

Helping Children Cope With the Trauma of Parental Arrest

Nancy J. Harm and Susan D. Phillips*

Children of offenders are often subjected to a variety of traumas that can lead to academic and behavior problems in school, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and ultimately, the risk of arrest and incarceration. The children who perhaps experience the most trauma are children of female offenders. Their mothers are frequently single custodial parents. For children, the arrest of a mother often means a move to another home, usually that of a maternal grandmother, who may be unprepared emotionally and financially to meet the child's needs.

In Arkansas, as in other states, the number of mothers arrested in recent decades skyrocketed, thus dramatically increasing the number of children who experience the arrest and incarceration of their mothers. Many of these children will themselves become involved in the criminal justice system. A Bureau of Justice Statistics report states that over half the children in long-term state-run institutions experienced the incarceration of a parent at some time in their lives (USDOJ, 1988). In Ohio, Hungerford (1997) found that four out of 10 boys between the ages 14 and 17 whose mothers were incarcerated had been arrested. In a study of jailed mothers in California, Johnston (1995) found that three in 10 had children who had been arrested. In the present study, 61 of the 192 inmates who were parents reported their children having serious problems; 12 (10 mothers; two fathers) reported their child had been in jail.

Chronic Trauma and Criminal Justice System Involvement

The arrest and incarceration of a mother is often only one of a number of traumatic events experienced by children of female offenders. Other common traumas include

poverty, witnessing violence in the home or community, multiple separations from parents and siblings, exposure to criminal activity, and impaired parenting.

When children are repeatedly traumatized, they do not have the opportunity to master one trauma before being assaulted by the next. Marans and Cohen (1993) state that feeling unsafe and helpless "runs counter to the developing child's desire and capacity to be in greater control of the self and to achieve increasing mastery of his or her environment." Without intervention, normal emotional responses to trauma such as anger, sadness, grief, and anxiety may be expressed as trauma-reactive behaviors such as physical aggression, withdrawal, or hypervigilance. As children struggle to gain a sense of control, these reactive behaviors may be organized into patterns of behavior. Some of these patterns, such as fighting with peers, substance abuse, gang activity, or asocial behaviors can result in criminal charges and children's subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system (Johnston, 1995).

Particular attention has been paid to links between chronic trauma and aggression. Ryan (1996) states that chronically traumatized children often interact with the world with "substantial disability," interpreting others' behavior in an aggressive manner and with great mistrust. Also, when exposed to the dangers of violence, children may identify with the aggressor as an adaptive mechanism. Further, Terr (1991) describes rage as a striking finding in post-traumatic disorders brought on by chronic trauma.

The degree of trauma children experience in response to any given event is influenced by a number of variables including the developmental phase of the child, the context of the trauma, and the responses of the child's family, school, and community (Marans and Cohen, 1993). This last variable begs the question: How can the criminal justice community lessen the degree of trauma children experience as a result of a mother's arrest?

Witnessing Parent's Arrest Traumatizes Children

Typically, the arrest and incarceration of a mother is just one more in a series of traumas her children experience. The arrest of a mother could be the point at which chil-

dren who have been chronically traumatized are identified and interventions begin to minimize the effects of trauma. An important first step, however, is to make the arrest of a parent less traumatic for child witnesses.

Staff from Centers for Youth & Families (CYF) in Little Rock, Arkansas, have worked with incarcerated mothers since 1991. Mothers participating in CYF programs talked about their arrest and the impact it had on their children. They described guns being drawn on children, not being able to arrange for the care of their children, children being taken to the police station, etc. Mothers also talked about the fear their children experienced during and after the arrest, their concern for the mothers' safety, their anger at and subsequent fear of police. The manner in which arrest is conducted, early support for caregivers, and assistance making custody arrangements all appeared to be important factors affecting children at the time of a mother's arrest.

Law Enforcement Officers' Behavior Can Be Critical. In order to better understand how arrest of a mother affects children, CYF staff and faculty from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock held focus groups at a county jail, a community corrections facility, and community drug treatment programs. Descriptions of arrest varied among focus group participants. Some described officers screaming and yelling at their children, and interrogating and searching small children. Others described officers as sensitive and concerned. Some mothers talked of officers helping to arrange for someone to come get their children or giving them the opportunity to explain to their children what was happening before they were taken into custody.

