

America's Lost Children: Ministering to Children of Incarcerated Parents

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With America's new war on drugs and many states' "three-strike" policies, the American prison system is growing each year. In just the 8 years between 1980 and 1998, the imprisonment rate rose by 300%.¹ As more and more people are incarcerated, more and more prisons are opened, and more and more people are impacted. The people impacted are not only those incarcerated, but also their families and thus society at large. Perhaps the most affected people are the smallest and the quietest, for standing alone after the sirens, twirling lights and handcuffs are millions of children. These children, bereft of one or both parents, experience challenges that many would consider insurmountable. It is the purpose of this paper to report on the demographic information of these children as well as the challenges they face and then to propose ways to help them overcome their circumstances.

Because there is no systematic way of keeping track of these children, they often fall through the cracks, unattended by parents, government or society. They are "the lost children." When a person is arrested and incarcerated he/she is not asked to report information on his/her family, and consequently there is no definitive record of the number of children who have parents in prison. There is also no definitive record of their demographic information, their struggles or their needs. As author Cynthia Seymour states, "...it is unclear how many are affected, who they are, or where they live."²

¹ Renny Golden, *War on the Family: Mothers in Prison and the Families They Leave Behind*, (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 1.

² Cynthia Seymour and Creasie Finney Hairston, *Children with Parents in Prison*, Washington D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, (1998), 472.

However, there have been some government studies conducted by surveying incarcerated parents. There have also been private interviews and studies conducted by individuals concerned for the welfare of these lost children. Because much of the research findings of these studies are based upon small-scale studies and surveys, they are not always precise representations of the facts. Furthermore, once these studies are completed, “the courts and the correctional system do not regularly request or collect information about prisoners’ families.”³ As a result, the children are once again lost.

Estimates of the number of children with an incarcerated parent vary greatly. For instance, a study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that there are approximately 1.5 million children of prisoners,⁴ while educator and founder of the Loving Through Bars organization, Cynthia Martone, cites that there are over 2.3 million.⁵ The truth is that either of these figures could be true—at any given moment of time. The prison system is like a revolving door with thousands of people being admitted every day and thousands more being released. A more accurate number of the total children who have or have had a parent incarcerated in the last year is over 7 million! That means 1 out of every 10 children have a parent somehow entangled in the American legal system, whether incarcerated, on probation or on parole.⁶

We can learn a little about these children by learning about their parents. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the majority of imprisoned parents are African American and Hispanic. Hispanic children are 3 times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated

³ Charlene Simmons, “Children of Incarcerated Parents,” California Research Bureau 7, no. 2 (2000): 10.

⁴ Christopher J. Mumola, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children” U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), 1.

⁵ Cynthia Martone, *Loving Through Bars: Children with Parents in Prison* (Santa Montica, CA: Santa Montica Press, 2005), 15.

⁶ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 2.

parent,⁷ while African American children are 9 times more likely than their peers to have a parent in prison;⁸ that means 1 out of every 8 African American children have a parent behind bars.

There are also far more incarcerated fathers than mothers. In fact, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 93% of incarcerated parents are male. The impact of a father's incarceration on his children depends in large part upon whether or not the children were living with him at the time of his incarceration. Many with an incarcerated father were living with their mother at the time of the father's incarceration, and thus the impact of the father's absence from the home is minimized.⁹ Approximately 40% to 50% of incarcerated parents have never been married, and incarcerated fathers often have children by several different mothers.¹⁰ Based on this information, it may be safe to assume that many children may have a father in prison who they have never met or with whom they have no current contact.

While the incarceration of a father is undeniably traumatic for a child, the incarceration of a mother typically has far more negative consequences for a child. And unfortunately, since 1991 the number of incarcerated mothers has nearly doubled.¹¹ While most children with a mother in prison end up living with a grandparent or other relative, they are 8 times more likely to be sent to a foster care home. They are also more likely to have lived on the streets or in

⁷ Cynthia Martone, *Loving Through Bars: Children with Parents in Prison* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2005), 168.

