
Family Programming for Incarcerated Parents: A Needs Assessment Among Inmates

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ABSTRACT The current exploratory study was undertaken to investigate the needs, as perceived by the offender, of families with incarcerated individuals. The aim of the research was to determine inmates' family and parenting issues and concerns, and to assess their interest in formal and informal family services. Respondents were 136 inmates (99 male, 37 female) who ranged in age from 18 to 49. Inmates requested information about child rearing, better visitation for their children, and help with issues of trust and communication. The results demonstrate that male and female inmates have differing concerns. However, both incarcerated mothers and fathers seem to value their parental identity and family commitments. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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A parent in prison creates disruption for the entire family system. In the United States over 1.7 million people are currently incarcerated in jails and prisons (Gilliard & Beck, 1998). More than one half of state and federal inmates are between the ages of 18 and 34 (Gilliard & Beck, 1998). Approximately 65 percent of inmates have children un-

der the age of 18, and six percent of women entering prison are pregnant. Because the corrections literature's primary focus is on inmate data, it's not surprising that information concerning family relationships and functioning is sparse (Hairston, 1990). This article presents data on incarcerated individuals' perception of family needs and suggests means for assisting families through their experiences with the correctional system.

INMATES' FAMILY NEEDS

Historically, the justice system has concentrated on offenders as individuals, ignoring their families and communities. In addition, "while social service agencies were designed to assist and support families in crisis, the practical reality for incarcerated parents is that this system more often works to separate families than to reunify and heal them" (Barry, Gilliard & Beck, 1995). During incarceration, parents are much more dependent on their families than they were prior to their arrest. They are dependent on their families for money, telephone contact, and personal materials. For families that may already be financially burdened and upset with the incarcerated parent, providing assistance is often difficult and not readily forthcoming. Also, incarcerated parents have to rely on partners and other family members to bring their children for visitation. One of the toughest hardships during their imprisonment is the separation from their children (Weilstein, 1995). Mothers and fathers are not usually allowed to parent while they are incarcerated—often parents lose track of their children's daily routines and have minimal contact with them (Ginchild & Lee, 1995). Inmates often report guilt and anxiety from leaving their children, and fear what will happen to their children upon release.

FAMILIES OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Families experience obstacles and prior relationship problems that make it difficult to maintain contact with the inmate. These include the travel distance from a home to a prison, inadequate visitation facilities for children, and inconvenient and/or infrequent visitation opportuni-

ties (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978; Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Lanier, 1991). These problems are compounded by the lack of resources available to address the needs of the families of inmates. Without a link between community-based services and the criminal-justice system (Carlson & Cervera, 1991), the few family-support services available in communities may be ineffective in facilitating positive family functioning for this population.

Incarceration of a partner often intensifies pre-existing relationship problems and creates new tensions that contribute to this population's high divorce rate. Prior to arrest, family members who have lived with the offenders typically have had a series of experiences related to the inmate's crimes (Johnston, 1995). These experiences include police contact, substance abuse, domestic violence, and absences from the home. In addition, prolonged absence of a parent from the home caused by incarceration not only threatens family cohesion, but also puts excessive strain on children's development (Hairston & Lockett, 1987).

CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

Estimates suggest that about 200,000 children have an imprisoned mother and more than 1.6 million children have an imprisoned father (Barry, Gilliard & Beck, 1995). Little is known about the impact incarceration has on children's development; however, one of the most devastating aspects is the lack of contact with the incarcerated parent. The existing literature suggests that children suffer from both emotional and behavioral difficulties which often lead to problems such as academic failure, gang involvement, anxiety, drug abuse, and early pregnancy (Fishman, 1982; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Lanier, 1991; Marshall & Binkiewicz, 1992; Stanton, 1980). One disheartening long term effect of parental incarceration is that one in ten children will become incarcerated themselves as juveniles and/or adults (Johnston, 1995). Review of the current child welfare literature supports the importance of frequent, regular parent-child visitation following separation to combat children's risk factors (Hess, 1987). Unfortunately, it is estimated that only half of all incarcerated parents receive visits from their children (Johnston, 1995). For children visits can be frightening, are often noisy, crowded, and are not conducive to rebuilding the parent-child relationship.