These focus groups were followed by a written survey distributed to 286 non-violent offenders in community corrections facilities. Of this group, 192 were parents (46% (89) fathers; 54% (103) mothers); 77 (40%) reported that their children were present when they were arrested. In 27% of those cases, weapons were drawn. This was more common in the case of fathers being arrested. Law enforcement officers explained to the children why they were arresting the parent in fewer than 20% of the arrests. In approximately one third of the arrests, the police gave the parent the

See *TRAUMA*, next page

*Nancy Harm, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801 S. University, Little Rock, AR 72204-1099; phone: (501) 569-3240; e-mail: njharm@ualr.edu. Susan D. Phillips, LMSW, is Community Resource Development Coordinator, Centers for Youth and Families, 5905 Forest Pl., Suite 100, Little Rock, AR 72205; phone: (501) 666-6833; e-mail: susan@aristotle.net. The authors wish to thank the Arkansas Department of Community Punishment, the Pulaski County Sheriff's Department, Black Community Developers, and UAMS Arkansas CARES for their support and cooperation.

TRAUMA, from page 35

opportunity to explain to children what was happening. A markedly higher percentage of the mothers (30% compared to 3% of fathers) reported that law enforcement officers postponed handcuffing them until they were out of sight of their children.

Better Officer Training Needed. It is clear that the response of law enforcement officers to children witnessing the arrest of a parent varies. The nature of the crime, the parent's behavior at the time of arrest, and consideration for the safety of officers are variables that may influence the action of officers. These things considered, some officers still demonstrated an awareness of the potential impact of a parent's arrest on children who were present. With education and training about the importance of minimizing the degree of trauma children are exposed to, consideration for children who witness their parent's arrest could be a vital part of revised arrest procedures. In fact, similar revisions have already been made by units working with domestic violence and child abuse cases and could be generalized to other types of arrest.

What Kind of Help Is Needed When a Parent Is Arrested?

Focus group participants were asked: "What would have been helpful to you when you were arrested?" They suggested several kinds of assistance: "class or counselor to help deal with child abuse issues," "help with financial problems," "someone to discuss legal rights and issues," "ability to explain situation to children," and "opportunity to set up arrangements for my children." Women at the county jail were most concerned about contact with their children, wanting longer visiting hours and evening visits, but most notably wanting their children to have the reassurance of physical contact.

When asked what would have been directly helpful to the children, participants gave answers such as: "someone to help them deal with anger," "someone to explain what's going on," "transportation services for visits." Asked what would help the caregivers of their children, they responded: "money," "support," and "help with transportation for visits." See Table 1.

Eighty percent of the parents responding to the survey (154) indicated it was a good idea to have someone talk with parents between the time they are arrested and when they are incarcerated about plans for their children. However, only 24% of the mothers reported talking with someone about

Table 1: What Help Is Needed

Percentage of parents who believed the item would be "very helpful" when they were arrested

Item	All parents	Men	Women
Contact visits	86%	83%	89%
Help for caregiver	80%	74%	85%
Help making plans for someone to care for children	82%	76%	88%
Information on legal issues	79%	71%	85%
More time to find someone to keep children	79%	72%	86%
More sensitivity from police to children	77%	75%	79%
Family counseling	75%	66%	82%
Someone to help parents tell children	66%	53%	76%
Individual counseling for children	65%	51%	78%

their children. Approximately 25% of the mothers who reported talking with someone indicated that they spoke with someone at the jail.

Developing a Collaborative Network of Services

Information from focus groups and surveys suggested services that arrested parents believe would assist in minimizing the degree of trauma children experience as a consequence of parental arrest. Practical assistance in terms of financial support for the caregivers and legal advice regarding custody issues were important, as well as emotional support for both children and caregivers.

Based on this information, Centers for Youth and Families developed a collaborative network of services for the Pulaski Enterprise Community. As part of the training for law enforcement officers, a module is included in training for new recruits that discusses ways officers can reduce the degree of trauma children experience when they witness their parent's arrest. Crisis intervention is also provided to caregivers who assume responsibility for children of female arrestees. The immediate needs of children's caregivers following the arrest of a mother may include help enrolling children in school, information about child welfare practices, mental health services for children, housing assistance, or information about social welfare programs. Mothers and caregivers are assisted in making plans for the care of their children in the event the mothers are sentenced to serve time.

A weekly group for mothers is held at the county jail, using guest speakers from community organizations to provide information to mothers on topics relevant to their roles as mothers. These topics include domestic violence, child welfare laws, par-

enting skills, drug treatment, and consumer credit counseling. Support groups are held for caregivers while mothers are incarcerated. These groups are held concurrently with therapeutic groups for children ages 4 to 17. Case managers work with caregivers to assure that the family has access to the resources they need to provide for the children's needs.

Conclusion

With the tremendous increase in mothers being incarcerated in our nation, communities must develop resources for their children and the children's caregivers. At-risk children; depressed, overwhelmed caregivers; and impaired parents paint a stark picture of vulnerability and future generations of offenders. These services may prevent the likelihood of perpetuating the much discussed cycle of family criminality.

