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News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association

All children

deserve to

grow up

in a safe,

permanent

home.



Learning to Walk in Their Shoes—the Life of a Child Whose Parent Is Incarcerated

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CASA
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Court Appointed Special Advocates



Learning to Walk in Their Shoes

Thousands of children in foster care have an incarcerated parent. How can CASA volunteers best serve them?

By Lisette Austin

It is hard to imagine how millions of children could be invisible. But such is the case for most children of US prisoners—a hidden population with a multitude of unmet needs. Although they have not committed a crime themselves, they end up paying a steep penalty alongside their parents. Many struggle with traumatic loss and upheaval with almost no support from their community. Thousands of them wind up in foster care, one of many service systems that do not yet fully acknowledge or address this population's unique needs.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics an estimated 2,000,000 children in our country currently have a parent behind bars. As many as 10,000,000 children currently have a parent under correctional supervision (prison, jail, probation or parole). These numbers represent a 50% increase since 1991. For most of these children, it is a father who is incarcerated, but more than 116,000 are estimated to have a mother serving time.

These children are invisible primarily because they are difficult to identify. When an adult is incarcerated, the correctional system is not required to ask about children left behind and what their needs might be. This means there is no official record of affected children. Also—because of the social stigma around incarceration—families and children often hide the problem themselves, bearing their pain in silence.

How Having a Parent in Prison Affects a Child

The effects of parental incarceration on children are wide-ranging, profound and just beginning to be understood. What is clear is that having a parent behind bars can leave lifelong emotional scars.

“Any time a child loses a parent to prison, there are going to be abandonment issues,” says Dr. Sal Severe, nationally known parenting expert and former school psychologist. “The question often is ‘why did my parent choose criminal activity over me?’ It’s easy for them to blame themselves.”

Children Of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I struggle with my parent's incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labeled because of my parent's incarceration.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

Source: San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents

He explains that children often feel angry with their incarcerated parents yet also desperate to be with them. Although they may feel ashamed of what their parents have done, they still love them. All of this can be very confusing.

When families lie to children about their parent's imprisonment, it only compounds the situation. "Denial is a big problem in families affected by incarceration," says Marge Scanlon, a former middle school teacher who spent 13 years teaching parenting classes to prison inmates. "I knew a child who didn't know for years where her

mother was," says Scanlon. "It wasn't until her grandmother died and her mother came to the funeral in shackles that she found out the truth." Family deception can increase children's fears and mistrust.

Emotional distress is only one part of a constellation of difficulties that children of prisoners face. Many are transient, moving from caregiver to caregiver, particularly if their mother is incarcerated. The removal of a parent can send families into an economic tailspin, making it hard to meet basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing. Many live

in neighborhoods plagued with drug addiction, violence and poverty.

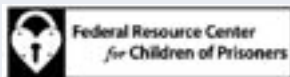
According to the Child Welfare League of America, children facing these overwhelming challenges often become depressed or act out. They have a difficult time trusting others. These children are at increased risk for problems at school and running away as well as drug and alcohol abuse. They are also prone to running into trouble with the law. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that roughly half of all juveniles in custody have a parent or sibling who is or has been incarcerated. "These kids

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Web Resources

The federal agency, Administration for Children and Families (acf.hhs.gov) initiated the Mentoring Children of Prisoners program in 2003 to support the establishment and operation of mentoring programs and to make competitive grants to applicants serving populations with substantial numbers of children of incarcerated parents.

Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners (cwla.org/programs/incarcerated)



This CWLA website provides information and publications about children of prisoners as well as technical assistance, training for mentoring programs, communities, agencies, corrections and law enforcement.

Families and Corrections Network (fcnetwork.org)

FCN is an organization for and about families of prisoners. The website offers information, training and technical assistance regarding children of prisoners, parenting programs for prisoners, prison visiting, incarcerated fathers and mothers, keeping in touch, returning to the community, the impact of the justice system on families and prison marriage. Contains a library with fact sheets about families and children affected by incarceration.



