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## Knowledge of Master of Social Work students regarding parental incarceration: An exploratory study

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KNOWLEDGE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS REGARDING  
PARENTAL INCARCERATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

---

by  
Shyra Lynn Harris  
September 2011

KNOWLEDGE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS REGARDING  
PARENTAL INCARCERATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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by  
Shyra Lynn Harris

September 2011

Approved by:

  
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## ABSTRACT

While attempts have been made to highlight the social problem of parental incarceration and its effects on the family unit, especially the children, very little research has been done to accurately account for just how badly these children are affected. To effectively work with a specific client population, having the requisite knowledge about it and its needs is a necessary first step. To assess whether they are prepared to work with this population, the purpose of this research study was to explore the level of knowledge among MSW students regarding the effects of parental incarceration on the children and families involved, and the special needs that result from this experience.

This study was exploratory in nature, employed a snowball sampling methodology, and utilized an online survey targeting MSW students at three Southern California Schools of Social Work to assess their overall knowledge of this topic, how this knowledge was attained, and level of competence and confidence that the respondents felt in meeting the psycho-social needs of the population. A total of 70 surveys were completed by the target respondents, which included a 10-item scale,

developed by this researcher, to assess this knowledge or competencies of the respondents. Univariate and bivariate analyses were performed using SPSS, and the results revealed a serious deficiency in the respondent's knowledge about this client population and area of practice. No respondent scored higher than six out of ten correct answers, approximately one-fourth (24.4%) scored no correct answers out of ten, and almost ninety percent (88%) of the respondents scored three or less correct answers out of ten.

In keeping with the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, recommendations are provided to help ensure that social work students possess the requisite knowledge and competence to effectively work with these clients and in this area of practice upon graduation. Lastly, recommendations for future research are also provided for the same purposes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heart-felt gratitude and thanks for all the hard-work, support, and dedication shown to me by Dr. Herb Shon, and Rachel Strydom. Your unfailing belief in my passion, vision, and ability has allowed me to grow...to shine...and to see my path to an amazing future. You both are amazing experts in the field, but beyond that, you provide encouragement, foundation, support, constructive correction, and revelation about who we can become!

Secondly, I'd like to acknowledge my friend and confidant, Anne "Wangui" Wahome, who has cheered me on to be greater than I knew I could be. Your philosophies, strategies, and humor saved me. May you see in yourself, all the power and brilliance you see in everyone else! See you in law school!!

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my MSW cohort. Amazing, amazing, amazing!! You have broadened my worldview, and taught me about respect and dignity. Watch out world, here we come!

## DEDICATION

My MSW degree, and the opportunities that I have access to because of it, would not have been possible without the love and support of my remarkable husband, Tavon. You dedicated yourself to helping me attain my dream. You worked several jobs, got next to no sleep, carried your own load of classes, and never once complained. You're God's greatest demonstration of His love for me! Lover Fish, here's to 15 years...and plenty more...I love you!

And then, there are my boys!! Robbie, all I have done has been for you. My desire to see you surpass your father and I, in every way, is what made me fight when I wanted to quit. Believe in who you are...ALWAYS! And, Shorty Beef, scratches and love, my baby!! You guys are "Mama's heart."

"Living the Dream, and Changing Lives!!"

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

"The increasing number of children with incarcerated parents constitutes perhaps one of the largest at-risk populations in the United States" (Miller, 2006, p. 472). Studies about how many children are being affected by parental incarceration have been occurring since approximately 1978, when McGowan and Blumenthal contributed estimates of just how many children had parents in prison, and what their living arrangements were because of it. They began to assess what unique needs this population of children may have, including issues around regular communication between the incarcerated mothers and the children's caseworkers. In 1994, Adela Beckerman began to expose the lack of regular contact that was occurring between the mothers and the caseworkers, including lack of communication about child custody hearings and child case plans. "Beckerman observe[d] that many incarcerated mothers with children in foster care received no correspondence (49 percent) from case workers and were often uninformed of child

custody hearings (28 percent). Two-thirds (66 percent) of mothers reported not receiving a copy of their child's case plan" (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002, p. 462). In 1999, the Bureau of Justice Statistics did a special report, estimating that

State and Federal prisons held an estimated 721,500 parents of minor children...Parents held in U.S. prisons had an estimated 1,498,800 minor children in 1999, an increase of over 500,000 since 1991. Of the Nation's 72 million minor children, 2.1% had a parent in State of Federal prison in 1999. (Mumola, 2000, p. 1)

In 1993, Bloom and Steinhart's study (as cited in Krisberg, 2001) from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) found "that the number of incarcerated women and men had grown tremendously, but there was little or no improvement in the response to their children" (Krisberg, 2001, p. 2).

Parental incarceration is a problem that has short and long terms effects on the family system, the children left behind, the potential caregivers, and the community at large.

The immediate effects can include feelings of shame, stigma, loss of financial support, weakened ties to the parent, changes in family composition, poor school performance, increased delinquency, and increased risk of abuse or neglect. Long-term effects can include the questioning of parental authority, negative perceptions of police and the legal system, and increased dependency or maturational regression to impaired ability to cope with future stress or trauma, disruption of development, and intergenerational patterns of criminal behavior. (Travis, Cincotta McBride, & Solomon, 2005, p. 2)

From an ecological perspective, this social problem must be examined in the context of the microsystem; the parent-child relationship, the mesosystem and exosystems the interrelations between the parent, child, family, etc. while in prison (visiting centers), including prison policies and reunification programming, and the macrosystem the "overarching institutional patterns and cultural prototypes such as economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems" affecting the family system (Arditti, 2005, p. 252). It is only by

taking this bio-psycho-social approach that it will truly be determined who is suffering, to what degree, and what needs to be done about it.

"Social work within a prison, [and/or with those involved with the criminal justice system], are areas that have not received much attention from the profession or social workers as individuals," even though the literature reports that "social work certainly provides the training, knowledge, and skill for such an undertaking" (Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997, p. 364). What is continually referred to in the literature is, the idea that social workers are the most well-suited and trained to treat and serve individuals and families involved with the criminal justice system at a variety of levels due to their holistic approach and orientation toward treatment, however their presence is lacking. In a study by Nevers, Piliavin, Schneck, & Henderson, 1990 (as cited in Ivanoff & Smith, 1997), "Social work has failed to respond to the challenge of meeting the needs of incarcerated individuals, [and their children / families], in recent years" (Ivanoff & Smith, 1997, p. 309). This is believed to be attributed to several factors including a conflict between philosophies of forensics and social work, the

perception that rehabilitative interventions are ineffective, and according to Nevers et al., 1990 (as cited in Ivanoff & Smith, 1997), "the lack of criminal justice and correctional education and experience provided in schools of social work" (Ivanoff & Smith, 1997, p. 310). Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie assessed that "academic social work is paradoxically absent", and attest that what is required, according to Weiss, et al., 2006 (as cited in Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009) is "a study of social work as a social political practice" that connects individual work with the level of the community and of social policy, starting from the right of all people to live a life with dignity" (Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009, p. 124).

Given the lack of available and relevant social work education literature on this population, its psycho-social needs, its growing effect on society, and its priority in the Schools of Social Work curriculum, the rationale for this must be addressed. One of the major barriers to ideal collaboration and problem resolution lies in education.