References

- Hungerford, G.P., "Caregivers of Children Whose Mothers Are Incarcerated: A Study of the Kinship Placement System." *24 Children Today* 23 (1996).
- Johnston, D., "Effects of Parental Incarceration," in Gabel, K. and Johnston, D. (eds.), *Children of Incarcerated Parents*. New York: Lexington Books (1995) at 59-88.
- Marans, S. & Cohen, D.J., "Children and Inner-City Violence: Strategies for Intervention," in Leavitt, L. & Fox, N. (eds.), *The Psychological Effects of War and Violence on Children*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (1993).
- Ryan, K., "The Chronically Traumatized Child." *13 Child and Adolescent Soc. Work J.* 287 (1996).
- Terr, L.C., "Childhood Traumas: An Outline and Overview." *148 Am. J. of Psychiatry* 10 (1991).
- United States Dep't of Justice, *Survey of Youth in Custody, 1987* (NCJ-113365). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics (1988). ■

Connecting Child Welfare and Corrections Agencies: Seven Ideas for Inter-System Cooperation

For CYF, the over-arching lesson learned in working with these families has been the need to build cooperative relationships between the child welfare community and the criminal justice system. This is not something that happens overnight, but a process in which professionals come to understand areas of each other's missions that are mutually compatible and to respect each other's assets and limitations. Communities can begin to build these relationships in several ways.

1. Make sure law enforcement and correctional staff ask women if they have children who will need to be provided for when they are arrested, when they are booked, when they are arraigned, and while they are incarcerated. When a mother is arrested she may not volunteer that she has children if they aren't present, for fear that they will be taken from her. Having accurate, understandable information about child welfare laws can help alleviate unnecessary fears and help mothers make plans for the care of their children.

2. Have the local child protective agency develop written information that can be given to mothers who have been arrested. This information should note specific details of any laws that apply in cases where mothers are incarcerated. It should be easily understandable by someone who has no background in child welfare. Correctional staff who have never worked with abuse and neglect cases may not easily understand how the laws and policies apply to a mother who has been arrested; chances are she won't either. Also, the agency should provide periodic in-service training to correctional staff who work with female offenders.

3. Provide information to relatives about what is happening with the mother. There's a human tendency to fill in the blanks when we don't know something, and more often than not we fill in those blanks with the worst-case scenario. Relatives need to know when mothers will be released, when they will be sentenced,

when visiting hours are, what the rules are about children visiting their parents, how children will be searched, and where the mother will be housed. This not only relieves relatives of unnecessary worry—so that they have more emotional energy to devote to helping children cope with the crisis of their mother's arrest—but it lets them give children information so that the children won't be imagining the worst.

4. Help mothers to be realistic about their prospect of serving time. Another human tendency is to distort or deny situations that we would rather not cope with. A mother facing jail or prison time may want to believe a miracle will happen. This can prevent her from making necessary arrangements for her children or prevent the children from having an opportunity to say good-bye to their mother. Community organizations that provide children's mental health services, or a local university, can help prepare tips that either social workers or correctional staff can give to mothers and relatives to help them to explain to children—in terms children will understand—what is happening with their mother.

5. Give relatives information about community resources that can help them meet the needs of the children they are caring for. Many agencies that serve children and families will have a list or directory of local resources. Relatives will need help with everything from food to diapers to clothing and medicine. Ask the mothers in your case load who is caring for their children and send them a copy of the list or information about where to get a directory. Also, develop a pool of mental health professionals from agencies that serve children and arrange, with the assistance of correctional staff, for them to take turns being available during prison visitation to explain their services to relatives.

6. Encourage caregivers. Taking responsibility for someone else's children is a major disruption to employment, marriages, and other children in the home. It

is an overwhelming experience. Not only are relatives' lives turned upside down, but they may be angry with the mother, blame themselves for the situation, be unrealistic about the mother's chances of being released, and be exhausted from trying to fill in as parents to children who are in emotional crisis. They may be ashamed to let family and friends know that the mother has been arrested. They may feel isolated and alone.

Studies show that children cope better with crisis when the person caring for them copes well. Support groups where relatives can talk with others who are in similar situations can have a powerful impact. They give caregivers an opportunity to talk about their feelings and concerns with others who will understand from their own experience what the caregiver is going through. They also give caregivers the opportunity to share information and learn ways of coping from each other.

Resources: Information about how to start caregiver support groups is available from the AARP Grandparent Information Center, 601 E Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20049; phone: (202) 434-2296; e-mail: member@aarp.com. Also, contact Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, 100 McAllister Street, San Francisco, CA 94102; phone: (415) 255-7036; fax: (415) 552-3150; internet: <http://www.igc.org/justice/cjc/asp/manual/cover.html>.

7. Help mothers prepare to resume caring for their children. Without intervention, mothers may leave jail or prison no better off than before they were arrested. In fact, their criminal records may make it even more difficult for them to find housing and employment to support their children. Parent education classes, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence education groups, and employment assistance are important to help female offenders be in a better position to resume the care of their children when they return to the community.

—Susan Phillips ■