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Facts and Issues: CPL 104

Risk and Protection

*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.*

Children and families of prisoners often share common characteristics and life circumstances. Many are poor. Some live in suburban and rural communities, but most live in inner-city neighborhoods. Most are likely to experience addictions and domestic or community violence. Within that profile, however, there are many variations and a continuum of risk.

At one end of the continuum, there are families in grave danger. On the other are those with adequate support systems that are coping fairly well. In between are large numbers of children and families that are barely managing and are under great pressures.

Assessing Risk Factors for Children and Families of Prisoners

Research has helped us to understand the continuum of risk and has identified behaviors and

characteristics that put children and families at risk. The incarceration of a parent may be, in and of itself, a risk factor, but most members of the families of prisoners experience multiple risks. They often endure poverty, substandard educational environments, violent neighborhoods, inadequate parenting or care and various forms of institutional and interpersonal racism. Studies show that the accumulation of these risks creates cycles of failure.

These failures can lead to poor work and school performance and cause a loss of self-respect.

Children and families of prisoners express feelings of hopelessness, loss and defeat and/or rage and resentment. They may be more vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse as they seek connections and test boundaries. The pursuit of numbness (via drugs and alcohol) that follows in the wake of trauma and hopelessness can lead to the criminal behaviors that chemical dependence requires and unresolved rage breeds.

Some families find protection

from the most damaging aspects of risk. Others do not. As communities work to provide protection and to meet the needs of these families, individual strengths and varying realities must be respected.

Some incarcerated parents were caring and involved prior to imprisonment. Some were uninvolved and disconnected before and continue that pattern inside. Some begin to build a relationship with their children only when they are locked up. Others appear involved while incarcerated, but have great difficulty maintaining their relationships on the street. Some men and women may distance themselves from their families when they go to jail. They often do so as a protective coping strategy, not from a lack of interest or caring.

Each inmate, parolee, child and family member will cope with incarceration in their own way. Prisoners and their families remind us that each family is unique and that many factors influence a family's ability to cope with the incarceration and release of a family member.

What Puts Families At Additional Risk?

The following risk factors, when added to parental incarceration, increase stress and negative impact for children of prisoners.

- Abuse: physical, sexual, emotional.
- Poverty and/or parental unemployment or under-employment.
- Racism.
- Substandard schooling/education for parent and/or child.
- Alcoholism (child's or parent's).
- Drug abuse/addiction (child's or parent's).
- Deteriorating or uninhabitable housing.
- Gang involvement.
- Crime-victimization.
- Criminal activity (child's or parent's).
- Incarceration of parent or caregiver.
- Trauma...violence, abuse, terrorism or other life threatening circumstances.
- Parental neglect.
- Parental harshness.
- Low birth weight.
- Poor nutrition.
- Inferior medical care.
- Mental illness of child or parent.
- Physically or emotionally unavailable parents.
- Marital distress (parents).
- Family divorce.
- Single parenthood (parent's or teen's).
- Lack of social support (kid's or parent's)
- Lack of role models (kid's or parent's).
- Deprivation of social relationships and/or activities.
- Profound or repeated loss.
- Powerlessness-personal, family and community.

Factors Affecting Family Coping

- Community support vs. isolation: urban, suburban or rural.
- Economic stability.
- Health and emotional capacity of caregivers.
- Quality of the child's school.
- Job satisfaction (teen's and adult's).
- Community resources.
- Child and family spirituality.
- Racial and ethnic prejudices.

What Protects Children and Families

Protective factors are people and things that buffer children and families from risk. They increase the capacity for survival and can foster healthy development in spite of the risks. Research on resiliency tells us that for children exposed to multiple risks, three factors stand out in those who develop successfully:

- Predictable and attached relationships with one or more caring adults.
- Skills and activities that build competence and confidence.
- Belief in a higher power, spirituality and/or affiliation with a community of faith.

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People and programs can make a difference in the lives of children and families of prisoners. They can function as protective factors. People who make a difference are resourceful in the face of difficulty, able to emotionally recover from setbacks and see themselves as capable of making a difference in others' lives.

Programs that help are relevant to the needs and lives of the families they serve, partner with family members to find solutions to problems and support children and families without judging or criticizing the family member in prison.

For more about how communities can help, see *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide* by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, Family and Corrections Network, publisher.



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In Appreciation

The Children of Prisoners Library is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation.

We are also grateful to our sponsoring organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association.

Special thanks to the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York for permission to revise and publish material from the three volume set of pamphlets, *How Can I Help?*

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.

