

A Study of the Children of Prisoners

Summary Report, October 2010

Practice implications: what can be done?

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Project 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 face my parent's incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labelled because my parent is incarcerated.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

The main finding of this project is that the path of the children of prisoners towards an incarcerated future is full of places where good interventions can 'break the cycle', or where poor interventions make things worse. The elements, and what can be done, is documented in a practice manual to be made widely available, which is based on the SFCHIPP Bill of Rights, in the box at left.

Implications for Justice, Police and Corrections

At arrest, in the court system or at the prison, children need to be treated with kindness and respect for their rights. Poor justice practices inflame anger and resentment; good ones foster strong bonds that can reduce re-offending and assist the children to cope well.

Implications for social agencies

Good practices, including ensuring the health, social and educational needs of the children are met, offering mentoring and other forms of support, reducing family poverty and ensuring that the children have the opportunity (if they wish) to maintain a quality relationship with their incarcerated parent, can do much to stop the children ending up on a path to prison.

This booklet provides a summary of a research project into the effects of parental imprisonment on the health, well-being and prospects of children. The study was funded by the Lotteries Community Research Fund and undertaken by Network Research on behalf of PILLARS.

Over two years of the study, 368 sentenced prisoners have been surveyed in 9 prisons: six men's and three women's. Surveys were completed with 123 women and 245 men.

271 of 368 prisoners stated they were parents, and they had 871 children between them. The average number of children per parent was 3.2, and the average number including non-parents was 2.4.

74 interviews were carried out with whānau and tamariki of prisoners. Those interviewed have been parents, grandparents, other relatives or non-relatives of children.

Finally, close to 50 interviews, seminars, conference papers and presentations have been undertaken with government and community agencies, organisations, professionals and others with an interest in good outcomes for the children.

Stop the cycle of crime

New Zealand's rate of imprisonment is high compared to similar countries - 199 people in prison per 100,000 population. This is high compared to Australia (134/100,000), the UK (154/100,000) and Canada (117/100,000). The USA has a much higher rate at 748/100,000.

As a result of policy changes, it is estimated that the New Zealand prison population will increase from 8,500 currently to 12,400 in 2018 (a rate of 290/100,000). Many of those places will be filled by people who are currently children who live on or below the poverty line, many of whom have had one or more parents in prison.

A core goal of this project is to understand the situation and needs of the children of prisoners, so that we can stop the cycle of crime for the next generation, and bring down prisoner numbers, by reducing crime.

Related information

Invisible Children (2009). Report of first year findings of 'A study of the children of prisoners'. Available at www.pillars.org.nz or www.networkers.co.nz.

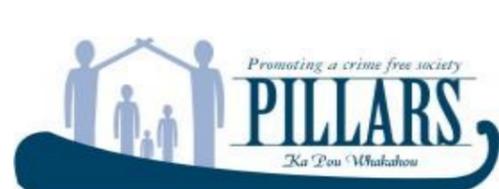
Practice manual for working with the families and children of prisoners. Contact PILLARS on 03 377 3990 for copies of the manual.

Other reports: the project has generated a range of milestone and progress reports on the prisoners survey (2), the family interviews (2) and a second year summary report. Articles are also being written for academic journals on (a) the survey of women prisoners and (b) the overall project. Contact Liz Gordon at liz@networkers.co.nz.

During the process of this study, the National Health Committee was doing a parallel study on the health of prisoners and their families. The two studies should be read together.

National Health Committee (2010) Health in Justice. Ka Piki te Ora, Kia Tika! Wellington: NHC. Available at <http://www.nhc.health.govt.nz>.

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Key findings of the study

Nearly half of the prisoners surveyed had, as a child, experienced family members (between 1 and 8) going to prison.

Where the arrest takes place at home, certain police tactics (dawn raids, hammering on doors, breaking in, shouting, armed offenders in black combat outfits and carrying guns, denial of use of toilet, denial of breakfast when family woken, children having to stand outside) traumatise the children even without seeing their loved one being taken away by force. The police have no overall policies for such arrests.

Less than half of the prisoners who were parents had their children living within a hour's drive. Many caregivers undergo significant hardship to ensure the children can visit their incarcerated parent, and such hardship is often compounded by lack of facilities or welcome at the prison for the caregiver or children.

The children of prisoners mainly live in families headed by a beneficiary or a retired person, and there is a significant shortage of resources in their homes.

The children of prisoners tend to have a wide range of emotional and physical health problems, anger, bed-wetting, attachment disorders, bullying or victim behaviour that affect every aspect of their lives, impeding their educational achievement and causing them to gravitate to risky behaviours in adolescence.

In most cases these problems remain untreated, and there are few services to support the children.

Much more needs to be done.



Normalisation the great debate

During the process of this research, we have occasionally come across the belief that the best way to treat the children of prisoners is to keep them as far away as possible from their incarcerated parent. The fear is that children may become 'normalised' to the culture and systems of the prison, which may make it more likely that they will offend as adults.

We saw no evidence of normalisation being a cause of intergenerational crime.

