

Impact of Incarceration on Children

Children of prisoners mourn the loss of their incarcerated parent. Some mourn the loss of the parent who was previously available to care for them. Others mourn the loss of the parent who “could have been,” if only the parent hadn’t made that mistake or hadn’t gotten caught.

The tragedy is that life has suddenly changed for the child and they are often too young to understand why. This is how things look to the child:

1. **No warning:** Arrest and incarceration is usually a sudden thing. There is no way to prepare.
2. **Emotional trauma:** If a child is present when the parent is arrested, it is especially traumatic.
3. **Worry about the parent:** The child knows the parent is in a lot of trouble and worries about what is going to happen.
4. **Sudden financial crisis:** If the parent was the wage-earner, the family is thrown into immediate financial crisis.
5. **School work suffers:** The child begins to have problems in school. Classmates make fun of them and their attendance and grades suffer.
6. **Separation by distance to prison:** Now the parent may be 200-300 miles away and they have no control over whether anyone will take them to see their parent.



In many ways, these are normal kids facing very abnormal situations. They have committed no crime, but they pay a steep penalty because of others who have committed crimes.

With or without visible trauma, having a parent incarcerated causes many confusing emotions. These are some typical hurtful feelings children experience:

- **Fear:** Children are afraid of being abandoned, of never seeing their incarcerated parent again, and of being taken away from their caregiver. This fear can even translate to unfounded fears of specific people, places, animals, or activities.
- **Worry:** Concerns about the well-being of the incarcerated parent are common, even if the relationship is troubled. Children also worry that their caregivers will not be able to take care of them or that there will not be enough food or money.
- **Confusion:** Often children are not told the truth about their incarcerated parent’s whereabouts. This leads to questions that children are afraid to ask. They become confused about what is true and what is not.

- **Sadness:** There's just so much loss for the child to deal with. Loss of the parent is usually the worst. But there are other losses, such as not having their parent with them on holidays or perhaps having to go live with another relative or having to change schools. Each new loss resurrects feelings of previous losses.
- **Guilt:** For some reason, children often feel responsible for their parents' behavior. They wish they had tried harder to stop Mom's or Dad's drug use. Or they blame themselves for not getting better grades or helping around the house.
- **Isolation:** A conspiracy of silence is often expected of children in families of prisoners. Social stigma keeps children from talking about their situation. Well-intentioned caregivers may attempt to protect the children by avoiding conversations about the parent. This can leave the children feeling very alone.
- **Embarrassment:** Children with parents in jail or prison feel stigmatized, even when they know many people that have family members who are incarcerated. Imagine the shame and embarrassment of seeing your mother or father's picture in the news with a story about their arrest. Some children deal with the pain by pretending they don't care.
- **Anger:** Anger doesn't usually show up in the early days, but over time and after experiencing loss after loss and disappointment after disappointment, anger emerges. When you see anger in these children, you can be sure they have been hurt very, very deeply and they feel they just can't take it anymore.

Some of these emotions come and go, while others are pervasive. Hopefully, there are also some protective factors present in the community to help these children overcome their trauma. Research on resiliency describes three key factors that are most protective: relationships, skills, and faith.

These three important protective factors – relationships, skills, and faith – can be found in the local Body of Christ. Let us pray that the Church will arise to the need and willingly open its arms to the children and families of the incarcerated.

Some of the information presented in this article came from Prison Fellowship's *Family Embraced Tool Kit*. For more information on Family Embraced, go to www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/family-embraced/