



# Briefing Paper

Quaker United Nations Office Geneva

## Children of Parents Sentenced to Death New Work at QUNO Geneva



There is a striking lack of research into the impacts of a parent's death sentence on their children. On both sides of the death penalty debate, people generally do not give much thought to those left behind.

To fill this gap, QUNO recently published *Children of Parents Sentenced to Death*. It is a survey of the scant existing evidence, suggesting directions for future research. QUNO's study clearly indicates that children are directly and powerfully impacted by their parents' involvement with the capital justice system.

In some countries, especially where the death penalty is applied in cases of death by domestic violence, children may lose both their parents and end up on the street. In all countries, a parent's death sentence can be a uniquely traumatic and isolating bereavement, with a subsequently unsupported grieving process and likely long term repercussions. *Children of Parents Sentenced to Death* presents findings on the broad range of possible impacts

on children, drawing on limited research and anecdotal evidence from different countries. The publication concludes that there is an urgent need to examine the effects of capital punishment system in its entirety, including the social, economic and psychological impacts on lives that were never intended to be the targets of death penalty laws.

*There is an urgent need to consider the social, economic and psychological impacts on lives that were never intended to be the targets of death penalty laws.*

*Children of Parents Sentenced to Death* has garnered tremendous interest since its publication in English, French and Spanish in February. Other groups have taken it on themselves to translate it into Farsi, Arabic and Japanese.

Given the interest in this topic, QUNO is now proposing an awareness-raising project. It will involve undertaking research, gathering evidence and providing analysis relating to the multidimensional harm that these children endure.

QUNO will survey the support available for affected children in different countries - in terms of practical, material assistance and psychosocial support. We will survey both abolitionist and



Until recently, no UN body had considered the impacts of parental imprisonment on children.

QUNO has been instrumental in putting this issue on the UN agenda, playing a key role in organising a Day of General Discussion on Children of Incarcerated Parents by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (September 2011). Since then, QUNO has contributed to the inclusion of a section on children of prisoners in the Human Rights Council resolution on the Rights of the Child (March 2012). QUNO is regularly asked to contribute expertise, or participate as a speaker in panel discussions on this topic.

In the course of this work, QUNO has been able to identify a range of issues relating to the rights and interests of children whose parents are in the criminal justice system that require further consideration. *Children of Parents Sentenced to Death* is a contribution to the discussion of one of those neglected issues.

retentionist States because we are aware that this issue is relevant to children in many countries. For example, many States continue to apply the death penalty for drugs-related offences. In consequence, there are hundreds (if not thousands) of foreign nationals who are facing the death penalty. No government can be sure that one of its citizens will not face the death sentence and that their children will not be affected.

The project will also give due consideration to how far these impacts extend, both into communities and across generations, in the light of the literature on intergenerational trauma.

Beyond the children immediately impacted by the loss of a parent, capital punishment has a huge symbolic significance. Studies have repeatedly shown that children's exposure to violence can predict attitudes justifying their own use of violence. What attitudes do children living in societies using the death penalty develop

***Children of Parents Sentenced to Death***, Helen F. Kearney, February 2012. Copies of all QUNO publications can be downloaded free from our website. Hard copies are available on request.

**We hope that readers will contact us with any ideas, information, suggestions or comments that you may have. Please write to Helen Kearney, [hkearney@quno.ch](mailto:hkearney@quno.ch)**

regarding conflict and the use of violence?

The body of knowledge generated by this project will provide a basis for identifying what interventions and policy changes can prevent and/or mitigate the suffering of the children affected. In addition, through our contact with social workers, psychologists and counsellors, this project's evidence will feed into practical assistance for those affected.

The project will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the capital justice system, emphasising the extent to which this is a public health issue.

Quakers oppose capital punishment in all circumstances. We are also concerned about its impacts while it continues. There is an urgent need to consider the rights and welfare of the children of the condemned.