⁸ Christopher J. Mumola, "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children" U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ Cynthia Martone, *Loving Through Bars: Children with Parents in Prison* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2005), 70-90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

poverty with their mother prior to her incarceration.¹²

More can be learned about the lives of the children of incarcerated parents by studying their parent's offenses. The majority of incarcerated parents were convicted of drug offenses or violent crimes: particularly homicide, sexual assault and robbery.¹³ And the majority of these parents are *repeat offenders*. Thus, their children have grown accustomed to witnessing violence, illegal drug activity and an unending cycle of incarceration and release.

The environment in which many of these children live can be described as unhealthy and underprivileged. At the state prison level, 70% of incarcerated parents have no high school diploma,¹⁴ and many of them lived in poverty-stricken circumstances surrounded by a neighborhood full of families in similar circumstances.¹⁵ Among mothers, around half reported that they earned less than \$1000 a month for their household.¹⁶

As a result of the difficult circumstances of these children, they face multiple obstacles in their childhood and their future. Social justice experts Reed and Reed ominously say "minor children of parents under some form of criminal justice control...are among the most at-risk, yet least visible, populations of children."¹⁷ Moreover, journalist and coordinator for the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, Nell Bernstein, states, "The children of prisoners suffer from anxiety and attention disorders, or from post-traumatic stress. They are

¹² Christopher J. Mumola, "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children" U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵ Volunteers of America, "Families and Reentry," <http://www.voa.org/NR/rdonlyres/EFB8678C-80BC-4E48-AO71-05AF96849613/151/FamiliesandReEntrytr.doc> (accessed December 19, 2006).

¹⁶ Christopher J. Mumola, "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children" U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), 10.

¹⁷ D.F. Reed and E.L. Reed, "Children of Incarcerated Parents," *Wilson Social Sciences Abstracts. Social Justice* 24, no. 3 (1997), 152.

likely to bounce from one care-giver to another; to have and cause trouble in school. Often poor to begin with, they get poorer once a parent is arrested.”¹⁸

In addition to these challenges, Tori De Angelis explains, “many drop out of school and many are prey to sexual and physical abuse, neglect, and substance abuse. Worse, most of these youngsters never receive help, and consequently, many become offenders themselves.”¹⁹

This last fact is the greatest challenge these children face; they are left alone to break the cycle their parents have created: the cycle of generational incarceration.

Children of incarcerated parents are *7 times* more likely than their peers to become involved in the criminal justice system²⁰ because they grow up “in the shadow of the prison.”²¹ Most of them have seen their parent go in and out of prison, house arrest, probation and halfway houses multiple times. Doing time has become a normal and expected part of adult life to these children.

Because “police often plan raids for late-night or early-morning hours, when those they seek are most likely to be home with their families,”²² many children have even witnessed the traumatic sight of their parent’s arrest. And with 8 years old as the average age of most children with an imprisoned parent,²³ this experience can have profound negative effects upon a developing child. Children watch while strangers break in the doors of their home, often

¹⁸ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 3

¹⁹ Tori DeAngelis, “Punishment of Innocents: Children of Parents Behind Bars” *Monitor on Psychology*, 2001, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/may01/punish.html> (accessed November 13, 2006).

²⁰ *Notice of Funding Opportunity for Mentoring of Children of Prisoners*, Washington DC: Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, February 23, 2004. <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/multidb.cgi> (accessed December 19, 2006).

²¹ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ Christopher J. Mumola, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children” U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), 2.

overturning furniture and crushing holes through the walls in search of criminal paraphernalia. They watch while their parents are handcuffed and taken away. If the parent is defiant, the child may hide behind a couch or peek from a darkened hallway while the police restrain his/her parent. Sometimes in these situations the police must throw the parent to the ground and use pepper spray or strike the parent. As a result of this experience, it is easy for these children to resent the law. From a tender age, they have seen law-enforcers in the role of a person who hurt them and their parent.

Other children may not be present at the time of their parent's incarceration. Instead, they may come home from school to find that they are left alone "to fend for themselves in empty apartments for weeks or even months...they are left to draw their own conclusions—not to mention cook their own dinner."²⁴ Because fear of abandonment by a parent is perhaps the single greatest fear in a child's mind,²⁵ it is not difficult to see how many of these children grow up to be damaged adults.

