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[Printed] Can ex-inmate's sons escape her fate?

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On the Ground



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Can ex-inmate's sons avoid her fate?

Early intervention programmes are key to break cycle of inter-generational offending

Risa (not her real name) started sniffing glue when she was 13 to find out "what was so great about drugs" that it consumed her mother's life.

Before long, she was abusing ice and heroin with her mother, who was jailed thrice for drug offences.

Her father was also in jail for drug offences for the first 14 years of her life. Risa, an only child, was raised by her grandmother.

Risa, now 28, said: "I felt a deep-rooted sense of loneliness. I was never my mum's first priority and she always chose drugs over me. The first time I abused drugs with my mother, I found the yearning I was looking for from my mum. We were laughing, talking and bonding, so I continued using it."

Like her mum, a teenage mother, Risa dropped out of school at 16 as she was pregnant. At one point, she was trafficking drugs to support her mother's drug habit.

Risa was jailed for more than four years in her third and most recent jail sentence.

But unlike her mother, she is determined to turn her life around and prevent her two sons, now aged 11 and seven, from going astray.

Risa obtained her N, O and A levels behind bars and is now working as a retail assistant, after being released last year. The unwed mother also hopes to further her studies.

She said: "A prison warden knocked some sense into my head. She asked me if I loved my sons

enough to ensure they would not go through the same path as I have."

CHILDREN OF OFFENDERS MORE LIKELY TO OFFEND

A recent landmark study found that children whose parents were convicted offenders are three times as likely to be convicted themselves of an offence, compared with children whose parents do not have a criminal record.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) study looked at close to 94,000 parents and about 183,000 of their children.

It found that one in five fathers and one in 20 mothers studied had been convicted of their offences.

Compared with children whose parents were never convicted, the study found that:

- Children whose parents committed drug offences are 5.2 times as likely to be convicted of an offence themselves, compared with 2.3 times for children whose parents committed non-drug related offences. The addictive nature of drug abuse impairs the parents' day-to-day functioning and their ability to care for their family, the study noted.
- Having a parent who was convicted increases the risk for daughters of being convicted as well, more than for sons.
- Children whose fathers were

convicted for their offences are 2.7 times as likely to be convicted of an offence themselves. This rises to 3.7 times if their mothers were convicted.

The study said mothers are the primary caregivers, and there is a larger impact on their child's development and life when they are jailed.

The Singapore After-Care Association (Saca) has a programme to ensure that children of newly incarcerated women are cared for and their caregivers – often the child's grandparents, uncles or aunts – are given the help they need to cope with caring for the children.

Saca deputy director Lin Mingjie said fathers often have to work, are in jail or are divorced, so such children have to be cared for by other family members.

Take, for example, Jenny (not her real name), a 39-year-old mother of five children aged 10 to 16.

When she was jailed for taking drugs, her husband had to work and was unable to care for their children, who went to live with their uncle's 10-member family.

Saca volunteers found out that Jenny's two oldest children smoked, stole and performed badly in school. Her three other children were not told that their mother is in jail and one thought she had abandoned them, Ms Lin said.

So Saca persuaded their aunt to explain Jenny's absence to them, and referred them to a social service agency to guide the children in their conduct and studies.

Dr Razwana Begum, head of the Public Safety and Security Programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, said

there are various reasons why children whose parents broke the law are more likely to do so themselves.

The parent is not around to supervise the child, she said, or the family could be facing other problems, such as poverty and family violence, which increase the risk of the child getting into trouble.

The child could also emulate the parents' bad behaviour, in a case of negative role-modelling.

LIVING A NEW LIFE STORY

Risa's life circumstances probably checked most of the factors highlighted in the study that increases the risk of a child breaking the law. But she is determined to break the cycle of offending with the help of New Life Stories, a charity that works to prevent inter-generational incarceration.

Under its family strengthening programme, a volunteer would befriend and read to Risa's sons once a week, acting as a reliable adult and friend they can count on and open up to, said its executive director Saleemah Ismail.

The charity's staff counselled Risa and encouraged her to write stories for her children when she was behind bars, as an expression of love, and so her stories are passed to her sons.

New Life Stories also helped her family with their needs, among the host of aid it has rendered to them in the past four years.

Ms Saleemah said the study highlighted the importance of early intervention programmes, like the one New Life Stories runs, to break the cycle of offending.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Other groups such as the Industrial and Services Co-operative Society (Isco), Life Community Services Society and the Salvation Army also run programmes for children of inmates and former offenders to break the cycle of offending.

