

Understanding the Effects of Parental Incarceration

Research demonstrates a correlation between parental incarceration and adverse outcomes for kids. A child with mom or dad in prison is: 2 to 3 times more likely to suffer depression and other serious mental health problems; twice as likely to have learning disabilities; 3 times more likely to drop out of school; 3 times more likely to have delinquent behavior; and 2 to 3 times more likely to become incarcerated.

dependent variables

While the trauma of parental incarceration triggers complex emotions and needs for every child, the severity of the impact will depend on many things including:

- the child's age, developmental level, and individual personality,
- the quality of the parent-child relationship before incarceration,
- whether they witnessed their parent being handcuffed and taken away
- the degree of household and economic stability
- the nature of the parent's crime, and how long their sentence is
- whether the parent and child can maintain contact and develop a strong bond
- the extent of help available to support the child, caregiver, and family

stages and stress points

The criminal justice process can take years and includes a number of distinct stages, each with its own particular challenges. Children may experience different stress points as their parent proceeds through each of the stages. Stress that might have subsided at one stage may re-emerge at any point in the process:

- time of arrest
- detainment
- pre-trial, and awaiting plea negotiations,
- trial, and sentencing
- incarceration
- parole hearings
- pre-release and re-entry

emotional consequences

Children of incarcerated parents usually experience a mixture of intense feelings as they try to deal with their multiple losses—not only the loss of their incarcerated parent, but also the loss of the life they once had. They may experience:

- **Grief.** Separation from a parent, for any reason, results in stress, sadness, and fear. Separation through imprisonment can be especially difficult because of the social stigma and the ambiguity—many children are told to maintain secrecy and they are often left alone to grieve the loss of a parent who is alive but physically and emotionally absent.
- **Confusion and fear.** Children often become confused and fearful, worried about their parent’s safety in prison, and anxious about “What is going to happen to me now that Mom or Dad is gone?” If substance abuse or domestic violence was occurring in the home before the arrest, a child may be fearful that their parent could be released, with the potential for more abuse.
- **Feelings of abandonment.** Children can feel abandoned and lonely when their parent is gone. Other adults in their life may not have as much time for the child as they once did. Children may feel like they are being shuffled around, and miss the one-on-one time they might previously have enjoyed (for example with a grandparent who has now taken on the role as primary caregiver). Children who have a parent incarcerated need reassurance that both the absent parent and the caregiver still care about them. Children can feel unloved—“if my dad loved me, he’d be with me, not in jail.”
- **Guilt.** Children may feel guilty, not understanding that it was Mom or Dad who did something wrong. "If I had been good this wouldn't have happened ... I shouldn't have opened the door when the police came ... if I didn't ask for a new bike, Mom would not have stolen that money... This is all my fault."
- **Shame.** Shame burdens many children of incarcerated parents. Due to the social stigma of imprisonment, they may be told to keep a family secret— a big burden for a small child. Even when the family tries to maintain privacy, other children who know what happened may bully and tease them. Some children may withdraw while others become aggressive.
- **Anger.** Fits of rage, defiance, or hostility are common. Children may feel that their own sense of justice and fairness has been violated. Their fury may be unfocused and arbitrary, directed at nobody and everybody. Or it may be specific: targeted toward other kids; police and corrections officers; adults at school; and others in positions of authority. Often, a child’s anger is directed at their current caregiver, or their absent parent. If they feel that parent is the cause of their pain, they may not want anything to do with their incarcerated parent. Simply having so many strong feelings can be upsetting!

social and behavioral consequences

Along with this storm of feelings, and often because of it, children's behaviors may change. The emotional needs that drive their behaviors may not be recognized and understood by caregivers, educators, and others. Disciplinary measures taken in response to disruptive behavior can actually make it worse, further alienating the child at a time when she most needs care and nurturing. It may be useful to seek the support of a counselor, educator, or behavioral specialist who has experience with children of incarcerated parents and the trauma that affects them. Here are some of the common challenging behaviors that can accompany parental incarceration:

- explosive outbursts
- frequent crying
- inability to focus
- problems at school
- bedwetting, or incontinence during the day
- fighting
- disobedience or rule-breaking
- over-eating, or *not* eating
- stealing, hoarding
- lying
- sleep problems, nightmares, fear of the dark
- self-harming behaviors like cutting, head banging, or hair pulling
- frequent illness, headaches, stomachaches
- social isolation

Children of incarcerated parents may become withdrawn and have little interest in friends and activities. They may be reluctant to—or refuse to—leave the house, go to school, or participate in activities they once enjoyed. If a child's caregiver shows excessive stress, the child may take on adult roles or responsibilities, for example trying to "parent" their younger siblings. Older children may engage in risky behaviors, like unsafe sex, cigarettes, alcohol and drug use.

These changes in behavior are cries for help, and need to be met with understanding, guidance, and sometimes superhuman patience. It is important to recognize the painful emotions behind the problematic behavior, and help the child learn better ways to cope.