

---

---

# THE NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF INCARCERATION ON BLACK FATHERS

Princess L. J. Currence, School of Social Work, University of Michigan

Waldo E. Johnson, Jr., School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago

*Fathers who are in prisons and jails are not just convicts.  
They are parents too.*

—Dr. Creasie Finney Hairston,  
Dean, Jane Addams College of Social Work,  
University of Illinois-Chicago

By 2000, the increase in divorce and childrearing out of wedlock resulted in less than half of children growing up with two parents in the household (Ventura 1995; Western 2000; Edin 2000). Today a third of all births in the U.S. are to unmarried parents, and many of these children will never live with their fathers (Ventura 1995; Western 2000). Eighty percent of African American children will spend at least a portion of their childhood without a residential father (United States Department of Health and Human Services 1999). However, there is another contributor to this growing phenomenon of absent fathers: incarceration. The three strikes laws, truth in sentencing provisions, and the abandonment of parole boards have all increased the duration of prison sentences, raising incarceration rates by as much as 36% between 1980 and 1996 (Blumstein & Beck 1999, 43; Mumola 2000). This expansion of the penal system does not appear to be strongly related to crime rates but is instead rooted in policy shifts closely connected with federal and state governments' "war on crime" and "war on drugs." The Justice Policy Institute found that the imprisonment of drug offenders has grown at an alarming rate over the past two decades, even when compared to the generally explosive growth of incarceration in the U.S. during that time. Although the rates of drug consumption are roughly equal among white American and African American populations, blacks are imprisoned for drug offenses at 14 times the rate of whites (Mauer 1999; Sampson & Lauritsen 1997); consequently African American children are disproportionately more likely to be left fatherless due to incarceration than their Caucasian counterparts.

The impact of male incarceration on parental relationships and child well-being has received little systematic empirical study (Hagan & Dinovitzer 1999). The lack of research on incarcerated fathers and their families is not surprising because inmates are marginalized in American society and are often viewed as non-supportive delinquents, not fathers. Furthermore, there has not been substantial research conducted on

---

---

the influence fathers have on a child's development. Past research studies primarily focused on mothers' influence on child well-being; the reason for this gendered research approach may be linked to mothers' perceived role as "biological connection rather than a social construct" (Amenus 1995). It is common in father-absent literature that the position of the father is subordinated to a secondary caregiver role, usually in terms of financial support or nonsupport, or in terms of the problem they present rather than the resources (i.e. emotional) they provide (Hairston 1996; Hairston 1998). During the late 1980's and 1990's when much of this literature evolved into a broader, more inclusive paradigm of specific parenting roles, relations and involvement, the father-child relationship emerged as important and a father's absence was seen as having negative impacts on child development.

The number of incarcerated fathers of dependent children, for whom the father had some responsibility prior to admission, is growing. Parental responsibility must be understood broadly. While traditional measures of paternal involvement assessed father's presence and activity residing within the home, when paternal responsibility and more specifically, paternal involvement is so narrowly defined, paternal involvement is largely unmeasured and under-measured (Johnson 1998). Success in the provider role and sustaining residence with their children throughout their minor statuses has become increasingly difficult for fathers in every socioeconomic strata to sustain. Poor, marginally-educated fathers are especially vulnerable to failure as sustaining providers and co-residents in their children's homes. They are also highly likely to be incarcerated fathers. The African American community is disproportionately impacted by this trend. In 1990, the nonprofit Washington, D.C.-based Sentencing Project found that on an average day, one in every four African American men ages 20–29 was either in prison, in jail, or on probation/parole (Mauer 1990). Ten years later, the ratio had grown to one in three. Consequently, in the present prison population, African Americans constitute almost half and are the majority in prisons in most states. Black children (7%) are nearly 9 times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children (.8%); however, the dearth of knowledge on the psychological, social and behavioral impacts incarceration has on fathers, their children and their families of origin as well as procreation is particularly striking. To better understand the aforementioned effects, one must explore the barriers that incarcerated fathers face in establishing or maintaining positive relationships with their families. Before embarking on the examination of six factors that serve as barriers to paternal involvement among the incarcerated: legal, correctional facility security, proximity, relationship with the mother of child, communication and psychological, we must first present the context of the discussion.

