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Writing 50

11 March 2010

The Relationship between Paroled Mothers and Their Children after Prison

In the United States, 600 thousand prisoners are released annually, on average 1,600 prisoners per day (Armstrong, Bahr, Fisher, Gibbs, & Harris, 2005, p. 2). With such a rapid rate of reentry into the “free world,” this is a population worth studying. Historically, literature has focused on the issues pertinent to male offenders. However, one group that is often overlooked when studying parolees are mothers. Three-quarters of all incarcerated women are mothers (Navarro, 1994). When released from prison, they are weighed down by the burdens of reestablishing their life: finding a job, securing a place to live, and beating the odds of recidivism. Yet, reestablishing their relationship with their children is the most complicated issue of all. While visitation in prison can help the relationship rebound after prison, this is rare due to logistics and personal feelings about it. The negative consequences of maternal incarceration on children often lead children into a life of pain, which can manifest itself in a cycle of crime. Consequently, feelings of sadness, anger, and guilt on the parts of the mother and her child can impede the transition of the mother back into her role. Reclaiming her maternal identity, despite the past, is important in order to improve her confidence and the

relationship with her children. Although problems in the mother-child relationship begin while the mother is still behind bars, the relationship is further strained by external pressures of parole life and the pressure to "make it" in the free world. Social and community programming which address the family need to be prioritized more highly, as the role of the family is often the largest factor preventing a mother's reentry into the criminal justice system (Luke, 2002). The benefits to finding solutions to this national problem are far-reaching. The significance of this research is that the relationship between mother and child is related to parolee success. Armstrong, Bahr, Fisher, Gibbs, and Harris found that, while simply being a parent had no influence on parole success, there was a positive correlation between the two factors if the parent lived with their children prior to incarceration. This illustrates that being present in the children's life, while creating these bonds and relationships, is vital in the post-prison period. The same study reports that the quality of the parent-child relationship, and how it helps parolees adjust, is an important family matter that has been overlooked in research.

Visitation during the time of incarceration is correlated to a more successful relationship after release, but is regular visitation is difficult to establish. One study reporting that only one out of five mothers had their children come and visit them in prison notes that those who did have contact with their children were less likely to return to prison later (Armstrong et al., 2005). Additionally, prison programs have shown that creating a strong bond between the mother and children during the prison time correlates to more custodial contact after release (Dawe & Frye, 2008). Although there has been adequate research on the positive effects of visitation on the parent (Clopton & East, 2008), the list of barriers to visitation is extensive.

Visitation can require long distance travel, especially visitation to women's prisons, which are few in each state. Sometimes caretakers may not be willing to bring the children, and many parents do not want their children exposed to the prison environment (Armstrong et al., 2005). The scene is often frightening, especially for young children, and the sight of their parent locked up can be very disturbing. Often, parents would prefer to correspond by mail rather than to have their children view them as prisoners. Some parents even avoid all contact with their children, often by making up excuses for their absences, like saying that they are away for college or a job (Navarro, 1994). Because some women cannot deal with their pain and guilt, they revert to familiar "escape strategies" to suppress and avoid the hurt they caused their children (Kochal & Shamai, 2008). One woman in Kochal and Shamai's study reported that she felt like a loser, and her shame eventually caused her to stop the visits altogether. She says, "I didn't feel like a mother. A mother is something that is clearly defined. A mother is someone who wakes you up in the morning, who cares for you every day. I felt like a nice aunt who comes with candies and there it ends. I felt empty"(p. 332). Still, maintaining these bonds prevents a further severing of the relationship and leads to a less stressful reunion after the prison term is over. Visitation also allows the mothers to feel involved in their children's growth and development, so that they know who their children are, and do not have to rebuild their relationships from scratch when they are released. In many cases, being able to see their children provides mothers with something to look forward to in the monotonous routine of prison, gives them hope for their futures, and motivates them to get out as soon as possible.