As in many cases where avoidance and resistance rule, it is ignorance and a lack of education that fuels

the fear that motivates behavior. For the social work profession, this education begins in the Schools of Social Work, where the basic and fundamental concepts, code of ethics, and introduction to disenfranchised populations, and the policies that impact them are taught. The lack of social work education literature that speaks directly to parental incarceration is concerning, especially given the vast numbers of individuals, children, and families that are impacted directly by it. Some might even say that the Schools of Social Work are not meeting their stated missions, nor the mission of the CSWE who regulates them. Therefore, it is imperative that research be conducted to examine the level of knowledge among MSW graduate student about parental incarceration and its effects on the children and families involved, in order to determine what steps need to be taken to prepare the social work profession to adequately "promote human and community well-being, guided by a person and environment construct, a global perspective, [and] respect for human diversity" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 1).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to analyze MSW curriculum and its correlation to the knowledge MSW students have regarding issues pertaining to parental incarceration. The study utilized surveys given to MSW graduate students from three Schools of Social Work within California Universities to gain insight into the level of knowledge about parental incarceration, its effects on children and the families involved, and how that knowledge was attained. Quantitative data analysis techniques were used.

An understanding of the knowledge and competence among MSW graduate students, who are the future of social work services, is valuable to ensure that the Schools of Social Work are meeting the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mission to "promote and strengthen the quality of social work education through preparation of competent social work professionals" by offering specific curricula for and about this population and their psycho-social needs (Council on Social Work Education, 2010).

Each participant was asked to complete a survey to assess their academic exposure to populations affected by

incarcerations, their perceived level of competence with populations affected by incarceration, their level of historical knowledge about parental incarceration, their legislative knowledge about parental incarceration, the effects on the children and families involved, and the psycho-social needs that result. In addition, the MSW students will be asked to identify the source(s) from which their knowledge was attained (e.g. undergraduate study, MSW program, field internship, unrelated work experience, personal experience, etc.).

The data was collected from three Southern California Universities; two public California State Universities and one private university, all of which have an accredited school of social work and/or a social work department that offers a Master's of Social Work Degree. Surveys were made available via the internet through the Social Work Department of each participating school, as well as in hard copy paper surveys for those who preferred this method. A snowball method was used to solicit participants.

## Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study is categorically necessary in order to increase insight into the issue of parental incarceration, as a whole, which will lead to an increased sensitivity to and cultural competence for social workers when working with these families and their members. Through this increased awareness, Schools of Social Work and University Social Work Departments throughout California, and across the nation, will see the benefit of holistically preparing their students through an expansion of their curriculum to include a focus on parental incarceration. This increased knowledge and preparedness can result in new and more effective programs, and developed services to impact the lives of this disenfranchised population, in adherence to the CSWE mission. This study also highlights the need for increased advocacy toward policy change and re-examination of sentencing guidelines.

This study can potentially contribute to micro social work practice by increasing the understanding and insight of social workers about the factors and consequences that children, families, and the incarcerated parents experience. On gaining this insight,

social workers can learn how to better meet the needs of these families with less unconscious judgment and bias. The insight that comes from this study can serve to increase sensitivity and cultural competence when working with these children, families, and incarcerated parents.

At the macro level, this study can highlight the need for social work advocacy toward policy change. This study can motivate social workers to push legislation that reflects an attitude of rehabilitation, family preservation, and parenting concerns. Sentencing guidelines need to be re-examined to be sure that rehabilitation opportunities have been fully exhausted before incarceration is utilized. The "one size fits all" approach to sentencing should no longer be seen as valuable, especially where parents and children are concerned.

Parenting considerations are almost never considered by judges as they set penalties within the statutory guideline systems. This is particularly ironic since an offender's value to his/her employer can be considered to ameliorate some sentencing guidelines, but their value as a sole care giver is not deemed relevant. (Krisberg, 2001, p. 3)

Among the three reputable schools of social work in the Southern California region, there are several similarities among their missions that make assertions to "graduate level education that prepares competent, ethical and compassionate social work" (Buckles, Beverly, 2010-2011) with an emphasis "to engage in activities to promote social justice, to enhance the quality of life for all persons, to advocate for the elimination of poverty, oppression and discrimination, and to take leadership roles in the development of effective service delivery systems" (Lopez, Rebecca, 2010). The mission statements make proclamations "to provide a graduate curriculum that prepares students for global practice and develops competency in and respect for all aspects of human diversity, populations at risk and the promotion of social and economic justice" (Buckles, Beverly, 2010-2011).

These grand commitments are only valuable if they are taken as seriously as intended when they were written and ascribed to. Therefore, it is important that further research be done in order to assess the knowledge among MSW graduate students regarding the growing social issue of parental incarceration and the long ranging affects it

has on the children and families involved. This assessment will allow the social work educators to survey and appraise their MSW graduate curricula to ensure that they are mission-focused both with their individual missions, as well as that of the Council on Social Work Education, which aspires toward "the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 1).

CHAPTER TWO  
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section of the study outlines and explores some of the peer-reviewed literature pertaining to incarcerated parents and the plight of their children and families. It also examines the involvement of social workers with this social problem, and the role social work education plays in properly preparing them to do so. The literature review begins by highlighting the lack of attention paid to this social issue. It proceeds by exploring who is becoming incarcerated and the nature of their crimes. The next area of focus is to identify who is vulnerable and the short- and long-term effects of parental incarceration. Subsequently, the child welfare system has been examined. Finally, the literature review examines the level of involvement of social workers in the criminal justice system, and the implications for social work, as a whole, both academically and professionally, because of it.

## Parental Incarceration Ignored as Social Issue

As far back as 1978, social science researchers began to see the need for the exploration into parental incarceration and its effects on the children that are left behind. Since that time, several interviews and surveys have been done to collect data about this population, but little, if anything, was done once the information was gathered, leaving these children "invisible." Due to the rapid growth in incarceration rates between 1991 and 1999, including women being incarcerated, state and federal government agencies realized that the problem could no longer be ignored. They could no longer hide it under the umbrella of child welfare and speak to the unoccupied parental role; "for any number of reasons, one or both parents are not present in the child's life" (Poppo & Leighninger, 2008, p. 317). The time had come for it to be addressed.

While an attempt has been made to highlight the social problem of parental incarceration and its effects on the family unit, especially the children, very little research has been done to accurately account for just how badly these children are affected. "Although considerable information has been generated in a number of small-scale

studies, the Child Welfare League of America concludes...the true scope of the problem is uncertain because few reliable statistics exist" (Simmons, 2000, p. 1). The literature that has been published has been done in response to, potentially, the fastest growing at-risk population in our Nation. It has been a reactive effort to an age-old problem, and only seems to have become an issue because it began to "boil over." Unfortunately, the concern was not for the affected families and their children, or even for the collateral damage within the community. The concern seems to have been about the extra funding required to care for this bastard offspring. Our approach has been to "punish the sons for the sins of the father."

#### Who Is Being Incarcerated and Why

While it is obvious that both men and women are incarcerated, the difference between the genders has always been vast. Men have always been known to have higher incarceration rates than women due to the severe nature of their crimes compared to that of women. However, "from 1991 to 2007, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122%, compared to a rise of 76% for

incarcerated fathers" (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009, p. 2). The studies have undoubtedly pointed to the notion that this increase is due to the change in anti-drug legislation which includes stricter, mandatory sentencing laws.

The number of women incarcerated in state prisons for a drug offense rose by 888% from 1986 to 1996. A 1995 study of California's female prisoners found that their...involvement in criminal behavior is tied directly to drug use and lack of viable economic skills.

(Simmons, 2000, p. 7-8).

