

“...and how are the children?”

by Karima Amin

Because we tend to view incarcerated people as one-dimensional beings, defined by their crimes, we rarely think of them as our neighbors, colleagues, or social acquaintances. Not thinking of them as people, like ourselves, we tend not to think of them as parents. As such, some of us have never thought about their children. Who are the children of incarcerated parents? What becomes of children who have incarcerated parents? How are children traumatized by the incarceration of one or both parents? Who protects the children of incarcerated parents? As much as those of us on the outside try to separate ourselves from those behind bars, this is virtually impossible, because their families are here with us. Their children are here in community with us. The realities of “mass incarceration” in America means that more and more children, especially children of color, do not live with their parents and in some cases, may not know their parents.

A 2009 study released by “The Sentencing Project,” reports that there were 1.7 million children in America in 2007 with a parent in prison. More than 70% were children of color. The “San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership” reports that there are 2.4 million children in America today who have a parent behind bars. The “SFCIPP” further states that “7 million children, or one in ten, have a parent under criminal justice supervision,—in jail, or prison, on probation, or on parole.” When “SFCIPP” was first founded in 2000, this coalition of social service providers, government bodies, advocates and others who work with or are concerned about children of incarcerated parents, formulated a “Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights.” While acknowledging certain institutional requirements, this partnership developed this “bill of rights” on the belief that it is essential to start from the child’s perspective and to work on what is possible from there. These rights, as stated by “SFCIPP,” provide a starting point for dealing with the unmet and often unacknowledged needs of these children. Revised in 2005, these eight rights are profound in their simplicity and yet we tend to shrink from their truth and their value. For example, number seven simply says: “I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.” This sounds good and right and yet we too often stigmatize children who are victimized by a criminal justice system that lays claim to their parents. As much as we love children, sometimes our prejudices against their parents, makes us forget to honor our better selves and their humanity.

PRP2 programs are sponsored by The Circle of Supporters for Reformed Offenders and Friends of BaBa Eng. For further information, contact Karima Amin: 716-834-8438; karima@prisonersarepeopletoo.org.

*"God has not called us to see through each other, but to see each other through." (Anonymous)*