



# TROOP 1500

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY Ellen Spiro  
PRODUCED BY Karen Bernstein

At the Gatesville Prison in Texas, a unique Girl Scout troop unites daughters with mothers who have been convicted of serious crimes. Facing steep sentences from the courts and tough questions from their children, the mothers struggle to rebuild relationships with the daughters who endure a childhood without them.



## FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

One of the challenges in directing *Troop 1500* was how to empower the girls, ages 8 through 14, to guide the making of this documentary beyond simply shooting a video camera. Humanities Texas had initially awarded the project a small media-training grant so that the troop could learn the rudiments of shooting and editing but I knew that this documentary had to venture even further than a music video or short film would have. When we were all driving in the Girl Scout van to Gatesville, Texas, to visit the mothers one day, it occurred to me that these girls were now ready to interview their own moms. Their response was incredible; they all wanted to do it. They had learned the basics of camera and sound in our workshops and this was a chance for them to add their own intellect and thoughts to the process. They wrote all their own questions on that van trip and it deepened the story further than any question I could have come up with! It reminded me that despite years of filmmaking experience, I still have a lot to discover about making documentary films.

I hope that the public will be reminded of the resounding effect that incarceration has on the children left behind. I truly believe that a good many of these moms and so many people in the criminal justice system need rehabilitation services and counseling more than lockup. Most of the mothers I met are in jail for nonviolent, addiction-related crimes.

I believe that the very best effort can be made in agreeing to mentor a young person whose parents are behind bars. Regardless of the resources any given state has in terms of ex-offender or parolee services, rehabilitation and counseling, the simple one-on-one contact between a committed volunteer and child is undeniably effective.

The goals of *Enterprising Girl Scouts Beyond Bars* (Girl Scouts of the USA) were consistent with social work practice tenets of strengthening girls self esteem and sense of self efficacy in the context of maternal relationship challenges. Whether mom is in prison or released back into the free world, that girl gains decision making skills to keep herself safe, to help her be successful.

We also learned that a mother's release from jail can trigger distress as much as excitement. Families, mentors, and teachers should keep in mind that prison may have represented the first time a mom has been clean and sober, but the release is often scarier than prison. It is very important that anyone involved in this movement maintain the good work of re-entry programs like Crime Prevention Institute in Texas. All too often those programs get slammed onto budget chopping blocks and that's a foolhardy approach to prison management.

The impact of *Troop 1500*, the film, has already occurred. It has given the girls in the troop some strength to deal with the stigma of having a mom in prison. Their development in front of and behind the camera is a cathartic and inspiring experience. The camera becomes a witness, an ally, and a friend.

Telling stories that need to be told and knowing that entities like Independent Television Service (ITVS) are out there doing this work each day is what keeps me motivated. When Karen Bernstein – my producer – and I wrote the initial grant to Open Call we knew that one of the few television stations the women could watch at Gatesville was PBS and we knew this film had to be broadcast there especially. So much commercial television is like candy for the brain. ITVS is committed to doing so much more than candy can and opens us up to the power and beauty of art and social change. I do hope *Troop 1500* will continue to change lives for the better in this rebroadcast years later.

Ellen Spiro



*Ellen Spiro, Director/Producer*

## THE FILM

Prison is not a place where you would expect to find a group of Girl Scouts, but for some of the girls of Troop 1500, based in Austin, Texas, prison visits are an important activity. These scouts have mothers who are serving sentences in the Gatesville Women's Prison and their visits provide a way for the girls to stay connected to their mothers and for the mothers to participate in their daughters' lives. *Troop 1500* goes inside the prison and inside the lives of the mothers and the girls who visit them, describing the emotional toll that incarceration takes on the family.

Julia Cuba, the troop leader and a social worker, brings 8 to 10 of the troop's 48 girls to the prison to visit their mothers once a month. The major goal of the visits is to strengthen the bond between mothers and daughters in order to break the cycle of crime. The film focuses on four mothers who are incarcerated for different offenses: Ida, possession of heroin; Kenya, possession with intent to deliver; Melissa, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon; and Susan, euthanizing a patient. According to Darlene Grant, a professor of social work at the University of Texas who works with the girls, the typical visit follows a certain course: first, the "honeymoon" phase filled with compliments and positive affect, then, a quick change to the emotional phase where a lot of pent-up feelings come out. A scene in the film shows Kenya and her older daughter Caitlin in a tearful confrontation about Caitlin's failure to respond to her mother's letters, while Dr. Grant explains the daughter's omission as a characteristic of her age (12) and not a lack of feeling toward her mother.

