

# THE POTENTIAL FOR CHILD LIFE IN THE AMERICAN JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLSs) have extensive knowledge of human development and base their work on current and relevant research to provide developmentally appropriate socioemotional care and resources to children and families. CCLSs, with proper training and experience, can provide age- and developmentally-appropriate support and education about the justice system, preliminary hearings, sentencing hearings, arrests, etc. The U.S. justice system currently has employment opportunities available that focus on advocating for victims, but no profession focuses on the difficulty of transitions children will face, along with the emotional challenges that are inevitable when a loved one is being prosecuted, taken into custody, or having the rights to their children taken away.

## History of Federal Victim Services

In 1982, the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime was established by President Reagan to address issues that victims face, including feeling marginalized and neglected by the justice system (Lee, 2019). However, until the early 2000s, it was rare to see victim services within a police department (Foster & Ryan, 2023). The Austin Police Department supported the expansion of

victim services and experimented with its benefits, finding several, including increased conviction rates and victims seeking and receiving necessary mental health support (Foster & Ryan, 2023).

Some organizations offer assistance to children who have one or both parents incarcerated. Lesley University (n.d.) states that common experiences of children who have incarcerated parents include having adverse living conditions, strained relationships with their parent(s), financial





remained beneficial throughout their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood?

## The Potential of the Child Life Role in the Justice System

Often, the family members of those who are incarcerated are known as “hidden victims” (Martin, 2017). Unfortunately, hidden victims receive little support and do not benefit from societal mechanisms “generally available to direct crime victims, despite their prevalence and...similarities to direct crime victims” (Martin, 2017, para. 1). Research shows that children who have a parent or parents who are incarcerated are at a higher risk for exhibiting antisocial behaviors, having psychological problems, having economic hardship, being suspended or expelled from school, and committing criminal activities themselves (Martin, 2017). Martin (2017) stresses the importance of practitioners building “strong partnerships with law enforcement, public schools, and child welfare agencies to understand the unique dynamic of the family...and try to ensure... safety...for the child” (para. 3). Though these practitioners Martin (2017) is referring to the fact that the way they are described is exactly the job a CCLS could confidently perform.

A social worker works to assess a client’s situation and attempt to safely reunify families. However, if there is no therapeutic intervention done with the child before this reunification, the child may face socioemotional struggles. The CCLS can assess these struggles before they happen and assist the child in coping with these difficulties before a potential reunification. If the CCLS enters the scenario after a reunification has occurred, their training also assists them in targeting the socioemotional struggles they have faced because of the reunification. The child life specialist could also work with a child if reunification with a parent or family member is not possible. For example, the CCLS may work with the child on how to cope with missing their parent or family member during their incarceration. Additionally, any instance of an arrest, a court hearing, or a jail/prison release could be explained to the affected child in developmentally appropriate terms.

hardships, and rare opportunities for contact with their incarcerated parent(s). There is research on the effects of having one or both parents incarcerated; however, there has been no research on how the socioemotional support that CCLSs provide could assist in coping with these stressful experiences and their lifelong effects. There are caseworkers for when these scenarios arise, but often caseworkers have an exorbitant number of cases to attend to.

Experiencing parents or loved ones being arrested and/or being processed through the judiciary can be a scary event, especially as a young child. Whether for an infraction or a felony charge, children should be informed of the proceedings, what to expect, and be provided with coping skills based on each child’s age- and developmentally-appropriate assessment. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, roughly half of United States inmates were parents of minor children in 2007 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), with children of incarcerated parents increasing by 80% between 1991 and 2007 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). The question remains: how many of these children could have benefited from child life services, and would those benefits have

## Ethical Considerations for a CCLS in the Justice System

It is important to note that this proposal calls for CCLSs who have received adequate education and clinical training to work with children and families in stressful situations. Though not based in the typical hospital setting, CCLSs should remain consistent in their abidance with the ACLP's Code of Ethics (2023). Some ethical considerations when working in the non-traditional setting include remaining consistent in the commitment to psychosocial care and demonstrating child life competencies within this non-traditional setting while also continuously seeking knowledge on the specifics of the setting.

### Ideas for future research

If child life specialists are implemented within the justice system, research should also be conducted on the efficacy and value of their role in a child and family's life. Studies have shown that

a child life specialist's presence and support is crucial to decreasing a child's pain during medical procedures (Drayton et al., 2019). If this is true, studies should also be conducted on whether anxiety, maladaptive behaviors, and confusion are decreased in those who receive child life services while their parents or loved ones are being processed through the justice system or are incarcerated.

### Conclusion

All in all, if implemented, a CCLS would be an extremely beneficial asset to children and families affected by the justice system. Not only could child life specialists provide age and developmentally-appropriate explanations of current and future proceedings, but they can also provide resources for functional, communicative and coping strategies. Child life specialists consider each child's specific needs and base them on their extensive education and training.

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