

Depictions of Parental Incarceration in Children's Literature

Ashton Pfannenstiel

Faculty: Jodie Hertzog, PhD

Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Often called “unintended victims of the war on crime,”¹ 1.5 million children have at least one incarcerated parent and 22% are younger than 52. Accessible literature for these children to relate to, which would also increase other children's understanding, could decrease their reported stigmatization³. This qualitative pilot study includes thematic analysis of 10 published children's books about parental incarceration. 4 books contain male children, 4 female children, and 2 were gender neutral. Of incarcerated parents portrayed, 3 were mothers, 6 were fathers, and in 1 book both parents were incarcerated. In the books, caregivers were mothers (3), an aunt (1), grandmother (2), both grandparents (1), or not mentioned (3). In 9 books, there is contact with the parent via phone calls, letters, or visitation. Overall, the most prevalent themes were emotional issues, life changes, and confusion about emotions or the situation. Future studies should examine accessibility of these resources.