On the other hand, "forty-five percent of fathers in State prison were violent offenders, compared to 26% of mothers", and only 23% of fathers were convicted of drug offenses (Mumola, 2000, p. 6). From 1986 to 1997, the number of incarcerated parents in both the State and Federal prison systems more than doubled; "from 273,045 in 1986 to 637,309 in 1997" (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002, p. 464). More than half of the 1.4 million adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons are parents of minor children. The vast majority of incarcerated parents are male (93%) and are held in state prisons (89%). Among

the men held in state prison, 55 percent report having minor children. Among the women, who account for six percent of the state prison population, sixty-five percent report having minor children (Travis, Cincotta McBride, & Solomon, 2005, p. 1).

### Short-and Long-Term Effects

"Parental incarceration is complex and multifaceted, often involving emotional pain, changes in parent-child relationships, work-family conflict and shifts in labor force participation, the intensification of poverty and need for public assistance, and difficulties connected to visitation at corrections settings (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003)" (Arditti, 2005, p. 252). The victims of these consequences can be counted among the children, the families, the potential caregivers, and even the incarcerated parent themselves, because no one's life will ever be the same again. "The prisoner, the nonincarcerated parent, and children are embedded in a broader sociocultural network that stigmatizes involvement in the criminal justice system, intensifying the potential harm for families" (Arditti, 2005, p. 252). The families of the incarcerated parent, especially the

children, are the ones who suffer the most. They are the victims. Due to the stigma attached to being involved with the criminal justice system, the families are disenfranchised.

One of the areas often overlooked with these children is their sense of loss. While their parent(s) are not biologically dead, they are physically gone and unable to provide the support and protection needed by their children. Unlike biological death, which draws out sympathy and support from others in the social system, incarceration often draws out judgment. This makes the family, especially the children, feel ashamed, forcing them to deal with the loss on their own, or not at all. The children of incarcerated parents experience "unique disruptive effects of incarceration...because of the demoralization and stigma attached to it. Stigma has been theorized as spreading from the stigmatized individual to those associated with him or her" (Arditti, 2005, p. 253). This feeling of being exiled by their community, friends, and social supports not only drives the family and children into isolation, but can also drive them away from the incarcerated parent.

"Disenfranchised grief is defined as occurring when persons experience a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Arditti, 2005, p. 253). This is what happens to children when the loss of their parents is not handled as a loss, but instead life moves on "as usual." These children are very aware of the parent's absence but begin to live up to the expectation that they must pull themselves up and get on with life. However, because they are not allowed to treat their loss with grief and mourning, they often begin to compromise their ability to function.

The literature contends that there is a high probability that many of these youth encounter cognitive delays, developmental regression or delays, and inappropriate coping strategies. They possibly have difficulty successfully meeting developmental tasks, such as forming attachments, developing trust, autonomy, initiative, productivity, and achieving identity. (Miller, 2006, p. 478)

Child Welfare System, Family  
Reunification/Preservation

"In 2002, a United States DOJ-NIC inquiry found that only six states had statutes in place regarding incarcerated mothers and their children:" Alaska, California, Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, and New York (Laughlin, Arrigo, Blevins, & Coston, 2008, p. 226). Of these six states, only Florida (Fla Stat. & 944.8031) and California (Cal. Penal Code & 6400) had language that emphasized visitation, reunification, and family preservation. Both of these states' legislation is highly focused on visitation between mother and child while the parent is incarcerated. However, the federal government has placed all Department of Corrections statutes within the control of each state, oftentimes leaving the parent and child at the mercy of the political viewpoints of each state's representatives. At the present time, due to an economic budget crisis, California has stopped its bus program and 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday visiting programs.

There are no specific social policies or legislation that applies directly to dealing with or caring for children of incarcerated parents, nor do "law enforcement policies and procedures specifically address children of

arrestees" (Simmons, 2000, p. 6). Therefore, children only become "visible" when they end up in court because they are ready to start school and need vaccinations, "having been informally left with friends or relatives who lack legal authority for their medical care" (Simmons, 2000, p. 6).

A relatively recent survey of 500 child welfare, law enforcement, and correctional officials revealed that 80 percent of protective service agencies surveyed had no specific policies or guidelines for placing children whose mothers had been arrested. Although more than 50 percent of child welfare administrators acknowledged an increase in the number of children of incarcerated parents...most reported a lack of formal procedures for working with this population. (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002, p. 462)

However, there are two main piece of legislation which purpose to address the issue of parental incarceration, with punitive measures. The first is "the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) signed by President Clinton in 1997, authorizing the termination of parental rights when a child has been living under foster care for

15 of the last 22 months" (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009, p. 9). This is a problem because the average prison sentence exceeds 22 months, and with the mandatory sentencing laws and stricter anti-drug laws, most parents will be at a huge risk of permanently losing their children, whether to the foster system or caregivers.

The second policy is the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), welfare reform that was also signed by President Clinton in 1996. This legislation "imposes a lifetime ban on cash assistance and food stamps for people convicted of a drug offense," leaving parents released from prison, especially mothers, who lack vocational skills and are facing a multitude of obstacles in obtaining employment, vulnerable. The inability to get gainful employment and the lack of public assistance may render the parent hopeless, "diminishing the likelihood of regaining custody of their children" (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009, p. 9).

#### The Role of Social Work and Social Work Education

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was founded in 1952 and is "recognized by the Council for

Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in this country"

(Council on Social Work Education, 2010). According to the CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards,

The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being. Guided by a person and environment construct, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work's purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons. (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 1)

While this mission is saturated with well-intended terms such as dignity, human rights, justice, and diversity, literature regarding social work education and its focus on issues dealing with parental incarceration is absent.

Due to the lack of research and peer-reviewed literature that specifically focuses on parental incarceration and social work education, a broader view

was taken: juveniles and families involved with the criminal justice system, social work roles within the criminal justice system, and evidence-based interventions used.

Social workers have taken a "hands off" approach to the legal system and issues surrounding it. A study by Madden, 2000, (as cited in Madden & Wayne, 2003), showed that "Because of the overwhelming scope of the law, as well as the unfamiliar language and culture, the social work profession has directed insufficient attention to the legal system" (Madden & Wayne, 2003, p. 339). Social workers need to understand and respond to the need their clients have to be educated and guided through their legal issues. They need to be ready to engage in building a partnership with and collaborating with all disciplines in the legal system, to best assist their clients to get the positive outcomes they desire. According to Wexler & Winick, 1996 (as cited in Madden & Wayne, 2003) "Therapeutic jurisprudence asks policy makers, judges, lawyers, and other legal actors to examine all the ways that the law affects individuals, families, and communities to evaluate the effects of the legal process,

and ultimately to improve legal outcomes" (Madden & Wayne, 2003, p. 340).

While "the literature suggests that youth's entry, exit, and prolonged involvement in the juvenile justice system are influenced by a host of *individual and social/environmental* factors beyond purely legal factors," social workers are resistant to and fearful of becoming knowledgeable and competent in issues regarding the legal system (Maschi, Smith Hatcher, Schwalbe, & Scotto Rosato, 2008, p. 1376). However, in order to effectively help their clients, they need to understand that the client's psych-social issues may be huge factors in the creation of their "run-ins" and interactions with the legal system in the first place. This calls to the table the social work profession and its "eroding emancipatory capacity" (Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009, p. 113). It indicts the Social Work profession and its seemingly "absent" status from youth delinquency, allowing it to be "someone else's problem." There remains a "paradoxical situation that social work is very active in different kinds of preventative practices within youth justice, on the one hand, while on the other hand it is not taking part in

the debate on how we 'construct' delinquent behavior"

(Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009, p. 123).

Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie (2009) approach how social workers need to take a more active role in the macro level of social work in the juvenile justice system, especially in regard to policy, however they stress that social workers cannot ignore how their ambivalence affects their ability to effectively and adequately assist clients who are in direct contact with the criminal justice system (Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009). The resistance to understanding the legal system, make it virtually impossible to help clients navigate through it, and because of the nonchalance, the social work profession is not keeping a pulse on how their lack of involvement leads to a shift in thinking and perspective about treating families involved with the justice system.

Juvenile violence statistics are still on the rise, however social workers are showing no interest in this population, as evidenced by the lack of research and data available. "The small number of articles on juvenile justice [and parental incarceration] found in the literature give the impression of sparse interest by social work" (Hughes, 2004, p. 65). Although stricter

juvenile justice laws are shifting focus away from rehabilitation and toward punishment and accountability, social workers lack of understanding about violence leads them to avoid this population.

Van Soest and Bryant concluded that the lack of initiative by social work to address the juvenile justice problem is due to its 'inadequate understanding of the concept of violence' (p. 550). They pointed out the need for the social work profession to educate itself as well as its students about all three levels of violence: individual, institutional, and structural cultural levels.

(Hughes, 2004, p. 65)

Therefore, the schools of Social Work need to add this topic to their curriculum.

The competing philosophies between social workers / human services workers and criminal justice / corrections remain a huge issue in service delivery.

Many practitioners who work with 'involuntary clients' have always had to acknowledge and attempt to balance 'their dual role as social controllers and helpers'. However...this balancing can prove very difficult to the extent that 'often workers and

organizations find it easier to focus on one of the roles to the exclusion of the other (p. 41).'

(Wimhurst & Allard, 2007, p. 438)

Ultimately, what students of social work and human services, are learning in school goes a long way in how they will approach their work in the field. These underlying tensions between the competing paradigms hinder the articulation and development of a positive set of skills and attributes...[and] although educators...may have confidence in their own values and ideological positions, 'trainees', in fact, remain uncertain...and hence, have difficulty developing an informed professional identity of their own. (Wimhurst & Allard, 2007, p. 438)

Ivanoff and Smith (1997) speak to the issue of preparing social workers to understand the specific needs of juveniles and families involved in the criminal justice system. Their focus was placed on the culture and perspective differences between corrections / law enforcement and social work. Social work has failed to respond to the challenge of meeting the needs of incarcerated individuals in recent years. The uneasy relationship and decreasing professional attention

between social work and criminal justice or correctional work may be attributed to several factors. (Ivanoff & Smith, 1997, p. 309)

Social workers need to be better trained, through their MSW programs, and equipped to work in a correctional setting, and social workers need to truly know their own worldview about those involved with the criminal justice system (e.g., whether they lean more toward rehabilitation or punishment) so that they are able to be most effective in assisting their clients un-biasedly. Although students come into their respective disciplines with a worldview and personal perspective on things, they cannot forget that they have taken an oath to do what is in the best interest of their clients, and have promised to do that without being biased toward their own worldviews.

Social workers have the opportunity for change even within an environment of strict limitations and restrictions. They have to be willing to look hard enough and reject their almost natural inclination to resist the correctional culture, in order to create the tremendous changes that can be facilitated both for their clients and within the facility as a whole. Because "social

workers are trained to study the effects of the environment" they are best suited for creating and implementing plans that can alter and change the environment and/or to help their client to find healthier coping skills (Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997, p. 350). Ultimately, "from their training and experience, social workers understand the importance of environment and significant others in the life of their clients" (Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997, p. 354).

Social work and other helping disciplines across the board have essentially ignored the true impact and importance of contextual factors on the development and life outcomes of clients (Beale-Spencer, 1997). What is not being considered by most authorities and decision makers is, "ongoing delinquency may reflect a failure of community-based social service interventions or alternatively may reflect the intensity of the social service needs that remain unmet" (Schwalbe, Smith Hatcher, & Maschi, 2009, p. 31). Social workers must increase their commitment to doing evidence-based practices in order to ensure "preventative promise of their interventions" (Schwalbe, Smith Hatcher, & Maschi, 2009, p. 39). Evidence-based interventions are not

absolutely fool-proof, however, studies show that when they are utilized there is more consistent success for clients, and time and energy are preserved. Second, practitioners need to develop more interventions and program through a "spirit for critical reflection and learning, a preparedness to adapt prescribed models of working to local needs and circumstances" (Prior, 2005, p. 109).

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

##### Ecological Theory and Developmental Theoretical Orientation

An ecological / developmental perspective have been used to approach the research focus in the context of the microsystem the parent-child relationship, the mesosystem and exosystems, the interrelations between the parent, child, family, etc. while in prison, including prison policies and reunification programming; and the macrosystem, the "overarching institutional patterns and cultural prototypes such as economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems" affecting the family system (Arditti, 2005, p. 252). It is only by taking this bio-psycho-social approach that it will truly be determined who is suffering and to what degree, so

that we can establish the severity of the social problem and, as a result, the need for stronger and more focused social work education to address it.

Beale-Spencer and Jones-Walker (2004) refer to developmental theoretical orientation and the use of the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) framework as a model to follow due to its attention to contextual factors, environment, and personal characteristics of the youth / family (Beale-Spencer & Jones-Walker, 2004). PVEST states that "across [the] life course, experiences in different cultural contexts (e.g., home, school, peer group, community) influence how one perceives oneself" (Beale-Spencer, 1997, p. 817). By combining ecological theory with PVEST "(i.e. how the individual perceives or makes sense of an experience)" social workers are able to more clearly evaluate the client's ability and potential for understanding the expectations that society has for them, based on stereotypes, biases, and preconceived notions, and "even those that they themselves endorse or fulfill (Gordon & Gergen, 1968)" (Beale-Spencer, 1997, p. 818). When parental incarceration is conceptualized using this theoretical orientation, social workers are

ensuring that important contextual factors are not left without consideration.

Using this orientation and theory, social work education has a formal foundational basis upon which to conceptualize the social issue of parental incarceration, and therefore, an evidenced-based theory from which to teach MSW graduate students. PVEST also encompasses the philosophy of the CSWE's mission to educate students, both at the BSW and MSW levels, to consider human diversity, cultural competence, and person in environment.

#### Summary

This chapter included a review of peer-reviewed research and literature about parental incarceration and its effects on the children and families involved. The literature defined the issue as a social problem, highlighted its victims as well as the short and long term effects experienced, recognized the call for policies that protect families and their right for reunification and family preservation, and examined the role of social workers and social work education in the criminal justice system and the implications for the

profession. Also included was the theoretical orientation and approach used to support this study, Ecological Systems Theory with an emphasis on Restorative Practices. Finally, the chapter explains the micro insights that can be attained for the social work profession regarding sensitivity and cultural competence, when working with children and families who are impacted by parental incarceration. It also prioritizes the importance of political advocacy for legislation that supports unbiased family preservation, as well as, social work education that prepares professionals in the field to intervene and fight parental incarceration, in its entirety.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

Chapter Three addresses the choice of study design and why this choice is best suited for the study. It also discusses the process by which the study participants were chosen and how the data was gathered. Finally, the chapter closes by outlining the procedures for data gathering, including how data was collected, recorded, and analyzed.