A major obstacle to rebuilding this relationship after prison is overcoming the impacts of

maternal incarceration on the children. "Nothing good happens to the child when the mother is in prison," said Diana Mattson, who heads a child-advocacy program at New York's only maximum-security prison for women. "The children are the victims" (qtd. in Navarro, 1994, p. B1). Often times the children are forced to move homes, switch schools, and separate from their siblings. The main findings of the study by Kochal & Shamai (2008) are that children of maternal incarceration suffer from low self-image, underachievement, high anxiety, depressive tendencies, difficulties in building relationships, and "delinquent" behaviors. According to Dawe & Frye (2008), some of these behaviors include aggression, fighting, hostility, and withdrawal. However, the most serious problem is the rate at which children continue the vicious cycle began by their parents, ending up in prison themselves. According to government figures, more than half of all juveniles who are currently serving time for "serious crimes" have relatives in prison; nine percent said that this relative is their mother (Navarro, 1994). It is extremely difficult to reestablish a parent-child relationship when the children have suffered from a life they did not fully control or choose for themselves. Many children hold onto anger about their mothers' situations and its effects on their own lives. Furthermore, if the children end up in prison themselves, there cannot even be a reunion when the mother is paroled.

This point is best illustrated with a true story. The article, "Mothers in Prison, Children in Limbo; when Inmates Are Parents, the Pain of Incarceration Is Spread," from *The New York Times* gives a classic example of the dire aftermath of maternal incarceration. It tells the story of a New York mother's four children, who were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four at the time of their mother's arrest for selling drugs. After their mother left the home, the household spiraled out of control. The two oldest sons dropped out of school and also went to

jail for selling drugs. The younger two children were beaten by their step-grandfather and ended up being placed in three separate foster homes. When the family finally reunited, the painful effects of the separation remained. The children relied on each other for support and advice instead of their mother. One child reentered the criminal justice system while another attempted suicide. The daughter in the family describes the injustice that came from her mother's incarceration this way: "We did a lot of suffering. Because of her actions we didn't get the right education, we weren't treated right, we got the short end of the deal" (Navarro, 1994, p. B1). Even a short jail term can permanently break families apart. The needs of the children need to be addressed in order to break the cycle of anger, suffering, and incarceration.

Due to the myriad negative consequences that their incarceration has on their children, the guilt and sense of failure that mothers in prison feel significantly affects their relationships. Mothers stake their identities on being able to protect her children from the negative things in the world, and many take full responsibility for the effects of their absences. While incarcerated, they distress over their parenting skills and child's wellbeing, which increases their anxiety and hurts their wellbeing (Luke, 2002). As Meredith, an interviewee said, "everyone here is a bad mother simply by the fact that they are not with their kids" (Enos, 2001, p. 77). Cathy Schen (2005) argues that the feelings of powerlessness and guilt associated with incarceration are further complicated due to its involuntary nature, and to the social ostracism, disapproval and stigma attached to it. The guilt complex experienced by incarcerated mothers is even more significant because it carries weight into the free world and home life. Even when there is reconciliation, feelings of anger and guilt remain. As one mother says about her daughter, "Even

today I am angry at myself for what I caused her. She suffered such pain that even our good relationship today does not erase the past”(Kochal & Shamai, 2008, p. 331). Phyllis Jo Baunach (1985) found that a mother needs to resolve her guilt complex in order to have a healthy reunion with her children. It is important for the mother and children to discuss their feelings of separation and guilt with each other in order to find resolution and heal damaged relationships.

In some cases, according to Kochal & Shamai (2008), the painful prison experience can actually be tied to an improvement in maternal functioning. This is true even when the mother-child relationship was strained before imprisonment. One incarcerated mother stated, “When I was in prison I finally started to accept motherhood...[because] in prison you want to be with your children, to know what’s going on with them, to experience their steps, to grow together with them” (Kochal & Shamai, 2008, p. 329). Additionally, the mother-child relationship can help women overcome the difficulties of prison by providing a sense of hope for the mothers’ future. Motherhood provided a defense for the mothers against harm and insanity, and provide “a reason to get up in the morning” (Kochal & Shamai, 2008, p. 328). Incarceration also provides a time for introspection, as the women can think about how their lives have affected their children. They can then address their concerns and work on finding ways to address them (Luke, 2002).

