

**Episode 192 - Dr. Caroline Long Burry: "No One Asked About My Children":
Voices of Incarcerated Mothers**

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hello I'm Charles Syms and this is in social work. A report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that from 1991 to 2007 the number of parents in federal and state prisons rose by 79 percent and the percentage of children of incarcerated parents increased by 80 percent. During the same time period the number of incarcerated mothers increased by a startling 131 percent. It is well known that the results of their mother's incarceration can have a significantly adverse impact on children. They are at risk for a number of problems including bonding and attachment issues mental health and substance abuse problems academic troubles negative externalizing behaviors out-of-home placement incarceration and poverty. However while we know a good deal about what happens to children much less is known about the experience of their incarcerated mothers to better understand them our guest for this podcast engaged incarcerated women for a qualitative inquiry. Dr Caroline Long Burry is an associate professor and chair of the families and children's specialization at the School of Social Work University of Maryland. Dr. Burry received her MSW from the University of Georgia and her Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. In addition to university faculty her career includes working in adoption child protective services and foster care.

[00:02:21] She has also been a therapeutic foster parent. Among Dr. Burry's current teaching and research interest are adoption foster care evidence informed practices and child welfare parental incarceration and prenatal substance exposure in the United States Little work has been conducted to appreciate the experiences of the growing population of mothers who are incarcerated. In this podcast Dr. Burry discusses a pilot study she conducted with these parents with the hope of learning more about their parenting experiences. Specifically Dr. Burry wanted to better understand how the mothers plan for the care of their children as well as contact and parenting challenges. Also explored were the mothers attempts to negotiate the criminal justice system while in their role as parents and experience from which the title is drawn. Nobody asked me about my children Dr. Burry describes why this subject is so important to social work. And she provides a context for how social workers should think about responding to the needs of this vulnerable group. Dr. Burry was interviewed by Dr. Patricia Logan Greene in March of 2016. Dr. Logan Greene is an associate professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. So tell us about your current research project. Well I conducted a small pilot qualitative study with mothers who were incarcerated in a local county detention center and that particular focus was on their parenting experiences. I really wanted to know how they plan for the care of their children during their incarceration. What contact they had with their children during their incarceration and whether that care plan changed during the time they were incarcerated. What sparked your interest in that topic.

[00:04:25] Well as a child welfare person I'm really aware as we are that there are many risk factors for children who have incarcerated parents and this risk factors are found in many areas of the children's lives. Educational problems behavioral problems both the externalising and they internalizing behaviors a higher risk for future incarceration themselves and a very high rate of entering foster care. And I was particularly concerned about the foster care risk and as I mentioned my interest in particular was learning more about the what I think of as the front end of incarceration for mothers. That is how did they plan for their children's care during incarceration. So what this particular project was that research question you were hoping to address or were there other things you wanted to discover with this. Well I was looking to begin in a tiny way to fill in

some of the gaps of our knowledge. And so my research questions since it was qualitative research were pretty open ended. Looking to have the mothers themselves. Tell me about their children about their experiences with the criminal justice system from arrest through their incarceration and have a plan for the care of their children. Now most of the research in this area in the U.S. so far has been retrospective. That is the focus has been looking on children already in care and looking backwards. To find out more about their family situations and often discovering that they were children of incarcerated parents.

[00:06:32] Also there's a lot of research with adult prisoners or former prisoners finding an intergenerational pattern that is they themselves had parents who had been in the criminal justice system but there really wasn't very much in the US literature starting again at the front end with prospective research starting at incarceration of parents and my study mothers and following them to the incarceration. So how does the social work issue. It's an enormous work issue because more than two and a half million children in the U.S. currently have a parent incarcerated. And it's almost three times that many children in the U.S. If you look at children who have parents anywhere in the criminal justice system that is probation parole community commitment of any kind and incarceration. So wherever we're working or for those of us who teach for wherever our students are in placement or will be working we're going to be working with some children or youngsters or adolescents who have incarcerated parents whether or not we're even in the child welfare or correctional areas of practice. So what did you do for this research project. Well I was very fortunate to be able to meet with Katherine Flann at a conference a couple of years ago and she is on the faculty at Monash University in Australia and has it turns out done extensive research with both mothers and fathers who are incarcerated in Australia with a focus on how they planned for their children's care. And I noted that there really wasn't much at all in the US litterers or to compare or certainly know more about the US population. So she very generously agreed to let me use her instruments.