#### Study Design

This is a descriptive design aimed at assessing MSW students' knowledge of the psycho-social needs of children and families affected by parental incarceration. The variables under study include concentration of education / degree including whether they are pursuing a dual or single degree, years of work experience, social work courses offered in their MSW program related to parental incarceration, and where they believe their specific knowledge was attained (work, school, or life experiences). Differences in knowledge was examined both by foundational versus advanced years of study, as well

as the difference in knowledge among the three different schools of social work. Because limited research has been conducted to explore MSW student's knowledge in this area, implications for professional practice with this growing population, it is crucial to analyze their awareness of and familiarity in order to maintain CSWE's mission statement to advance the profession through a comprehensive and diverse education that is inclusive of disenfranchised and underserved populations.

#### Sampling

A non-probability method, specifically a purposive sample, was used to recruit participants from among three specific universities that offer a MSW program of study; California State University-Long Beach, and California State University-San Bernardino, and Loma Linda University. Purposive sampling was chosen due to "the unique position of the sample elements...who are particularly knowledgeable about the issues under investigation" (Schutt, 2008, p. 153). In order to be eligible for this study, participants must be enrolled one of the MSW programs being surveyed. All MSW students

are invited to participate regardless of year of study and/or full-time / part-time enrollment status.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The data was collected in the form of a self-administered electronic and paper surveys comprised of 36 questions designed to capture a comprehensive numerical picture of MSW curricula and their correlation with the knowledge MSW graduate students have regarding issues pertaining to parental incarceration. The *MSW Curriculum and Parental Incarceration Knowledge Survey* was developed by Harris (2010) and explored four areas: A. MSW Curriculum (10 questions), B. Knowledge of Parental Incarceration (17 questions), C. Socio-demographics (4 questions), and D. Educational Background (4 questions). The survey sought to explore whether the level of knowledge among MSW students (dependent variable) is correlated with whether or not the MSW programs they are enrolled in have curricula that address issues of parental incarceration, using independent variables such as courses offered, field practicum opportunities offered, specific year of study, and work and personal experiences related to social work

and incarceration. The demographic and survey variables for this study were chosen from among those commonly used in studies assessing social work students' knowledge on a range of topics, e.g., effectiveness of Child Welfare Systems (Phongprasert, 2010), self-mutilation (Whitney, 2004), and substance abuse among older adults (Smith, 2005), as well as the researcher's previous work with children in detention and children of incarcerated parents, as well as, what other clinical social workers and psychologists have shared as concerns.

While this study has the potential for determining the future need for additional and more specific research, it is limited by the sample pool and will not be inclusive of MSW programs across the country.

#### Procedures

Permission was attained from the directors of each of the specific universities being surveyed via both email and phone contact from the researcher. The following was articulated to each director: 1) research purpose, 2) assurance that the study was approved by CSUSB's IRB, 3) criteria for participation, 4) access instructions for the survey (e.g., survey monkey), and

5) assurance of communication regarding research results upon completion. The survey should have taken approximately 10 15 minutes of the participants' time.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were provided with an informed consent at the opening of the IRB approved, electronic survey via the internet, whereby their consent will be required prior to the survey beginning. The informed consent letter invited the research elements to participate on a completely voluntary basis with no potential for consequence should they elect not to, and will remain confidential.

#### Data Analysis

Univariate analyses (frequencies, percentages, means, and range) will be performed and reported for each the following variables: age, gender, ethnicity, school of attendance, discipline of bachelor's degree, discipline of additional master's degree, degree type/concentration, social work program status, and number of years of social work experience.

Bivariate analyses will be performed on each of the following independent variables with the dependent

variable, level of MSW student's knowledge: age, gender, ethnicity, school of attendance, discipline of bachelor's degree, discipline of additional master's degree, degree type/concentration, social work program status, and number of years of social work experience. A Pearson r statistic will be used to determine the strength of a linear relationship for each. However, the Pearson r statistic assumes that certain assumptions are met. If they are not, then the nonparametric statistical test, the Chi-square, will be employed and cross-tabulation tables of these relationships will be presented. This procedure will require that the researcher recode continuous variables into categorical variables, roughly based on each variable's quartile results or its median or mean score. Other recoding may also be required which, if this is the case, will be further discussed in chapter four.

### Summary

Chapter Three outlined the study design, including variables under study and rationale for the research. Sampling methods and criteria for eligible participants were also discussed. The plan for data collection, as

well as the rationale the for research instrument, are highlighted, including implications for future research. Procedures for conducting the study, such as participant recruitment and informed consent were discussed. The chapter closes with an overview of how the data will be analyzed, including measurement tests that were used and the exploration of what relationships exist between the dependent variable (level of student knowledge) and the many independent variables listed above, for the purposes of future studies.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Socio-demographic Characteristics

Socio-demographic data were collected from the respondents, such as current age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Additional background data were also collected that included the respondents' level of personal experience with incarceration, the type of bachelor's and master's degrees they have earned, their status in their MSW program, the type of MSW degree they are currently earning (e.g., single MSW vs. dual MSW degree with another degree), and the extent of respondents' social work experience (including their internship/field experience).

The demographic of respondents (N = 81) who participated in the survey are exhibited in Table 1. Eighty-one social work students, at all levels / status' within their respective MSW programs, were surveyed from within California State University, Long Beach; California State University, San Bernardino; and Loma Linda University. Respondents ranged in age from 22 years and 59 years, with the mean age being approximately 35

years. While both male and female students were surveyed, the majority of respondents were female (n = 66) 94.3%), while male respondents (n = 4) only accounted for 5.7%.

Of those surveyed, the majority of respondents identified themselves as Hispanic / Latino (n = 31, 44.9%) or Caucasian (n = 20, 29.0%), followed by African-American / Black (n = 10. 14.5%), Asian / Pacific Islander (n = 1, 1.4%), and "Other" comprised of those who identified as Italian, Dutch, Nigerian, and having multiple ethnicities (n = 7, 10.7%). The majority of the respondents indicated that they had no personal experience with parental incarceration (n = 32, 45.7%), and 23 respondents identified themselves as a friend of an incarcerated individual (32.9%). The remaining respondents (n = 22, 31.4%), had the most direct personal experience, being either directly incarcerated, having an immediate family member incarcerated or being a caretaker of a child affected by parental incarceration.

Furthermore, the respondents were surveyed about their educational demographics, specific to type of bachelor's degree, type of MSW degree, their status in the MSW program, and years of social work experience. The majority of respondents indicate that they earned a

bachelor's degree in either psychology (n = social work (n = 22, 31.4%), followed by sociology (n = 9, 12.9%), behavioral studies (n = 4, 5.7%), human services (n = 2, 2.9%), and "other" comprised of criminal justice, child development, business administration, political science, and French. At the master's level, the respondents indicated they are pursuing their Master of Social Work (MSW) degree in the following areas: 52.9% of respondents (n = 37) are pursuing a single MSW general degree, 8.6% of respondents (n = 6) are pursuing a single MSW Title IV-E degree, 27.1% of respondents (n = 19) are pursuing a single MSW with a declared area of specialization ("other"), 1.4% of respondents (n = 1) are pursuing a dual MSW/gerontology degree, 7.1% of respondents (n = 5) are pursuing a dual MSW/criminal justice degree, and 2.9% of respondents (n = 2) are pursuing a dual MSW degree with an unspecified second degree. The respondents were surveyed using snowball sampling from among all levels of MSW study. The majority of respondents (n = 45, 65.2%) indicated that they are participants in the 2 year/Full Time program, while 33.3% of respondents (n = 23) indicated they were participating in the 3 year/ PT

program. One respondent (1.4%) indicated that they were a participant in an Advanced Standing program.