The Family Connection Project

There is evidence that family support for inmates during incarceration, be it informal or programmatic, promotes positive behavior and reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Borgman, 1985; Fishman, 1982; Schafer, 1994). There is also evidence that children with incarcerated parents are at risk and need support to reduce the likelihood of intergenerational criminal behavior (Adalist-Estrin, 1994). Despite the high number of inmates with families and children, families with incarcerated members have received little attention from family professionals. As a result, few programs exist which are specifically designed to strengthen family functioning during the imprisonment of a parent.

Some correctional facilities have begun to see the need for family strengthening programs and have designed special programs to address these issues. One such innovative family program is *The Family Connection Project* (Kazura, Baber, & Temke, 1999). This project represents an established partnership among a university's Department of Family Studies, whose researchers direct the project and evaluate the family programs; the university's Cooperative Extension, whose educators implement the family education programs; and the state's Department of Corrections, which provides the site for programming, and contributes to operational costs. Programming objectives are to strengthen at-risk families and support the healthy development of children with incarcerated parents through a family-centered, strength-based approach. The acquisition of positive family and relationship skills is expected to help reduce the rate of recidivism of incarcerated parents, and improve the parenting abilities of these families.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current exploratory study was undertaken to investigate the needs of families with incarcerated individuals as perceived by the offender. The aim of the research was to describe inmates' family systems, to determine their family and parenting issues and concerns, and to assess their interest in formal and informal family services. The study findings were then used to develop support services and parenting education curriculum for inmates and their families. Because there

is little research addressing the impact of incarceration on family functioning and the basic family characteristics of these individuals, a broad range of questions was asked to gather information. This information is rarely collected and then almost never reported (Hairston, 1990); therefore, this study contributes to the small body of literature that is slowly accumulating regarding this population.

METHOD

The Corrections Facility

The facility houses a state-of-the-art corrections program established in 1993. The majority of offenders served by this facility have committed crimes associated with drugs and/or alcohol use. This facility offers inmates two sequential programs: (1) a therapeutic community to deal with inmates' substance abuse and (2) a vocational college program to assist the inmates in their education and employment needs. Although the facility provides a progressive model for offender rehabilitation, programming has ignored critical family issues. During the first 60 days of the program, the facility's rules forbid any direct *physical* contact between an inmate and any family member; however, letter writing is permitted. After the 60 days, visitation takes place on weekends and in a cafeteria—a setting designed for security rather than for improving family relations.

In 1998, the facility served 228 male inmates and 31 female inmates. However, during the time of our investigation inmate population was increasing to approximately 500 (450 men; 50 women). The facility's estimation of the proportion of inmates who were parents was approximately 60 percent.

Participant characteristics. Respondents were inmates who either had children or expected to return to homes with children (i.e., partners' children, siblings' children) upon being released from the facility. One hundred thirty-six inmates (99 male, 37 female) who ranged in age from 18 to 49 ($M = 29.33$, $SD = 7.67$) completed the needs assessment. Ninety-three inmates were Caucasian, 4 were African-American, 11 were Hispanic/Latino, 18 Native American, 5 list themselves as Other, and five inmates neglected to indicate race. Fifty inmates had below a high school education, 39 inmates had a high

school diploma or GED, 35 had some college training, 7 had a college degree, and 5 respondents did not report their education level.

Fifty-five inmates reported that they were single, 24 were married, 24 divorced, 30 were in a serious relationship, 1 was legally separated, and 2 inmates did not provide this information. Seventy-three percent of our sample had children of their own and twenty-seven percent expected to return to homes with children. The number of children inmates had ranged from zero to five ($M = 1.42$, $SD = 1.30$), children's ages ranged from less than a year old to 28 years old ($M = 8.94$, $SD = 6.31$). Because visitation only occurs on weekends, the maximum number of visits per month for each inmate is four, more than four visits per month only can occur via court orders. Participants were asked how often (over a four-month period) did their partners/spouses visit and how often did *each* of their children visit. Inmates reported that on average their partners visited them a little more often than once a month ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 6.92$), and 38 percent of inmates stated that their partners never visited. Their children also average a little more than one visit a month ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 5.82$), and 42 percent reported that their children never visited.