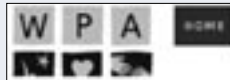
Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents (e-ccip.org)

Organizational goals are the production of high quality documentation on, and the development of model services for, children of criminal offenders and their families. Con-

tains numerous resources related to families affected by incarceration.

Women's Prison Association and Home, Inc. (wpaonline.org)

Provides programs through which women acquire life skills needed to end involvement in the criminal justice system and to make positive, healthy choices for themselves and their families. Publications include:



- *Supporting Women Offenders and their Families*
- *Partnerships between Corrections and Child Welfare*

Centerforce (centerforce.org)



Provides services for prisoners, former prisoners and family members of prisoners; holds an annual conference; and offers consultation and training for government agencies, community-based organizations and correctional facilities across the country and internationally.

Amachi (amachimentoring.org)

A unique partnership of secular and faith-based organizations working together to provide mentoring to children of incarcerated parents.

Lydia's Place, Inc. (lydiasplace.org)



Lydia's Place helps female offenders and their children rebuild their lives. Lydia's Place, Inc. sponsors a number of programs that help

female offenders in Allegheny County (PA) and their dependent children: re-entry and mentoring programs prepare women for release from jail and life on the outside, life skills classes, parenting classes as well as weekly support groups and referral services for women newly released from jail.

Other mentoring resources include:

- National Mentoring Center's Topical Resources on Starting a Program (nwrel.org/mentoring/topic_startup.html)
- Public/Private Ventures' Contemporary Issues in Mentoring (ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/37_publication.pdf)
- *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters* (ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/111_publications.pdf)
- MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership's Elements of Effective Practice (mentoring.org).

Friends Outside (friendsoutside.org)

is dedicated to breaking the cycle of crime and delinquency and preserving families. Friends Outside chapters provide support and assistance for inmate families, offenders and ex-offenders and they also offer diversion, intervention and prevention programs. Friends Outside believes that by aggressively addressing the factors that cause violence, child and spousal abuse and criminal lifestyles, crime, delinquency and their effect on society can be significantly reduced.



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often grow up hating the system that took their parents away,” says Scanlon, whose middle school students included children of prisoners. “They can end up with a world view in which the authorities are the enemy. This obviously can be a huge problem.”

Tackling the Problem

Although the numbers of children affected by parental incarceration continue to rise, many of the issues they face remain unacknowledged by the greater community. However, a growing number of organiza-

tions are working to raise awareness. The San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, for example, has published a compelling booklet entitled *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights* in hopes that service systems will begin to recognize and respond to this population’s unique needs (see sidebar on page 6). And in 2001, the Child Welfare League of America received a three-year award from the US Department of Justice to create the Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners. The center con-

ducts research, distributes publications and provides training.

Other organizations are trying to find and directly serve children of prisoners. The Girl Scouts’ Beyond Bars program provides support to 5- to 17-year-old girls who have an incarcerated mother, while strengthening the mother-daughter relationship through structured prison visits. Started in 1992, Girl Scout councils are now running this program in 22 states. A few similar Boy Scout programs have also recently started. Another example is Amachi, a program that has connected

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Books & Movies Addressing Parental Incarceration

The following list is a sampling of books and resources available to those interested in learning more about the subject of incarcerated parents and their families.

Directory of Programs Serving Families of Adult Offenders, edited by James W. Mustin, provides an extensive state-by-state listing of programs and organizations focused on children and families of offenders (nicic.org/pubs/2002/017081.pdf).

Parents in Prison: Addressing the Needs of Families, by James Boudouris (American Correctional Association), provides information from a national survey of prison-based programs for incarcerated mothers across the country and in Canada. It addresses the needs of the whole family, the importance of parental ties, resources for parents and facilities, family advocacy and the increased role of volunteer programs.

Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families and Communities, edited by Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul, is available in paperback from the Urban Institute Press. This book is for anyone concerned about foster care, child development, strengthening families and post-prison adjustment (urban.org/pubs/prisoners).

Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry by Jeremy Travis, Elizabeth Cincotta McBride and Amy L. Solomon. This policy brief helps focus attention on the hidden costs of our criminal justice policies and the impact of parental incarceration on young children. Available from the Urban Institute (urban.org/url.cfm?ID=310882).

Coping When a Parent Is in Jail by John J. La Valle (Rosen Publishing Group). LaValle writes about how teenagers can deal with their emotions when a parent is incarcerated, explains what happens in prison, the visiting process and reports on where teens can find support.

Children’s Books

Into the Great Forest: A Story for Children Away from Parents for the First Time by Irene Wineman Marcus and Paul Marcus, PhD, with illustrations by Susan Jeschke (Magination Press). Early separations—whether to go to school or camp—can be as upsetting as they are exciting for both children and parents. How these events are handled can affect how children behave in similar situations throughout their lives. This story about a young prince’s adventures away from home explores the insecurity and anger children may feel and suggests ways

to resolve their conflicts by relying on their own strengths.

Two in Every 100: A Special Workbook for Children with a Parent in Prison, (Reconciliation Ministries, Inc., Nashville, TN). A workbook for children with incarcerated parents and their parents, teachers or counselors.

Zachary’s New Home: A Story for Foster and Adopted Children, Geraldine M. Blomquist, MSW, Paul B. Blomquist (Magination Press). Children in foster care and adopted children usually suffer painful separations from their families for reasons they may not understand. This story, which explores their experiences, problems and emotions, can be a useful tool for understanding and helping these children to cope with their many losses and to feel happier and more optimistic. Ages 3-8.

The Kissing Hand, Audrey Penn (Child & Family Press) is a book for any child who will be temporarily separated from home or loved ones, whether going to preschool or to camp. Ages 4-8.

Visiting Day, Jacqueline Woodson (Scholastic Press). A young girl and her grandmother make the long bus trip every month to visit the girl’s father in prison. Join the family for visiting day and find out what life is like for kids when a parent is incarcerated and what

it's like for a parent who can't be at home with his family. Ages 4-8

Mama Love Me from Away, Pat Brisson (Boyd's Mills Press). The story of a young girl, now living with her grandmother, who looks forward to visiting her imprisoned mother every Sunday. Prison is never mentioned; the focus lies on the emotional bond between the two. Ages 4-8.

Finding the Right Spot: When Kids Can't Live with Their Parents, Janice Levy (American Psychological Association). A story for all children who can't live with their parents, emphasizing, loyalty, hope, disappointment, love, sadness and anger. Richly illustrated. Concludes with chapter written by a child psychologist for caregivers on dealing with the emotional needs of these children. Ages 4-8.

All About Change, Kathy Kagy-Taylor and Donna Dansker (The Aring Institute of Beech Acres). This workbook helps to explain positives and negatives about changes in life. For children in grades K-4.

Help for Kids! Understanding Your Feelings About Having a Parent in Prison or Jail, Carole Gesme, MA, CCDP, with consultation from Michele Kopfmann (Pine Press). Gesme, who has created several therapeutic and educational games and tools, has taught parenting within the Minnesota Correctional System for more than 20 years. She is also a trainer for the Minnesota Child Welfare Training System in effective parenting skills and the effects of abuse and neglect on child development. Ages 6 and older.

A Visit to the Big House, Oliver Butterworth (Houghton Mifflin Company). Two children and their mother visit their father in prison. Ages 7-10.

Let's Talk About When Your Parent Is in Jail, Maureen Wittbold (Powerkids Press). More people are in prison today than at any other time in US history. Many prisoners have children. The impact of this situation on kids can be traumatic. This book takes kids through the stages of a parent's incar-

ceration to help them understand and deal with their thoughts, fears and other feelings. Ages 8-11.

Queenie Peavy, Robert Burch (Puffin). The biggest troublemaker in school, Queenie learns a lesson when her father is incarcerated. Ages 9-12.

Breaking Out, Barthe Declements (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group). In this final volume in DeClements' trilogy, Jerry, a seventh grader who must adjust to his father's imprisonment, makes friends with Grace, a preacher's daughter with problems of her own. For older children.

