Helping Parents Behind Bars Be Parents

by Jason Lewis
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Photo by Jason Lewis Gerald Harrison, an inmate at Ossining Correctional Facility, met with his family as he graduated from a parenting class at the prison.

A seven-year-old girl jumps up and down and waves her hands high in the air from side to side. Her flowery blue dress sways rhythmically with her jovial leaps into the air.

Through a wide bright smile she loudly belts out, "Bye, Daddy," across a hall the length of a football field and into another room where her father stands. Gerald Harrison, a 46-year-old man incarcerated at Ossining "Sing Sing" Correctional Facility, smiles, waves and shouts "I love you" to his daughter.

They repeat this energetic exchange as many times as they can before guards escort Harrison's family out of the area.

The little girl was celebrating her father's graduation from the Parenting Course and Healthy

Marriage Seminar run by the Osborne Association at Sing Sing. The initiatives are designed to help incarcerated men learn how to be better parents and spouses while in prison and to prepare for family life once they are released.

"Re-entry programs now deal with jobs, homes and drug addiction," Harrison said. "But up until the Osborne entry into the whole process, no one ever ventured to really understand the importance of a strong family unit."

Many people are blind to the immense economic, psychological, educational and social burdens that incarceration imposes on children, families and entire communities, said Tanya Krupat, program director for the Osborne Association's Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative.

Changing that, she said, will require "sensitivity training — really appealing to people's hearts, but it's also reframing. Under the heading of criminal, or offender, or inmate and convict, they're real people, with kids and with families, with stories, with lives."

The Burden of Incarceration

The words "strong unit" don't pop into most people's heads when they think about a family splintered by incarceration. The Osborne Association, though, believes that providing individuals, families and communities with access to education and support services will substantially reduce the negative effects of incarceration.

In addition to helping the child while the parent is incarcerated, such services can provide benefits after. Research indicates that prisoners who maintain ties with their families are less likely to return to prison and they have lower rates of drug use than those without such connections.

A look at the numbers makes the need for such support immediately apparent. An estimated 105,000 minor children in New York City have at least one parent who is incarcerated. In addition, thousands of single mothers, single fathers, grandparents, foster parents, extended-family members and family friends are left to care for those children â€“ and are also deeply affected by the incarceration.

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For over 40 years New York City and the rest of America has waged its so-called war on drugs and crime, causing the American prison population to soar by 700 percent from 1970 to 2005. The brunt of this "mass incarceration" has fallen on members of inner-city communities — particularly African-American and Hispanic men â€“ as evinced by the fact that 1 in every 15 black males and 1 in every 36 Hispanic males over the age of 18 are incarcerated, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Mass incarceration is an accurate description of how the criminal justice system is experienced in many particularly urban communities of color where a very high percentage of particularly African-American men have had contact with the criminal justice system often for things that in other communities would not result in an arrest or incarceration," said Ann Jacobs, director of the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College.

Mass incarceration has played a huge role in the economic, social and psychological destabilization of many urban youngsters, families and communities of color. Unfortunately, no one began to substantially address the dramatic impact that mass incarceration has had on this segment of our population until 10 or 15 years ago — after decades of damage had already been done, Jacobs said.

Recalling Incarcerated Parents

In a social lounge, with yellow painted walls, a few couches, computers, a television and a big blue banner that reads "success is getting up just one more time than you fall down," a group of teens and young adults discuss growing up with incarcerated parents — memories that aren't as cozy as the snug yellow room.

The young people all are a part of, or were a part of, the Osborne Association's Children of Incarcerated Parents program. They made their way to Osborne's Brooklyn office to talk about how the incarceration of their parents affected them growing up.

"We're all looking for the bounce back," said Joshua Griffin, 19-year-old son of a formerly incarcerated mother. "We had nothing to do with this. We had nothing to do with our parents being incarcerated."

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The response that a child has to the incarceration of a parent varies and depends on a number of different circumstances, according to a May 2011 report released by the Osborne Association. These can include the age and developmental level of the child, how much the incarcerated parent was involved in the kid's life, and the stability of the child's home. Whether the child must go into foster care also plays a major role. In most cases, not only does the child have to contend with the loss of a parent, but he or she also must grapple with shame and stigma attached to incarceration.

