



# New Study Shows Children of Incarcerated Mothers Experience Multiple Challenges

by Julie Poehlmann

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

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

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

## Children and mothers find incarceration painful

Mothers described their child's reaction to separation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Children of incarcerated mothers are at risk for unhealthy development

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

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

On intelligence tests, about one third of the children scored below average, which is consistent with their high risk status, and 10% scored in the delayed range, which is about 1½ times the number expected. About half appeared to have normal test scores despite the risks that they face.

## Children of incarcerated mothers often have troubled attachments

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

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

## Interventions need to be carefully designed

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

Other results suggest that helping mothers, children, and caregivers develop secure attachments while the women are in prison may prove to be complex. Visitation with children is an important issue

that has implications for mothers' mental health and children's attachment relationships. Poehlmann's research has found that the quality of the mother-caregiver relationship is a key factor in determining how much contact children have with their mothers during imprisonment. This finding suggests that interventions targeting mother-child contact should also include the caregiver.

## Summary

Many incarcerated women have had a family member in prison (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999), which suggests the risk

of a cycle of criminal behavior. If we don't pay attention to the needs of children of incarcerated parents and thereby jeopardize their chances of growing up into competent and caring adults, taxpayers and society may bear additional costs beyond that of their parent's incarceration. References are available from the Family Impact Seminars ([fis@ssc.wisc.edu](mailto:fis@ssc.wisc.edu)) or Professor Julie Poehlmann ([poehlmann@waisman.wisc.edu](mailto:poehlmann@waisman.wisc.edu)). ■

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