



## *Children of Offenders and the Cycle Of Intergenerational Incarceration*

By Christina Melton Crain

**W**ith more than 155,000<sup>1</sup> men and women behind bars in Texas, one must wonder: Who is minding the children? It is largely assumed that the majority of children of male offenders live with and are cared for by their biological mothers. On the other hand, children of female offenders — who make up roughly 7 percent of the incarcerated population in Texas — may live in foster care or with their fathers, maternal or paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, or friends of the family. Little is known about these children individually, but collectively, they are quickly becoming the focus of national attention.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that as of Dec. 31, 2005, there were nearly 2.2 million offenders held in state and federal prisons or county and municipal jails. Coupled with individuals under community supervision, that figure totaled more than 7 million individuals, or approximately 3.2 percent of the U.S. adult population.<sup>2</sup> These prisoners are parents of an estimated 2.4 million American children, which translates to three out of every 100 children.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Mumola, a BJS statistician, estimates that about 7.3 million children — 10 percent of all minor children in the U.S. — have a parent in prison or jail or on community supervision.<sup>4</sup> A report developed by the Women's Prison Association and Home Inc. quotes a much higher estimate, reporting that at least 10 million children in the U.S. have a parent involved in the criminal justice system.<sup>5</sup>

Having determined how many children may be affected by parental incarceration and with whom many of these children live, the next step is to consider the individual child. It is here that one must examine the relationship between the child and the parent prior to the parent's incarceration; although, regardless of the quality of the relationship, the child suffers significant loss, pain and grief



The staff and leadership team who established the TDCJ GO KIDS initiative are recognized at a Texas Board of Criminal Justice meeting in May 2005.



Manuel Peralta

Leonard S. Don Jr. reads to his daughter, Alyssa Kadyann Don, during the Storybook Project's Family Literacy Day at Travis State Jail.

when separated from a parent. The age of the child, as well as the child's developmental stage at the time of separation, factor into his or her ability to cope with the loss.

Also important to the well-being of the child is the living environment and type of care received while the parent is absent. Children who are passed from home to home or separated from their siblings will likely fare much worse than those who have some semblance of stability and solidarity in their daily environment. The length of the separation (ranging from days to decades) and the amount of contact with the absent parent affect the security of the child. Although it is true that in some instances separation is in the best interest of the child, those cases are rare and not the subject of discussion within this article.

We know not every child who has a parent in prison is doomed to live a criminal lifestyle and become part of the criminal justice system. So what makes the difference? Statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice show that children of offenders are six times more likely than their peers to be incarcerated, and one in 10 will be confined before ever becoming an adult.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, a 2004 Justice Department report indicated that nearly half of the then 2 million offenders in state prisons reported having a relative who was or had been incarcerated.<sup>7</sup> Within the juvenile justice system, more than half of the confined population has at least one parent who is or was in prison.<sup>8</sup> All of these numbers indicate that there is a strong correlation between family ties and crime.

## Education

More telling is one common element in generational incarceration that is markedly present: lack of educational achievement. According to BJS, 41 percent of all prisoners in state and federal systems did not have high school diplomas or GEDs, compared with 18 percent of the general population in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> The same study indicated that 75 percent of state inmates dropped out of high school. In a separate study, the Urban Institute found that 43 percent of

Texas state prisoners had not completed high school or earned GEDs.<sup>10</sup> If Texas, along with the rest of the U.S., were able to raise the male high school graduation rate by 5 percent, there would be an annual savings of \$5 billion in crime-related expenses, according to information contained in the 2007 Justice Policy Institute's *Education and Public Safety Report*.<sup>11</sup>

The intergenerational link to educational achievement between parents and their children is not a new concept. In 1994, the National Center for Education Statistics published findings from a prison population survey that found that prisoners attained lower educational levels than those of their parents. This same study also concluded that parents of prisoners, overall, had attained less education than their cohorts, with 36 percent of the surveyed prisoner parents having less than a high school diploma, compared with 32 percent of the general population.<sup>12</sup> Another study examined the children of incarcerated mothers and found that overall these children had a 36 percent dropout rate, compared with the 9 percent national rate. For those incarcerated mothers who dropped out themselves and never attained GEDs, an astonishing 52 percent of their children also dropped out, compared with 15 percent of children whose mothers had finished high school prior to their incarceration.<sup>13</sup>

