



Children of Incarcerated Parents: They are in our midst and in need of our help

Background Paper Exploring Issues Affecting Children of Incarcerated Parents

A document from Prison Fellowship International
Asian Commission.

Prison Fellowship International (PFI) is a non-governmental organisation with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

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Introduction

Children who have a parent in prison are in our midst. From New Zealand to Cambodia, from the United States to Uganda, from Kyrgyzstan to Kenya, there are children who have a parent that has been taken away from them because of crime.

There are serious issues that face children of incarcerated parents in every culture and context, and it appears that while these cultures and contexts are all very different, the issues facing children share common themes and the required responses also share common elements. This paper presents findings regarding these common issues affecting children of incarcerated parents.

Our aim is to present emphatically the fact that ***there will be children of incarcerated parents in your context and they will be facing difficulties that urgently require intervention.*** Not maybe. They will. Because of this there is a need for all who work and volunteer in prison environments to acknowledge that children of incarcerated parents ***are*** affected in their own context, and that we need to respond to their needs.

“[An underlying theme] is that the effect of parental incarceration on children is not a local concern but a global one, affecting children both in the developed and the developing world.”¹

Methodology

In the first planning meetings the project team² compiled a list of issues their respective ministries had identified relating to children of incarcerated parents. These were summarized into seven broad categories for the purposes of aiding in research information compilation. These categories were later revised down to five broad categories.

31 research documents, articles and publications were obtained from around the world through web search, questionnaires sent to PF National Ministries involved in the project (India, Cambodia, Nepal, and Hong Kong), and from research documents prepared by PF National Ministries.³

Of these documents two came out of ***Africa***, five from ***Asia***, one from ***China***, five from the ***UK***, seven from ***North America*** (USA and Canada), one from the ***Pacific Region*** and ten research documents

¹ Tompkin, J. (2009). Orphans of justice: in search of the best interests of the child when a parent is imprisoned: a legal analysis. QUNO.

² The *Prison Fellowship International: Asia Commission* meeting was conducted over three days and made up of a representative from the PF International Centre for Offender Transformation, PF International Executive Vice President, Executive Directors and members of PF National Ministries from Cambodia, India, Nepal, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, and a PF International: Asia Secretariat staff member

³ A full list of research documents and their source is included in the appendices (available upon request)

had a **Global focus**. The ten with the global focus included information from New Zealand, Canada, Kyrgyzstan, Africa, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, Belgium, Australia, China, India, Palestine, France, Cambodia, Japan, Kenya, Argentina, Spain, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Ireland, Bolivia, 30 European countries, and South Africa.⁴

Findings

The first striking observation arising from the information was the commonality of issues across the globe. The same issues found in Asia in a less wealthy setting for example, were the same issues being faced in North America or the United Kingdom or New Zealand.

In reviewing the material we found five major categories of issues that affect children of incarcerated parents. These are:

1. Risk of deprivation of basic necessities and opportunities
2. Risk of danger of secondary victimization and depersonalization
3. Risk of deterioration of overall situation of a child
4. Risk of distance from incarcerated parent
5. Risk of descent into antisocial behaviour

For each of these categories, there are between 9 and 16 specific issues that have been identified. They are included here with the top three issues gaining the majority across the range of contexts at the top.

Category	Issues	<i>out of 26 documents</i>	%
<u>Deprivation of basic necessities and opportunities</u> (26/ 32 documents addressed this issue)	Basic necessities (competent care, finances, food and nutrition, shelter, warmth)	19	76%
	Parental relationship (with incarcerated parent)	20	76%
	Social relationships/ support	11	42%
	Protection (from exploitation or abuse)	9	
	Education	6	
	Good role modelling	6	
	Health care	6	
	Information about imprisonment	6	
	Adequate supervision/ parenting	4	
	Family relationships	2	
	Liberty	1	
	Citizenship	1	

Category	Issues	<i>out of 25 documents</i>	%
<u>Danger of secondary victimization and depersonalization</u>	Shame/ Social Stigma/ Discrimination	17	68%
	Abuse (physical, sexual, mental)	11	44%
	trauma experienced during arrest and trial phase	7	28%
	Exploitation/ trafficking	6	

⁴ Particular recognition must be given to the Quaker United Nations Office for their work in this field and the well presented user friendly material that was sourced through their web site. Thank you!