Procedure

Inmates with children or who expected to return to homes with children were eligible to participate in the study. A program administrator at the correctional facility distributed approximately 200 consent letters, needs assessment questionnaires, and return envelopes to interested inmates. Because of the smaller female population, when a second cohort of women arrived at the facility a second set of questionnaires was distributed to women only. The first cohort of women returned twelve questionnaires, and 25 were received from the second cohort. The consent letters covered all of the critical points that would be included on an informed consent document, most critically that their prison sentence would not be affected in any way by choosing to participate or not. It was assumed that if they returned the needs assessment, they were agreeing to participate in the study. The program administrator was trained in administering the instrument, and she was available to answer any questions that the inmates had concerning the needs assessment or the study.

Measure

Possible Needs for Incarcerated Individuals is a 50-item, Likert-type, self-report measure that assesses inmates' perceived needs for themselves and their family members (Kazura, Baber, & Temke, 1998). This measure was developed from focus groups conducted with 32 inmates at the same correctional facility. This assessment asked inmates to indicate their needs for education concerning parenting issues, their concerns regarding finances, their needs for visitation programs, their partner's need for information about the correctional facility, their needs and their partner's needs for social support services, and their needs for life skills training. Demographic information was also collected.

Analysis

Although the sample size for women is small, the proportion of men and women is a similar ratio as the larger facility population. Therefore, because these data were collected to develop family programming for this facility, it seems to warrant reporting gender differences. These differences are to be viewed however, with a note of caution. Statistically, since there was a large case number difference between the groups, separate variances for its error within groups is reported versus pooled within groups variance. When gender differences did not exist, total means and standard deviations are reported.

RESULTS

Parenting Issues

Many of the inmates realized that they would soon be returning to the community and that they would need to rebuild their relationships, especially with their children. There were similarities and differences for men and women on the parenting subscale (see Table 1). However, women offenders were slightly more interested in information regarding the effects on children's development concerning separation $t(134) = 2.17, p < .05$, and having an incarcerated parent $t(133) = 2.30, p < .05$. Women were more interested about information concerning

□ **Table 1: Incarcerated Parents' Parenting and Financial Needs**

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<i>Parenting Issues</i>					
1. Children's growth and development.	4.19	(1.18)	4.38	(1.13)	.378
2. Caring for and raising my children.	4.46	(0.90)	4.67	(0.81)	.199
3. Disciplining my children.	4.27	(1.10)	4.03	(1.34)	.332
4. Parenting alone or parenting from a distance.	4.61	(0.96)	4.06	(1.51)	.044
5. How to find childcare.	3.84	(1.63)	3.35	(1.83)	.163
6. Talking with my children about prison.	4.84	(0.44)	4.15	(1.36)	.003
7. Help my children's stress and sadness.	4.87	(0.42)	4.69	(0.79)	.215
8. Helping my children with their other parent.	4.38	(1.21)	4.33	(1.21)	.836
9. My children visiting a prison (fear, guilt).	4.65	(0.98)	4.34	(1.24)	.177
10. Harmful signs in my children's behavior.	4.78	(0.53)	4.57	(0.98)	.202
11. The effects of separation on child development.	4.95	(0.23)	4.55	(1.08)	.031
12. The effects of incarceration on children's lives.	4.92	(4.45)	4.45	(1.23)	.023
13. Termination of parental rights—foster care.	4.92	(0.28)	2.89	(2.13)	.225
14. Children's adjustment to school or daycare.	4.00	(1.49)	4.37	(1.05)	.115
<i>Financial Concerns</i>					
1. Affordable housing.	4.35	(1.34)	4.09	(1.46)	.347
2. Help to support my children's basic needs.	4.30	(1.33)	3.99	(1.62)	.304
3. Public assistance.	3.95	(1.52)	3.47	(1.76)	.145
4. Getting more education.	4.51	(1.22)	4.32	(1.24)	.426
5. Budgeting and financial management.	4.46	(1.26)	4.15	(1.21)	.197
6. Job training.	4.51	(1.22)	4.13	(1.50)	.170

parenting from a distance $t(131) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, and talking with their children about their prison experience $t(134) = 3.01$, $p < .01$.

