Who are the children?

An estimated two million children between the ages of five and eighteen have a parent who is behind bars. With the incarcerated population growing at a rate of 6% a year, this number continues to rise (Mumola, 2000).

- Half of the parents are African American (49.4%), and, although most are fathers (93%), the number of incarcerated mothers has risen in the past decade.
- An estimated 65 of female inmates have children (Mumola, 2000); 6 or more of female inmates are pregnant (Beck & Karberg, 2001).
- Over 60% of mothers in prison are incarcerated more than 100 miles away from their children (Seymour, 1998; Mumola, 2000).
- Most children whose mothers are behind bars are placed with other family members (79%) (Mumola, 2000).

What challenges do children of prisoners face?

A parent's incarceration rarely signals the beginning of a child's or adolescent's difficulties (Travis & Waul, 2004). Instead, it adds to the stress of a family already struggling with such life circumstances as poverty, discrimination, instability, violence and limited access to sources of support.

In some instances, imprisonment can actually bring relief to a family—particularly when the parent was the source of financial strain, abuse, domestic strife or neglect. (Travis & Waul, 2004). But, for the most part, the stigmatization and stress associated with parental arrest, imprisonment and separation are very difficult for children.

Stigma

Unless the incarceration is seen as a direct result of racism, feelings of being stigmatized by peers, teachers and society in general are common among children of prisoners (Gabel 1992; Gaudin & Sutphen, 1993).

Children of prisoners are often haunted by cultural beliefs that they are destined for illicit activities themselves (Eddy & Reid, 2004; Hairston, 2004)
Unseen victims

Clark (1995) has noted how children of prisoners become the unseen victims of their parent's incarceration, rarely getting the support they need. In particular, many children of prisoners do not tell even their closest friends or potentially helpful adults of their parent's imprisonment—out of shame and fear of rejection (Hairston, 2004; Fishman, 1990; Koenig, 1985).

As a result, children of prisoners are often denied the attention and support that others receive when separated from a parent because of death, divorce or military deployment.

Financial burdens

The families of prisoners often face the loss of a breadwinner—and, in many cases, incur additional transportation, legal and long-distance telephone costs (Mumola, 2000).

Family instability

Family relationships and stability are often strained by the incarceration, with children experiencing multiple changes in caregivers and/or living arrangements, loss of parental socialization through role modeling, support and supervision.

What are the effects?

Children of incarcerated parents are at heightened risk for psychological and behavioral difficulties. Among the most commonly cited effects are:

- Low self-esteem;
- Anger and depression;
- Emotional numbing and withdrawal from friends and family;
- Feelings of abandonment loneliness, shame, guilt and resentment;
- Eating and sleeping disorders;
- Diminished academic performance; and
- Inappropriate or disruptive behavior at home and in the school (Henriques, 1982; Johnston, 1995; Jose-Kampner, 1995; Travis, 2002).

Relative to their peers, children of prisoners are:

- Seven times more likely to become involved in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems; and
- Six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated at some point in their lives (Johnston, 1995; Travis).

Variations in adjustment

Despite these difficulties, not all children experience parental incarceration the same way. A number of factors govern children’s reactions, including the:
- Length and degree of separation;
- Remaining adult's parenting style, attitude and stability (Hairston, 2004);
- Level of family communication, including contact with absent parent:
  - In many cases, children are not fully informed about their parent's absence;
  - Children often receive a distorted explanation of where their parent is and why he or she is there; and
  - Indeed, nearly one third of American families of incarcerated parents do fact engage in some form of total or partial deception and may refer to prison as an army camp, a hospital, or even a school (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2004);
- Temperament;
- Social skills;
- Age at separation;
- Previous separations;
- Gender (boys are at greater risk for behavioral problems than girls) (Eddy & Reid, 2004);
- Positive peer relationships;
- Community support; and, importantly,
- Supportive relationships with caring adult outside the family (e.g., with a teacher, mentor or coach) (Hetherington, 2003; Seymour, 1998).

**Mentoring children of prisoners**

This final factor brings us to our discussion of mentoring programs. When a child faces such turmoil, having a trusting, enduring mentoring relationship can be a crucial protective factor, providing both stability and support.

Although small mentoring programs for children of prisoners have been successfully launched in other countries, including Israel and the Netherlands, the emergence in this country has been relatively recent. Several efforts will be highlighted below.

**Amachi**

The first major effort to mentor children of prisoners in the U.S was a partnership among Public/Private Ventures, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania.

- The partners began recruiting children of prisoners in 2000 and 2001. By the end of 2002, the program, Amachi, (meaning, Who knows but what God has brought us through this child) had made 400 matches.
- BBBS oversees the program's screening activities, training, match support, etc., and Amachi incorporates program elements found to be essential in previous research.
- Researchers at Public/Private Ventures recently conducted a descriptive analysis of Amachi's first matches and found that:
  - Mentors and mentees spent their time together in ways consistent with the best practices that have been identified in past research.
    - Most mentor/mentee pairs engaged in fun activities (hanging out together or attending sports, movies, concerts and theatre).
    - Some mentors and mentees attended church services or other church activities together.
• Mentors and mentees met fewer than the required four times per month (averaging two times per month), yet met more than expected number of hours (7.3 per month).
• As of November, 2003, Philadelphia's Amachi program had matched a total of 72 mentors with children of prisoners.
• Although fewer than half of the matches (46%) were no longer active, most terminations were the result of change in the child's life—such as family mobility or caregiver decisions, as opposed to the mentor failing to fulfill their commitment.
• On a positive note, over a quarter (28%) of the matches had extended beyond the one-year mark—a vital benchmark for mentoring relationships—and a quarter of matches have lasted for over two years.
• Surveys of the matches that persisted for a year or longer indicated that 93% of mentors and 82% of caregivers felt that the mentee had greater self-confidence.
• And about 60% of the mentees had an improved sense of future.
• A majority reported better academic performance and improved school attendance.