For example, the Iscos charity arm, the Iscos ReGen Fund, runs the Fairy Godparent programme. Among other things, it provides family support, for example,

through support groups for mothers who are former convicts or whose husbands are incarcerated. It helps children with their educational needs through tuition and bursaries, pairs them with mentors and teaches them positive life skills.

The MSF and NCSS study highlights the groups of children with the highest risk of breaking the law. More attention should be paid to these particular groups, such as daughters of offenders, children whose mothers are jailed and children of drug offenders, to prevent them from following in their parents' troubled footsteps.

Mr Muhd Ali, Iscos manager of programmes and services, also pointed out another high-risk group, which the study did not address: children who have or had both parents in jail, like Risa's.

Among the pool of 300 families on its Fairy Godparent programme now, an estimated 10 per cent fall into this category, he said.

Needless to say, this group of children are especially vulnerable and need extra attention.

Programmes aside, there can also be more specific intervention strategies to improve the chances of rehabilitation for offenders.

Dr Razwana suggested adopting gender-specific rehabilitation approaches, which consider the different roles mothers and fathers play, as well as the behaviour and characteristics of their gender.

This is needed as mothers and fathers face different pressures and risks after their release from jail.

For Risa, her two children are coping well in school, thanks to the help given by New Life Stories. She is also trying to build her bond with her younger son, who was only two years old when she was jailed. He initially would not acknowledge her as his mother and was hostile towards her, unlike his older brother who welcomed her wholeheartedly, she said.

But their relationship has improved since her release, she added, and he now calls her "mum".

"My children are my biggest motivating factor not to relapse."

PROTECTING HER CHILDREN

A prison warden knocked some sense into my head. She asked me if I loved my sons enough to ensure they would not go through the same path as I have.

RISA who was jailed for more than four years in her third and most recent jail sentence.

Kids of convicted offenders: Charity programmes help them break cycle of crime

[Printed headline: **Can ex-inmate's sons escape her fate?**]

By Theresa Tan

SINGAPORE - Risa (not her real name) started sniffing glue when she was 13 to find out "what was so great about drugs" that it consumed her mother's life.

Before long, she was abusing Ice and heroin with her mother, who was jailed thrice for drug offences.

Her father was also in jail for drug offences for the first 14 years of her life. Risa, an only child, was raised by her grandmother.

Now 28, Risa said: "I felt a deep rooted sense of loneliness. I was never my mum's first priority and she always chose drugs over me.

"The first time (she abused drugs with her mother), I found the yearning I was looking for from my mum. We were laughing, talking and bonding, so I continued using it."

Like her mum who was a teenage mother, Risa dropped out of school at 16 when she got pregnant. At one point, she was trafficking drugs to support her mother's drug habit.

Risa was jailed for more than four years in her third and last jail sentence. But unlike her mother, she is determined to turn her life around and stop her two sons, now aged 11 and seven, from going astray.

Risa obtained her N, O and A-Levels behind bars and is now working as a retail assistant after being released last year. The unwed mother also hopes to further her studies.

She said: "A prison warden knocked some sense into my head. She asked me if I love my sons enough to ensure they would not go through the same path as me."

Children of offenders more likely to offend as well

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Compared with children whose parents were never convicted, the study found that:

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- Children whose father was convicted for his offences are 2.7 times as likely to be convicted of an offence themselves. This rises to 3.7 times if their mother was convicted.

The study said mothers are the primary caregivers, and there is a larger impact on their child's development and life when they are jailed.

The Singapore After-Care Association (Saca) has a programme to ensure that children of newly incarcerated women are cared for and their caregivers - often the child's grandparents, uncles or aunties - are given the help they need to cope with caring for the children.

Saca's deputy director Lin Mingjie said fathers often have to work, are in jail or are divorced, so such children have to be cared for by other family members.

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So Saca had to persuade their aunt to explain Jenny's absence to them, and referred them to a social service agency to guide the children in their conduct and studies.

Dr Razwana Begum, head of the Public Safety and Security Programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), said there are various reasons why children whose parents broke the law are more likely to do so themselves.

The parent is not around to supervise the child, she said, or the family could be facing other problems such as poverty and family violence, which increase the risk of the child getting into trouble.

The child could also emulate the parents' bad behaviour, in a case of negative role-modelling.

Living a new life story

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But she is determined to break the cycle of offending with the help of New Life Stories, a charity that works to prevent inter-generational incarceration.

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Breaking the cycle

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But their relationship has improved since her release, she said, and he now calls her mum. "My children are my biggest motivating factor not to relapse."