(25/ 32 documents addressed this issue)	Neglect	4	
	Prison environment traumatic for child visits to parents	4	
	Revenge taken against them	3	
	Separation from siblings	3	
	Trauma of separation from parent	2	

Category	Issues	<i>out of 23 documents</i>	%
Deterioration of overall situation of a child (23/ 32 documents addressed this issue)	Destructive behaviours	10	43%
	School performance	9	39%
	Regressive behaviours	8	34%
	Mental and Emotional Health	7	
	Economic stability	7	
	Ability to relate and communicate with peers	6	
	Self esteem	5	
	Leave original roles to take on greater responsibilities	5	
	Physical health	4	
	Parental relationships	4	
	Developmental delays	3	
	Reduced coping mechanisms and supports	3	
	Housing	2	
	Negative views of authority	2	
	Break up of family unit	1	
Spirituality and morality	1		

Category	Issues	<i>out of 17 documents</i>	%
Distance from incarcerated parent (17/ 32 documents addressed this issue)	Long distances from prison location	13	76%
	Transport difficulties	9	52%
	Prison visiting facilities unpleasant and cause visiting issues	8	47%
	Costs of visits/phone calls reduce contact with parent	7	
	Caretakers unwilling or unable to coordinate visit	7	
	High level of children never visit parents	5	
	Corruption/ negative attitudes of prison staff reduce desire and ability to visit	3	
	No-one able to take child	3	
	Infrequent visits cause confusion for child	2	
	Authority of parent in child's life reduced	2	
	Difficulties communicating with parents in prison	2	
	Family unaware of imprisonment or whereabouts	2	
	Parents in prison find it hard to maintain relationship even with visits	1	
	Lack of privacy during visits	1	

Category	Issues	<i>out of 20</i>	%
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		<i>documents</i>	
Descent into antisocial behaviour (20/ 32 documents addressed this issue)	Criminal activity	15	75%
	Substance abuse	7	35%
	Aggression	7	35%
	Gang involvement	3	
	Delinquency	3	
	Street living/ homelessness	3	
	Violence	2	
	Sexualised behaviour	2	
	Involvement in sex trade	2	

Breaking this down into the areas of most concern, we can confidently make the following assertions:

Regardless of the culture or context in which children of an incarcerated parent is found, as a result of the incarceration of their parent some will:

1. Be being deprived of basic necessities (competent care, finances, food and nutrition, shelter, warmth), parental relationship (with incarcerated parent) and vital social relationships and supports and/or
2. Be experiencing secondary victimization such as shame, social Stigma and discrimination, some form of abuse (physical, sexual, mental) and be suffering from trauma experienced during arrest and trial phase and/or
3. Be experiencing a deterioration in their behaviour and exhibiting destructive behaviours, lower school performance and regressive behaviours such as bed wetting, and/or
4. Be distanced from their parent and have difficulties visiting because of long distances from the prison, because of transport issues, and because the visiting environment is unpleasant and unsuitable for children and/or
5. Be descending into antisocial behaviours such as crime, substance abuse (alcohol/drugs etc) and aggressive behaviour.

These are the issues on our doorstep. What are we doing about it?

Factors of context that need to be considered

While we are promoting the fact that these issues are common worldwide, we are not naive to the fact that the opportunities within each context will differ and that a group's ability to respond to these needs will depend on a variety of factors. However, while these factors exist, every effort should be made to manage and reduce these risks where possible. The Asia Commission team sent simple questionnaires to Prison Fellowship International ministries. We received 11 completed responses.⁵ The questionnaires contained eight questions relating to quality of services, of religious context and of accessibility to target

⁵ Information for this section was sourced from Prison Fellowship National Ministries that responded to our questionnaire from Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United States, Fiji, Pakistan, Mongolia, Malaysia, and one non-PF ministry in the Indian State of Nagaland.

groups.⁶ This is not a large enough pool from which to make definitive conclusions however some interesting points were noted and could be explored further.