Table 1. Socio- Demographics of Respondents (N = 70)

Variable	n	%
Age	^69	
22-29	35	50.7
30-39	16	23.2
40 +	18	26.1
Gender	70	
Male	4	5.7
Female	66	94.3
Ethnicity	^69	
African-American / Black	10	14.5
Asian / Pacific Islander	1	1.4
Hispanic / Latino	31	44.9
Caucasian	20	29.0
Other	7	10.1
Level of Personal Experience	70	
Direct Incarceration	1	1.4
Child of Incarcerated Parent	7	10
Sibling / parent of incarcerated individual	8	11.4
Caretaker of child affected by Parent Incarceration	6	8.6
Friend of Incarcerated Individual	23	32.9
No Personal Experience	32	45.7
Type of Bachelor's Degree	70	
Social Work	22	31.4
Psychology	26	37.1
Sociology	9	12.9
Human Services	2	2.9
Behavioral Studies	4	5.7
Other	8	11.4
Type of MSW Degree	70	
Single: MSW General	37	52.9
Single: MSW Title IV	6	8.6
Single: MSW Other	19	27.1
Dual: MSW/Gerontology	1	1.4
Dual: MSW/Criminal Justice	5	7.1
Dual: MSW/Other	2	2.9

Variable	n	%
Status in MSW Program	^69	
3 yr./PT - 1 <sup>st</sup> Yr.	1	1.4
3 yr./PT - 2 <sup>nd</sup> Yr.	7	10.0
3 yr./PT - 3 <sup>rd</sup> Yr.	15	21.4
2 yr./FT - 1 <sup>st</sup> Yr.	20	28.6
2 yr./FT - 2 <sup>nd</sup> Yr.	25	35.7
Other	1	1.4
Years of Social Work Experience	70	
None	1	1.4
Under 2	28	40.0
3-5	26	37.1
6-9	11	15.7
10+	4	5.7

^Contained Missing Data

#### Knowledge Scale Characteristics

Table 2 displays the characteristics of the knowledge scale utilized in this exploratory study. The dependent variable was a 10-point scale that measured knowledge of parental incarceration (i.e., history of juvenile justice and child welfare systems, social policy and legislation, incarceration statistics, and the role of social workers with incarcerated populations). Each correct answer on each item was coded as a "1" and each incorrect answer and the answer option "Don't Know / Unsure" were coded as a "0." A maximum total of 10 points was possible, as was a minimum score of zero.

To ensure that parametric tests could be performed, a kurtosis and skewness tests were performed on the dependent variables. Some positive skewness was observed, however both tests produced statistics that provided evidence that the assumption of normality was adequately met.

The knowledge scale had a possible range of 0-10; 0 indicating no knowledge and 10 indicating a very high level of knowledge. There was an observed range of 0-6. The average mean score was 1.80 with a standard deviation of 1.47.

Table 2. Knowledge Scale Characteristics of Respondents  
(N = 70)

Instrument	Possible Range	Observed Range	M	SD
Knowledge	1-10	0-6	1.80	1.47

#### Correlation of Attitude/Perception of Competency with Knowledge

Table 3 reveals the results of a Pearson r correlation coefficient ran to assess for the linear relationship between MSW student's attitude/perceptions of their level of competence about parental incarceration

and their actual level of knowledge ( $r = .359^{**}$ ,  $p = .002$ ) suggesting that attitude/ perception of competence was correlated with their actual level of knowledge.

Table 3. Correlation between Attitude/Perception of Competency and Knowledge ( $N = 70$ )

		Parental Incarceration Knowledge	Perceptions of Parental Incarceration Knowledge
Parental Incarceration Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	1	.359**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	82	70
Perceptions of Parental Incarceration Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	.359**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	70	70

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### Correlation of Level of Knowledge with Age, Gender, Degree, and Years of Experience

Pearson  $r$  correlation coefficient was performed to assess for difference in knowledge by age - no statistically significant differences were found. An independent  $t$ -test was performed to assess for differences in knowledge by gender. There was a statistically significant difference in the scores for

male ( $M = .7500$ ,  $SD = .957$ ) and female ( $M = 2.197$ ,  $SD = 1.350$ );  $t(68) = -2.105$ ,  $p < .039$ , with women receiving higher levels of knowledge.

Table 4. Differences in Gender ( $N = 70$ )

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Parental Incarceration Knowledge	Male	4	.7500	.95743	.47871
	Female	66	2.1970	1.34987	.16616

Table 5. Result of t-Test for Parental Incarceration Knowledge by Gender ( $N = 70$ )

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Knowledge Scale Equal Variances Assumed	.566	.455	-2.105	68	.039	-1.44697	.68742	-2.81870	-.07524

A one-way ANOVA test was performed to assess for mean differences in knowledge by the type of bachelor's degree held by the respondents. No statistically significant difference was found. A one-way ANOVA test was performed to assess for mean differences in knowledge by the number of years of social work experience, which included internship, as well as status within the MSW program. No statistically significant difference was found.

#### Summary

Univariate statistics were performed for each variable to describe the sample. Different types of bivariate statistics were also generated. A Pearson r correlation coefficient was performed to assess for a linear relationship between the two variables, respondent age and knowledge; an independent t-test was used to assess for differences in knowledge by gender; and, one-way ANOVA tests were performed to assess for differences in mean knowledge scores between three or more groups, respondents with different years of social work experience and types of bachelor's degree earned.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

Mass incarceration has had significant and long-lasting impacts on American society, and particularly on communities of color. There is now a growing awareness that parents who go to prison do not suffer the consequences alone; the children of incarcerated parents often lose contact with their parent and visits are sometimes rare. (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009, p. 1)

Most of the law enforcement and child welfare agencies have little, or no, training or policies in place that prepare them to place children when a parent is arrested, and possibly incarcerated (Bouchet, 2008, p. 4). Although the N.A.S.W. Code of Ethics calls for social workers to serve "the vulnerable, the oppressed, and those living in poverty" the incarcerated population and their affected children and families remain "invisible," not only within politics and greater society, but within the social work profession, as well (National Association of Social Work Assembly, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to explore the level of familiarity with and knowledge about parental incarceration among MSW students within all status levels and degree types (i.e., single and dual), at California State University, Long Beach; California State University, San Bernardino; and Loma Linda University. Familiarity and level of perceived competence included both personal and work experience. It also explored the level of familiarity and attention given to this population by the Schools of Social Work, due to their commitment to adhere to the CSWE's mission. This study was intent on exploring reasons for the unserved and underserved status of this population, while beginning to build awareness within the social work profession and academia in order to erase the "invisible" status from this population.

#### Summary of Findings

The respondents ranged in age from 22-59 year, with the largest group falling between 22-29 years old. As anticipated, female respondents greatly outweighed the male respondents, who were only 5.7% of the sample, which is widely representative of the social field, in general.

74% of respondents indicated that they were either Hispanic/Latino or Caucasian, with the remaining respondents (26%) identifying as African-American, Asian, or "Other" (i.e., multi-ethnic, Italian, Nigerian, Dutch).

