

GRATER FRIENDS

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New Study on “Invisible Victims” of Incarceration: Children

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What is done to children, they will do to society.

—Karl A. Menninger, American Psychiatrist (1893-1990)

They call them “invisible victims” or sometimes, “collateral damage” of mass incarceration. They are the children of incarcerated parents and it is estimated that there are 1.7 to 2.8 million of them in the United States. The numbers vary from study to study, depending on the criteria used — some include only parents in state prisons, others also include parents in local jails.

The phenomenal growth in these statistics paralleled the rise in the use of imprisonment for non-violent (mostly drug) crimes, which included unprecedented numbers of women.

These statistics were drawn together as part of a recently completed, two-year study by an advisory committee of the state House and Senate. The report is entitled, “The Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children: Needs and Responsive Services.” (It is available through the Joint State Government Commission in Harrisburg or online at <http://jsg.legis.state.pa.us/resources/documents/ftp/documents/children%20of%20incarcerated%20parents.pdf>.)

As the title suggests, the 152-page report delves into much more than just numbers. The House and Senate resolutions that brought about this study charged the committee “to study the effects of parental incarceration on children of the incarcerated parents; to recommend a system for determining and assessing the needs of these children, services available to them, and barriers to accessing those services; and to report recommendations to the General Assembly.”

Members of the study group were keenly interested in the impact on the kids of those arrested and incarcerated. The report cites findings from a 2002 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

“While the initial arrest causes nightmares and flashbacks in young children, long-term psychological effects may include insecure attachments; internalizing problems such as anxiety,

withdrawal, hyper vigilance, depression, shame and guilt; and externalizing behaviors such as anger, aggression and hostility towards caregivers and siblings.”

Three policy concerns evolved from the study. One recognizes the dangers posed by separation of parents and their children and urges minimizing periods of separation. Another acknowledges the difficulties caused by disruptions in care giving and encourages policies that increase stability for the child. The third advocates minimizing the economic hardship inevitably associated with the incarceration of the parent(s).

The 38-member study group issued recommendations in the following areas:

- Arrests and judicial proceedings – heighten awareness of police and courts to the existence of minor children at the arrest site and accommodate the needs of the children during lengthy court proceedings
- Caregiver and support services expand community-based resources, streamline guardianship programs, improve data collection and sharing, protect the rights of parents in prison to participate in dependency proceedings, and support effective mentoring and afterschool programs for affected children.
- Family and corrections interaction – encourage contact visits between parents and their children at all state and county prisons and jails, provide reduced charges for telephone calls to their children, arrange visiting hours that accommodate schedules of schoolchildren, support programs that enhance parenting skills.
- Reentry and reunification planning – eliminate penalties that make it more difficult for individuals to acquire housing, jobs and education; create case management positions for reentry planning at each correctional facility; support evidence-based family strengthening programs inside and outside the walls of correctional facilities.

Rep. Cherelle Parker, a Philadelphia Democrat, and Sen. Stewart Greenleaf, a Montgomery County Republican, introduced the resolutions in their respective chambers. Ann Schwartzman, Prison Society policy director, chaired the study group that included Prison Society member Dr. Rosemary Gido and Prison Society Advisory Council member Rev. Dr. Wilson Goode.

We often mouth sentiments such as, “Our children are our most important asset” and “Our children are the future.” More frequently, though, we tend to ignore the traumas that devastate their unformed psyches.

Let’s hope this is one study that doesn’t become a dust collector like so many others. The recommendations are solid and will make a big difference in the lives of those otherwise “invisible victims.”