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## Community Programs

Cognizant of the vital role that all members of a family play in the life of a child, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) implemented the GO KIDS (Giving Offenders' Kids Incentive and Direction to Succeed) initiative in fall 2004. GO KIDS actively promotes the importance of preserving family ties and providing positive prevention and intervention services to the high-risk children of parents involved in the Texas criminal justice system. Maintained through the TDCJ Rehabilitation and Reentry Programs Division, a link on the TDCJ Web site ([www.tdcj.state.tx.us](http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us)) connects individuals to the GO KIDS Web site, which provides information on valuable resources and services across the state.

GO KIDS serves the caregivers of children of offenders by providing information about these types of children as well as about services in the community. On its user-friendly Web site, service organizations are listed by their locality,

with contact information and a Spanish and English summary of the services offered by the organizations. To heighten awareness of this resource, GO KIDS posters are displayed at TDCJ facilities and at parole and probation offices statewide, and free flyers are available for visitors that provide Web site and contact information. A GO KIDS exhibit room has also been established at the agency's biannual Public Awareness – Corrections Today (PACT) Conference. This free conference provides offender families, as well as offender advocates and volunteers, information on TDCJ and its programs. The GO KIDS exhibit room expands that focus to highlight community programs and prison programs that help children of offenders.

For the caregivers, GO KIDS provides information about resources in the areas of health, legal counsel and employment, in addition to information on mentoring, parenting skills, stress management, social and mental health services, home-based interventions, and school advocacy. Because positive youth development is a key factor in breaking the cycle of intergenerational incarceration, many of the services listed for children are geared toward creating a sense of personal safety, self-worth and responsibility, as well as offering support and guidance from caring adults. In addition to local community resources, the GO KIDS Web site provides links and contact information for relevant Texas state agencies and a variety of state and national organizations. Listings include the Texas Department of Human Services; Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services; Child and Family Programs, which provides services in various cities within Texas; Prison Fellowship; the Family and Corrections Network; and the American Association of Retired People, which provides information and resources to grandparents raising kids.

In addition to the Web site presence for children and their caregivers, GO KIDS helps TDCJ offenders by promoting a variety of in-prison programs designed to strengthen the parent-child relationship. These resources provide effective parenting education and training by offering activities that facilitate and encourage parent-child connections. Currently operating within the TDCJ prison system are a number of reading programs, like the Women's Storybook Project of Texas, which improve the reading skills of both the parent and child. Programs that teach parenting and relational skills are also offered in prisons. Examples of these include the nationally acclaimed Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program and the Texas SKIP (Supporting Kids of Incarcerated Parents) program. The Girl Scouts program offers opportunities for mothers and daughters to build relationship skills while the mother is incarcerated, and it provides services to the mother and family upon release. Texas SKIP focuses on responding to the needs of children, their caregivers and their incarcerated parents, and it provides interactive sessions to help strengthen the family connection.

For offenders on parole and probation, GO KIDS offers support by providing information on resources related to counseling, family preservation, therapy, crisis intervention and the social services that are available in many Texas counties. GO KIDS is also an invaluable tool for criminal justice professionals. When an attorney has a client whose family includes a child affected by a parent's arrest or incarceration, through GO KIDS, the attorney can pro-



Bambi Kiser

West Texas Boys Ranch President Doran Reynolds stands by his organization's exhibit during TDCJ's 2006 Public Awareness – Corrections Today conference.

vide the family and the caregivers of that child with information about available assistance and local services that will make a difference in the lives of all involved.

## Future Partnerships

Several well-known local and national service organizations collaborate with GO KIDS, working side by side with TDCJ to help children of offenders. These organizations — Amachi, Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Texas, No More Victims Inc., KickStart and the West Texas Boys Ranch —

### Current Programs and Initiatives in Texas

**Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Texas** provides children support, guidance, friendship and fun by matching them with adult role models.