The next and most important step in this healing process for the mother is reestablishing and reclaiming her identify as a mother. The commitment to and responsibility of motherhood is strongly associated with a mother’s self-worth (Enos, 2001). The concept of being a “bad mother” comes from those who perceive the mothers as having neglected their children; it also

comes from the mothers themselves. However, according to Luke (2002) “Mothers do not stop being mothers because they have been convicted of acts that society finds abhorrent” (p. 936). One of the most essential roles of a mother is to protect children from the world (Bloom & Brown, 2009), which is an aspect of motherhood that many mothers never truly relinquish, although prison damages a woman’s confidence in her ability to perform this task. Many mothers struggle with feeling that they have lost their identities as mothers just due to the separation. This separation of time and space increases the difficulty of reentry into the children’s life. As one parolee said, “They kind of grew up without me” (Armstrong et al., 2005, p. 253). It is extremely difficult to rebuild relationships after children have grown up without their parental figures present, since during the time their mothers are in prison, children build relationships with other caregivers and family as they go to school and learn about the world. The mothers have to find where they fits in their children’s daily lives, since while in prison they have not been the liaison between her children and school and other activities (Bloom & Brown, 2009). Ultimately, if a woman wants to return to her family as the mother, she needs to have confidence in her role. This will show allow her relationship with her children to move forward. If she can be confident in being a mother and having a “place” in society again, she will also be more confident in her ability to maintain a life free of crime.

Once mothers are released from prison, their relationship with their children can be strained by a variety of external stressors. According to Dawe & Frye (2008), “The overriding goal for most mothers is to reestablish relationships with their children. Yet the strain of separation, coupled with financial, occupational, residential and social pressure, intensifies the difficulty of this task”(p. 100). Most parolees reenter society without savings, without a high

school diploma (Golden, 2005), and without employment prospects as a result of their criminal record. Therefore, the job search is extremely frustrating: “nobody wants to hire a convict, you know... you check “yes” on those, you know, that’s as far as they look at it” (Armstrong et al., 2005, p. 257). In addition to facing the prospect of an exasperating job search, mothers also leave prison overwhelmed with debt from prison and court fines, child support, victim compensation, with only their children’s welfare money as a means of supporting their families. These dire financial straits do not put women onto a healthy track for refocusing their lives. No matter how “rehabilitating” the women’s time in prison may have been, if they cannot obtain the resources to support their families, they are more likely to revert to illegal activities.

In addition to these financial hardships, many other struggles arise when a woman reenters the free community. Baunach’s study (1985) described the three most reported problems for both mothers and children after the mother’s release. The highest ranking problem for mothers was the discipline of their children, followed by custody battles and housing stresses. Successfully reestablishing their maternal roles and identities was difficult when mothers felt unqualified to set boundaries and enforce discipline. One woman interviewed by Kochal & Shamai (2008) questioned her right to be a mother, saying, “Could I ask them how was school? Did you do your homework? What did you do? It was nery to even expect them to answer me” (p. 333). Another woman from the same study was able to put her doubts behind her, setting boundaries in accordance with what she perceived a proper mother to be; she viewed boundaries and discipline as reparation for the chaos and damage caused by her absence. Most parolee mothers have the responsibility of being economically responsible for their children if they regain custody (Golden, 116). Custody battles over children are frequently the biggest issue

women face, as their children have had alternative care for some time. Due to recently passed legislation, states have to file for termination of parental rights for children who have been cared for out of the home for fifteen of the past twenty-two months. Although this is meant to protect children, it impacts mothers who have been separated from their children by incarceration (Schen, 2005). In many courts, regaining custody is an extremely difficult process, increasing the anxiety of the newly paroled mother. In regards to housing, most mothers return to their previous home community, with the same difficulties as before, and without services to assist them. Family support was the single greatest factor in success in finding housing easily (Armstrong et al., 2005). Often paroled mothers are economically forced to return to unhealthy relationships with partners and spouses (Bloom & Brown, 2009).

The mothers in Kochal and Shamai's study (2008) also identified their top concerns for their children. They feared that their children would become too dependent on them, that they would not want to live with them, or that they would reject or disrespect them. One interviewee discussed her fear of rejection and how grateful she was when the opposite occurred: "I have relationships with them, they call me Mother. Do you understand what that means? They could have also not called me Mother. They could have behaved as if I didn't exist" (p. 333). In contrast, a mother in Bloom and Brown's study (2009) reported that there was "crying, fighting, and screaming" as the household tried to adjust to their new lifestyle (p. 325). Parolee mothers take various routes as they adapt and change their parenting styles according to their prison experience. For example, a mother who particularly felt the isolation of prison will often shower gifts and affection on their children while a mother who felt mostly uncertainty in prison will act

out of extreme protectiveness for her children. Sometimes the strict schedules and rules of prison are so rooted in the mother's experience that she brings it home, demanding instant obedience and implementing harsh requirements (Baunach, 1985). Whatever the method, renegotiating their relationship with their children is typically difficult. Children often have mixed feelings: their love of their parents can be tainted by their anger and guilt, and their excitement for reuniting can be laced with fear that their parents will fall into the same felonious patterns (Armstrong et al., 2005).

