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Facts and Issues: CPL 101



Introduction to Children of Prisoners

By Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin

*Adapted from **Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide** by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003, used with permission.*

There are over 2 million prisoners in the United States.

Over the last 30 years, the U.S. prison population has increased by 500%. When someone goes to prison, their family members become invisible victims. While each family's experience is unique, there are some common themes.

Many families find that, at a time when help is most needed, people seem to withdraw from them. There is often a sense of shame and a fear of being labeled. Many in our society view prisoner's families as guilty by association.

Many families were already short on money before their loved one's incarceration and now are plunged into a struggle for economic survival.

The justice system and its procedures are often baffling and frustrating.

Maintaining ties between prisoners and their families is difficult at best. Visiting conditions are usually stressful. Prisons are typically located in remote areas, not served by public transportation. Ties outside blood or marriage may not be recognized by the system. Self-confidence can be undercut by friends, family and society members who criticize a relationship with a prisoner.

When visits do occur, the happy and unhappy feelings and events of day-to-day life seem hard to talk about.

Over time, un-connectedness can overtake relationships. This is especially hard for children.

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One in forty children in the United States has a parent in prison.

Children of prisoners are often present at their parent's arrest. Many times, children of prisoners are not told the truth about where their incarcerated parent is. This leaves children confused and questioning.

Children with parents in prison imagine all kinds of explanations and answers. They feel vulnerable, unprotected and at fault. When children blame themselves for the loss of a parent to jail or prison, they may rebel or withdraw. They are often afraid to talk to anyone about their situation, limiting the ability of others to understand and help.

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There are relatively few agencies or programs to help these millions of families. There is no government agency charged with specific responsibility for the impact of the criminal justice system on families and children.

This impact on families has been described as a *series of crises*: from arrest, to trial, incarceration, and re-entry (Fishman and Alissi, 1979). Each of these crises can diminish a family's capacity to care for and support its members.

To help, Family and Corrections Network has created this new resource—the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), an Internet based resource at www.fcnetwork.org. CPL provides free information sheets aimed at health care providers and others serving children of prisoners and their caregivers.

CPL pamphlets describe the challenges facing children of prisoners, strategies for intervention, and tips for fostering trust. CPL also provides extensive additional resources: agencies serving children and families of prisoners, a list of books for children, a set of pamphlets especially for incarcerated fathers, topical reading and references, and a selected video list.

Family and Corrections Network will continually add to the Children of Prisoners Library as opportunities allow. We are now seeking support to add materials especially for educators, faith communities, legal practitioners and mental health practitioners. We also want to provide reading

materials for children of prisoners and a forum for their stories. To be notified when new material is added to CPL, join the FCN E-mail list at www.fcnetwork.org.

Reference

Fishman, Susan F. and Alissi, Albert S., "Strengthening Families as Natural Support Systems for Offenders," *Federal Probation*, September 1979.

In the Library

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- 101: Introduction to Children of Prisoners
- 102: Why Maintain Relationships?
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About CPL'S Author and Publisher

Ann Adalist-Estrin

Ann is a Child and Family Therapist at BRIDGES: Parent-Child Counseling and Consultation Services in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania. She operates Incarcerated Parents and their Children Consulting Services and is a trainer for the Healthy Steps For Young Children Project at Boston University School of Medicine.

Ann is an author, speaker and consultant to a wide variety of agencies serving children and families in the U.S. and Canada. She has served on the faculties of Temple University, The University of Arts, and Community College of Philadelphia. She currently teaches a seminar for child care center directors at Holy Family College in Philadelphia and a graduate course for teachers entitled "Those Left Behind: Addressing the needs of children of prisoners" for Bob Randall Associates at Gratz College, Philadelphia.

She serves on the Board of Directors of Family and Corrections Network.

With Jim Mustin, Ann co-authored *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide*. She authored the Children of Prisoners Library.

Jim Mustin

Jim is the executive director and founder of Family and Corrections Network (FCN). At FCN, he publishes FCN REPORT, the only national publication on working with families of offenders and manages the FCN web site, www.fcnetwork.org, which has over 150,000 visitors a year. Under Jim's leadership, FCN has produced five national conferences on families of offenders.

Jim co-managed two North American Conference on Fathers Behind Bars and on the Streets with the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families. In 1995, Jim took early retirement from the Virginia Department of Corrections. He lives with his wife, Ellen, in Palmyra, Virginia.

With Ann Adalist-Estrin, Jim co-authored *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide*. Jim edited and published the Children of Prisoners Library.

About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the Family and Corrections Network (FCN) web site, www.fcnetwork.org. Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold.

Sorry, FCN is not budgeted to mail free copies.

Send comments to The Children of Prisoners Library at FCN, 32 Oak Grove Road, Palmyra, VA 22963, 434/589-3036, 434/589-6520 Fax, fcn@fcnetwork.org. Copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003.

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The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from *How Can I Help* and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.