[00:08:58] So what we did was conduct a small pilot application a part of her research and the way my research team was myself and my MSW graduate assistant Joanna Hurwitz who was invaluable and also to me and also I think learned a lot as did I during the project. You create humans in your sample. How did you recruit them and tell us about them. It is very interesting as I mentioned we went to a county detention center and we recruited through flyers and word of mouth mothers who had been primary caregivers of at least one of their minor children and we wanted to talk with them early in incarceration. So there was a requirement that they be have been incarcerated within the last 30 days. And we also required that they had at least six months to serve so that we would have a window to follow them in Maryland. And I think in many states local detention centers tend to be shorter term perhaps up to a year is typical and state facilities tend to be for longer term sentences. So a lot of our potential sample did not have longer enough sentences to serve in order to be a part of the study. And I can tell you a little bit about the moms who were in our study. All the women in our study and there were five in the small pilot self identified as white or Caucasian and they were between 26 and 36 years old. Lots of interesting other information emerged about them all but one had been incarcerated at least one other time previously. None was still romantically involved with the father of her children at the time we interviewed them. Two out of the five.

[00:11:19] And this was a distressing finding two out of the five reported that the fathers of their children were also incarcerated at the same time which we know is not unusual but again in our very small sample that was a bit of a surprise and a couple more things at the time we did the interviews the moms had 10 children between them and all of those children were living with relatives. So even though we have certainly percentage that is higher than otherwise expected of children with incarcerated parents being in foster care that was not the case in our study and I can speculate a little bit about why that is perhaps at another point. And finally all of our participants indicated that their convictions were for nonviolent crimes all related to substance abuse and those

who are charged with such as possession or intent to distribute or theft. But again even theft related to their substance use. So how did you interview them. Well we had a strangely helpful cooperation from the detention center and after the moms had consented to the study we had the opportunity to interview them in a private interview room. These are rooms that are generally used for the inmates to meet with their attorneys or counselors or other situations in which they need a privacy. So we appreciated that and all the interviews were open ended. In terms of we had the questions but allowed the moms to talk as long as they would like to add information. So we met with them in private rooms at the detention center on the average for about two hours for each interview. And what was your analysis plan with this data. Well because it was qualitative or primarily qualitative. We took the responses from the 70s start to interview questions and used in InVivo software.

[00:13:56] After we had done transcripts and then coded and took the notes from the coding down in number from sort of a first run through into it there were two of us. We also coded separately and then did an analysis to make sure that we were reliable between our Codings. I should mention there was also one quantitative piece The Australian researcher I mentioned Catherine Flann uses an instrument called the strengths and difficulties questionnaire with her participants and so we're used to that with our moms as well. And then just analyzed that pretty straightforwardly and used the strengths and difficulties. Question There is an instrument that the completed themselves and all of our moms were literate so they were able to complete it completely its age based so they completed the instrument that met the age of their. They talked about one child. So they answered the questionnaire about their children's hence the name of the questionnaire strengths and their difficulties with regard to behavior. For older youngsters with regard to school and with younger children with regard to behavior around adults and other children. So we had a large qualitative piece and a small quantitative piece. So what did you learn overall. Well I really ended up or we really ended up distilling the entire story down to a brief quote from one of the mothers. And that quote is No one asked about my children. And as I said that really distilled our primary finding that is that the moms in our study believed very strongly that overall systems with which they worked did not attend to them and in their relatives moms and even more so did not attend to the needs of their children.

[00:16:26] During the separation I'm really want to emphasize that all of the mothers in this study accepted responsibility for their actions did not focus or dwell on any ducking of responsibility about their criminal behavior but rather did focus on given that they were likely to be separated from their children that they wanted and wish they'd had different opportunities from the time of arrest onward to have the experience to be not as traumatic as it turned out to be for the children. And then the separation not to be as sharp as it was during their time in the detention center. So going a little bit more in depth. What did you learn from them for example about planning for their children's care. Well interestingly most of the moms had a pretty good idea that they were going to be arrested at some point. That is they knew that they had been investigated or they had been questioned or they knew that someone else had been arrested for the same crime. So they did have the opportunity to think about where their children might go if they were or when they were arrested. Three of the five were actually arrested in the presence of their children and that was traumatic as described by the moms and I think I'm comfortable in saying accurately so I think to have those three arrests were at night so things were a little more chaotic and loud some of the things that the moms said actually are probably the very best way of talking about planning for their children's care. So for instance a quote from one mom was I knew I was going to be arrested before I actually got arrested.