For the overwhelming majority of these children, the cycle of release and incarceration becomes routine rather than repugnant. In fact, for many children, incarceration even becomes preferable to their present circumstances: while incarcerated, a person receives three meals a day, clothing and shelter. Other children's perception of prison becomes confused. Instead of a cold place of punishment, in their minds, it becomes a place of warmth where they could connect with their parent. A Florida police officer recounts the following story about a young man, between 8 and 10 years old who came up to the police car and said, "Take me to jail." I said, come on, man, we don't want to take you to jail. I tapped him on the head. "We're not going to take you

²⁴ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 14.

²⁵ Cynthia Martone, *Loving Through Bars: Children with Parents in Prison* (Santa Montica, CA: Santa Montica Press, 2005), 17.

to jail.’ He said, ‘Well, my daddy’s in jail, I got to go to jail.’”²⁶ The tragic assumption of this child was that jail can’t be that bad if my daddy is there.

Other children, as they grow, come to view incarceration as a way of defying the law and displaying autonomy. In many troubled neighborhoods, it almost becomes a “badge of honor” to do time. For these children, a jail sentence is like a rite of passage into adulthood. Rather than the familiar goals of obtaining a degree, landing a good job or becoming financially successful, the goal of these youngsters is to spend time behind bars so that they can come back to the hood and tell “jail stories.”²⁷

Whether out of hurt, rage, defiance or habit, the fact remains that, without intervention, children of incarcerated parents are at great risk of future incarceration. Experts agree on several intervention methods that have proven to help these children break the cycle of incarceration and heal their wounds. Arguably the most important thing is for a child to visit his/her parent in prison. As Nell Bernstein states, “Consistent, ongoing contact reduces the strain of separation, lowers recidivism, and is the single most important factor in determining whether a family will reunify after a prison term.”²⁸ In fact, a California study conducted in 1972 reported that those who were regularly visited in prison were 6 times less likely to reenter prison.²⁹

Though this step is very helpful, it is not always a pleasant experience for children. Some children are forced to visit their parents with a piece of Plexiglas separating them. a juvenile detention center, who recounts how she has only touched her incarcerated father once

²⁶ Ibid.,167.

²⁷ Lenzell Franklin, “Not a Rite of Passage” *Reflections Journal*, 2004, <http://www.reflectionsjournal.org/Articles/V4.N1.Franklin.Lenzell.pdf>. (accessed December 20, 2006), 133.

²⁸ Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 76.

²⁹ Ibid., 77.

Journalist Bernstein traveled around the country interviewing these children about their relationships to their incarcerated parents. She tells the story of one teenage girl, serving time at and she was wrenched away from him by a corrections officer.³⁰ Bernstein also points out that these visits can be confusing or frustrating for small for children. After a visit, one young girl asked her father over the phone, “Are you dead?”³¹ Another four-year-old child “peer(ed) at her father through scratched Plexiglas, shouting to be heard over the staticky telephone. ‘Daddy, come out of there,’ she roars in frustration, dropping the phone and banging her fist against the glass.”³²

Furthermore, as one can imagine, prisons are not friendly places for children. Educator Cynthia Martone served as the principal at several elementary schools. Throughout her career, she has had the opportunity to accompany some of her students on their visits to incarcerated parents. She tells of long waits in long lines standing next to adults cussing and speaking about vulgar topics. She explains how many prisons require the children to remain seated, without bathroom breaks, for hours. If a child needs to leave the room to use the bathroom, he/she is not allowed back into the visitation area.³³ Some institutions allow visitors and incarcerated people to engage in inappropriate public displays of affection that children will witness, while other institutions do not even allow children to hug or touch their parents. Furthermore, author Sandra Enos reports that many parents complain that visiting times are brief and visiting rooms

³⁰ Ibid., 71.

³¹ Ibid., 79.

³² Ibid., 1.

