

Child Aware Conference – Melbourne – 31 March – 1 April 2014

Workshop: *Breaking cycles and building Dreams for Indigenous children impacted by parental incarceration.* **Carol Vale, Board Member, Shine for Kids**

Introduction: *“All children should have the best start in life, and they should also be able to grow up safe, healthy and happy,”* from 2013 conference.

Children of prisoners are often described as an ‘invisible population in society’. At the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion in 2011, these same children were referred to as *“Collateral Convicts”*.

These descriptions are quite apt due to the lack of research, policy and coordinated response to identifying, little only meeting the needs of these children.

SHINE for Kids is a not-for profit organisation that has been operating since 1982 to support children impacted by parental incarceration. The organisation works with and for young people to:

- Support, help, inspire, nurture and empower in a child-centred manner
- Break the cycle of intergenerational offending, reuniting and strengthening families
- Develop and provide services to help as many children as possible at their point of need

It is well documented that children of incarcerated parents are consistently reported in research to experience varied emotional and practical problems including social isolation, social stigma, mental health problems, unstable accommodation, family conflict, grief and depression, sleep disturbances, regression in their development and attachment problems.

Despite these growing numbers and their significant problems, this population has had little sustained research undertaken.

Up until the beginning of last year, I worked for the NSW government in a number of capacities, including the Department of Education in a policy environment, and as a consequence of my becoming aware of Shine for Kids, I undertook a policy audit across NSW government agencies to see if I could find a policy or position statement relating to how the system supports children impacted by parental incarceration.

Education, Health, Child Protection, Police, Correctional Services, Disabilities and Aboriginal affairs – this audit failed to reveal any policy statement or objectives that clearly articulates the need for agencies within their respective portfolio areas to explicitly take into consideration the needs of a child or young person with a parent incarcerated, when developing policies or designing programs.

A recent paper concerning Australia and the Convention on the Rights of the Child which was submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child by the Australian Human Rights Commission discussed a broad range of areas including educational disadvantage, Out of Home Care, children with disabilities, family and domestic violence, racism, children in immigration detention, child homelessness and trafficking – at no point was the needs of a child with a parent incarcerated noted.

The Mental Health and Children of Prisoners Forum held in Sydney on 25 October 2012 referred to the “unseen victims” and noted that whilst there are a range of service responses

in NSW to children of prisoners, they tended to be “ad hoc with no central co-ordination or strategic directions.”

I share some of these examples, because I am a firm believer that *‘good policy drives good practice’*.

However, information should not be gathered or policies developed for their own sake. It is important that the motivations for gathering information and developing policies about prisoners’ children are clear, reasonable, respect the children’s right to privacy and do not add to the stigma they face.

Government agencies can only plan or provide for children they know about, so better information could ‘allow for early identification of service needs for children, increase interagency coordination, provide critical information about the magnitude and nature of the issues, and provide the basis for more public funding and private funding.’ Prisoners may be more willing to disclose information if they know the ways in which it will be used.

It is well documented in statistical information across each jurisdiction the growing number of Aboriginal men, women and young people being incarcerated. The 2009 NSW Inmate Census indicated that Aboriginal people represent 21.3% of the prison population. Of this, Aboriginal women represent close to 28% of the total women prison population with Aboriginal men representing close to 21% of the total male prison population.

That’s a lot of possible ‘parents’ and it is these statistics that underpin the critical work being undertaken by SHINE for Kids in supporting Aboriginal families.

What is Shine for Kids?

SHINE stands for Support, Hope, Inspire, Nurture and Empower; and the organisation emphasises holistic and integrated solutions that work towards building resilient children, who are less likely to become the next generation of offenders. It does this by consulting children and young people and considering their issues.

The organisation works with children and young people aged from 0 to 21 across NSW (metro and regional), the ACT and Victoria. It also works closely with government and non-government agencies in NSW, ACT and Victoria.

In 2012, SHINE for Kids supported over 5,000 individual children of which 27% were from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and 22% were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

SHINE for Kids' programs are informed by two critical needs.

Firstly, effectively engaging children in strengths based programs that are specifically designed to realise their potential and strengthen life choices, aiming away from patterned intergenerational offending of their parents.