**Amachi** assists children and youths who have parents currently or formerly incarcerated. Its goal is to help these individuals achieve their highest potential by engaging them in mentoring relationships with people of faith.

**No More Victims Inc.** addresses the deterrence of violent, abusive and victimizing behavior, with a special focus placed on the parent-child relationship. It offers education, emotional support and empowerment to both children and adults.

**KickStart** specifically encourages students to resolve conflict productively, avoid participating in gangs, choose drug-free lifestyles and remain in high school until they graduate. Resiliency is enhanced through the values and philosophies taught in martial arts.

**West Texas Boys Ranch** offers young men guidance, structure and opportunities through a family-based program and Christian environment.



Kelly Adams of Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Texas mans the Amachi Texas display booth during TDCJ's 2006 Public Awareness – Corrections Today conference.

work directly with children and offer mentoring, counseling and empowerment opportunities.

The Amachi Program, founded by former Philadelphia Mayor Rev. W. Wilson Goode Sr., is a unique partnership for secular and faith-based organizations to work together and provide mentoring opportunities to children of incarcerated parents. "Amachi" is a Nigerian word that means, "Who knows but what God has brought us through this child." Currently, 250 mentoring children of prisoner programs have partnered with more than 6,000 churches in 48 states and have served more than 100,000 children.<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing the positive benefits that initiatives and programs such as GO KIDS and Amachi can bring to children of offenders, Texas Gov. Rick Perry announced a \$3.78 million grant on March 9, 2006, to launch Amachi Texas, a collaborative effort between TDCJ, the Office of the Governor, Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Texas Workforce Commission and the OneStar Foundation. Amachi Texas is the nation's first statewide Amachi effort.

According to Olivia Eudaly, state executive director of Amachi Texas, within its first two years of operation, the program matched 2,012 children of offenders with positive adult role models, and it hopes to coordinate an additional 640 matches by the end of the fiscal year. Starting in the North Texas area, the program has since expanded and now provides mentoring opportunities throughout the state, to include the Panhandle and El Paso.

Because one in every 33 children has a parent in prison or jail, it is imperative that professionals involved in the criminal justice arena remember that an offender's family, in particular his or her children, are affected significantly by incarceration. By providing and using available resources, a great potential exists to help these children gain hope and direction and learn that there is an alternative life for them absent of crime. Such efforts can create, develop and strengthen the bond between children and their offender parents, ultimately breaking the potential cycle of intergenerational incarceration.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> TDCJ Daily Maximum Offender Population for Feb. 20, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2006. *Prisoners in 2005 and Probation and parole in the United States, 2005*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, Nell. 2005. *All alone in the world: Children of the incarcerated*. N.Y.: New Press.

<sup>4</sup> Mumola, Christopher. 2006. Children under correctional supervision: National statistics. Presentation at the National Institute on Drug Abuse research meeting, 6 November, in North Bethesda, Md.

<sup>5</sup> The Women's Prison Association and Home Inc. 2001. *Family to family: Partnerships between corrections and child welfare, part two*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Baltimore.

<sup>6</sup> Favro, Tony. 2007. Up to 10 million American children suffer the consequences of convicted parents. *City Mayors Society*, 17 March. Available at [www.citymayors.com/society/usa-prisoners-children.html](http://www.citymayors.com/society/usa-prisoners-children.html).

<sup>7</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2004. *Special report: Profile of jail inmates, 2002*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>8</sup> Favro, Tony. 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2003. *Special report: Education and correctional populations*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (January).

<sup>10</sup> Watson, Jamie, Amy L. Solomon, Nancy G. La Vigne and Jeremy Travis, with Meagan Funches and Barbara Parthasarathy. 2004. *A portrait of prisoner reentry in Texas*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center.

<sup>11</sup> Justice Policy Institute. 2007. *Education and public safety*. Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute.

<sup>12</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. 1994. *Literacy behind prison walls: Profiles of the prison population from the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

<sup>13</sup> Trice, Ashton and JoAnne Brewster. 2004. The effects of maternal incarceration on adolescent children. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 19(1):27-35.

<sup>14</sup> Amachi. 2008. Amachi updates. Retrieved 31 March from [www.amachimentoring.org](http://www.amachimentoring.org).

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