Men and women were only moderately interested in learning more about the termination of parental rights ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 2.09$). Both men and women wanted to increase their knowledge about general

childcare issues ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.84$), techniques they can use to lower children's stress, sadness, and lonely feelings ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.71$), and the harmful signs of parental incarceration on children's behavior ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.89$).

Financial Concerns

Overall, men and women reported similar concerns for their financial future. Men and women had future financial concerns about getting more education ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.24$), budgeting their finances ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.23$), and job training ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.44$). The participants are currently receiving vocational training at the facility; therefore, it is understandable that there were no gender differences.

Visitation

Two items for the visitation needs subscale resulted in a significant difference between men and women (see Table 2). Women more often than men wanted time after visits to have family counseling $t(133) = 2.86$, $p < .01$. Women reported interest in finding transportation to the facility for their family $t(133) = 3.43$, $p < .01$.

Both men and women wanted family days (i.e., holiday parties, family picnics) at the facility ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.93$), better meeting places for children ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.99$), and play activities provided for their children during visitation ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.99$).

Correctional Facility

There were no gender differences for issues concerning the facility's policies. Means ranged from 3.74 to 4.12. Inmates were most interested in getting information about the facility's visitation policies to family members ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.44$), and getting information about their parole to family members ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.42$).

Social Support Services

The social support services subscale was developed to assess the type of support in which inmates would be most interested in participating. Men and women reported differences on three out of ten of

□ **Table 2: Incarcerated Parents' Visitation and Facility Policy Needs**

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<i>Visitation Programs</i>					
1. Better meeting room at the facility for children.	4.68	(0.82)	4.59	(1.06)	.687
2. Play activities during visitation.	4.78	(0.48)	4.52	(1.12)	.162
3. Family days at the facility (family picnics).	4.73	(0.90)	4.66	(0.94)	.712
4. Time after visitations for family counseling.	4.83	(0.50)	4.23	(1.24)	.005
5. Sharing pictures with my children's parent.	4.33	(1.33)	4.16	(1.39)	.528
6. My family needs help finding transportation.	4.41	(1.09)	3.12	(2.17)	.001
7. Help writing to my children's parent.	3.76	(1.66)	3.06	(2.15)	.078
8. Help preparing my children for visitation.	4.19	(1.37)	3.57	(1.89)	.070
<i>Correctional Facility</i>					
1. Visitation policies for my family.	4.32	(1.31)	4.03	(1.49)	.293
2. Information to family about the facility.	4.08	(1.44)	3.75	(1.72)	.300
3. Information about my parole for my family.	4.35	(1.11)	4.03	(1.52)	.245
4. Information about court proceedings for family.	4.16	(1.44)	3.53	(1.74)	.072

these items (see Table 3). Women were more interested in family counseling $t(134) = 3.14$, $p < .01$, support groups for themselves $t(134) = 2.83$, $p < .01$ and support groups for their children $t(133) = 2.90$, $p < .01$ than were men.

Both men and women expressed an interest in needing help with issues of trust and anger ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.40$), and communication techniques for interacting with their children's other parent ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.40$).