Eight of twelve of the respondent countries are categorized as developing nations. Four are categorized as developed nations.⁷

Religious Context

- Secular = two nations (NZ, Nepal,)
- Buddhist = two nations (Cambodia - Theravada, Mongolia - Shamanism)
- Muslim = three nations (Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan)
- Hindu = one nation (India *(please note that by constitution, India is secular, however religious context in majority Hindu)*)
- Judeo Christian = four nations (Nagaland, The Netherlands, USA, Fiji)

Quality of Health Services and Prison Conditions

In addressing issues of health services and prison conditions, five nations (one developed and one developing) ranked them as **adequate to good** (with exception of NZ whose ranking was excellent for health services), with seven nations (all developing) ranking them as **minimal to poor**.

Quality of Courts and Judicial Processes

In this category only four of the developed nations ranked this as **adequate to good**. The eight developing nations ranked this as generally **poor with one ranking it as minimal**.

Quality of Reintegration Services

In this category only four of the developed nations ranked this as **adequate** – none ranking it any higher. The remaining nations ranked this as **poor down to minimal**.

Quality of Services for Children

Only New Zealand ranked this as adequate. The remaining nations ranked the quality of social services for children of incarcerated parents as **not adequate**.

Response to Christian Activity or Organizations working with prisoners and communities (Ranking from bad/poor/o.k./good/ excellent)

Nine nations described the response as o.k. to excellent. Only three nations described the response as bad or poor (*two Muslim nations and one Hindu nation, all three developing nations*)

Level of Access to Prisons and Prisoners (*ranking from none, low, medium, high*)

⁶ The full list of questions with the definitions of the answer options can be obtained at the Asia Commission workshop or by contacting PF International directly.

⁷ Distinctions made according to the [International Monetary Fund](http://www.imf.org)'s World Economic Outlook Report, April 2010. A list of nations considered developing can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Developing_country

In this category, 10 nations described their access as medium to high, with only two ranked as low (Pakistan and Bangladesh). It was noted that despite major difficulties in some contexts, none stated that there was no access.

Level of Access to Communities/ Children/ Families of prisoners

In this category, 10 nations described their access as medium to high, with only two ranked as low (Pakistan and Nagaland⁸). It was noted that despite major difficulties in some contexts, none stated that there was no access.

Concluding observations that can be made regarding context and access to prisoners, families of prisoners and communities of prisoners

Even in the countries where the development and religious context are most challenging, there ***seems to always be some form of access possible*** both to prisoners and to the communities in which their children and families are located. There may be significant challenges for some ministries in developing ministry for children of incarcerated parents that would require serious consideration, but there is still a seed of opportunity. For the most part, there seems to be the possibility of high access.

Regardless of the development or religious context of a nation, it also appears that prisoner reintegration services and services for children are generally inadequate or non-existent.

Conclusion

Children who have a parent in prison are in our midst. ***There are children of incarcerated parents in your context and they face difficulties that urgently require intervention.*** We have seen that the same issues are facing children in every development and religious context. In every context, children of incarcerated parents will be facing deprivations of basic needs, will be deprived of ongoing healthy relationships with their parents and will be suffering from deteriorating social relationships. Out of these deprivations children will be becoming secondary victims, will be suffering from deterioration in behaviour, living situation, relationships and educational performance. Out of these issues, children of incarcerated parents will be entering into anti social behaviour and possible criminal activity.

Unfortunately we have also seen that in many contexts, those in authority that remove parents from their children and deprive them of their freedom because of crime, only provide services to these children that are adequate at best, but are generally inadequate or non-existent.

These are the issues on our doorsteps. What are we doing about it?

References (list of references available upon request).

⁸ The respondent for this questionnaire stated that they had never attempted access and indicated that should permission be sought to do such a thing, there was a high likelihood of being granted it.