Secondly, by supporting offending parents through structured programs and services to take responsibility for their actions through facing the realities of the demise that is bought onto their children and families through their own actions of offending. SHINE for Kids balances the needs of children with safety.

SHINE for Kids' programs span the following areas:

- Casework services
- Maintaining parental ties (which includes both prison based and community based programs)
- Supporting carers and families of the children
- Schools and education
- Mentoring programs (community based and juvenile justice)
- Aboriginal programs
- Regional programs
- Specialist training and resources for the sector

Most programs have multiple aims that span each of these areas and all our programs include Aboriginal children even where they do not have an indigenous focus.

SHINE for Kids' programs also aim to intervene at critical transition points – arrest of a parent, the court process, incarceration of a parent and maintaining contact during the period, the release of the parent as well as childhood milestones such as the pre-school years, starting school, achieving at school, adolescence and leaving school.

Needs of Aboriginal Children with a Parent in Custody

The impact of parental incarceration on Aboriginal children is compounded by cultural issues of punitive justice, isolation caused by great distances between home and the prison and institutional racism in all sectors of the broader Australian society, including the schools, correctional and justice systems.

All available research indicates that having a parent in custody can profoundly affect a child's social, emotional and behavioural development.

Children of prisoners often experience a range of emotions including grief and loss, anger, guilt, shame, abandonment, rejection, anxiety and depression.

They generally also suffer lifestyle disruption due to changed care arrangements and financial insecurity.

Research on the impact on and the needs of Aboriginal children with a parent in custody is extremely limited.

However, the needs analysis report, *Aboriginal Women with Dependent Children Leaving Prison Project (UNSW, 2008)*, highlights a range of issues facing Aboriginal children which include:

- Ability to maintain parental bonds
- Children dealing with unresolved trauma and resultant behavioural and emotional difficulties
- Social and emotional well-being of children with limited culturally appropriate service/program models or culturally competent staff to deliver services
- Cultural and Aboriginal community identity formation
- Parenting by others (including multiple placements sometimes with non-Aboriginal people) and conflict regarding access whilst the parent is in prison.

The number of Aboriginal children with a parent in prison is unknown. This is due to data on the parenting status of prisoners not being collected. Further, information on the children themselves is generally not known.

According to an occasional paper produced by the Commonwealth *Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs*, "almost every study on prisoner's families emphasised the lack of statistics on children of prisoners and stressed the need for statistics to be gathered including: the number of parents in prison, the number of children who have one or more parent in prison, where these children are now, how these children are being cared for".

SHINE for Kids – Aboriginal Programs

SHINE for Kids plan for improving services to Aboriginal children focuses on:

- Improving services and programs to ensure cultural relevance
- Building cultural capability across the organisation through targeted employment, cultural awareness training and mentoring
- Establishing a systematic approach to service development and evaluation to increase service/program effectiveness and in turn, increase Aboriginal child/family participation.

Two Aboriginal programs developed and delivered by Shine are:

Colourful Dreaming, is a support program for at-risk Aboriginal children aged 10–15 aimed at exploring their personal challenges through artwork and increase their sense of cultural identity. The program is delivered at Wagga Wagga, Junee and Narranderra.

Through group work with local Elders, children learn about Wiradjuri clan totems, bush tucker, breathing techniques for playing the didgeridoo, traditional stories and art.

The children are also encouraged to build positive family relationships, develop awareness of their emotions, to communicate with their incarcerated parent/s and to develop increased self-esteem in a supportive environment.

The activity aims to significantly improve the life chances of participants and reduce the risk of their future involvement in crime by strengthening social support and cultural connections.

Belonging to Family – Aboriginal specific program linking offenders to family and community support during their transition back into the community.

The program focuses on building a sense of Aboriginal identify and belonging by providing skills, strategies and support needed to successfully reintegrate back into family and community life

Where to from here:

Studies indicate ongoing contact with incarcerated family members can assist children to cope with the challenges surrounding imprisonment. Yet research also highlights a range of practical and structural problems for children maintaining such contact.

One way to address the identified challenges is through facilitated programs aimed at reducing the negative impact of incarceration on children by allowing children and incarcerated parents to interact in a child orientated environment within the prison setting.

You tube clip:

[Living Black: S18 Ep9 - Parents in Prison](#)