

## Chapter 9

# The Locked Cage: Understanding the Impact of Incarceration on Children and Families Within the School

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter aims to discuss the on-going problems of mass incarceration within the USA and the impact it has on the family and the school system. Mass incarceration is a societal concern because it impacts those that are incarcerated and the families that they leave behind outside the cage. Those that are parents and are incarcerated not only have to deal with their decisions, their children do as well. It is estimated that more than 1.7 million children within the USA have experienced a parent or caregiver being incarcerated. Incarceration can have a negative effect on the students development within the classroom, leading to long-term traumatic experiences and negative behavioral, emotional academic performances within the classroom. This chapter explores the impact it has on the students and academic environment while provide tools to best support these students and families.*

### INTRODUCTION

Incarceration is a pandemic that is impacting the entire nation. Individuals with varying cultural dynamics serve sentences that cause them mental and physical anguish, as well as time away from the ones whom they love. Of the individuals who are impacted by incarceration, one group that suffers immensely is the children of incarcerated parents. The vicarious **childhood trauma** that comes from parental incarceration results in mental, physical, emotional, and financial stress for the children and their families. Due to this negative impact, it is imperative that school counselors are aware of the dynamics of incarceration to effectively assist this population.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7319-8.ch009

## BACKGROUND

### Inside the Locked Cage

According to the Prison Policy Initiative (2020), the United States (US) currently has an incarceration rate of 631,000 inmates in local prisons, 1,291,000 inmates in state prisons, and 226,000 in federal prisons and jails. These numbers include individuals from many different cultural backgrounds and identities, and do not include the number of children or adolescents that have been incarcerated. However, the commonalities among these individuals are the crimes committed. These crimes include, but are not limited to: drug possession, murder, rape/sexual assault, assault, theft, burglary, fraud, weapons, public order, and immigration. While the crimes may be similar for individuals who are incarcerated, the influencing factors and experiences of these populations differ in many ways.

### Incarcerated Women

The rate of incarcerated women has been on the rise for many years. The factors influencing this increase range from poverty to unmet needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs proposes that needs must be met at different levels before an individual can reach their highest potential (McLeod, 2020). Any disruption in the meeting of these needs could lead to negative responses. When women find that their basic needs are not being met such as physical, emotional, and financial needs, they may take drastic measures to have these needs met. Women living in impoverished communities may find themselves more vulnerable to commit crimes, such as, drug use or drug possession and property crimes (Cowan, 2019). In addition, when cognitive needs are not met, one may behave in ways they would not behave in other circumstances. According to Steadman et al. (2009), at least 31% of recently detained women inmates presented with a serious mental illness. These serious mental health disorders could include depression, substance use disorders, eating disorders, trauma and stress-related disorders, and psychosexual dysfunction disorders (Messina & Grella, 2006). Physical and sexual abuse have also proven to be prevalent in women inmates. These abusive acts violate needs for safety, belongingness, love, and esteem in women and could lead to crimes of public order (prostitution, pornography), murder, assault, or robbery.

### Incarcerated Men

While the incarceration rate of women has risen, it does not exceed the rate by which men are incarcerated in society today. Men have higher arrest rates than women for all crimes except prostitution (Gender & Crime, 2020). When examining factors that influence criminal activity among men, substance use, mental health issues, and poverty can be found at the top of the list. Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied to incarcerated men, as the lack of psychological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs being met can be a driving force to crimes being committed. A desire for a better lifestyle, desperation, and alcohol abuse can lead to crimes such as robbery or aggravated assault (Galbicsek, 2020). In addition, mood instability combined with substance use increases the chances of men committing crimes of sexual assault, homicide, and intimate partner violence (Galbicsek, 2020). Past **childhood trauma** has also been shown to be a factor in male incarceration. Behaviors modeled during the childhood of incarcerated men such as parental substance abuse and familial incarceration increased the likelihood of repeated patterns (Messina et al., 2007).

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