[00:18:50] So I gave them that as my children to their grandparents ahead of time to get them used to it so I could kind of ease out of the picture. So they didn't wake up one day and I'm gone. So that was a mom who anticipating her arrest was able proactively to make a plan for her children. Other moms talked about having to really beg the arresting officer to let them call someone that had made

a plan for their children. And as I said in several cases children were right there and they were able to do that. But interestingly and again going back to that overall quote even when their children were right there the moms across the board said that they weren't asked about their whole trend. They had to ask the arresting officers. Can I call my sister or mother or neighbor to take the children. So what did they say in terms of the benefits and their concerns about their children's care when they got arrested across the board. I would say that they were distressed about having to be separated from their children but generally pleased with the care of the children were receiving and with the fact that the children were with family members rather than with foster parents or others who would be unknown to them. One mom said of her daughter I'm happy she's with my family and that she's not somewhere with complete strangers. And that was a fear expressed across all the moms was that the children would have ended up in foster care now.

[00:20:55] I'll certainly say as someone who's worked in foster care and been a foster parent that absolutely foster care is an important part of the array of services that we offer in terms of providing safe and nurturing homes for children who can't be in their own homes. However given that these children were not previously in the child welfare system rather living with their mothers at the time of arrest the idea that they could live with relatives rather than go into care was really really important to the moms in our study. Were they able to maintain contact with their children to some degree. And that was one of the other really interesting areas of findings from this study. That is because they were with relatives and communication from the detention center is not surprisingly controlled access to telephones is controlled. Calls have to be made collect and visiting was restricted. The moms were not satisfied with the amount of contact that they had both because of limitations at the facility and because their relatives who were keeping their children were not always very open to maintaining contact between the moms and their children. What about custody issues along with concerns about foster care or the potential for foster care custody issues were of great concern to these moms. Whether that was and specifically what I mean is fears about losing custody of their children due to their incarceration. Now again they were in a county detention center. So sentences were going to be typically a year or less. But that's a long time in the life of a child. On the other hand these were moms who'd been parenting their children on a daily basis prior to their incarceration.

[00:23:28] So the direct link between their being incarcerated and potentially losing custody because of that was a huge huge concern and that was whether custody might go to their children's fathers or to the grandparents on either side who were on one case great grandparents who were parenting with children in their mom's absence was a huge worry. And I think that was compounded and confounded by the fact that they were prevented from having as much contact as they would have liked with their children. For instance one mom said on paper if you say I've only seen my child once in the past six months it looks really bad for me. But the issue is that's all that she's been allowed to see me by my parents. So even though I have regular phone calls with her and we write back and forth. If my child's grandparents went for custody and said oh well she's only seen her mom once that she's been incarcerated that my way very heavily in a judge's opinion ending her quote or paraphrasing her quote there I'll say that really makes sense that there's a difference between choosing not to be involved and be precluded I'll say the moms again I said they took responsibility for their incarcerations and their crimes. So they also took responsibility for the fact that it was their quote unquote fault that they were separated from their children but not having as much contact as they would like. And at least from their perspective as their children would have liked during their incarceration really challenging really hurtful were they able to parent at all from prison. Well they certainly tried and that involved a variety of different techniques and strategies.

[00:25:52] Many of the children were school aged and moms who had school aged children talked a lot about talking with their children about homework about report cards about their friendships at school and the whole school experience. This detention center also had a really great little program

in which moms and dads could participate and that involved in my case the moms recording themselves reading storybooks to their children and then sending those tapes to them so that the children could hear it and listen to their moms read them a story that was just tremendously meaningful even when their children were older than typical storybook reading age the mom said their children really liked that experience and listened to the books a lot. There was a real distinction between having opportunities to parent and what is called a contact visit versus a noncontact visit and did not contact visit is in a visiting booth through glass. So there's no physical contact contact visits were very limited yet cherished. For instance the detention center had a program at the beginning of the school year in which moms could have contact visits with their children and give them backpacks of back to school materials that had been donated. And so those mom whose incarcerations overlapped with the best school period. I had just really cherish that opportunity to hug their children have the children sit in a lab looked through the material and the backpack together. Another opportunity for contact visits came from moms who participated in what seemed to be an excellent program in its detention center and that was trauma focused treatment group for women. Women who successfully completed that program participated in a graduation ceremony and their families could come and have a contact visit. Again that was just a one time thing.

