

Chapter 6

Prison

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the role of the child life specialist working with families affected by incarceration. Children and families are at increased risk due to trauma exacerbated by arrests, incarceration, and re-entry. This chapter will focus on the ways a child life specialist working in jails, prisons, detention centers, and in communities with schools, non-profits, and faith-based organizations can provide developmentally appropriate explanations, preparation, play, expressive arts, and coping, facilitating opportunities that foster relationships and understanding while promoting resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The author of this chapter provided specific programming for incarcerated caregivers. The ideas for the role of a child life specialist outlined in this chapter originated from discussions with parents and caregivers experiencing and being affected by incarceration, as well as the author's experience and knowledge as a Certified Child Life Specialist in both traditional and community settings. This chapter describes how a child life specialist would benefit those affected by incarceration and the staff working within a corrections facility. The role of the child life specialist, as described in this chapter, could also be incorporated into schools, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations working to support those affected by incarceration or at risk for incarceration or re-entry post-incarceration.

Throughout this chapter, the author defines those affected by incarceration as individuals who have been incarcerated, children of those who are incarcerated, and families, including foster families that care for the children of incarcerated individuals. Although the chapter focuses on caregivers and parents in jails and prisons, the author recognizes that child life services and many of the interventions described would also benefit at-risk youth, justice-involved youth, and those committed to juvenile detention centers.

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BACKGROUND

Statistics, Settings, and Disparities

According to Sawyer and Wagner of The Prison Policy Initiative (2022), the American criminal justice system holds almost 2 million people in 1,566 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,510 juvenile correctional facilities, 2,850 local jails, 186 immigration detention facilities, and 82 Indian Country jails, as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories. The same report articulated that of those incarcerated, nearly half of state prisoners (47%) and more than half of federal prisoners (57%) reported having at least one minor child. Among minor children of parents in state prison, 1% were younger than 1, about 18% were ages 1 to 4, and 48% were 10 or older. The average age of a minor child among parents in federal prison was 10 years old. An estimated 13% of minor children of federal prisoners were age 4 or younger, and 20% were aged 15 to 17.

Before working within jails or prisons and community agencies, one must first understand the types of settings, statistics, and disparities that affect and contribute to the stress of those affected by incarceration. Most justice-involved persons are incarcerated in either jail, state or federal prison, or juvenile detention centers. Jail is a locally operated, short-term facility where justice-involved persons typically await trial and sentencing for up to 364 days and those sentenced to less than a year. Prison is a state or federally operated, long-term facility. Prisons are for incarcerated individuals sentenced to 365 days or longer. Federal prisons prohibit parole, so the amount of time served is significantly higher than the average time served in state prison (Crime Museum, n.d). In addition, those under the age of 18 reside in juvenile detention centers unless tried and convicted as an adult.

A child life specialist must understand the racial disparities affecting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experiencing incarceration or justice-involved persons or youth. According to The Sentencing Project (2021), Black Americans are imprisoned at five times the rate of White Americans. In addition, those that identify as Latinx have 1.3 times the incarceration rate of Whites, making it clear that the “outcome of mass incarceration today has not occurred by happenstance but has been designed through policies created by a dominant White culture that insists on suppression of others” (p.4). The toll is steep for families affected by incarceration, as it disrupts relationships through lost connections. Communities suffer from losing parents whose absence leaves families in tatters through lost jobs, income, homes, and hope. Many families will experience financial stress as the added burden of lost revenue, legal and court fees, and phone calls and commissary costs can leave families struggling to make ends meet (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016).

A demographic analysis commissioned by the Association of Child Life Professionals (2018) states that the typical Certified Child Life Specialist is a 34-year-old White female (Lookabaugh & Ballard, 2018). Although a profession of predominantly White women, any child life specialist, regardless of race, would benefit from education and training on how the justice and correctional systems perpetuate and promote racism and anti-Blackness that have led to the increased incarceration of BIPOC. Principle 3 of the Child Life Code of Ethics states:

Certified Child Life Specialists have an obligation to maintain an environment that respects variations in culture, age, gender, race, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, religious affiliation, veteran status, and socioeconomic status (Official Documents of the Child Life Council, 2020).

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