"At first I didn't understand it because I was like three, four, five. But then as I got to school and I started noticing other students had mothers. â€¦ So it upset me, like, 'why is she never here, where is she? Why can't she come?" said Daphney Cagle, 20-year-old daughter of mother who has been in and out of prison for most of her life."And, as I got older I understood, and it just made more angry and made me feel more alienated from other people."

Some children externalize the negative emotions associated with the incarceration, acting out and exhibiting poor behavior. This affects their ability to learn in school and places extra stress on their caregiver.

"I was just fighting a lot cursing, hitting teachers, students. When I was in kindergarten, that was my first time getting suspended," said Talesha Duncan, 18-year-old daughter of a long-time incarcerated father. "I think it was kind of hard 'cause if my dad was there, I probably would have never did that stuff. It's like my mom saying one thing and it's like, yeah whatever, and my pops say it, it's like â€ I get it.' I wouldn't say I'm scared of him but it's more strong."

Resisting Help

Children need outside support to help them properly deal with the trauma of a parent's incarceration. Despite that, they often reject advice and inquiries from outsiders because they have had negative experiences when opening up to others.

"I felt like I don't want the extra attention. I didn't want to go to my friends and my peers, guidance counselors or anyone talking about it," said an Osborne program participant who requested anonymity. "I don't need the whole world to just be in my business, giving me extra attention that I do not want at all."

Osborne advocates training for teachers, guidance counselors and psychologists to help them properly handle and assist students with incarcerated parents.

"I think many say they don't want support but they do need support; many young people have not had a positive experience with a helping professional. First people need to be trained and more sensitive and understanding," Krupat said.

The organization also is pushing for increased community outreach to educate people on the realities of incarceration and reduce the stigma associated with it.

Cagle says that she's been trying to shake the stigma of her mother's incarceration for years. Often, community and family members can make it difficult for kids to escape the shadow of their parent's incarceration.

"Toward junior high school and high school it was a lot of pressure because everybody be like, 'Oh, don't mess up like your mother; don't be like your mother, you got to do good.' It was too much pressure on me," Cagle said. "Instead of people supporting me and telling me 'figure out what you want to do and make sure that you're the best at whatever you want to do,' everybody's always just like don't mess up."

"Some of the young people and the kids do struggle with what their destiny is. And then, with so many people assuming the apples don't fall far from the tree â€¦ they don't see bright futures for themselves," Krupat said. "Then things happen in their lives that affirm that for them, even if it's unintentional like a teacher accusing them when something's missing from the classroom or misunderstanding their anger that they can't be with their parent. And, then they may get sent to special-ed. Their possibilities get limited more and more."

This not only leads individuals having lower personal expectations. It also affects the expectations of entire communities.

"For me it wasn't such a big difference because I grew up in Bed-Stuy/Crown Heights. All my friends, most of them their father was locked up. So, we were the cool kids kind of," said

Duncan, who will be headed to college in the Fall. "I wasn't embarrassed by it at all for some reason. I'm not saying it's normal, but for where I live at it's kind of a common thing."

Despite the hardships that the young men and women of Osborne have faced, many still hope for a productive present and a brighter tomorrow.

"Always believe in yourself and have faith â€ cause God, he helps. You just got to follow and trust him," said Rachel Rios, a 19-year-old daughter of a formerly incarcerated mother and father. "And it comes, you don't got to ask for nothing. It just comes to you when it's supposed to come to you, when you really need it."

Parenting from Prison

Many outsiders and even caregivers believe that a child may be better off not having any contact with their incarcerated parent. However, studies have shown that children are emotionally healthier when they can have positive and frequent contact with their incarcerated parent.

Lawrence Bartley, 38-year-old who has been incarcerated for 21 years, believes a child should, if at all possible, have both parents in his or her life. "They need the balance," he said, "Without that, a child is one-sided. I know a lot of men that are incarcerated today because their fathers weren't in their life. That maybe isn't the primary reason they're in here but it's certainly a factor."

Many people fear that children should not visit their parents in prison, perhaps fearing the children will experience even more emotional distress when they have separate from their parent at the end of the visit. But, if the parent and child have consistent contact and positive exchanges, the child will become more comfortable with the reality of the situation, according to the Osborne report.

"When I was a kid I use to love going to see my father, and I would be excited. But the hardest part would have to be me leaving. I hated when I had to leave there was a certain point in time when I didn't want to go see him," said April Triana, 16-year-old daughter of a long-time incarcerated father and recently incarcerated mother. "But then, he started calling me more often, like every three days a week. And, he said I want to see you. 'Like OK" I want to go see him. Then I started back again, me going to see him."

