

## ORGANIZING FOR THE INCARCERATED AND THEIR FAMILIES

### THE CASE OF ACIFaD IN ARGENTINA

# 6

Caroline Buhse<sup>1</sup>

ACIFaD is an Argentine non-profit organization that supports the family members of incarcerated individuals by facilitating support groups and networks, and by assisting individual families who have specific needs or questions with regard to their imprisoned family member. ACIFaD advocates for prison reform in Argentina, and raises awareness of the issues faced by children with an incarcerated parent. ACIFaD has served more than 7,000 people who have a family member in prison.<sup>2</sup>

#### Context and Description

Incarceration is often only discussed in the context of the individual who is in prison, yet many family members and friends also directly experience the negative effects of incarceration. The Civil Association of Families of Individuals Detained in Federal Prison (*Asociación Civil de Familias de Detenidos en Cárceles Federales*, ACIFaD), based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, is a non-governmental organization that works to alleviate the stress involved with the imprisonment of a family member through support networks, advocacy, and by providing help to individuals with specific questions and needs. ACIFaD is comprised of family members and friends of incarcerated individuals, and professionals that work for the organization.

ACIFaD began in 2008 after a group of women met while lining up outside a prison waiting to see their family members. These women decided to form a support group for families and friends of incarcerated

individuals. As individuals who had experienced what it was like to have an imprisoned family member, they realized that they could provide advice and support to other individuals who had not previously experienced life with a relative in prison. While not all of those involved have a family member incarcerated for a drug offense, drug offenses are the third most common conviction in Argentina.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2008, ACIFaD has grown significantly. Its most significant activity is organizing and running meetings on Tuesday evenings that are open to anyone with an incarcerated family member or friend. Andrea Casamento, the director of ACIFaD, is present at each meeting in addition to criminal justice professionals and women who have experienced what it is like to have a family member in prison. Other attendees (all individuals with a loved one in prison) come when they feel they need

**Drug offenses are the third most common conviction in Argentina.**

the support; hence, some attend the session every week, while others go to meetings less regularly. At the meetings, members discuss the struggles and realities of their life with a family member in prison, and often times receive advice from other members who have had similar experiences. A few common topics that are generally discussed include how to explain incarceration to children in the house, how to emotionally process incarceration, and how to prepare for a family member to return home after their release from prison.



Members of ACIFaD participate in advocacy initiatives on behalf of incarcerated individuals and their families. Source: ACIFaD

In addition to organizing and running meetings every week, ACIFaD focuses on advocating for individuals with family members in prison. ACIFaD's advocacy is mainly focused on influencing policies involving incarcerated individuals and their family members. The organization's staff members often meet with elected representatives, judges, and government officials to discuss topics such as prison conditions, disproportionate penalties, and the effect of incarceration on children.

The organization is particularly interested in highlighting the effects of incarceration on children, and has worked with NNAPES (an organization advocating for the rights and well-being of children) and Church World Service in Argentina to organize roundtables

on these negative effects.<sup>4</sup> ACIFaD also advocates for female family members who are left responsible for financially supporting themselves and their children, as the majority of attendees in the support sessions are women.

Additionally, ACIFaD successfully defended the need for the government to pay a “universal allowance per child” to families whose breadwinner is incarcerated. This allocation is a monthly stipend given to children who are Argentine citizens, and whose mothers and fathers do not work in the formal economy. ACIFaD brings together various organizations and engages in advocacy with public agencies in charge of funding the program, ensuring that families receive support during and after incarceration.

Finally, ACIFaD provides resources and support to families and incarcerated individuals with specific problems that need to be resolved on an individual basis. To do so, ACIFaD has created a network of organizations with a specific focus on torture prevention, mental health, and legal aid, and can connect participants with these specialized organizations as necessary.

## Results and Impact

Over the last ten years, more than 1,200 people have participated in the support groups across Buenos Aires and over 7,000 individuals have contacted ACIFaD with questions and concerns regarding incarcerated family members.

ACIFaD began because people were willing to volunteer their time to help and support others who had a family member in prison. The grassroots nature of the organization allowed it to grow successfully without a significant budget. However, as the organization has continued to grow, it has

now started looking into different funding opportunities to promote more sustainable growth in the future.



ACIFaD members participate in their weekly meeting.  
Source: Anabella Museri

ACIFaD has provided invaluable support and advocated for families with incarcerated relatives. However, while some men with female relatives in prison use the services provided, the program mostly serves women who have male family members in prison. Although ACIFaD is also not specifically focused on people incarcerated for drug offenses, it is a unique grassroots initiative that has had interesting impacts in Argentina, and this initiative may therefore be instructive for other communities dealing with high rates of incarceration.

## Key Resources

For more information about ACIFaD, please contact Andrea Casamento at [andreacasamento@hotmail.com](mailto:andreacasamento@hotmail.com).

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Andrea Casamento and Anabella Museri for their valuable comments and contributions.

## Endnotes

1. Program Assistant, WOLA.
2. The information included in this briefing was obtained through a conversation with Anabella Museri, a staff member for ACIFaD (interview conducted on September 14, 2016).
3. Corda, A., *La estrategia fallida: Encarcelamientos por delitos relacionados con estupefacientes en la Argentina*, Colectivo de Estudios Drogas y Derecho, 2016, <http://www.drogasyderecho.org/publicaciones/pub-arg/Corda%20-%20La%20estrategia%20fallida.pdf>
4. Children of Prisoners Europe, *COPE's Spanish Memorandum of Understanding as model for Argentinian advocacy*, May 5, 2015, <http://childrenofprisoners.eu/2016/05/05/copes-spanish-memorandum-of-understanding-as-model-for-argentinian-advocacy/>

---

Disclaimer: The opinions set out in this briefing are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the CIM/OAS.

*This series aims to share examples of innovative approaches that incorporate a gender perspective and the principles of public health and human rights into drug policy. Such innovations will have the best possible outcomes only when they are accompanied by more fundamental drug law and policy reform. However, in the absence of broader reforms, or carried out in conjunction with such reforms, these innovations can help break the vicious cycles of poverty, social exclusion, drug use, involvement in the drug trade, and incarceration that plague so many poor communities across the Americas today. Global Innovative Approaches is a tool that accompanies the publication [Women, Drug Policies and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).*