The CSWE's mission states that its affiliated schools "promote and strengthen the quality of social work education through preparation of competent social work professionals" (Council on Social Work Education, 2010). However, the results and findings from this exploratory study are impenetrable, due to the insight they provide. The results point to a lack of knowledge among the majority of MSW students, regardless of program status or experience. Respondents indicated that their schools offered very few classes focused on issues related to parental incarceration, restorative justice, and social policy and incarceration. However, there was a positive correlation between higher attitudes / perceptions of competence and level of knowledge. This is to say, those students who assessed themselves as being familiar with and knowledgeable about issues related to parental incarceration, proved to be more knowledgeable than those who did not.

Respondents were assessed for levels of knowledge, using a 10-point scale. The questions included topics such as history of juvenile justice and child welfare systems, social policy and legislation, incarceration statistics, and the role of social workers with incarcerated populations. A serious deficiency of knowledge was discovered, with no respondents scoring higher than 6, and 24.4% (n = 20) getting no answers correct.

The fact that 88% of the MSW student respondents scored a 3 or less concurs with Bouchet (2008) who says that treating and serving "children and families with incarcerated parents is difficult because the population is 'invisible'" (Bouchet, 2008, p. 7). We just don't know anything about the issues that impact and impair them.

While many tests were run to assess correlation of several factors (i.e., age, type of degrees, program status) with level of knowledge, only one proved to have a statistically significant difference; gender. It was found that women received much higher scores on the knowledge scale than men. For consideration of future studies, it may be important to make efforts to be inclusive of a higher number of male respondents. However,

due to the disparity of males in the social work profession, those efforts might require an oversampling in order to get an equal sample of respondents.

The lack of evidence identifying specific reasons for the seriously low level of familiarity and knowledge among MSW students, as well as the literature stating the lack of supportive resources and legislation for this population are alarming. This information indicates that incarcerated individuals and their affected families have not been defined as a "special population."

The problem is worsened by the fact that many individuals with special needs are dispersed among the general population and their needs not recognized and planned for unless they self-identify and state their requirements...Some people also hesitate to voice their needs for fear of being stigmatized or singled out for special treatment which can be embarrassing for them. (Vogt Sorensen, 2006, p. 2)

This appears to strongly suggest the need for a stonger political and legislative focus toward defining these individuals and families as a "special need" population. It also demonstrates an imminent need for a solid

academic focus within our social work curricula, including field internship placements.

### Limitations

Although this exploratory study presents with a number of limitations, they should not be allowed to weaken the importance of this distinct investigation which examines the perceived competence with and level of knowledge among MSW student about parental incarceration. Because of the small sample size ( $N = 82$ ) of MSW students from three schools of social work, and due to only 70 respondents completing their surveys, the result from this study may not be generalized to any other population of MSW students. Limitations of reliability and validity may also exist due to the research instrument being developed by the researcher. As previously mentioned, there was an overrepresentation of women within the sample (94.3%), as compared to males (5.7%), which is not atypical for the social work profession or the schools that provide social work education. Even so, this study can be a monumental first step in raising awareness about this social problem, and its impact on the lives of "over 1.7 million children in America with a parent in prison"

(Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009, p. 1). It can also serve to facilitate action and response for future studies to support the need for the inclusion of social work curricula that addresses the psychosocial needs and treatment of incarcerated populations and their families.

#### Implications for Future Research and Social Work Practice

Currently, there is a severe lack of research and data available regarding this special population and the social problem that creates their plight. Very few data sources exist, primarily due to, "the U.S. criminal justice system traditionally not considering inmates' familial relationships, poor communication among prisons, child welfare agencies, and other social service entities, and the stigma and implications associated with incarceration (for parents, children, and caregivers)" (Bouchet, 2008, p. 7). It is imperative that further studies be implemented in order to gain more insight and knowledge among MSW students, practicing social workers and educators, and those in power at the legislative levels.

Finding from this study show that future social workers are significantly unprepared to realistically and

effectively address this social problem. In order to address and better serve this population, social work students need to be trained and prepared to properly utilize psychosocial assessments to identify those impacted by issues of incarceration, followed with utilization of treatment modalities and interventions appropriate to meet the needs of these clients. Therefore, the evidence for schools of social work to respond to the call for increased focus to improve knowledge and awareness among their students has been provided.

### Conclusions

This study has lent itself to establish evidence of the possibility that a lack of knowledge exists about the issue of parental incarceration and the people affected by it. This lack of knowledge exists among greater society, law enforcement and social welfare agencies, educators and students...everyone except those affected by it. What this implies is, incarcerated individuals and their families are "invisible", and if they continue to be ignored, will rapidly become the newest underclass. Social workers are dedicated and committed to serving

populations that fit this description. Therefore, this study has provided a beginning foundation upon which to build future studies and research that can lead to improved services and attention for this group.

APPENDIX A  
SURVEY / QUESTIONNAIRE

## MSW Curriculum and Parental Incarceration Knowledge Survey

### A. MSW Curriculum (10 questions)

Circle one number for each question.

1. Indicate which MSW graduate program that you are currently enrolled in:
  - 1 - California State University, Fullerton
  - 2 - California State University, Long Beach
  - 3 - California State University, San Bernardino
  - 4 - Azusa Pacific University
  - 5 - Loma Linda University
  - 6 - University of Southern California
  
2. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to criminal justice?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure
  
3. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to parental incarceration?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure
  
4. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to restorative practices?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure

5. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to family group conferencing?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure
  
6. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to social work and incarcerated populations?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure
  
7. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to social work roles in the criminal justice system?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure
  
8. How many classes are offered in the course of your MSW graduate degree program that specifically include curriculum related to impacts of parental incarceration?
  - 1 - 0
  - 2 - 1-4
  - 3 - 5-8
  - 4 - 8 or more
  - 5 - Not familiar with this topic
  - 6 - Don't Know / Not Sure

**Please carefully read each of the following statements and, using the scale below, circle the number that most closely represents your level of knowledge. Circle one number for each question.**

1. - Strongly Disagree
2. - Disagree
3. - Neutral / Undecided
4. - Agree
5. - Strongly Agree

9. My MSW program considers parental incarceration a social problem that requires special attention evidenced by the priority it's given (e.g. related classes offered, issue discussed in classroom settings, familiarity with population among instructors, etc.) within our curriculum.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Neutral / Undecided
- 4 - Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

10. My MSW program considers parental incarceration a social problem that requires special attention evidenced by the consideration it's given within our field practice options.

1. - Strongly Disagree
2. - Disagree
3. - Neutral / Undecided
4. - Agree
5. - Strongly Agree

**B. Knowledge of Parental Incarceration (17 questions)**

**Please carefully read each of the following statements and, using the scale below, circle the number that most closely represents your level of knowledge. Circle one number for each question.**

- 1. - Strongly Disagree**
- 2. - Disagree**
- 3. - Neutral / Undecided**
- 4. - Agree**
- 5. - Strongly Agree**

11. I feel competent in my ability to clearly identify the psycho-social needs among children and families affected by parental incarceration.
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 3 - Neutral / Undecided
  - 4 - Agree
  - 5 - Strongly Agree
12. I am familiar with the services and programs offered as part of Family Reunification.
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 3 - Neutral / Undecided
  - 4 - Agree
  - 5 - Strongly Agree
13. I am familiar with the relationship between incarceration and parental rights.
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 3 - Neutral / Undecided
  - 4 - Agree
  - 5 - Strongly Agree
14. I feel competent in my ability to clearly articulate and educate children and families affected by parental incarceration about the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and its timeframes concerning parental rights and incarceration?
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 3 - Neutral / Undecided
  - 4 - Agree
  - 5 - Strongly Agree