The film offers a glimpse into the lives of the girls and the effects of their mothers' incarceration. Melissa's daughter Jasmine lives with her father, Tony, a caring and attentive man who braids her hair and organizes a birthday celebration for her. Kenya's two daughters have been separated – Caitlin, the older one, lives with her maternal grandmother, and Mikaela, the younger one, lives with her paternal grandmother. Both girls seem to be in relatively stable situations, although Caitlin will be moving to Colorado with her grandmother, who has taken a job there. Ida's daughter Jessica lives with her stepfather, Danny. He takes her to the prison for her mother's GED graduation, but beyond that, it is not clear how close a relationship Danny and Jessica have. Her teacher reports that Jessica is often in need of a hug; after school, Jessica seems to be the only one home. Nothing is shown about Susan's daughter Naomi's home life, but the assumption is that she continues to live a middle-class life with her father and siblings.

The prison visits serve multiple purposes and include a variety of activities. The girls bring cameras and interview their mothers, asking hard questions about their mothers' transgressions and hopes for the future. There are mother-daughter troop meetings, with pizza, singing, and recitation of the Girl Scout pledge. There are discussions and counseling sessions. And there are tears – brought on by emotions, which are so close to the surface, and by saying good-by, which is wrenching for both mothers and daughters.

Except for Susan, who won't be eligible for parole for about 18 years, the mothers are up for parole in a matter of months. Kenya's hopes – and those of Mikaela, who was going to live with her mother – receive a setback when her parole is delayed a year. Melissa's parole, however, is approved, and Julia drives her to the Girl Scout camp where she has a joyful reunion with Jasmine.

Archival footage showing scenes of Girl Scout activities a generation ago provides a stark contrast with the activities of Troop 1500. In the past, the challenge for Girl Scouts was, how do you survive in the wilderness? The challenge today for the girls of Troop 1500 is the same, but the wilderness now is found in the culture they live in and calls for a different set of survival skills. *Troop 1500* provides a sobering look at how the girls of one troop try to balance the activities of typical school-age children, while struggling with the reality of having a parent behind bars.



## SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN TROOP 1500

Julia Cuba – Troop leader and social worker

Darlene Grant, PhD – Professor of social work, University of Texas

### Incarcerated Mothers and Their Offenses

Ida – possession of heroin

Kenya – possession with intent to deliver

Melissa – aggravated assault with a deadly weapon

Susan – former nurse who euthanized a patient

### Girl Scouts

Caitlin – Kenya's older daughter

Mikaela – Kenya's younger daughter

Naomi – Susan's daughter

Jessica – Ida's daughter

Jasmine – Melissa's daughter

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Women in Prison: Looking at the Numbers

Over the past three decades, there has been a sharp increase in the female prison population in the U.S. Much of this growth has been attributed to the passage in the 1980s of harsher drug laws and stricter sentencing guidelines. The following statistics provide more specifics:

- From 1977 to 2007 the female prison population grew by 832 percent; the male prison population grew 416 percent during the same period.
- In 2008 there were 115,779 women incarcerated in either state or federal prisons.
- Over 60 percent of incarcerated women are in prison for non-violent offenses, many for drug-related crimes or property crimes (burglary, motor vehicle theft, or theft).

Sources: [http://www.demosnewspond.com/pf/additional/statistics\\_about\\_women\\_prisoners](http://www.demosnewspond.com/pf/additional/statistics_about_women_prisoners) and <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>

### Many Are Mothers

The majority of the women who receive prison sentences have minor children. According to the Women's Prison Association (WPA), nearly two-thirds of the women in prison are mothers. The increase in the number of mothers in prison has far outpaced the increase in fathers being incarcerated. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that between 1991 and 2007 the number of mothers in federal and state prisons increased a staggering 122 percent, compared to a rise of 76 percent in incarcerated fathers. During the same period, the number of children with mothers in prison more than doubled, rising to almost one hundred and fifty thousand nationwide.

