

Strengthened family ties break cycle of criminal behavior

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Ministry to inmates' children and spouses can help keep families together through incarceration and after release. Generally, offenders are placed in prisons away from home—often across the state or even in another state.

Lynn Humeniuk, director of the [criminal justice program at Howard Payne University in Brownwood](#), believes taking a restorative approach with prisoner families may help keep other members out of the prison system.

“Ministering to inmate families is restorative,” she said. “Many family members are also victims, and they are all but lost in the (judicial) process. If a cycle of incarceration is to be broken, they need to catch this early on and show love and respect to these families.”

Reed Hanna of St. Louis knows prison routine firsthand. Convicted of violating a prisoner's civil rights, the former federal deputy was convicted and served time. Both as an officer and as an inmate, Hanna saw the effect prison has on offenders and on their families

Understanding the toll, Hanna started [Project Jericho](#), a ministry that walks with an offender's family even before the individual walks through prison gates.

When Hanna or a volunteer learns someone in their ministry area has been convicted of a crime, someone on the team meets with the individual to help him or her and the family understand the criminal justice process.

They provide the family information about services available through government agencies and not-for-profits. After the offender is incarcerated,

Project Jericho volunteers assist families that request help. Volunteers help sponsor a prisoner's child—some as mentors to teach skills to the child and spend time with him or her. Others act as a family liaison to find out the family's needs and relay those to an appropriate agency or church.

The organization also seeks financial donations to help provide activities—such as sports camps or music lessons—children of single-parent households often miss.

Members of a church in Mineral Wells wanted to make a difference at Christmas but were not sure how. Then they learned about Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree ministry and decided to participate. Although the town had no nearby prison, members were surprised at the number of inmate families that lived in the community.

The grandparents of two children invited the church team to stay a few minutes when members delivered gifts to the home. They wanted to learn why the church would purchase gifts on behalf of the children's mother, who was serving time in a state prison.

Impressed by the church, the grandparents began attending and soon joined the congregation. Church members continued to minister to the children and assisted their mother after she was released from prison. Eventually, she found a job and relocated to another community.

[Angel Tree ministry](#) is perhaps one of the best-known Christmas ministry options for churches. Individuals purchase gifts on behalf of an inmate for the offender's children. Congregations can maintain contact if the family grants permission.

Prison Fellowship estimates 1.5 million children have an incarcerated parent. The ministry encourages churches to use the Christmas project and other contacts as a way to share Christ's love with a child and his or her family.