

Ministries Go Beyond Bars to Help Children of Inmates

Jesus talked about visiting prisoners, but what about the children of inmates? More than 1.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent, according to The Sentencing Project, and most of them don't get to see mom or dad. The number of incarcerated women rose 57 percent between 1995 and 2005, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports, and 75 percent of those females are mothers.

But it gets worse: Children with incarcerated parents tend to have antisocial behaviors. According to a U.S. Senate report, these children are six times more likely to be imprisoned sometime during their lives. Indeed, it's not unusual for inmates to have sons and daughters serving time in the same prison.

These stark realities are driving a new breed of prison ministry—ministries that meet the unique needs of children of inmates. Although these kids can be difficult to find, ministries such as Children of Inmates, Child Evangelism Fellowship and Prison Fellowship are making it their mission to meet the children's natural, emotional and spiritual needs and reconnect them with their parents.

"We connect with children of inmates through referrals, then we find out what their needs are," says Linda Freeman, executive director of Miami-based Peacemakers' Children of Inmates program. "Sometimes their caregiver doesn't have food in the home or can't pay the electric bill. We try to address their immediate critical need, then we try to help them get counseling. This year, we took 280 kids to see their parents in prison."

Child Evangelism Fellowship discovered that the best way to

find the 1.7 million children of inmates is to visit the parents. Debbie Walsh, director of Prison Ministry for CEF, visits about 40 prisons a year to talk with prisoners about what went wrong in their lives. She gives them a booklet that explains the gospel and offers to enroll them in a correspondence Bible program.

“People in prison are worried about their children,” Walsh says. “We teach them to pray for their children and to let their children know they are loved. The inmate can enroll their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews in the Mailbox Club so they can receive Bible lessons. The Word of God does not return void.”

Prison Fellowship reaches out to children through its Angel Tree ministry, which connects incarcerated parents with their children by delivering Christmas gifts. But the ministry doesn't end on Dec. 26. The Christmas connection aims to serve as the beginning of an ongoing relationship with the children of inmates and their families.

“We partner with 8,000 churches in our work to help reconcile families. It starts with a Christmas gift to a child on behalf of their incarcerated parent,” says Charles Rock, national director of Angel Tree Programs. “The gift shows the kids they are loved by parents who they have little contact with. But it also opens the door for local church members to show the greatest gift of all by delivering the good news of salvation.”