranchisement may not only a function of family involvement in the criminal justice system, but also of being a single parent (Donati, 1995; Guttman, 1993), of being poor, and of societal reproach associated with poverty and the use of public assistance (Seccombe, 2000). Additionally, the scope of the disenfranchisement associated with incarceration encompasses more than reinforcing or intensifying poverty. It has a significant microsystemic social and emotional element as well. As discussed in the previous section, there is an expectation that one will grieve less for individuals who are less socially valued, such as a prisoner, and there is also a sense that socially devalued individuals, such as children or prison widows, have less legitimacy to grieve (Doka, 1989). Furthermore, the deep break is evident relative to many of the difficulties associated with family visiting in corrections settings. Unfortunately, the

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majority of families must deal with parental incarceration with little in the way of resources and social support (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).

Additionally, blaming the prisoner and the extension of this blame to the family that he or she has left behind are elements of disenfranchisement that undermine the possibility of social justice. Shelden (2001) asserted that such blaming does little to solve any problem related to crime and contributes to the problem that is the criminal justice system: a system that historically and arguably still is class, gender, and racially biased. The problem for Shelden involves the control and marginalization of the “dangerous classes” via social blaming. In sum, disenfranchisement has a significant, multisystemic influence on parent–child relationships and the family’s inner life. It is a manifestation of deep-break policy as macrosystem and has a bearing on the experience of incarceration and the resultant losses associated with a family member’s imprisonment (Harvey, 2002; Rando, 1993).

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Implications for Intervention and Policy

Theorizing about the implications of incarceration for parenting and child development highlights how the removal of one parent via imprisonment from a child’s life can deplete the human and social resources of the family (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Issues around economic deprivation and social stigma thus become salient features of parental adversity. The harm then that results from incarceration is multiplicative in that its effects become elements of what theorists have called the “chain of adversity” (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). The systemic elements described in the previous sections can be seen as links in the chain. An ecological framework informs social work professionals’ understanding not only by recognizing the theoretical importance of individual links in the chain, but also by highlighting the implications of their connectedness and the systemic fusion that underlies the chain of adversity. Notable is the heightened economic risk incarceration poses for families as well as the role strain, fatigue, and social isolation associated with single parenting (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest., 2003). Additionally, family visitation is potentially part of the chain of adversity in terms of its possible additive effects on children and families. It would be important to understand how visiting a parent in prison may compound the depletion of family resources and intensify parental adversity or, conversely, mitigate the effects of incarceration.

Ecological theory suggests that diminished family functioning is likely mediated in part by protective factors. Protective factors are typically defined as individual or environmental characteristics that ameliorate risk (Kaplan, 1999). These protective factors are best conceptualized in terms of their connection with various systemic levels and the corresponding constructs of interest. Examples of protective factors include family strengths and individual resiliencies, economic and personal resources, community strengths, ecologically sensitive family practice, family-friendly visiting, and criminal justice reform. Many of these protective mechanisms have been well documented in the resilience literature as ecologically significant mediators of adversity (Seccombe, 2002; Walsh, 1998). Others are more speculative or connected more closely with the peculiarities and challenges associated with incarcerative contexts. The list of protective factors is not meant to be all inclusive, but rather a recognition that although there may be common threads among families impacted by incarceration,

there is also diversity in terms of their experiences with the criminal justice system and their ability to overcome adversity. Because these families are an understudied group, it is unknown how many of them have been able to “beat the odds” and avoid some of the more deleterious effects associated with having a parent incarcerated.

Resilience and Family Strengths

An ecological perspective recognizes the multiple spheres of influence in risk and resilience across time (Walsh, 1998). Thus the families’ experiences connected to incarceration occur in a nested system that is characterized by some level of plasticity with many potential sources of intervention. Although the vast resilience literature is beyond the scope of this article, it is worthwhile to recognize resilience conceptually. For the purposes of this discussion, resilience is defined as an individual or family system’s capacity to survive, regenerate, and grow out of crisis and challenge. Resilience suggests a hardiness, a viability, and an ability to cope creatively even in the midst of complex stressors, obstacles, and difficulties associated with incarceration (Walsh, 1998). Individual and family resiliencies, support networks, and family solidarity seem to serve as protective factors that buffer negative aspects of the experience (Lowenstein, 1986). Indeed, it is important to recognize that families may be internally strong despite fewer economic and social assets (Orthner,

Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2001). Parents and children are “active agents” in the environment, thus having the capabilities, even in prohibiting developmental contexts, to set in motion “enhancing processes of interaction” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 634). A cornerstone of ecologically sensitive practice involves recognizing the efficacy of interventions that are strength focused—particularly with families who are at risk for being underserved (Snell-Johns et al., 2004). Strength-based interventions emphasize the importance of not blaming families and the use of nonthreatening therapeutic approaches (Kagan, Reid, Roberts, & Silverman-Pollow, 1987). This type of approach is particularly applicable for work with families impacted by incarceration, given the challenges associated with stigma, disenfranchised grief, and ambiguous loss.

