

# Acknowledging and Reaching Children of Prisoners

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## Abstract

Referencing the current literature, this article explores the difficulties and life prospects of the children of prisoners and contrasts their futures with those of other “high risk” children. The children of prisoners have largely been ignored in the child welfare and education systems. As a result their normal social function is gravely diminished and the likelihood of their later involvement in the criminal justice system is extraordinarily high. Some helpful strategies to recognize and engage with them are provided by the author to ameliorate their futures.

## Introduction

Those who work with children know that early life experiences can have a profound effect on their future. Teachers are well aware of the broad issues: poverty, addiction, family dysfunction, and neighborhoods of lower socio-economic indicators. The role of a teacher or other professionals working with children in their early years is therefore particularly important. It is important for a teacher not only to identify children who may struggle with the transition to formal schooling, but also to address their particular problems in order to avert or minimize a child’s difficulties.

Within Canada, a particular group of children, the children of prisoners, have epidemic poor life outcomes, and these children — unlike their counterparts in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Australia, and a host of other countries — have not been recognized as a dis-

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tinct group. Researchers have identified these children as having much higher than normal incidences of lower academic achievement, truancy, gang involvement, substance addiction, mental illness, crime, and incarceration (Stanton 1980; Baunach 1985; Gabel, S. 1992; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Gabel and Johnston 1995; Seymour 1998; Ascione and Dixson 2002; Murray and Farrington 2005). The primary source of their risk is hidden through labels which place them within broader social pathologies. In failing to recognize these children we condemn them to increased risk.

In order to more effectively assist the children of prisoners it is necessary to consider that children of prisoners are affected by their parent’s imprisonment and that within this group of children those whose mother is imprisoned are at even greater risk. Moreover, while there is limited research on the subject, existing studies

**Note: All article quotations in text boxes are from confidential sources.**

“I tell ‘em to make sure Grampa keeps his pecker in his pocket. He’s old now. He won’t ... I don’t ... I don’t suppose I have to worry.”

*Mother, serving three years, with two children, ages 5 and 7, who live with her parents.*

suggest that the children of imprisoned mothers tend to be placed in informal care agreements with family and friends (Gabel and Johnston 1995, 106-107). As a consequence, these children do not come to the attention of government services. Instead, the problems and needs of the children of prisoners are most likely to be recognized by their teachers, rather than other professionals in the child welfare or medical systems. It is important therefore that teachers understand the unique problems of these children, and understand what they can do.

## The Big Questions

Anyone working with children of high risk is always concerned that their actions do not in any way diminish a child’s potential. There are three key questions to keep in mind when considering the children of prisoners.

Are the children of prisoners at any greater risk than children without a parent in prison who face similar risk factors?

Does acknowledging and identifying the children of prisoners increase their risk factors?

What is it about the lived experience of the child of a prisoner and a parent in prison that is important for those working with these children to know?

Keeping these questions in mind, it is possible to reach out effectively and reduce the risk that children of prisoners face.

### Inside Prisons

Typically people in our prisons are poor and struggle with related issues such as addiction. There is another characteristic, however, that has not been well recognized. A disproportionate number of prisoners come from families where at least one other family member was incarcerated. In the US, the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents conducted a study of incarcerated women and found that 33% of the women had a parent who had been incarcerated, approximately 80% had a member in their immediate family who had been incarcerated, and 59% had multiple family members who had been incarcerated (Gabel and Johnston 1995, 47). The Center also reported that over one third of incarcerated men also had an immediate family member who had been incarcerated (Gabel and Johnston 1995, 4).

For over fifty years studies have looked at the effect on the family of a parent going to prison; other studies have looked at how children from dysfunctional and separated families are at risk of antisocial and delinquent behaviours when compared with children from intact homes. However, only a limited number of studies have considered the effect of incarceration on the children of prisoners. Most studies are small, and are of male prisoners and their children. Of the studies that do exist, few are longitudinal. Further, the children of prisoners face multilayered problems, and it can be difficult to isolate the impact of incarceration from other factors such as abuse, poverty, limited education, and addiction, to name a few. Thus, as Kazdin has noted, “[O]ver time several risk factors become interrelated because the presence of one factor can augment the accumulation of other risk factors” (Kazdin 1998, 68). There is a need, therefore, for further research. Yet, the existing research literature demonstrates unequivocally that the risk factors mentioned above significantly predispose a child to criminal behaviours, and that the accumulation of risk factors only exacerbates the likelihood of criminal justice involvement.

