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## Support for kids of imprisoned parents

Groups help affected families to prevent such children from taking the same road to crime

Rahimah Rashidh

Ana (not her real name) does not want to end up like her father, who has been in and out of prison for the past 15 years over drug offences.

They are no longer in contact with each other but, growing up, this was also limited to a prison visit every two weeks.

When she was just three days old, her father was nabbed for drug offences. Two months later, her mother left home and never returned.

Now 15, the Secondary 2 student has been looked after by her paternal step-grandmother all these years. She calls the 56-year-old woman "mami" (mother in Malay).

"Sometimes I feel left out. I also feel like it's my mistake," she said about her family's situation. "If I wasn't around, these things would not have happened and my grandmother won't have to work so hard."

Social workers say the plight of children like Ana has been getting more attention in recent years and there are now more programmes to help such families cope.

In January, the Singapore After-Care Association launched a pilot initiative to provide upstream support to families after a loved one is sentenced at the State Courts. Staff and trained volunteers stationed there provide information and referral services, and serve as the first point of contact for family members.

As at December last year, the Singapore Prison Service had 815 inmates with children under the age of 16, although it did not say how many children each prisoner has.

At the heart of the problem is the isolation the children feel and the impact on them as they grow up.

"Through research, it has been shown that children of incarcerated persons are more likely to enter the criminal justice system," said Mr Raymond Lye, centre manager for Salvation Army Prison Support Services.

His organisation has worked with dozens of children of inmates.

Mr Alfred Lau, senior social service executive at the Industrial and Services Cooperative Society (Iscos), agreed. "They may get into gangs with other kids facing the same kind of issues," he added.

A study last year led by criminal justice researcher Sybille Bauser from the University of California, Berkeley, revealed that those with imprisoned parents are 2.4 times more likely to display criminal behaviour than other children.

While there is little local data on the intergenerational cycle of crime in Singapore, experts acknowledge the issue. Organisations such as Iscos, the Salvation Army Prison Support Services and others are working to break the cycle.

Over the years, the prison service has worked with community partners to support families impacted by parental incarceration.

One of them is Iscos, which supports about 270 children of incarcerated parents through its various programmes each year.

In the case of Ana, she has received bursaries from Iscos and occasionally attends events the organisation arranges for children like her.

In 2006, Iscos launched the Fairy Godparent programme, which is aimed at breaking the cycle of intergenerational offending. It conducts child enrichment workshops such as art therapy, builds family support through caregivers and sets up study corners. It also provides bursaries.

Ana told The Straits Times that she was grateful especially after any hope she had of reuniting with

her father was dashed upon his release from prison three years ago. He did not move in with Ana, but remarried and lived somewhere else.

"Other parents buy their children all the things that they need but my father does not even care about me and my mother is not around. I feel really sad," she said.

Ana's step-grandmother is a cleaner, earning about \$600 each month.

"Years ago, I used to work as a cleaner at five different offices," she said. "Now I'm not strong any more. Every morning before I go to work, I need to take Paradol to hold the pain."

Mr Muhammad Ali, 32, who manages the programmes and services at Iscos, said many other families are falling through the cracks - the stigma around incarceration and the lack of awareness of help avenues preventing children and families from getting the support they need.

"Societal acceptance plays a big role in making the world a better place for children with incarcerated parents," he said.

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A CHILD'S LAMENT

Other parents buy their children all the things that they need but my father does not even care about me and my mother is not around. I feel really sad.

ANA (not her real name), who is no longer in contact with her father when she was just three days old. Her father was arrested for drug offences. Two months later, her mother left and never returned.

Ana has been looked after by her step-grandmother all these years. Social workers say the plight of children like her has been getting more attention, with more programmes to help such families cope. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

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Text:

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By Rahimah Rashith

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