Life Skills

Next inmates were asked seven questions about life skills training that ranged from accessing community resources to dealing with emotions, and coping with family issues. There were no gender differences on this subscale. Inmates were concerned about knowing what to

□ **Table 3: Incarcerated Parents' Social Support Services and Life Skills Needs**

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<i>Social Support Services</i>					
1. Family counseling.	4.57	(0.96)	3.73	(1.52)	.002
2. A support group.	4.43	(1.02)	3.65	(1.56)	.005
3. A support group for my partner (child's parent).	3.95	(1.72)	3.58	(1.73)	.277
4. A support group for my children.	4.60	(0.96)	3.78	(1.62)	.004
5. Help with issues of trust and anger.	4.52	(1.04)	4.20	(1.26)	.174
6. Training on crisis management.	4.38	(1.09)	3.88	(1.47)	.068
7. Communicating with my children's parent.	4.16	(1.28)	4.12	(1.45)	.880
8. A hotline for my family.	3.87	(1.48)	3.82	(1.48)	.871
9. A meeting for my family about the facility.	3.95	(1.55)	3.81	(1.56)	.648
10. Someone to talk to when my family has a question about the Facility.	4.43	(1.02)	3.90	(1.62)	.064
<i>Life Skills</i>					
1. Community resources.	4.41	(0.87)	4.04	(1.12)	.076
2. Coping and what to tell family and friends.	4.14	(1.32)	3.77	(1.42)	.173
3. How to deal with my feelings.	4.49	(1.07)	4.31	(1.19)	.423
4. Coping with day-to-day issues.	4.35	(1.01)	4.02	(1.29)	.162
5. Information about my return to the family.	4.62	(0.95)	4.50	(1.12)	.558
6. Drug treatment and co-dependency.	4.41	(1.28)	4.02	(1.52)	.173
7. Creating a family plan for my release.	4.43	(0.99)	4.42	(1.19)	.986

expect upon their release and return to their family ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.07$), and wanting help in creating a family plan to prepare them for release ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.14$). Inmates were also concerned about learning how to deal with their feelings of depression, irritability, and loneliness ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.62$).

DISCUSSION

Both men and women reported many needs across the six subscales, which is not surprising since the assessment was developed from focus groups of prior inmates at the same facility. The findings suggest that this assessment correctly identified the needs that the inmates at this facility have concerning their families and children during incarceration. Although there was a small number of women in this sample, gender differences were always in the direction of higher means scores from women's reports.

Incarcerated women seemed especially interested in children's issues related to effects of incarceration, visitation, and social support services. These findings are salient with previous research. Bonfanti, Felder, Loesde & Vincent (1974) reported that the majority of incarcerated mothers demonstrate a high degree of maternal behaviors, they likely had legal custody of their children prior to imprisonment, and planned to reunite with their children upon release. In addition, Moore and Clement (1998) found that parenting training during incarceration could be effective during incarceration. However, in this sample there were more similarities between men and women's parenting needs than differences. Parents seem to realize and be concerned about how their incarceration is effecting their children's social and emotional development. Many inmates requested information about how to deal with their children's stress and fear, and what signs to look for in their children's behavior that may demonstrate the impact of incarceration and/or separation. In addition to parenting issues related to incarceration, these parents wanted basic parenting education concerning discipline and caring for their children. This group of inmates seemed to be motivated to be more knowledgeable and skillful parents.

Next, financial concerns were assessed and men and women reported similar needs. Even though the correctional facility provides vocational training, inmates were concerned about their education and financial futures. These concerns may be linked to custody issues. Upon release parents often have to pursue custody of or provide financial support for their children (Hairston, 1990). The inability to maintain sufficient resources to meet the child welfare's reunification requirements could result in the loss of custody or reduced visitation rights. Therefore, inmates often need to secure a job to meet their own needs as well as those of their families.

Visitation was the next set of questions that the inmates addressed. Family days were important to both men and women inmates. Currently, the facility only offers one family event a year. Inmates reported that these events allowed them to feel more like “real” families for a few hours. Parents indicated a desire to carry this feeling into regular visitation by having organized play activities. Although this desire may seem self-serving for the inmate, research has demonstrated benefits for rehabilitation. Johnston & Gabel (1995) state that continuing contact between parent and child is perhaps the most significant predictor of family reunification following parental incarceration. Better meeting rooms for children were also a concern for parents. Children visit with their incarcerated parent in a cafeteria setting with a lack of toys and no opportunities for typical parent-child interactions (e.g., feeding, reading, and playing).