### Separation from Parents: Differing Outcomes Identified

One recently published longitudinal study, the first of its kind, does provide significant information regarding the effects on children of having a parent incarcerated (as opposed to the child being separated from their parent for other reasons). Murray and Farrington (2005), using longitudinal data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, examined socioeconomic conditions, schooling, friendship, parent-child relationships, extracurricular activities, school records, and criminal records. They controlled for individual, parenting, and family risk factors that previously had been shown to predict boys’ antisocial behaviour and delinquency. They found that boys who experienced separation due to parental incarceration have poorer life outcomes. The boys demonstrated greater antisocial and

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delinquent behaviour than their peers who had either not experienced parental separation, or had, due to hospitalization, death or other reasons (such as divorce). Further, these boys had poorer life outcomes up to the age of 32, when the study followed up with them.

“I don’t talk about it. What would you say? My mother killed my dad? I tell them my aunt is my foster mom.”

*Boy, age 13.*

Thus, Murray and Farrington were able to answer the question whether the children of prisoners were affected differently from their peers who were separated from a parent for other reasons (2005, 1273). In addition, they found that the effects of parental incarceration were not accounted for by official labeling of prisoners’ families. Thus, it is clear: acknowledging children of prisoners is not the risk mechanism that leads to their antisocial behaviours and poor life outcomes — an important consideration for professionals working with these children.

### Gender Differences

Women charged with offences differ significantly from their male counterparts. Women commit fewer crimes than men, have a significantly lower rate of incarceration and their collective profile differs significantly from that of men.

Typically, in 2004, of all offences committed, only 18% were committed by women. In addition, women are consistently more likely to be charged with property offences rather than violent offences (such as homicide, assault or robbery). The large majority of property crimes women are charged with involve either theft under \$5,000 or fraud. In 2004, 31% of all criminal code charges against women were for these offences, compared to only 17% of charges against men. Men were more likely than women to be charged with break and enter or other types of personal theft (Statistics Canada, March 2006, 169).

Overall, for both the provincial and federal offences for which women are charged, only 17% are for violent crimes. The majority of these are charges related to simple or common assault, the least serious form of assault. Examples include slapping, pushing, or threatening to harm someone. By contrast, a full 81% of all male offenders have committed a violent offence. One in three is serving a sentence of more than 10 years (CSC 2005,2). So it is fair to say that female prisoners commit fewer serious

crimes than men, for which they are incarcerated for short periods of time.

The average male offender has a higher level of education, a better standard of living, and a lower incidence of mental illness, addiction, and historical abuse than his female counterpart. In contrast, a special Human Rights Commission report (Canadian Human Rights Commission 2003) documented that the average female offender is between the ages of 20 and 34 with an education of less than Grade 9. Two-thirds of these women are mothers and two-thirds of them are the sole caregivers of their children. Similar percentages of women have unaddressed physical or mental health problems. A full 80% of women prisoners have suffered physical and/or sexual abuse, and the same percentage reported being unemployed at the time of their incarceration.

Gender differences are even more disturbing for Aboriginal women. Only 3% of the female population in Canada in 2003, Aboriginal women represented 29% of the women held in federal prisons. In contrast, Aboriginal men represented 18% of males in federal correctional facilities. According to a 2006 report from the Office of the Correctional Investigator; "between 1996 and 2004 the number of First Nations people in federal institutions increased by 21.7%. This is a 34% difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inmates. Moreover, the number of federally incarcerated First Nations women increased a staggering 74.2% over this period" (Sapers 2006, 1-2).

With all of the problems these women have, most will be released from prison in less than five years and become a part of our communities and the lives of their children.

There is one other overwhelming difference between male and female prisoners and that relates to their children and the implications of parenthood. Studies in the US, Canada, and the UK all report that a significant proportion of prisoners have children. Female prisoners have more chil-

dren than other women, and their incarceration has huge implications for them. In contrast to male prisoners, these mothers tend to be the sole caregivers for their children. Thus, as Gabel (1992) reports, when men are incarcerated, their children's lives are disrupted far less than the children of women prisoners. This is largely because, unlike the children of incarcerated women, the children of male prisoners almost always have caregiver continuity.

An American survey reports that 90% of the children with incarcerated fathers live with their mothers. In contrast, approximately one-quarter of the children of incarcerated women live with their fathers, half live with their grandparents, and the remainder live either in foster care or familial (or otherwise arranged) housing. Thus, children of female prisoners in the US live in circumstances predominantly unrecognized by social agencies (US Department of Justice 1992, 10). Families providing kinship care for children are not usually eligible for additional funding, such as that provided for children in foster care. Thus the families taking these children, and often the children themselves, feel the impact of a drop in family income. These children often come from living in poverty into situations with further pressures. For example, retired grandparents, or those nearing the end of their working lives, are faced with increased financial burdens and the responsibility for raising children. Unsurprisingly, studies since the late 1920s have documented the financial impact of parent incarceration, and have found severe problems and adjustment in the face of reduced family income.