Movies

A Sentence of Their Own, Edgar Barends, Director, chronicles one family's annual pilgrimage to a New Hampshire state prison, revealing the damaging impact incarceration has on families. It makes visible what is rarely seen, the gradual descent of a family "doing time" on the outside, and calls for a closer examination and deeper understanding of our growing use of incarceration and its impact on families, communities and our culture.

Champagne and The Talking Eggs, Michael Sporn, Director, shows two tales of love and hope:

Champagne: The true story of a young girl whose mother is jailed for murder. Living in a Catholic children's home, Champagne provides poignant commentary about her mother, her own situation and her outlook for the future. This award-winning film shows how hope can spring forth even in the most challenging times.

The Talking Eggs: When a young girl befriends a mystical elderly woman, magical things happen—not the least of which is the surprise of three talking eggs. Based on a Creole folk tale and narrated by Danny Glover, this richly textured animated fable encourages children to find their untapped potential and to pursue their dreams.

Children Left Behind, David Freudberg, Producer. Adults whose parents were incarcerated recall their experiences as children (the trauma of their parents' arrests, their feelings of abandonment and the sometimes humiliating treatment they experienced when visiting their parents in prison). The film also profiles community support activities for children whose parents are incarcerated and the views of experts and practitioners (reentrymediaoutreach.org/leftbehind.htm).

Children of Prisoners/Children of Promise, National Institute of Corrections, identifies problems and greatest needs of incarcerated parents and caretakers with regard to their children. This video-conference also addresses problems and issues that children of prisoners or former prisoners face that put children at risk; evidence-based and promising approaches to support these children and build on their strengths; and the benefits of the criminal justice system becoming more family-friendly (nicic.org/Library/018895).

Prison Lullabies, by filmmakers Odile Isralson and Lina Matta, is the remarkable portrait of four women who, serving prison time, have all given birth behind bars. Incarcerated in the Taconic Correctional Facility in New York State, one of five prisons in the US to provide a nursery program for inmates, they are allowed to keep their babies for the first 18 months and required to participate in a rigorous series of classes that range from basic child care to anger management and drug counseling. *Prison Lullabies* portrays life-altering choices and "the glimmer of possibility" the prison nursery program holds for them and for the future of their children. (reentrymediaoutreach.org/pl.htm)

When the Bough Breaks, Jill Evans Petzall, Producer. What happens to children when their mothers are incarcerated? In the United States, 80-90% of all female inmates are mothers of vulnerable children. This documentary is an up-close look at children coping with their mothers' incarceration.

Troop 1500 Documentary Examines Incarcerated Mothers of Girl Scouts



Their mothers may be convicted thieves, murderers and drug dealers, but the girls of *Troop 1500* want to be doctors, social workers and marine biologists. With meetings once a month at Hilltop Prison in Gatesville, Texas, this innovative Girl Scout program brings daughters together with their inmate mothers, offering them a chance to rebuild their broken relationships. Intimately involved with the troop for several years, the directors took their cameras

far beyond meetings to explore the painful context of broken families. Powerful insight comes from interviews shot by the girls themselves which reveal their conflicted feelings of anger and joy, abandonment and intimacy—as well as the deep influence their mothers still have on them.

An estimated 2 million children have incarcerated parents and 90% of female inmates are parents. Their daughters are six times more likely to land in the juvenile justice system. *Troop 1500* poignantly re-

veals how an inspired yet controversial effort by the Girl Scouts organization is working to help these at-risk young girls deal with their unique circumstances and break the cycle of crime within families.

Troop 1500 has a national PBS broadcast date on the Emmy-award-winning series, *Independent Lens*: March 21, 2006 (check local listings). Visit pbs.org.



Special Offer to Connection Readers

Troop 1500: Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (wmm.com/catalog/pages/c659.htm) is distributed by Women Make Movies, wmm.com. To order, email orders@wmm.com, or call (212) 925-0606 ext. 360. The film is offered at the special rate of \$89 to all CASA programs until December 30th, 2006.