[00:28:27] But the moms who participated in that graduation also had the opportunity to directly have contact with their children and no parent and that way in addition to phone calls and letters they talk with their children about being incarcerated. That's really interesting. It's interesting findings there which actually did parallel the literature about children with incarcerated parents. And that is some children knew their moms who were in jail and some did. The moms overall tended to say they thought their children should know and talk about being realistic with their children. In fact a great little quote from one mom who said she told her son and this is the quote I did this crime. You know how when you do something bad and Grandma put you in time out. I did something bad and I got put in timeout. And then she said speaking of her son he knows what I'm saying. He understands. So I thought that was actually just excellent. She talked about consequences of behavior with a fairly young child was able to help him understand using the real parallel of time out and being in a detention center other mothers were not able or did not talk with their children about the incarceration because their relatives who were parenting for them did not want their children to know. And so we had a couple of moms who said My children think I'm working out of state or in school out of state or otherwise just unable to be home.

[00:30:23] And I think they expressed some skepticism certainly some discomfort absolutely but also some skepticism that that was really a story that would hold up but again because they were in the position of believing they needed to defer and deferring therefore to the wishes of the caregivers. That was the story that was the cover story at least. Did the children act out at all again paralleling what we know from the literature. Yes. Even though these children from the moms in our study were all living with relatives that they knew across the board the moms said that their children did act out and that made it feel even more complicated and complex for them as parents when they were told that their children were acting out in various ways. They worked sometimes with a lot of support and sometimes with at least what they perceived to be less support with their relatives to try and address their children's feelings around their mom's incarceration to see if they could help address the behavior. What were their experiences as mothers with the criminal justice system. Well all of our participants were pretty negative about their experience. That is they described their contacts with various systems with regard to them as mothers as being apathetic at best and negative at the worst. So they talked about from the time of arrest even when their children were present through being booked having hearings meeting with attorneys et cetera throughout the sort of trajectory of the process from arrest to incarceration of either not being asked about their children or volunteering information about their children that having that not taken into from their perspective into consideration. I'll highlight that they've talked a little bit about police officers but

highlight court experience is the mom's again across the board talked about hoping that some consideration might be given to them in their roles as mothers.

[00:32:59] Again taking responsibility for their criminal actions but wondering if there were options for them that might involve shorter incarcerations or weekend jail. Various options that might be in front of judges as possibilities. And at least from their perspective they were not hurt. Several moms specifically said that they had asked their attorneys to raise the issue of alternatives to incarceration or to lengthy incarceration and found that at least they did not hear that their attorneys raise those issues with the courts. Do they have other concerns. In addition to that. Well I think all of them mentioned concerns about the potential that child protective services would be involved. And again as one who is a child welfare person and spend a lot of my time teaching students who are going to work in public child welfare is known to me that child protective services agencies have a bad rap the hook community and these moms certainly expressed the belief that I think many people hold that social workers in general and child protective services workers in particular are just out to take people's children away. And they felt vulnerable and at risk to that fear because of being separated from their children and because they now had if they didn't already previously criminal records so that was an issue that came up and touched on. Fear of losing custody and then a couple of other issues that came up a lot were related to their substance use. Since all of our moms in the study had and acknowledge history of substance abuse and in fact their crimes were related to their substance use. They raised other issues about that use.

[00:35:30] That is they not only talked about their criminal behavior but talked about having a lack of insurance when they were in the community that could cover substance use treatment and also a lack of access to treatment facilities and particularly treatment facilities focused on the needs of women with substance use disorders and the needs of mothers in terms of for instance if they needed inpatient services not having options for their children's care. What about their pre-trial experiences their pre-trial experience is very some more are held in detention before the hearings and some were out on bail and those who think a real distinction was those who were out and pretty much not surprising had more opportunities to make plans for their children. However a major concern and not being criminal justice experts something of which I was not really aware the moms who were held pre trial talked about the fact that could be six or seven months. And it turns out in their cases they were found guilty so that gave them credit for time served. But they raised the issue. What if they'd been acquitted. They would have been separated from their children for that amount of time and then have been acquitted or found to be innocent and they did talk about other women that they knew in their units at the facility being held for trial and then released on acquittal or case dismissal. And you know the fact that they serve time without actually having been convicted of anything and that that's an issue we hadn't anticipated and now raised a real concern that we hadn't considered before. Do they talk about anything that helped them during their periods of incarceration.