"I know I could be somebody. I want to go to school...  
It's my sixth one.

*Girl, age 10.*

Due to the limited number of female prisoners, there are few prisons for women in Canada. There are five prisons for women serving sentences over two years. Incarcerated women are often transported away from their home and children. For example, in Correction Service Canada's Prairie Region (consisting of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Northwestern Ontario, and the Northwest Territories), there are 11 male institutions and two institutions for women. In that vast geographic region, most women serving more than two-year sentences are sent to Edmonton (CSC Correctional Profiles 2006). Thus, in addition to the disruption of caregiver continuity initiated by a parental prison sentence, the children of incarcerated women often face increased traveling distances and a reduced ability to visit.

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Children of prisoners suffer from separation anxiety, expressed through isolating behaviours and sleep disorders, as well as displays of aggression and excessive anger. They experience other emotional problems, including feelings of fear, abandonment, shame and guilt, and have an increased risk of lower academic performance, truancy, gang participation, and substance abuse (Stanton 1980; Baunach 1985; Gabel, S. 1992; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Seymour 1998; Ascione and Dixson 2002). Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the data,

children of incarcerated parents have substantially higher levels of delinquency compared with other children (West and Farrington 1977; Gabel, S. 1992; Moses 1995; Rowe and Farrington 1997).

Most alarming, the number of children affected by incarceration is increasing in Canada, particularly for those of incarcerated mothers. The population of female prisoners is growing disproportionately when compared with males. Corrections Services Canada research on the number of women incarcerated between 1981 and 1998 (serving sentences over two years) indicates that there are approximately one and a half times as many women incarcerated now as then. By 2009, CSC anticipates that the population of incarcerated women will have increased by 31% (CSC 2001, 6).

#### Female prisoners and their children

The significance of the profile of a female offender and the reasons for which she is incarcerated are important factors in the composite of circumstances that affect her children. More women than men have incomes below the poverty line. Indeed, the rate of poverty for single-female-headed families is higher today (56%) than 30 years ago, when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women issued its ground breaking report calling for change (Townson 2000, 2).

For women who are the sole caregivers for their children, it is virtually impossible to raise children on a low-paying job. So they are often forced out of employment completely and onto social assistance. Women consequently face cycling through welfare, poverty, and the erosion of employment skills as they are forced out of the labour market for a period of time. They are then further impoverished by the denial of job opportunities. For example, in British Columbia, where the minimum wage on June 1, 2006 was \$8 an hour, amongst the highest in Canada (Government of Manitoba 2006), a single parent with two children living in Kamloops or Victoria would have to

work over 65 hours per week, every week of the year at minimum wage in order to reach the poverty line of \$27,386 (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006). Women on welfare in British Columbia are even more disadvantaged and live well below the subsistence level. As of January 2005, a woman in Kamloops or Victoria with two children would receive \$10,566.96 per annum — a full \$16,819 below the poverty line (Government of British Columbia 2005). Single-parent families live in the midst of numerous stressful and disruptive circumstances. Children who live in a household with one parent are considerably more likely to live below the poverty line than are children who live in a household with two parents (Moore & Halle 2000). In addition, single parents move more often than intact families (Caldwell 1998, 7-17), and studies show that children who move frequently are more likely to have problems at school. Moves are even more difficult if accompanied by other significant changes in the children's life, such as death, divorce, loss of family income, or the need to change schools (American Academy of Child and Family Adolescent Psychiatry 1999). Moreover, children of single mothers suffer economic disadvantages because women in Canada still earn less than men (Statistics Canada March 2006, 135). Weak social supports and programs further erode a parent's ability to cope with stress, while highly stressed parents tend to be psychologically unavailable to their children. According to the American Psychological Association (2004), single-parent families deal with many more pressures and potential problems than the nuclear family does.

"I wonder what my life would have been if I had normal parents."

*Boy, age 9,  
both parents imprisoned.*

In short, the environment of children in single-parent households often correlates strongly with a life of poverty and crowded dwellings, conditions that have been demonstrated to be significant predictors of juvenile criminal involvement (Weatherburn and Lind 1997). Moreover, these same factors frequently correlate with parental substance misuse.