³³ Cynthia Martone, *Loving Through Bars: Children with Parents in Prison* (Santa Montica, CA: Santa Montica Press, 2005), 29-38.

are noisy and lack privacy.³⁴

These visits can also be expensive for families already in strapped financial situations. There is the cost of gas to travel to the institution and the cost of supplies (such as toiletries or cigarettes) for the incarcerated family member. In addition, visitors must purchase food at the institution because visitors are not allowed to bring their own food, and visits typically last all day. For some children whose caregiver does not have appropriate finances, visits are not a feasible option. Also, more than 60% of parents in the state prison system are held over 100 miles away from their children.³⁵ For many of these children as well, visits are not a feasible option.

Fortunately for these children, there are other factors that improve family resiliency and child success. These factors are summed up by the Family and Corrections Network, an organization that works to repair the family life of incarcerated people. This organization cites three factors that help children develop successfully: children need “predictable and attached relationships with one or more caring adults; skills and activities that build competence and confidence; and belief in a higher power, spirituality and/or affiliation with a community of faith.”³⁶

Crossroad Bible Institute, a non-profit organization ministering to incarcerated people with distance education Bible study courses, is in the process of creating a program to reach these lost children. CBI believes their current program, adapted to meet the developmental

³⁴ Sandra Enos, *Mothering from the Inside: Parenting in a Women's Prison* (New York: State University of the New York Press, 2001), 84.

³⁵ Christopher J. Mumola, “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children” U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), 5.

³⁶ Ann Aldalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, “Risk and Protection,” *Children of Prisoners Library*, <http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL104-RiskandProtection.html> (accessed October 15, 2006).

needs of children, will address all three areas cited by the Family and Corrections Network.

Using Bible study lessons designed with simple, yet educational content, CBI's children's lessons will include color pictures, engaging text and straightforward questions. In order to be accessible and understandable to most children, lessons will be written at a second-third grade reading level. Students who read below this level can still participate if a caregiver, family member, mentor or friend will read the lessons aloud. Students who read above a second or third grade reading level will be free to complete the children's course and enter the next level of CBI Bible study courses.

Students will be given the freedom to express their prayer requests, concerns or questions with a personal Instructor who will answer each concern in a caring manner. After a student completes his/her first lesson, he/she will be assigned to a personal Instructor who is a responsible and loving Christian adult. This Instructor will pray for the child, correct the lesson with encouraging comments on every page and write a personal full-page letter in response. As the child progresses through the lessons, a mentoring relationship will develop between the child and the Instructor. In this way, CBI will provide a link between each child and a responsible, caring role model.

Throughout the course, students receive positive feedback from this role model, who writes constructive comments on each page of the child's lesson. There will be rewards and incentives to reinforce the student's work. One major incentive to encourage students to continue in the course will be a drawing for prizes ranging from small toys and t-shirts to one big prize, such as a bike or a stereo. After completing the course, students will be awarded a certificate of achievement and will be invited to continue their studies at the next level. In this way, CBI will provide children with "skills that build competence and confidence."

Finally, the most important thing that CBI will provide each child is also the greatest need of each child—the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Family and Corrections Network suggests that a child needs “belief in a higher power, spirituality and/or affiliation with a community of faith.” A child with a firm religious affiliation has purpose for life and the future, a basis for morals and guidelines and a strong connection to a community with like beliefs.

However, CBI provides more than just religion—it leads the student into a relationship with the personal God of the universe. Through study of Scripture, CBI takes students by the hand and points them to the cross of Jesus Christ, the only place where they are able to receive forgiveness for sins and peace with God. CBI is concerned with bettering the present circumstances of each student and improving his/her future. But more than that, CBI is concerned for the soul of each student, and CBI is confident that when souls are changed, situations can change. The cycle of incarceration can be broken through the transforming power of the Gospel, and that is what CBI intends to bring each lost child of an incarcerated parent.

The children of incarcerated parents, scattered across the country, lost and often forgotten, are struggling against great odds. Faced with separation from parents; at great educational, social and psychological risk; often exposed to negative adult behaviors; experiencing poverty, abandonment or abuse; and going through a mixture of difficult emotions, these children desperately need the help of caring and concerned adults. Crossroad Bible Institute intends to help these children break the cycle in which they are trapped through the transforming power of the Gospel.

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