Overall, close to two million children in the U.S. have a parent in prison; in most cases, it is the father who is incarcerated. The vast majority of children of male prisoners live with their mothers, while just over a third (37 percent) of the children of incarcerated women live with their fathers. Most children of female prisoners live with their grandparents or other relatives and the rest are in foster care.

Sources: <http://www.voa.org/Childhood-Disrupted-Summary>; <http://www.wpaonline.org/pdf/Quick%20Facts%20Women%20and%20CJ%202009.pdf>; and [http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc\\_incarceratedparents.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc_incarceratedparents.pdf)

### What Happens to the Children?

For the child, the immediate impact of the mother's arrest and incarceration is emotional turmoil due to major family disruption. Unless there is a father in the home who can continue to provide child care, the child is sent to live with relatives or placed in foster care. No matter how good the quality of care, the separation from the mother creates a strain on the mother-child bond, which often leads to a host of other problems. Here are some of the things a child may experience when his or her mother goes to prison:

- shame and stigma of having a parent in prison
- emotional toll of being separated from the primary caregiver
- feelings of rejection, anger, and sadness
- feelings of guilt and blaming themselves for the mother's offense that led to her arrest
- insecurity and confusion that results from not knowing what to expect
- problems in school (academic and behavioral)
- disruption of moving to a new home environment one or more times
- little or no contact with the mother – most inmates are in prisons more than 50 miles away from their former residences
- possible permanent removal of the child from the mother's care



### Risk of Delinquent Behavior

Most children of incarcerated parents have experienced a number of risk factors prior to the parent's going to prison. Among these factors are poverty, domestic violence, family involvement with drugs or alcohol, and crime. A parent's incarceration is almost always a traumatic experience for a child, and may result in developmental delays or negative coping strategies such as regression or antisocial behavior. According to a 2006 study by the University of Texas, children who have parents in prison are at increased risk for poor school performance, dropping out, gang involvement, early pregnancy, and drug abuse.

Children of incarcerated mothers may be especially vulnerable, since most of these children have had only the mother as the primary caregiver. Thus, more than the father's incarceration, the loss of the mother is a traumatic event that can put the child at greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior.

Sources: <https://dspace.uta.edu/bitstream/handle/10106/330/umi-uta-1276.pdf?sequence=1> and <http://www.voa.org/Childhood-Disrupted-Summary>

### Many Are Mothers

Parenting from prison is a huge challenge. Most inmates are in facilities 50 miles or more from their previous residences, making regular visitation by family members very difficult at best, and in many cases, impossible. In some cases, the caretaker prevents or discourages the child from having contact with the mother because of their own feelings of anger or embarrassment, or because they feel it wouldn't be in the child's best interest. Data compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2004) on the frequency of contact between inmates in state prisons and their children show that 41 percent of mothers reported never having telephone contact with their children, and 58 percent said they never had personal visits from their children. It follows that 15 percent have never had any contact with their children.

For mothers with infants or very young children, a handful of states provide prison nurseries and community-based residential parenting programs. In general, programs focused on maintaining parent-child contact are sponsored by nonprofit organizations and vary greatly in their scope and quality. Two sources for information on these programs are the Women's Prison Association and a report commissioned by the Volunteers of America: "Strengthening Families Impacted by Incarceration."

Sources: <http://www.voa.org/Childhood-Disrupted-Summary>; <http://www.wpaonline.org/pdf/Quick%20Facts%20Women%20and%20CJ%202009.pdf>; and [http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc\\_incarceratedparents.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc_incarceratedparents.pdf)

### Troop 1500 Beyond Bars

Among the programs designed to maintain family ties while the mother serves a prison sentence is Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB). An initiative of Girl Scouts of the USA, the program was established in 1992 in partnership with the National Institute of Justice. The goals of GSBB are to lessen the impact of parental separation due to incarceration, to foster the personal and social development of girls and their mothers, and to provide girls with the opportunity to participate with their parents in the Girl Scout Leadership Experience.