15. I feel competent in my ability to clearly articulate and educate children and families affected by parental incarceration using restorative justice practices and interventions.
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 3 - Neutral / Undecided
  - 4 - Agree
  - 5 - Strongly Agree
16. I am familiar with advocacy efforts that support children and families affected by parental incarceration, such as the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents and the Anne Casey Foundation.
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 3 - Neutral / Undecided
  - 4 - Agree
  - 5 - Strongly Agree

**Please answer the following questions by circling one number for each answer.**

17. The juvenile justice system was founded by Jane Addams.
- 1 - True
  - 2 - False
18. "Child savers" are a current group who advocate for family preservation.
- 1 - True
  - 2 - False
19. The children of parents who are incarcerated must be assessed and treated for bereavement issues.
- 1 - True
  - 2 - False
20. There is no specific social policy or legislation that applies directly to dealing with or caring for children of incarcerated parents.
- 1 - True
  - 2 - False
21. Research shows that social workers are scared and uncomfortable working in maximum security settings.
- 1 - True
  - 2 - False

22. The number of incarcerated mothers has increased \_\_\_\_\_% between 1991 to 2007.
- 1 - 122%
  - 2 - 67%
  - 3 - 888%
  - 4 - 92%
  - 5 - Don't Know / Unsure
23. In 2005, of the 1.4 million people incarcerated in the state and federal prisons, \_\_\_\_\_% were parents?
- 1 - 25%
  - 2 - 45%
  - 3 - 55%
  - 4 - 75%
  - 5 - Don't Know / Unsure
24. Research shows that social workers are the best suited and trained, among the helping professions, to work in the correctional setting due to:
- 1 - their dedication to the NASW Code of Ethics
  - 2 - their ability to do research that highlights implications for social work
  - 3 - their holistic approach to treatment
  - 4 - their nurturing approach to treatment
  - 5 - Don't know / Unsure
25. How many states within the U.S. have statutes in place regarding incarcerated mothers and their children?
- 1 - 5 states
  - 2 - 22 states
  - 3 - 52 states
  - 4 - 48 states
  - 5 - Don't Know / Unsure

26. The Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997, mandates:
- 1 - a lifetime ban on cash assistance and food stamps for people convicted of drug offenses
  - 2 - a background and fingerprint verification of all individuals who have contact with children whose parents are incarcerated
  - 3 - all workers for the Department of Child and Family Service agencies to maintain visitation and case updates to all incarcerated parents regarding their children
  - 4 - the termination of parental rights when a child has been living under foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months
  - 5 - Don't know / Unsure
27. Overall, where did you knowledge about parental incarceration come from? Please choose one:
- 1 - MSW Curriculum
  - 2 - MSW Field Placement
  - 3 - Work Experience
  - 4 - Personal Life Experience
  - 5 - Undergraduate Curriculum (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  - 6 - Additional Master's Curriculum (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  - 7 - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**C. Socio-Demographics (4 questions)**

**Circle one number for each question.**

28. Please state your current age:

\_\_\_\_\_

29. Please indicate your gender:

- 1 - Male
- 2 - Female
- 3 - Other

30. Please indicate your ethnicity:

- 1 - African-American / Black
- 2 - Asian / Pacific Islander
- 3 - Hispanic / Latino
- 4 - Caucasian
- 5 - Native American
- 6 - Other: (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

31. Please indicate your level of personal experience with incarceration:

- 1 - directly incarcerated
- 2 - child of an incarcerated parent
- 3 - sibling or parent of incarcerated individual
- 4 - caretaker of child affected by parental incarceration
- 5 - friend of incarcerated individual
- 6 - No personal experience with incarceration

**D. Educational Background (4 questions)**

Please circle all the apply for each question.

32. Please indicate discipline(s) of Bachelor's Degree

- 1 - Social Work
- 2 - Psychology
- 3 - Sociology
- 4 - Human Services
- 5 - Behavioral Studies
- 6 - Other: (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

33. Please indicate discipline(s) of additional Master's Degree

- 1 - None
- 2 - Social Work
- 3 - Psychology
- 4 - Sociology
- 5 - Human Services
- 6 - Behavioral Studies
- 7 - Other: (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

34. Please indicate social work program status

- 1 - 3 yr Part-Time / 1st yr.
- 2 - 3 yr Part-Time / 2nd yr.
- 3 - 3 yr Part-Time / 3rd yr.
- 4 - 2 yr Full-Time / 1st yr.
- 5 - 2 yr Full-Time / 2nd yr.
- 6 - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

35. Please indicate your degree type and concentration:

- 1 - Single Degree: MSW (Generalist)
- 2 - Single Degree: MSW (Title IV-E and/or Child Welfare)
- 3 - Single Degree: MSW (Other: \_\_\_\_\_)
- 4 - Dual Degree: MSW / Gerontology
- 5 - Dual Degree: MSW / Criminal Justice
- 6 - Dual Degree: MSW / Other: \_\_\_\_\_

36. Please indicate your number of years of social work experience (including internship / field experience):

- 1 - None
- 2 - Under 2 yrs.
- 3 - 3-5 yrs.
- 4 - 6-9 yrs.
- 5 - 10+ yrs.

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant –

I am writing to invite you to add your insight to an exploratory study about the level of knowledge among MSW graduate students regarding parental incarceration. This study is being conducted for the purposes of my Masters of Social Work thesis, and will be under the supervision of Herb Shon, L.C.S.W., Ph.D. The results will be conveyed to the participating universities via the directors of the MSW graduate programs. The study has been approved by the social work sub-committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval #SW1107).

From 1986 to 1997, the number of incarcerated parents in both the State and Federal prison systems has more than doubled, resulting in more than 550,000 incarcerated parents. The purpose of this study is to explore the level of knowledge among MSW graduate students regarding parental incarceration in order identify possible relationships between variables for future studies. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey. This survey is expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes of your time, and your decision to participate is completely voluntary, with no consequences if you choose to decline or withdrawal at any time. Because this study seeks to explore student knowledge, it is requested that all answers given are based on actual current knowledge rather than random guessing. Therefore, if you do not believe that you know an answer, please indicate that by choosing “don’t know / not sure.”

This survey entails no foreseen risks. Although the benefits of this study do not directly impact you, the hope is that the results will help MSW educators to become more aware of the needs related to this topic. The survey is completely confidential and no record will be made or saved that might be used to positively identify you as a participant. The anonymous surveys will only be seen by the researchers, and results will be conveyed in group form only.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study you may contact Dr. Herb Shon by phone at (909)537-5532 or by E-mail: hshon@csusb.edu, and Dr. Rosemary McCaslin by phone at (909)537-5507 and by E-mail: rmccasli@csusb.edu.

By checking the box, you are indicating that you fully understand and have been informed regarding this study and agree to voluntarily participate accordingly.

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this survey. The survey you just completed was an exploration of the knowledge MSW graduate students have regarding issues pertaining to parental incarceration. It was conducted for the purposes of my Masters of Social Work thesis, and being done be under the supervision of Herb Shon, L.C.S.W., Ph.D. The results will be conveyed to the participating universities via the directors of the MSW graduate programs.

Your opinions are invaluable to the furthering of the social work profession and the work that needs to be done with victims of parental incarceration. If you are interested in general information and/or have any questions about current services and/or programs available for victims of parental incarceration you can visit the following websites:

1. CCIP: The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents: [www.e-ccip.org](http://www.e-ccip.org)
2. The Family and Corrections Network (FCN): <http://www.fcnetwork.org/>
3. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA): <http://www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated/>

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