The incidence of prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol among children of prisoners appears high. In her 1992 Children of Offenders study, Denise Johnston found that "over half of the children of women who had been arrested, and 77% of the children of currently or previously incarcerated women, had been prenatally exposed to drugs or alcohol" (Gabel and Johnston 1995, 68-69). Parental substance abuse therefore multiplies the dangerous factors already affecting a child.

When mothers go to prison, the effects on their children can be profound, and the consequences more severe than for the children of male prisoners (Richards et al. 1996; Caddle and Crisp 1997). A number of studies have examined the effects of maternal incarceration. Specifically, the abrupt and prolonged separation of a mother from her children has been found to be detrimental to both mother and children (McGowan and Blumenthal 1978; Henriquez 1982; Fessler 1991, Fletcher et al. 1992). Disruption of the attachment bond between mother and child is particularly detrimental for children between the ages of six months and four years (Fuller 1993, 41-47). As well, it is recognized that the impact of the separation of mother and child is particularly profound for older children (Johnston 1995, 59-82).

The experience of parental detachment brings about several significant life changes that occur within discreet periods of time. During parental incarceration, the children generally change homes more than once, change schools and caretakers, and are separated from siblings. These changes, combined with the separation from their primary parent, contribute to nightmares, aggressive

behavior in school, and feelings of rejection, anxiety, anger, and confusion (Hunter, 1985). Additionally, children whose mothers have been incarcerated are subject to peer ridicule and mockery, which exacerbates their feelings of loneliness and alienation (McGowan and Blumenthal 1978). These effects can be long-lasting or temporary depending on the child's age, the relationship of the mother and the child, the caretaker's relationship with the child, and the way in which the mother's incarceration has or has not been explained to the child.

Parental incarceration is only one of many factors that may influence children of prisoners. The literature suggests that the children of incarcerated parents may have been exposed to other risks such as poverty or parental substance abuse or mental health problems prior to their parent's incarceration. How children respond to those circumstances is also affected by their personal resilience, where they are placed when their parent is incarcerated, the nature of their relationship with the substitute caregiver, and the multiplicity of traumas they have experienced.

The crucial point is that parental incarceration serves to flag the risks and accumulation of factors most likely to plague children of prisoners in the future.

People who go to prison, particularly women, are predominantly poor and consequently face the myriad of problems associated with poverty. A strong social bias against prisoners presumes that they cannot be good parents. Raising these issues is not to advance the argument that prisoners are unable to be good parents, but rather to acknowledge both the challenges they face as parents and the needs of their children. Nor does identifying children of incarcerated parents assist in identifying all the children who will be affected. As Loeber and Dishion argue, "the very fact that a father possesses a criminal record, one established before the birth of a child, will enhance the child's prospect of developing his or her own antisocial career" (Loeber and Dishion 1983, 94).

It is also worth noting that studies on children who were provided help or intervention all reported better outcomes for the children who remained in the family home — even where there was substance abuse, neglect or physical abuse present — than for those children who were removed from their home (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse 1999; US Department of Health 1999).

### **Building Prison Populations**

No one knows for certain how many children have incarcerated parents or how many children have been affected by incarceration. The question has only been considered within the last decade in other countries and more recently and only partially in Canada. It is, however, an important question, and one that is possible to closely approximate.

The number of incarcerated parents with children, and the number of children they have, is strikingly similar in the US, the UK, and Canada (Foran 1995). It is possible, therefore, to use, with a degree of confidence, the formula postulated by Denise Johnston in 1995 to estimate the number of children with incarcerated parents in the US (Seymour 1998, 469-494). The formula has been corrected to provide for the gender differential (93.2% men versus 6.8% women) for those incarcerated in Canada.

In 2004-2005, 150,024 people were imprisoned in Canada. Based on the formula, given their incidence of having children (56% of men and 67% of women) and their birth rates (2 children for men and 2.4 for women), it is possible to do a rough calculation predicting the number of children they have: 173,605 children.

Canadians have more than a one-in-ten likelihood of having a criminal record (10.93%). In reality, however, certain groups are significantly overrepresented. Aboriginal people are 3% of the population but 20% of incarcerated males and 31% of incarcerated females within provincial and territorial prisons (Statistics Canada March 2006, 171). Aboriginal people are almost 18.5% of the total federal prison population; Aboriginal women represent 32% of

women in federal prisons (Sapers, Howard 2006, 1). Blacks are 2% of the population and 6% of federally incarcerated inmates (CSC June 2004, 29).

Add the additional factor of a parent incarcerated and, unless changes are made, it is possible to see the number of inmates as second-generation prisoners continuing to grow. For women, the small variable increase in the number who are parents, coupled with their higher birth rate, makes a huge difference. Crime replicates itself through the children of male prisoners at the rate of 72 % of the population base, while women replicate their number at the rate of 86.4 % of the population base — without even considering prisoners coming from the remainder of the population. So it is easy to see why Corrections Services Canada predicts a 31% increase in the number of female prisoners by 2009 (CSC 2001, 6).