A more likely cause is the economic and social circumstances of the families, the health and educational problems that the children have, a general falling behind in social and emotional development, poor peer choices and a move towards crime. The truth is, it is not hard to see which children are heading down that path already. The attention seeking, bedwetting, angry, unruly, sick, crying, bullying, educationally backward child is all too common in the stories that we hear from the caregivers of children of prisoners. Social and justice agencies can make these tendencies worse by failing to identify and respect the needs of the children, adding to the trauma they face and failing to meet the children's needs.

The good news is that while they are younger, there is ample opportunity to intervene and assist these children through counselling, good access to their imprisoned parent, economic security, adequate housing, access to excellent health care and educational and emotional support.

The bad news is that, while these opportunities exist in principle, in practice there is often little help and support available for the children.

How are they doing?

Some families are doing very well, and some prisoner/ parents are better off away from their families because they may be abusive, addicted or mentally ill. But prisoners can be good parents too, and many families are struggling to survive and bring their children up well, as well as maintaining quality relationships with the incarcerated parent.

Families with resources do best, and especially if one or more caregivers are working. But most of the families interviewed for this study have debt, not resources, and end up living on benefits or grandparents' pensions. The effects of low incomes and inadequate resources are very evident. Families often live in poor housing, and may move frequently to try and find affordable options. They struggle to survive on benefits but the challenges of the children make it impossible to work. The strains are enormous:

When I went to WINZ they made me feel like I shouldn't be looking after the children ... I felt like there should have been a little bit more respect ... I gave up a full time job to take these children on, so that they wouldn't end up in the system. I find it kind of degrading, because you have to defend yourself over and over and over and over again.

Most of the children whose families participated in this study exhibit emotional and physical health problems directly caused by their situation. Younger children tend to have night terrors and attachment issues, in middle childhood there is anger, bullying, bedwetting and withdrawal, and adolescent children tend to become involved in a range of risky behaviours. Some live in nightmare conditions, with caregivers terrified to be alone with the children at night, but with no-one to turn to, and conveying their fears to the children.

These problems affect every aspect of the children's lives. Few were achieving well educationally. They may be unable to concentrate, have few friends, are bullies or bullies or are angry and oppositional. The stigma of incarceration often extends to families and children, marked as criminals long before they ever offend. The mix of emotional immaturity, anger, educational deficiency and alienation puts the children at extreme risk of becoming the next generation of prisoners; a risk that could be mitigated with good practices.

Some facts about prisoners and their children

- More than half of all prisoners are Māori. Māori are imprisoned at a rate of over 700 to every 100,000 in the population. 3% of Maori 24 year old males are in prison. In our prison surveys, 68% overall, and 86% of the women were Māori.
- Recidivist prisoners tend to have fragmented families, and may have children with 2, 3, 4 or even more partners. These children often grow up in poverty-ridden, stressful, benefit led homes.
- Prisons are not equally distributed throughout the country. The burden of providing adequate health and social care for these families therefore falls unequally, but in general District Health Boards and other agencies have not developed plans of action to meet the needs of these families. As a result, much of the time quality intervention for the children, to prevent them falling into crime as they grow up, is not available.
- Schools are often the first place that families turn for support when a family member is sent to prison. Schools and teachers tend to be highly supportive on a personal level, but the educational performance of the children still tends to track downwards, making poor outcomes more likely in adolescence. A good education is a powerful tool for crime prevention.
- Prisoners currently pay 99c a minute for a national call to family members using phone cards, and have no access to cheaper rates.

Arrest stories

It was 6am. The whole family Mum, Dad, Grandparents and the two children were all asleep when police and dogs arrived. Everyone was required to wait outside while the house was searched, the children still half asleep. The older child was very embarrassed as we had just moved there and all the neighbours were watching. It was [son's] twelfth birthday and he had a big day planned when around 30 members of the Armed Offenders Squad (AOS) swarmed into the house with four dogs. They shouted and yelled and they popped round corners with their guns. The [Dad] gave himself up and they did not even use handcuffs. The whole family was traumatised and in tears all day. Again at 6am, eight police woke us up, arrested Dad, and forced us to sit in the lounge for 4 hours while the house was searched. We were not allowed to go to the toilet or get breakfast. Yet another early raid, 6 am, the single mum and her child woken by police. The son was particularly traumatised and started screaming. Mum was arrested and handcuffed in front of him.

Prison visiting

Some prisons seem to focus only on security, which can mean grim, unsmiling officers, no access to drinks for visitors, no vending machines, no touching, no toys and long waits at security.

It was just shocking! You know, I hated taking my son to go visit him because ... it wasn't a place for kids to go to. It was bad, I hated it ... They definitely make you feel like it's a prison when you're walking through to visit. And the seats you have to sit on are awful. They should make it a lot more family friendly".

In contrast, we heard of prisons that allowed children in to eat on a regular basis with their mother to re-establish relationships, those that offer a hot drink to visitors and even access to some limited child care.

The officers make the checking easier when we bring the girls in. In the visitors room the wardens have been good, really friendly. Very child friendly - the officers have been fantastic.

Prisons have good relationships with local PARS volunteers, and children have more successful visits when they go in with a volunteer. There are major differences between prisons in visiting policies, and it was not clear to the research team or the families why this was so. We think that Corrections should be able to ensure good visiting services and support for families in all prisons without compromising security.