

July 2009

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*Human Rights  
& Refugees  
Publications*

# Children Need Dads Too: Children with Fathers in Prison

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*English Français Español*



*July 2009*



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Since 2003, the Quaker UN Office, Geneva, has been raising the issues of women in prison and



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accessing where this information is collected, it is patchy and not always shared.<sup>24</sup> However, there are some statistics available that allow approximate figures to be calculated.

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Denmark is the only country in Western Europe known to allow male prisoners to have their children in prison with them. This only applies if the father is scheduled to be released by the time

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If children are placed in state custody, parent-child bonds are at high risk of permanent rather than temporary severance. Many states in the USA make it easy for a foster care agency to petition for the termination of an incarcerated parent's rights, and the statutorily prescribed I C fd



On the other hand, the assumption that imprisonment means a man is a bad father must also be avoided. 'Even while many young fathers have trouble holding a job and may even spend time in jail, most have something to offer their children. In one set of interviews with families during prison visits, 81.6 percent of respondents believed that the incarceration of their father/husband had created problems for their family while only 29.8 percent believed incarceration had solved problems.

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Despite the lack of systematic data on the children of prisoners, some studies have begun to document the nature of detrimental effects of parental incarceration on children. The results are

visiting costs.<sup>131</sup> Debt can be accrued due to the financial disruption and pressure on inadequate incomes.<sup>132</sup> Many families are left dependent on welfare, which may not cater well to their situation. A study on poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families in the UK states welfare « ill », n nief UK

children experiencing stigma, bullying and teasing from their peers and the local community.<sup>146</sup> The



However, assertions that paternal criminality replicates itself in children should be treated with care. It is hard to find longitudinal studies, representative samples and appropriate control groups from which to establish general rules. Some studies also found contradictory results: for example, one researcher concluded that where children were in trouble with the police, they tended to have been involved in 'problem behaviours' prior to the parental imprisonment.<sup>179</sup> There are also variations in behavioural reactions of siblings in the same family and cases where a parent and child have become estranged or lost contact prior to the sentence, meaning that parental incarceration may have little impact on the child's behaviour.

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Being unable to control their own day-to-day routines, to make mundane decisions about their own lives or carry out traditional roles can encourage imprisoned men to perceive themselves as powerless and can devalue their role as parents.<sup>217</sup>

Many prisoners have serious social and emotional problems before entering prison that can inhibit their ability to parent effectively, such as substance abuse problems, repetitive criminal activity, abusive relationships, mental illness and health problems. In the USA 67 percent of incarcerated fathers in state prisons reported alcohol or drug dependence or abuse prior to arrest. Reports of clinically meaningful



noted previously, it can be upsetting for children when imprisoned fathers develop idealised notions of them, or feel unable to parent authoritatively. Helping these fathers, or parents in general, to remain positive and engaged with their children while in prison could protect their children from much of the potential harm caused by this situation.

One study on the 'parental

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may also help with the problem of fathers struggling to enact their role as 'play mate' whilst in prison. There are also play projects offering supervised play areas in some prisons in the UK and Belgium thanks to volunteers and the support of various foundations.<sup>314</sup>

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To an extent, these examples of good practice demonstrate that attitudes are changing with regard to supporting the children of imprisoned parents and perceptions of fatherhood. The implementation of some state-led responsible fatherhood initiatives challenge the conventional wisdom of treating incarcerated fathers' family responsibilities as private matters.<sup>315</sup> However, despite some promising approaches emerging, there is still a dearth of schemes available for the children of imprisoned parents in general,

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resources and strategies to obtain further resources to continue programme implementation. It could also create a shared understanding of what is required in order to avoid inconsistencies or overlaps in service provision.

There should be services available to accompany children on visits when they are practical difficulties. One option that could be made available is legal services for imprisoned parents, the primary purpose of which would be to help prisoners maintain a healthy, constructive relationship with their children. There should also be services available to support children in domestic or parental imprisonment. The children's best interests must be a primary consideration in any intervention.

Support for the children of imprisoned parents should continue after each sentence has been served to help reconstruct family relationships and positive child care. Many fathers are required to spend unpaid time in training and education programmes after release so incentives could be provided for participation. Harmful policies affecting ex-offenders need to be reviewed and post-prison support should be developed in a way that is father sensitive.

Support for ex-offenders to secure economic resources in order to care for children who are in need.

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# Endnotes

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