In 1997, an estimated 1,699,312 men were incarcerated in federal and state prisons and in jails. These men tend to be poor, undereducated, and unemployed; had family histories of substance involvement, crime, and violence; themselves had histories of

---

---

substance abuse, violence and repeat offenses; were apt to be unmarried; and were overrepresented with racial/ethnic minorities. They are also likely to be fathers of minor children. For the most part, these men continue to be viewed by their families and to view themselves as parents. Some were active parents before incarceration, whether or not they were married to or living with the mothers of their children (Wright & Seymour 2000). This paper focuses on these fathers. In 1990, there were 936,500 children with parents in prison, which dramatically increased to 1,498,800 children at the end of 1999. A majority of state (55%) and federal (63%) prisoners reported having a child under the age of 18. As a result, there were an estimated 336,000 U.S households with minor children affected by the imprisonment of a residential parent. Most incarcerated fathers have never been married to the mother of one or more of their children or are not currently married (Hairston 1989, 1995; Lanier 1987; Hairston 1998). The mean number of children per father is a little more than two. The percentage of imprisoned men with two or more children ranges from 40% to 69%.

The exponential increase in the number of black men in prison coupled with historical and media representation of parental irresponsibility among African American men, positive images and roles among black fathers are suspect. Under much resistance, the image of a black father within the African American home was only introduced to the American public during the 1970's through the popular sitcom, *Good Times*. Consequently, it can be said that public attitudes of black fathers, especially those that are unmarried, contain depictions of non-contributors to the emotional or financial well-being of their children prior to their admission to a correctional institution. However, research studies of unmarried African American fathers have shown that a substantial number spend time with their children and in their physical care and have strong emotional attachments even when they do not, or are not able to, provide regular financial support (Freeman 1989; Cortez 1979; Johnson 2000, 1998). Furthermore unmarried African American men are more involved with their children than their counterparts among other racial and ethnic groups (Johnson 2001; Lerman 1993; Seltzer 1991; Stier & Tienda 1993; Coley 2000).

### **Barriers to Paternal Involvement**

**Legal Barriers.** Children are not always permitted to visit their incarcerated parents. Many correctional facilities have regulations that do not permit children to enter them. In African American and other ethnic minority cultures, the extended family and fictive kin play significant roles in childrearing and family support (Martin & Martin 1978; Stack 1974). Within the African American community, it is equally likely for a male partner to share a household with a woman and assume the paternal responsibilities for children for whom he is not biologically or legally recognized as father. This creates a potential legal barrier for non-biological and/or non-legal

---

---

parents to see their children while incarcerated “fictive” or non-biological fathers must be granted legal permission to see their children (Davis 2000). Given that caregivers are not necessarily biological parents or relatives, fictive kin and extended family members can be denied visitation from their children unless accompanied by a parent or legal guardian.

***Correctional Facility Security.*** Correctional facility security is both intimidating and frightening. If the child is permitted to visit, visiting hours are often limited and most institutions do not have adequate facilities for parents to interact with their children. Visiting an inmate is a long process; visitors are usually frisked and their packages and personal effects are opened and searched. They may be required to wait for a large portion of the allotted visiting period while correctional personnel “find” the incarcerated parent. Moreover, depending on the facility, inmates are prohibited from having physical contact with family members, especially their children. They cannot hold their kids on their arms or sit them on their laps. Often, inmates and visitors can only speak to one another through a thick plate of glass. If children are noncompliant or unruly, the visit is often curtailed. As a whole, visitors are treated as unwelcome guests to be barely tolerated and more often as intruders to be kept in line through humiliation and intimidation (Hairston 1995a; Hairston 1996; Hairston 1998). The children of incarcerated parents rely on caregivers to facilitate visitation; however, they are oftentimes deterred by the hostile conditions of the correctional facilities.

***Proximity.*** The most obvious consequence of incarceration is its incapacitative effect (Western & McLanahan 2000). Incarcerated fathers are sequestered from society, thus alienated from their children and families. Incarcerated fathers are limited as active participants in the lives of their children. Unable to participate in care of their children, incarceration hinders these fathers’ ability to maintain and build positive father-child relationships (Davis 2000). Sixty-three percent of incarcerated male parents had families within 400 miles of the parent’s prison, which is approximately a two-day round trip (McPeck & Tse 1988). As a corollary, many families choose to visit once a week or less. Furthermore, over sixty percent of state prisons are located in rural areas, making them difficult to reach by public transportation and potentially limiting custodial parents’ or primary caregivers’ alternatives for bringing a child for prison visits.

Even fathers incarcerated in city jails and detention centers are often out of reach for their minor children. Because these facilities are usually regarded as “holding facilities,” they often are not equipped to accommodate minor children. Due to delays in court dates, transferring to state or federal prisons and overcrowding of jails, these “holding facilities” become long-term (Hairston 1998).