Families dealing with incarceration would benefit from intervention that breaks social isolation, given that many of these families receive little validation and support. Bringing an ecological consciousness to intervention would point to the importance of on-site services in jail and prison visiting areas as a natural means of mobilizing support. A model program serving New York’s children that incorporates special nonthreatening security measures and the use of a child-friendly area with toys available offers an excellent example of responsiveness to the needs of families (Bilchik et al., 2001). Friendlier visiting areas that provide activities for children while they wait may also free visitors up to interact with each other and provide informal social and emotional support. Efforts to mobilize support from within the natural network, as opposed to outside intervention when the presenting problem is highly stigmatizing, tend to be quite effective (Gottlieb, 2000). As parents are able to utilize support systems, levels of stress and social isolation might be reduced.

Unfortunately, the behavior of corrections personnel does not seem to be reflective of ecologically sensitive practice. Furthermore, innovation within the realm of visitation, especially at jails, is arguably dehumanizing. For example, video visitation systems are becoming increasingly popular, purporting to “replace contact visiting, eliminate contraband and confrontations after *bad* visits, and free officers for more *important* duties [italics added]” (advertisement for Vugate, Inc., in *American Jails* magazine, Nov./Dec., 2003). Obviously the major appeal of video visitation is its presumed cost efficiency, regardless of the effects the experience may have on families and children. The costs of video visitation on children are hidden and unknown and ultimately may prove to have collateral dam-

age one can only begin to imagine in terms of the overall effects of parental imprisonment on children.

Therefore, collaborations between correctional staff with child welfare workers seem to be particularly important. The central goal of any training program should be to emphasize the potentially traumatic context visiting poses for children and to help corrections officers to do no harm relative to visitors. The product of such collaboration involves helping correctional personnel to consider not only how visiting might impact the inmate and serve as a means to control prisoner behavior, but also to

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consider how visiting impacts the children and families that come through these settings. It has been noted elsewhere that corrections officers and personnel give priority to security rather than family and child well-being (Arditti, 2003; Sturges, 2002). On the basis of her study of the visitation at county jails, Sturges recommended a training shift from a traditional, security-oriented approach to a human services orientation. Such an orientation requires that correctional

officers understand how parental incarceration affects children as well as the potentially traumatic effects of visiting. Thus, officers trained within this approach would have the necessary skills to solve problems that might arise for families while they visit and assist visitors in terms of intervention and resource and referral.

In conclusion, with respect to social casework, strengths-based interventions, on-site support during family visiting, and community partnerships could potentially mitigate the negative effects of incarceration for families. However, it is important to recognize that it is not enough to try and bolster resilience in families and facilitate protective mechanisms and programmatic interventions (Rutter, 1987; Seccombe, 2002). Social work professionals must strive to change the odds against families impacted by criminal justice policies and attend to the interplay of political, economic, social, and racial climates that influence the shaping of these policies. Although the notion of resilience brings hope and optimism into an otherwise bleak discussion of incarceration and families, it should by no means be used as a way to rationalize current criminal sanction policies—particularly for nonviolent offenders.

Thus, any discussion of incarceration and families is incomplete without recognizing the need to minimize the use of imprisonment in the first place. An ecological framework recognizes the profound implications of the deep break and the need for policy that acknowledges the interrelatedness of crime, poverty, and family life. Public policies that treat these conditions independently may inadvertently make these

problems worse (Watts & Nightingale, 1996). Widely documented elsewhere is the over-reliance on incarceration, particularly for nonviolent property and drug offenses (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Irwin & Ziedenberg, 1999; Sheldon, 2001); thus sentencing reform and harm-reduction policies should be a centerpiece of criminal justice reform addressing the needs of families and children. From a harm-reduction perspective it is essential that the intervention (i.e., incarceration) do no more harm than the problem (such as drug use) one is attempting to solve (Denning, 2000). Fundamental principles of restorative justice incorporate this perspective as well and attend to the needs created by the criminal offense, while also attending to issues related to the cause of the offense, such as poverty, addictions, or a lack of moral or ethical base (Claassen, 1996). Only through challenging and deconstructing current crime control strategies in the United States can social work professionals begin to comprehensively address the needs of families impacted by incarceration.

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Publisher's note. Readers may be interested in a 2003 study on the social and financial costs of incarcerating parents for non-violent offenses written by Thomas A. Lengyel, PhD, MSW, director of research and evaluation services at the Alliance for Children and Families, the publisher of Families in Society. Lengyel's study is available at www.alliance1.org. Click on Research and then Article Archives.

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