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At Mound, prisoners man up and become fathers

More than 2 million U.S. children -- and one in 14 African-American children -- have an incarcerated parent. The rate could be double that in Detroit. These children are up to seven times more likely to go to prison themselves, yet few programs or agencies serve them. On Saturday, I saw what more than 50 inmates at Mound Correctional Facility in Detroit are doing about it.

The prisoners, mostly members of the National Lifers of America, had completed a Parenting from Prison program that they started themselves. In the prison gym, they celebrated an achievement, performed a skit showing the traps children face without proper guidance, and urged one another to maintain close relationships with their children and make a positive difference in their lives. They and their families developed most of the curriculum for the 16-week program, which showed prisoners how to become more effective parents, even while locked up.

It also showed how, working together, a local university, volunteers, inmates and prison staff can make a difference for little or no money. Joan Blount, of the Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute at Wayne State University, served as the group's volunteer instructor.

Society has a strong interest in making sure the tens of thousands of children in Michigan with incarcerated parents make it. Mentors can't replace parents but can steer more children from drugs, violence and truancy. Urban families need transportation to the remote regions of the state where most prisons are located. Schools ought to provide counseling to help students deal with the loss, trauma and stigma. Police departments should have policies that enable children to speak with their parents and, whenever possible, require officers to shield children during the arrest.

United Way agencies should also take note of what the men at Mound are doing and consider whether they could support similar programs in the community. In the long run, society will suffer if kids are made to serve time with their parents.