As a participant in GSBB, Troop 1500's major goal is to strengthen the bond between mother and daughter in order to break the cycle of crime. To achieve its goal, the troop makes monthly visits to Gatesville Women's Prison. In addition, there are weekly troop meetings, which allow leader Julia Cuba to keep an eye on the girls' family life, their school and social activities, and their mothers' progression through the penal system. Once a month, Troop 1500 also meets for group therapy, providing a structured and supportive environment where the girls can express themselves. As of 2003, five years after the troop was started, 96 percent of the girls had stayed in school, and 98 percent had stayed out of the penal system.

Aside from the group therapy and prison visits, Troop 1500 is a regular Girl Scout troop, with badges, uniforms, campouts, and – of course – the annual cookie sale.

Sources: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/troop1500/scouts.html> and <http://www.utexas.edu/features/archive/2004/girlscouts.html>

### Risk of Delinquent Behavior

Public policies have a significant impact on incarcerated women and their children. One of these policies is the Adoption and Safe Families Act signed by President Clinton in 1997, which authorizes the termination of parental rights when a child has been living in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months. Most mothers in prison are serving sentences longer than 22 months, so for those who have had to place children in foster care (approximately 11 percent of mothers in prison), losing custody of their children is a very real threat. Another law affecting female offenders is the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, passed in 1996. This welfare reform law imposes a lifetime ban on cash assistance and food stamps for people convicted of a drug offense, unless a state opts out of the provisions. The law creates significant hurdles for women – many of whom have been incarcerated for drug-related offenses – who need at least temporary assistance when they leave prison and try to establish stable households.

Source: [http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc\\_incarceratedparents.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc_incarceratedparents.pdf)



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. With their cameras in hand, the girls of Troop 1500 asked their mothers some pointed and serious questions. Do you think using cameras helped to facilitate asking difficult questions? If so, why? Do you think being recorded made it easier or more difficult for the mothers to answer honestly?
2. What emotions can you see in the girls' faces or body language as they interview their mothers and hear their responses?
3. What are some of the emotional issues the incarcerated mothers must deal with?
4. Why is Julia scared about the mothers going out on parole? What are some of her specific fears?
5. As difficult as it is for a young girl to have her mother in prison, it can be harder for her when her mother is released. What are some of the difficulties that could arise for the daughter as well as for other family members when the mother is released from prison?
6. What was your first reaction when you saw that Jewell, Kenya's mother, was moving to Colorado and taking Caitlin with her? Do you think that this will be good for Caitlin? Why or why not? What effect could this have on Kenya?
7. Dawn Grounds, the warden of the Hilltop Unit of the Gatesville prison, thinks it's wrong to bring children into the prison because they might get the impression that it's a positive place. Julia, on the other hand, believes the girls won't develop a romanticized idea of prison and that they won't want to subject their own children to the experiences they have had. Whose opinion do you agree with, and why?
8. Do you think seeing this film could serve as a deterrent to crime? What audience or what age group is likely to be most strongly affected by seeing the film?
2. Find out how you can volunteer your time at a prison. There are several ways to do this. Contact correctional facilities in your area or check with your state Department of Corrections ([http://crime.about.com/od/state/State\\_Prison\\_Systems.htm](http://crime.about.com/od/state/State_Prison_Systems.htm)). Also, the Prison Fellowship, a Christian-based organization, provides various opportunities for working with incarcerated individuals and ex-offenders. Visit their website (<http://www.prisonfellowship.org/prison-fellowship-home>) for specific information and to find opportunities in your area. You can also check with your local place of worship about how you can become involved in other faith-based programs that provide services to inmates or former inmates.
3. Find out how you can help a woman in prison or one who is making the transition from incarceration back to the community. The Women's Prison Association welcomes volunteers for one-time events or for long-term projects, such as tutoring or mentoring. Visit <http://www.wpaonline.org/> to learn what you can do.
4. An individual's release from prison can pose a challenge both for the individual and for the community. Learn about those challenges by reading the FAQs on the website of the National Reentry Resource Center (<http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/>). Organize a meeting to discuss and plan ways your community can support individuals who are reentering the community after being incarcerated by providing jobs, child care, counseling, drug or alcohol rehabilitation, and other services.
5. If you would like to work with children whose parents are incarcerated, check the website of the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (<http://fcnetwork.org/>), which contains a state-by-state directory of programs serving these children and their families, as well as a resource library to support people who are working with the children.
6. Write to your representatives in Congress to urge their support for the Second Chance Act, which provides resources to nonprofits, states, and local governments to aid people reentering communities after incarceration. In September 2011, the U.S. Senate's Committee on Appropriations approved a bill that would eliminate funding for the Second Chance Act and instead would add three hundred million dollars to the Federal Bureau of Prisons' budget to build more prisons. Visit the Sentencing Project's website (<http://www.sentencingproject.org>) for more information on this and other policy issues.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Become a Girl Scout volunteer. The Girl Scout website ([http://www.girlscouts.org/for\\_adults/volunteering/](http://www.girlscouts.org/for_adults/volunteering/)) describes numerous ways you can share your interests, time, and talents, and helps you with a direct link to your local Girl Scout council. For councils with Girl Scouts Beyond Bars programs, check this website: [http://www.girlscouts.org/councilfinder/gsbb\\_list.asp](http://www.girlscouts.org/councilfinder/gsbb_list.asp).