Mentoring Children of Prisoners, Program

• The Mentoring Children of Prisoners program is a three-year initiative put forth by President Bush in his 2003 State of the Union address, and fully funded in 2004 by Congress. So far, approximately 6,000 kids have been mentored, with an expectation of serving 33,000 additional youth as a result of the new grants.
• The grants are administered through HHS' Administration for Children and Families.
• Plans are underway to conduct a comprehensive outcome evaluation of the Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program. Such studies are essential to determine:
  o Whether children of prisoners' programs are effective; and
  o What kinds of programs and practices are most likely to result in positive impacts in children of prisoners

Bottom line

The dramatic expansion of youth mentoring for children of prisoners speaks volumes about the faith our society places in relationships between vulnerable young people and caring adults. A number of promising developments, including the expansion of Amachi and generous federal funding, have increased the likelihood that children of prisoners will get the adult attention and guidance that they need and deserve. A deeper understanding of the particular circumstances and needs of this population, combined with high-quality programs and enriched settings, will better position us to harness the full potential of mentoring for children of prisoners. Within this context, it will be important to harness the full potential of mentoring for children of prisoners. Within this context, it will be important to remain mindful of many important, yet unresolved, issues.

Role of religion

As discussed, many of the mentoring programs for children of prisoners are administered through faith-based organizations. It will be important to remain mindful of the implications and potential complexities of this relatively new trend in mentoring.

• One benefit of administering programs through faith-based organizations is the potential for greater access to children of prisoners. Since social policies in general, and
mentoring programs in particular, often do not reach or support the most severely disadvantaged youth, churches often play a critical support role.38 42.

- More generally, religious involvement appears to play an important role in lives of urban youth.40
- On the other hand, some critics have raised concerns over the increasing role of the federal government in supporting faith-based initiatives.
- Although African-American Christians and white evangelical Christians tend to be the most actively involved in providing faith-based social services, efforts have been made to reach additional denominations,
- Brent Coffi, director of the Program on Religion and Public Life at Harvard University's Hauser Center, worries that faith-based social services might diminish the diversity of religious groups, thereby homogenizing religious communities and thus diminishing the pluralism of a truly vibrant civil society.

Target Population

Although MENTOR estimates that over 17 million young people in the U.S. need mentors, a sizable proportion of the government funding for mentoring has been concentrated on this relatively small subset of vulnerable youth. Certainly, children of prisoners deserve this level of support. At the same time, federal and state funding is also needed for programs that can address the needs of all vulnerable youth.

Mentoring programs are feeling pressure to stay financially afloat and viable by demonstrating their capacity to recruit large numbers of children of prisoners and volunteers who are willing to work with them.

- Such demands can potentially overshadow concerns about the appropriateness and readiness of children and volunteers to engage in such relationships.
- Since most mentoring program staff work under the assumption that their programs are inherently beneficial to youth, they put their limited resources into creating these new matches, rather than sustaining matches that have already been made.
- Funding agencies reinforce this tendency, often using the number of new matches, as opposed to their sustainability, as the measure of a program's success.

In a typical mentoring program, youth with severe emotional disturbances are referred to more intensive treatment interventions. Such referrals are wise, as several studies, including the meta-analysis, suggest that youth who are at elevated risk (academically, psychologically, socially) are less likely to benefit from mentoring.

- In particular, DuBois et al. (2002) found substantial variation in the effectiveness of different programs. In mentoring programs where youth had less favorable life circumstances and worse psychological and social functioning at the onset, effect sizes were smaller.
- Along similar lines, (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) found that mentoring relationships with youth who had sustained emotional, sexual or physical abuse were more likely to terminate prematurely.

Yet, in the push to recruit large numbers of children of prisoners, programs might be including children who might benefit from more intensive therapeutic or educational services. It will be
important to ascertain the range of functioning of children of prisoners, and to identify those who are most likely to benefit from mentoring.

**Risk for negative outcomes**

As noted above, an initial evaluation of Philadelphia’s Amachi program found that nearly half of the relationships (46%) had terminated prematurely. Although most terminations were the result of changes in the child’s life circumstances, the concern for possible negative outcomes remains.

In a previous Research Corner, I have reported on findings that suggest that short-lived matches can have a detrimental effect on youth and that the impact of mentoring grows as the relationship matures.

Of course, as noted previously, most of the early terminations resulted from issues that originated with the youth, not the mentor. Nonetheless, we need to encourage program directors to seek ways to develop longer-lasting relationships between mentors and mentees in these programs.

**Ripple effects**

In addition to affecting the children, mentoring programs hold the potential of affecting the lives of their incarcerated parents. Previous research has shown that the effects of mentoring often reverberate back to the parent-child relationship.

- Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch (2001) found that mentoring relationships led to increases in the levels of intimacy, communication and trust that adolescents felt toward their parents.
- These improvements, in turn, led to positive changes in a wide array of areas, such as the adolescents’ sense of self-worth and scholastic achievement, and to a reduction in drug and alcohol use.45

It will be important to determine whether these improvements might also lead to improvements in the parents’ lives, including reduced recidivism.

**Notes**