[00:37:47] Well I touched on this but I really like to commend the facility for offering trauma focused intervention programs for women. It's small and selective. But both of our moms who participated in that program seem to have gotten an enormous amount of support from that program and that was much broader than in their role as mothers although they certainly talked about understanding more about their children and more about the importance of their recovery because it's trauma focused but also substance use treatment focused. Of course there's a big overlap there during that their participation in the program. They've learned more about themselves including impact of substance use on their children and the importance of strategies for sobriety and managing their trauma and other issues. Once they were released and reunited with their children that was really again not everyone in our study was able to participate. But those who did just found it exceptionally positive. I think other things that helped just in general were you know based on what the mom said were things related to just their personal growth as humans as women and as

mothers during their incarceration. A lot of time for reflection and not being ironic but they seemed rather than in irony. But in all seriousness to say I haven't had large blocks of time to think about myself and where I've been and where I want to be and that's of paraphrase of a quote. And at first it was a challenge but then it was a positive experience to really concentrate on how I can make things different after I'm released. And that optimism and future orientation. Those two things were pretty much hallmarks of hell the moms in our study talked about their time in detention.

[00:40:26] So balanced against what was hard about it which there were many things that were difficult and always at the top of that list was the separation from their children. So for all what do you see is the strengths and limitations of the study. Well as I've noted it was very small it was comprised store we interviewed moms who were self selected and mentioned that they were previously that all the moms in our study had their children living with relatives. And I think with self selection process I hypothesize it leads to that moms whose children were in foster care chose not to participate because either they'd been advised by their legal advisers not to do so or just themselves were concerned that participating in the study might in some way impact issues around their walking with social services. Other limitations. It was not a very diverse sample. And finally a couple of the moms were able to achieve early release so we could not do a follow up interview to learn whether there had been changes in their children's care during their incarceration. But we also found strengths in our study and those include first of all that we were replicating part of a large series of studies that have been underway for a decade or more in Australia so we could and did use instruments that had already been used with a very similar population. We also appreciated that we had the opportunity to do one of the few studies of its eye with the US population. And finally it certainly raised many many research questions for ongoing and more focused studies. So that was really terrific.

[00:42:38] Yeah and what do you see as the major take home points for workers particularly in practice. Well again our current to a quote from one of our moms because we ask them this question and one of the mothers in the study said quote I just really I feel like it needs to be from the beginning. If you have children it needs to be considered with everything that happens from that moment for. Now don't get me wrong I don't think that because you have children you shouldn't be in trouble. But just some type of consideration. I don't know exactly what necessarily could be done but I feel like somebody somewhere needs to you know just really think about that. And that's the end of the quote. And we took that to mean from her words and the words of the others that as I mentioned previously since we are working with these moms and these children in a variety of settings as social workers being aware of situations where children and parents are attached and living together. And these are positive relationships for the children that are continuing those relationships and supporting and nurturing those mother child relationships from the start is really important. It's really something that we can do. So we social workers if we're working in schools knowing that there are youngsters who haven't incarcerated moms or dads looking to just as an example find ways to involve those parents that been involved in their children's education helping that to continue during the incarceration.

[00:44:38] And again to quote I just read from that mom emphasizes not talking about not being responsible for criminal behavior but rather were looking at what's best for the children and that is looking in our various social work roles and settings to maintain relationships that are important and what are the next steps for you with regards to this research project. Well I'm really pleased that I've had the opportunity this summer to collaborate with colleagues in England and take students over to do a very similar research study with mothers who were involuntarily committed to psychiatric hospitals. And the connection is that those involuntary commitments were almost across the board related to criminal behavior. But these are moms who ended up in psychiatric hospital rather than in a detention center. And we had not surprisingly very similar issues and results with perhaps the additional stigma of having a psychiatric hospitalization. And I'm in the process of working on

developing larger studies related to this pilot study here looking to certainly have a larger group of participants but also participants who are incarcerated mothers but also to include as they have done in Australia other stakeholders police officers public defenders judges detention centre personnel and so on. Up to and including where and when possible children and the research in the future. Well that's fantastic and I want to thank you so much for talking with us today and sharing everything about this research project. Well it was a pleasure talking with you and talking about this and I thank you for the opportunity. And also again want to thank the mothers who participated and the facility for allowing us the chance to do this project which is I can say so a little bit out of the ordinary in session work research. So thank you. You've been listening to Dr Caroline Long Burry discuss her work on the experiences of incarcerated mothers.

[00:47:30] We hope that you found this discussion to be instructive. This is your host Charles Syms. Please join us again in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu and while you're there check out our technology and social work research center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.