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org), the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.



## RESOURCES

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/troop1500/> - This website contains information on the film, the filmmakers, and the incarcerated mothers, along with additional resources.

<http://www.girlscouts.org/> - This is the website of the Girl Scouts of the USA. Find information about Girl Scouts Beyond Bars under "Program/Girl Scouts Central/Community Outreach and Education."

### Women in Prison

<http://www.wpaonline.org/> - The Women's Prison Association (WPA) is a service and advocacy organization committed to helping women with criminal justice histories realize new possibilities for themselves and their families by helping them to obtain work, housing, and health care; to rebuild their families; and to participate fully in civic life

<http://www.womenandprison.org/> - Women and Prison: A Site for Resistance makes visible women's experiences in the criminal justice system by providing a dedicated space for prisoners, those previously incarcerated, activists, students, academics, and others to tell their stories, promote strategies and actions that challenge the system, and strive for social justice.

<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/index.cfm> - The Sentencing Project is a national organization working for a fair and effective criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing law and practice, and alternatives to incarceration. One of the sections of the website is devoted to information about women in the criminal justice system.

<http://law.jrank.org/pages/1808/Prisons-Prisons-Women.html> - This online law library lists links to nine topics pertaining to prisons for women, such as "The Composition of Women's Prisons" and "Problems and Unmet Needs in the Contemporary Women's Prison."

### Incarcerated Parents

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,998404,00.html> - Although over a decade old, this *Time* magazine article, "Mothers in Prison," describes a situation akin to the plight of incarcerated mothers and their children today.

<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf> - "Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children" is a special report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics that presents comprehensive data on mothers and fathers in state and federal prisons.

### Support Services and Programs for Children and Families

<http://www.cwla.org> - The Child Welfare League of America is a national coalition of private and public agencies serving vulnerable children and families, especially children and youth who may have experienced abuse, neglect, family disruption, or a range of other factors that jeopardize their safety, sense of permanence, or well-being.

<http://fcnetwork.org/> - The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Family & Corrections Network is the oldest and largest organization in the U.S. focused on children and families of the incarcerated and the programs that serve them.

<http://www.e-ccip.org/> - The mission of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents is the prevention of intergenerational crime and incarceration. Its goals are the production of high-quality documentation, and the development of model services for, children of criminal offenders and their families.

<http://www.voa.org/LookUpandHope> - A program of Volunteers of America, Look Up and Hope and its partner congregations and organizations offer prisoners, their children, and the children's caregivers a comprehensive array of coordinated support services including vocational training and employment services; educational programming and support for all family members; mental health and substance abuse treatment; life-skills and parenting classes; caregiver support groups; and other services.



**TROOP 1500 WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON DECEMBER 8, 2011. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.**

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ITVS Community is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and to create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS Community, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved).