The Economic Strain

Beyond the psychological issues, incarceration places an economic burden on families. The mother is usually left to bear the responsibility of supporting the family when the father is in prison. Even if that father lived apart from his children prior to going to prison chances are that he contributed to the family's economic well-being in some way, according to the Osborne report.

That changes when the sentence begins. If a father had been paying child support, for example, he likely will be unable to continue to make that contribution while he is in prison. Depending on the degree of that contribution, his imprisonment could leave the mother with a significant financial burden.

The situation differs dramatically if the mother goes to jail."When a mother is incarcerated, it is much less likely that the father will assume care. It is more likely that grandparents, especially grandmothers, will," according to the report. Grandparents, though, are not always in the ideal physical or economical condition to meet all of their grandchildren's needs.

The economic effects can linger long after the parent leaves prison. A 2010 Pew Center study found that serving time in prison reduced a man's earnings by 40 percent a year. The report said, "the typical former inmate will have earned $179,000 less than if he had never been incarcerated."

"Even when paroled inmates are able to find jobs," the New York Times has reported, "they earn only half as much as people of the same social and economic background who have not been incarcerated."

Other family members sometimes take in the children of incarcerated parents. Research has shown that it's usually healthier for a child to remain with a family member or close family friend rather than to go into the foster care system. That, though, can create a financial problem. Relatives and friends do not get the economic support from the city that foster care parents receive

Finding Funding

The Osborne Association advocates more federal, state and city level government economic and legal support to caregivers outside of the foster care system. In addition, if the programs Osborne now offers were to be provided to more children with incarcerated parents, state and local agencies would have to assume some of the responsibility, perhaps contracting with community-based providers to provide services.

In times when governments are cutting budgets, money to accomplish this could be hard to come by.

Even during sound economic times, New York has had difficulty fitting such services into its budget.

"We're lucky in New York to have corrections officials who believe in the possibility of people changing and who are committed to rehabilitation, but the budgets don't put very much money into that and it's only gotten worse in the last three or four years," Jacobs said.

New York's significant reforms to drug sentencing laws — most notably the 2009 reform of the harsh Rockefeller Drugs Laws — have led to steady declines in prison populations. These declines have led to the need for the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervisions to reduce its budget through the closure of several under-utilized state prisons.

The notion of fewer prisoners and less prisons sounds ideal. However, the scheduled closure of the Arthur Kill Correctional facility in Staten Island, one of very few prisons near New York City, will make it more difficult for financially strapped families from the city to visit their loved ones.

Furthermore, Jacobs is concerned about what the state will do with the money it saves from prisoner reduction and prison closure. "New York has had a significant reduction in its prison population but I have not seen the reinvestment of any of those monies into community based supports," she said.

Still a Parent

Despite the problems incarceration creates, it does not have to signal the demise of a family.

"We still have an opportunity to be somewhat of a parent to that child. I don't think that should ever be taken away," said Eric Benson, 39 year-old inmate who has served 19 years in prison and runs Osborne's family visiting center at "Sing Sing".

Benson went to prison when his son was just four months old. He relied on the skills that he learned from Osborne's parenting course coupled with his own personal determination to try and establish a relationship with his son.

"Although, I was in here and I was diligently trying to establish a relationship with him, my past haunted me," Benson said. "His mother, from me doing a lot of wrong in her life, she wouldn't allow me and my son to have a relationship. After 14 years she finally accepted that I should be in his life."

There are some people out there who think that a prisoner could never be a fit parent — that incarcerated individuals will never change. But experts think that is changing — and Harrison, the father in "Sing Sing," thinks so too.

"That stereotype of the criminal becoming a worse criminal or more criminal-minded is starting to be broken now because people are beginning to see that the decisions we make are what make our families stronger or weaker," said. "That stereotype of the prison being the breeding ground for worse criminals is being challenged."

The definition of what children and families affected by incarceration can be is being challenged at this time as well. It's certainly not the ideal circumstances to raise a family under, but it can still work.

"A father in prison is better than no father at all," wrote Omar Williams, currently incarcerated in "Sing Sing" and a graduate of Osborne's parenting course. "It is better for a child to be loved, though distance separates the father and the child, than to believe that he or she is not loved at all."

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