### **Recognizing Children of Prisoners: Strategies to Support them**

Countries such as Australia, India, the UK, and the US formally recognize the children of offenders and provide funded programs and systemic supports, including educational strategies and manuals for teachers, and courses on the subject in university curricula for teachers and social workers. Within Canada, however, there is virtually nothing for teachers, either directly for the children of prisoners, or information for professionals who will come in contact with these children. Nevertheless, teachers may become aware of the incarceration of a child's parent through the child, through classroom "gossip" from other children or parent-teacher conferences. They have the opportunity to offer assistance to these children who suffer from anxiety and depression at alarming rates. The shame and fear (wanting to protect their parent from the judgment of others; not knowing what is happening to their parent; feeling "Am I bad, too?") condemn these children to isolation and silence.

The awareness and strategies that teachers often have for sole-caregiver families are often transferable to the children of prisoners. Additional strategies include:

- not asking about the parent's crime,
- being non-judgmental toward the child (they have done nothing wrong),
- avoid treating the child as a victim, and avoid being over-protective.

At a minimum, teachers have the opportunity to:

- promote social acceptance and inclusion through modeling and challenging any prejudicial comments or behaviours by other students, just as they would address bullying in their classroom.
- encourage a child's confidence simply by saying, "It must be hard to have your (mommy/daddy) in jail," and continue the conversation if the child pursues the verbal cue.
- restate the comment (if the child doesn't pursue the conversation) a number of weeks later to let the child know that he or she isn't being judged and that the adult is open to talking with the child if desired.
- draw upon examples of adults who, as children, had parents imprisoned. History is full of examples from Charles Dickens forward. Current examples include actors Charlize Theron, Woody Harrelson, Keanu Reeves, Milla Jovovich, and social activist Heather Mills McCartney, all of whom had a parent in prison and have spoken publicly of the effect it had on their lives.
- provide storybooks written about children with a parent in prison such as *Visiting Day* (Scholastic Press, New York 2002) and *Moma Loves Me from Away* (Boyd's Mills Press, Honesdale, Pennsylvania 2004). Such examples

can provide powerful role models for children of their own potential to achieve and thrive.

Teachers will also need to:

- understand that prisons often allow visits only on weekdays and thus children may miss school. Providing children with school work they can share with their parent is normalizing and fosters the parent-child bond, in addition to providing an opportunity for teachers to remediate the effects of children missing school.
- provide activities that include an understanding that certain items are not allowed into prison visiting areas. A teacher may need to have a discussion with the child's caregiver to understand the limitations on items that can enter the prison. Activities during a visit could include the child reading aloud to the parent from a school book; reviewing his school notebook, and completing corrections or activities with paper and pencil (pens are almost always restricted). Further, teachers who take the time to prepare this work for a child demonstrate their openness and support of the child.

*One minimum security visiting area is devoid of opportunities for parents and children to interact in a normative way or to play. Prison procedure limits food and other items that may be brought into the prison (other than that purchased from a vending machine, most of which is poor nutritional quality). Closed visiting areas in medium or maximum-security prisons require families to visit separated by glass. See [http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/photofile/index\\_e.shtml](http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/photofile/index_e.shtml)*  
Credit: Correctional Service Canada

The sensitivity that teachers display regarding Mother's or Father's Day school activities for children who don't live with or have a parent, (for example, children apprehended or surviving a parent's death), can also be extended to the children of prisoners. For those activities, teachers can say, "Mother's Day is coming and we are going to make cards for mothers, grandmothers, foster mothers, or any other woman who's important in your life." Teachers might also pursue discussions or drawing and painting activities about "people we miss." Children of prisoners will be interested to hear that others also miss people in their lives, such as those who have died or moved away, to hear similar feelings, and share the solidarity of missing people with other children in the class. Similarly, activities of writing or drawing that allow the child to express her feelings and experiences are helpful, for example, asking children to "tell a story (through a picture or words) about what has happened to you in your life."

The challenge for a teacher is to recognize the totality of a child's life and to pull out the threads that reveal their feelings as normal — that others have similar feelings, and that feelings they have about their parent's incarceration like shame or grief aren't reflective of the child's worth or abilities. In this way teachers may provide the means through which the isolation and silence that children of prisoners experience can be broken. And, if we are to assist these children to have the bright futures they deserve, this is the first step toward breaking the generational bonds which entrap them.

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