---

---

***Relationships with the Mother of Child and Family of Origin.*** Over 90% of incarcerated fathers reported that at least one of their children lived with their mothers. Incarcerated fathers are more likely to be single or never married (Wright & Seymour 2000). Separate rooms where romantic partners can congregate are extremely rare and even when available provide limited or no privacy. Over time, the lack of emotional and physical connection between inmates and their partners may sever their romantic relationships. Mothers who do not sustain resilient relationships with the incarcerated fathers of their children are less likely to miss a day of work, and pay expensive transportation costs for a short, one-day visit to the correctional facility for themselves or children. Resentment among mothers may develop because all of the parental and household responsibilities, once shared, are now placed on their shoulders. However, if the mother has found a new mate, her likelihood to visit also drastically diminishes. Incarceration is likely to be a significant detriment to sustaining family relationships, contributing to marital strain (Western & McLanahan 2000; Edin 2000).

Recent studies also suggest that single mothers are reluctant to marry or live with fathers of their children, if the father has a history of incarceration (Edin 2000; Waller 1997). Thus, the stigma of incarceration significantly reduces the social status of a young man and signals his undesirability to possible marriage partners. Therefore, incarceration is likely to deter family formation both directly, by making it more difficult for fathers to live with their children, and indirectly, by reducing fathers' employment prospects and earnings capacity (Western & McLanahan 2000).

***Communication.*** It is assumed that incarcerated fathers can contact their children and families as needed. However, most families from which the incarcerated fathers originate are poor and collect calls from correctional facilities are expensive. Collect calls from jails and prisons cost the receiving household as much as three times more than a collect call placed from a pay phone by a person not incarcerated, and five to six times more had the call been made from a residential phone (Davis 2000; Hairston 1998). Hairston (1998) reported that many families resent what they perceived as a price gouging by telephone companies and the correctional institutions that share the profits from prisoner collect calls. In addition to the limited timeframe in which collect calls can be made, inmates usually cannot receive incoming calls. Because there are usually a limited number of accessible phones for outgoing calls for an increasing population of incarcerated parents, the telephone may not be available for use for each inmate desiring to call during the allotted timeframe. When calls are made, the inmates are not permitted to leave messages.

Letters and written correspondences are often discouraged because many correctional institutions carry an external label on mail warning outsiders of its origins that is embarrassing for the receiving families. Furthermore, if the inmate has literacy

---

---

problems, written correspondence via mail is futile.

***Psychological.*** Incarcerated fathers “cannot engage in their children’s daily care nor can they be present to assure their children’s safety. They have no control over their own jobs or income and are not likely to have much to contribute to their family’s financial support” (Hairston 1998). Many inmates express a feeling of being cut off or buried, when they are in jail. The threat that a stepfather or boyfriend will eventually replace them is a well-founded one. The feeling of isolation and dispensability of which there are drastic changes to his identity, a negative self-image emerges or is further exaggerated. As a corollary, an incarcerated father is likely to withdraw emotionally from the life/lives of his children, replicating the physical removal from his family (Davis 2000). Furthermore, if an incarcerated father has a distant relationship with his children, he is likely to experience depression (Hairston 1998). The stigma of incarceration can produce strong feelings of shame and anger, for both inmates and their families (Hagan & Dinovitzer 1999).

Although these men are in prison, they are still fathers, and the hopes and dreams for their families and children, although limited by the realities of confinement, are still the same as traditional fathers. Prisoners that have strong family ties have a greater chance of success once released. For fathers who have not established relationships with their children, knowing how to start a relationship can be difficult, particularly if the relationship with their current or former partner is strained due to their incarceration (Hairston 1998). However, since most of fathers are nonviolent offenders (i.e. drug related felonies) (Mumola 2000) that carry lengthy sentences, waiting until one “gets out” to establish a relationship with their children is not a viable option.

### **Impact on the Well-being of the Child**

In general, children without active and involved fathers are more likely to drop out of school, join gangs, become sexually active, use drugs and alcohol, commit crimes and have lower earnings as adults. Children who interact with their incarcerated parents only once a month or less develop substantial emotional needs (McPeek & Tse 1988). Studies show that positive paternal involvement, for boys and girls, is closely associated with a lower incidence of disruptive behavior, more responsible behavior, and thus more pro-social, positive moral behavior overall (Pruett 2000; Jeffries et al. 2001; Davis 2000; Simmons 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000; Gadsden & Rethemeyer 2001). A majority of these fathers grew up without their fathers, witnessed parental substance abuse and more than one-third experience the incarceration of an immediate family member (Seymour 1998) and want a better life for their children.