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volunteer mentors to over 7,000 children of imprisoned parents. Inspired by Amachi's efforts, Congress appropriated \$150,000,000 in 2003 to create 52 additional mentoring programs across the country.

How CASA Volunteers Can Help

So where does CASA come into the picture? Although many children of prisoners live with relatives or friends, roughly 10% end up in the foster care system. This means that any given CASA volunteer

could easily end up advocating for a child with an incarcerated parent. Having some awareness of and sensitivity to the issue is paramount, especially since CASA volunteers are often in the position to educate others involved with the child.

How can a CASA volunteer best serve a prisoner's child in foster care? An important first step is education. Becoming familiar with resources, attending workshops and reading available literature will create a firm foundation that can then be built upon.

An issue that CASA volunteers need to be particularly aware of is the effect of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act on families with an incarcerated parent. Under the act, states must begin proceedings to terminate parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months—six months if the child is under three. Over 70% of women in US prisons are serving sentences of 35 months or more, meaning that many incarcerated mothers with children in foster care risk losing their children permanently.

“CASA volunteers should keep this issue at the forefront,” advises Marsha Weissman, executive director of the Center for Community Alternatives, a New York organization that works to develop effective alternatives to incarceration. “You don’t want to have an automatic termination simply because the parent is incarcerated,” she explains. “You need to look at the bigger picture.”

She notes that there can be exceptions to terminations if efforts towards reunification have been made—most commonly through visitation. But visits frequently fall through the cracks, often because of the judgment of others. “It’s so easy to feel that because these parents have committed a crime they should have their parental rights terminated,” she says. “But the reality is much more complicated than that.”

Maintaining Contact With an Imprisoned Parent

In fact, many automatically believe it is detrimental for a child to be in touch with their incarcerated parent. It is true that visitations can be problematic. “Unpleasant things can happen during a prison visit, and there’s the chance a child will see something awful,” says middle school teacher Scanlon. But research suggests that regular visits and communication usually reduce recidivism for parents and improves emotional adjustment for children. “It is anxiety-provoking for the child if they never see their parent,” says Scanlon. “They wonder if their parent is really OK.”

Certainly each case is unique, and in some situations direct contact may not be appropriate. If physical distance or other factors prohibit visits, letters and phone calls are still good options. “I encourage kids to stay in communication any way they can,” says Severe, the parenting expert and psychologist. “It’s important for them to know that it’s still OK to love their parents.”



Building Support

Another way that CASA volunteers can make a difference is by building support. “There are more resources available now than there used to be,” says Weissman, whose organization also serves children of prisoners. “Advocates can work with the court and guardians to make sure the child is connected with as many resources as possible,” she says. Programs that allow children of prisoners to connect with other children and youth in the same situation can greatly reduce feelings of isolation and shame. And those that provide ongoing support after the parent is out of prison are ideal, as reintegration into the family is usually complicated and fraught with emotional minefields.

Another place to build support is at school. “Often school staff don’t know what is behind the behavior issues,” says Weissman. “If they don’t know the truth, they can’t properly respond to and support the child.” Severe agrees. “It is very important for teachers and counselors to know what is going on,” he says. “A CASA advocate could be very helpful by getting everyone on the same page.”

Keeping an Open Mind

Perhaps the most important message voiced throughout the literature and by those who work with this population is one of open-mindedness. “You have to be as non-judgmental as possible and learn to listen,” says Jarene Barnes, a former CASA volunteer who now works as a case manager with Lydia’s Place in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Lydia’s Place provides a wide range of services to mothers in the Allegheny county jail and their children—from providing parenting classes to recording mothers reading bedtime stories to their children.

“When you walk into that child’s life, you have to be very careful that you don’t get lost in your judgments and beliefs,” cautions Barnes. “You have to learn to walk a mile in these children’s shoes.”

Lisette Austin is a freelance writer who regularly contributes to local and national publications on a wide range of topics. She also works part-time as a communications specialist for Children’s Hospital and Regional Medical Center. She lives in Seattle with her husband and four-year-old son.