Another issue related to visitation is the correctional facility’s policies. Inmates had concerns about their inability to communicate the correctional facility’s policies to their family members. Due to the first 60-day no-visitation policy, only written communication is allowed during this time. Many inmates become concerned that their families and especially children don’t understand what is occurring. Therefore, both men and women were interested in getting information to their family about the correctional facility’s visitation policy and also their parole date (see life skills discussion). Inmates reported that it was difficult for them to inform their family through written communication about the correctional facility’s policies. Often inmates’ writing skills are not well developed and their understanding of the policies and why they exist are often incorrect. Some of the respondents suggested that the correctional facility should have brochures or a hotline available to families to support and answer family members’ questions.

The social support services subscale demonstrated some gender differences. Women were more interested than men in support groups for themselves and their children. Smith (1995) reports that parents (especially mothers) and children should be involved in joint counseling to maintain a viable relationship. Counseling allows children to express in a safe manner their feelings about their parent’s incarceration and separation. Such counseling is rarely available. Consequently, a mother may be at-risk for losing custody of her children because of

her inability to deal with her children's anger and developmental issues.

For life skills needs, both men and women reported a need to be able to understand and work on their emotional functioning. Domestic violence is a significant problem with this population. Programming to help incarcerated parents and their partners develop basic life management skills is critical for rehabilitation (Schafer, 1994). Programs such as anger management, problem solving, and stress management could help parents/inmates to learn to use these skills on a daily basis and learn to build healthy social support networks. In addition, inmates requested help with planning for their transition back into the community and family life. Once inmates conclude their training at the facility, some of them are left in limbo until the court system processes their parole. Therefore, planning for re-entry into the family and community is often difficult. Both men and women reported needing help with developing a plan of action for becoming an active member of their family after release. Currently, each family has to proceed through this transition on their own. Some of the respondents added comments on the questionnaire concerning their fears for the unknowns about this transition and how to prepare their families. O'Connor, Ryan and Parikh (1998) examined many of these same issues. Their Transition of Prisoners program focuses on the importance and difficulties associated with reintegrating ex-offenders back into their community upon their release from prison.

CONCLUSION

There is consistent evidence that family support for inmates during incarceration promotes positive behavior and reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Borgman, 1985; Schafer, 1994). Inmates who assume responsible spousal and parental roles upon release have lower recidivism rates than those who function without family ties, expectations, and obligations (Hairston, 1988). Therefore, innovative family programs for families with incarcerated parents not only improve the family functioning but also provide benefits to the correctional system.

These results demonstrate that even while parents are incarcerated they still value their parental identity and commitments. Although the

small number of women participants is an obvious limitation of this study, these results should challenge the family studies, social work, and psychology fields to focus more attention on families with incarcerated members. Developing and implementing interventions for families with incarcerated parents is a formidable task, but identifying the needs based on the inmates' perception is the first step. Next, an examination of needs from the perspective of inmates' families and correctional facility staff members requires attention. With this information practitioners can develop comprehensive family programs that fit this population's needs and conforms to the necessary security issues that may arise when presenting any type of programming within a prison facility. Furthermore, data of the relationship between the facility and families ought to be collected so we can better understand how to advocate for institutional change that both rehabilitates the inmate and strengthens the family.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

Kerry Kazura, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). In 1997, Dr. Kazura became the director of *The Family Connection Project*, which examines the impact of incarceration on the family system. The project's goals are to evaluate the effectiveness of the family programs that the Department of Family Studies and UNH Cooperative Extension are providing to inmates and their families. Dr. Kazura's research interests are ex-

aming differential effects of maternal and paternal incarceration on children’s social/emotional development, and descriptive information about families with incarcerated members. The journal of *Family Science Review* recently published a theoretical article describing *The Family Connection Project* by Dr. Kazura and her colleagues.

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