It should be noted that not all incarcerated fathers want to maintain or establish

---

---

relationships with their families during their imprisonment and after their release. Moreover, not all fathers should be in contact with their children because not all children benefit from a relationship with an incarcerated parent. However, most inmates want relationships with their children and most children want relationships with their fathers. Therefore, policymakers have to make provisions that would help maintain and foster positive father-child connections conducive to that end for the forgotten parent: fathers behind bars.

### References

Amenus, D. (1995). The Father's Role in Society. <http://www.vix.com/men/nofather/articles/amneus.html>.

Blumstein, A. & Beck, A. (1999). Population Growth in U.S. Prisons, 1980-1996. In M. Tonry & J. Petersilia (Eds.), Crime and Justice: Prisons, Vol. 26, pp. 17-62. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Child Welfare League of America. (1999). Children with Incarcerated Parents: A Fact Sheet. <http://www.cwla.org/cwla/prison/facts99.html>.

Coley, R. & Chase-Lansdale, P. (2000). The Sting of Disappointment: Father-Daughter Relationships in Low-Income African American Families. <http://www.olin.wustl.edu/macarthur/papers/wp-coley-chaselansdale.pdf>.

Davis, J. (2000). Barring Fatherhood: Incarcerated Fathers and Their Children. Connecting Low-Income Fathers and Families: A Guide to Practical Policies. National Conference of State Legislatures.

Edin, K. (2000). Few Good Men: Why Poor Mothers Don't Marry or Remarry. American Prospect, 11: 26-31.

Gadsden, V. & Rethemeyer, Karl R. (2001). Linking Father Involvement and Parental Incarceration: Conceptual Issues in Research and Practice. National Center on Fathers and Families. University of Pennsylvania.

Hagan, J. & Dinovitzer, R. (1999). Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners, pp. 121-162.

Hairston, C. (1998). The Forgotten Parent: Understanding the Forces that Influence Incarcerated Fathers' Relationships with Their Children. Child Welfare Journal of Policy, Practice and Program, (September/October).

---

---

Jeffries, John M. et al. (2001). Serving Incarcerated and Ex-offender Fathers and Their Families: A Review of the Field. Vera Institute of Justice Prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice and The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Johnson, W. (1998). Paternal Involvement in Fragile, African American Families. Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice. Smith College Studies in Social Work, 68(2): 215-232.

Johnson, W. (2001). Paternal Involvement Among Unwed Fathers. Children and Youth Services Review, 23(6,7): 513-536.

Johnson, W. (2000). Work Preparation and Labor Market Experiences Among Urban Poor, Nonresident Fathers. In S. Danziger & A. Lin (Eds.), Coping with Poverty: The Social Contexts of Neighborhood, Work and Family in the African American Community, pp. 224-261. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Martin, E. & Martin, J. (1978). The Black Extended Family. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mauer, M. (1999). Race to Incarcerate, pp.118-142. New York: The New Press.

Mauer, M. (1995). Young Black Americans and the Criminal Justice System: Five Years Later. Washington D.C.: The Sentencing Project.

Mauer, M. (1990). The Sentencing Project, Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem. Washington D.C.: The Sentencing Project.

McPeck, S. & Tse, S. (1988). Bureau of Prisons Parenting Programs: Use, Costs, and Benefits. Federal Office of Research and Evaluation.

Mumola, C. (2000). Incarcerated Parents and Their Children. Bureau of Justice Statistics: A Special Report. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. August 2000, NCJ 182335.

Pruett, K. (2000). Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child. New York: The Free Press.

Sampson, R. & Lauritsen, J. (1997). Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Crime and Criminal Justice in the United States. In Michael Tonry (Ed.), Ethnicity, Crime, and Immigration. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Seymour, C. (1998). Children with Parents in Prison: Child Welfare Policy, Program

---

---

and Practice Issues. Child Welfare: Journal of Policy, Practice and Program, (September/October): 469-493.

Simmons, C.W. (2000). Children of Incarcerated Parents. California Research Bureau. CRB Note Vol. 7, No. 2.

Stack, C. (1974). All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community. New York: Harper and Row.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). Involving Non-resident Fathers in Children's Learning: A Fathers Matter Report. This report is available on the HHS Fatherhood Initiative Web site at: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/involv-non-res00>.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). Trends in the Well-being of America's Children and Youth. Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Waller, M. (1996). Redefining Fatherhood: Paternal Involvement, Masculinity, and Responsibility in the "Other America." Doctoral Dissertation, Princeton University.

Western, B. & McLanahan, S. (2000). Fathers Behind Bars: The Impact of Incarceration on Family Formation. CRCW Working Paper No. 00-08-FF. Princeton University: Princeton, NJ. Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research, 2: 309-324.

Wright, L. & Seymour, C. (2000). Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies. Washington: Child Welfare League of America Press.