

Children hurt when mom's in jail

2004-04-11

Oklahoman Editorial

WHEN MOTHERS are sent to prison, it's often children who suffer the real punishment. Chances are the mothers probably wouldn't have won a parenting award to begin with.

But how does one calculate the effect on children ripped away from their primary caregiver and left in the care of a family member they may or may not know or placed in foster care? Add to that the possibility that the children may have to change schools and the worry of having a parent in prison. The children themselves must feel trapped in a prison of pain that is sure to overburden even the most well-adjusted child.

The truth is in Oklahoma we don't really know how high the toll is on children whose mothers are in prison. But we should. Oklahoma has the unwelcome distinction of incarcerating more women on a per-capita basis than nearly every other state in the nation.

A task force studying the female prison rate gave us a glimpse of how children are affected. It found that many children of women in prison are left in the care of the same people who inflicted abuse upon the mother. Many of the problems that land women in prison are cyclical, and unless the chain is broken, children will follow in their parents' footsteps.

Senate Joint Resolution 48 proposes allowing the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth to lead a study on the living conditions of children of incarcerated women and make recommendations for how the state can help "restore opportunities for the children to live healthy and productive lives."

The resolution indicates the possibility of expanding residential programs that allow the mothers with addiction problems and children to be together while receiving treatment. The Senate and House have approved the resolution. It now awaits Senate consideration of amendments. We hope the study will move forward.

The cyclical nature of problems relating to addictions and other problems often borne out of poverty and abuse is well established. And in some cases, separating children from their mothers when other alternatives are available may do more harm than good for kids who already face an uphill battle.