To address these concerns about reentrance into the community, it is imperative that social programs support and assist the parent-child relationships of parolee mothers. Varied research has shown the benefits of such programs. Programs that help women confront and cope with these various issues would help them strengthen their maternal identities and also lead to brighter outcomes for the children. These concerns are addressed by the Parents Under Pressure system, a family reunification program which provides individualized intensive interventions after the women's release (Dawe & Frye, 2008). Another example of an organization that works to support the mother-child relationship both during and after prison is the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership. This is a coalition that advocates for the families of children with incarcerated parents. Composed of social service providers, government representatives, and other advocates, the SFCIPP raises awareness of the children's specific needs. It took the Bill of Rights and adapted it into a specific version for these children. The program works to provide children with honest information, counselors and mentors, and opportunities to communicate with their incarcerated parents. The final statement in the bill is "I

have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent,” which can be achieved through the SFCIPP’s support of incarcerated parents upon reentry.

Ultimately, supporting these programs would save money by reducing the recidivism rates of parolees (Armstrong et al., 2005). According to Luke (2002), “if prison parenting programs are successful in maintaining that relationship, they could save society vast amounts of money in productivity, chemical dependency treatment, teen pregnancy, welfare dependence, and criminal justice costs”(p. 944). The potential benefits of further research on this topic would far outweigh its costs. Unfortunately, despite the critical need, these ideal programs are few and far between. When the parolee mothers were interviewed for Bloom & Brown’s study, the women were puzzled by the prospect of services that would offer to help them and their children. The fact that the possibility of help was not apparent illustrates that these kinds of services are simply not reaching this population of mothers. Many of the services that do exist like those that require formal surveillance in addition to the other extensive parole requirements, act as an additional punishment rather than actual support (Bloom & Brown, 2009). These women have been condemned, shunned, and shamed by the criminal justice system and social welfare system in the past, so it is understandable that they may be hesitant or unwilling to become involved with the same groups again. Parolee assistance needs to focus on the individual needs of women and their communities in the areas of housing, education, job training, employment, transportation, family reunification, child care, drug and alcohol treatment, peer support, and aftercare (Bloom & Brown, 2009). A rapidly growing population, these women and their children need the attention of the legislators and social service providers, as well as community and individual support.

Of the various obstacles faced by a paroled mother, reestablishing her relationship with her children is the most complex, since it is affected by everything else. This unique bond has been overlooked in research and literature, but is being acknowledged as the rate of maternal incarceration increases. Due to the difficulties the mother has in maintaining a relationship with her children while incarcerated, especially over extensive time and space, it is a challenge for her to pick up where she left off. It is most difficult for a woman to reclaim her identity as the mother of the family, and to overcome her feelings of guilt and failure. The children who have experienced a plethora of negative effects of maternal incarceration also have to deal with their own physical and emotional states. Furthermore, both the mother and her children have to constantly battle to beat the odds that are stacked against them in order to avoid a return to prison.

The relationship between mothers and their children after prison is not only worth analyzing from an individual perspective, but from the larger community perspective and beyond. Support systems, if not already established, need to be considered to help these broken families, financially and relationally, during the initial period of parole. Community involvement and programming to assist these families in fostering relationships would create a safer and happier environment, as well as far-extending benefits for communities and for society. Additionally, research on and action to preserve this relationship will provide insight into motherhood on a larger scale. This research focuses on the separation of families due to imprisonment, but many mothers have been tragically separated from their children due to various circumstances, such as illness, homelessness, immigration, or war. The role of a mother

is held by the majority of women in the world, so exploring it in different contexts is needed.

The family unit--parents and their children--is defined as the primary social group. Research on its traits and qualities is an investment in society's future.

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