



The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2018, there were over six million adults (about 1 in 40 individuals) incarcerated, on probation, or on parole. In the state of Florida, 357,400 individuals made up the correctional population for that year. With such a large number of individuals involved within the criminal justice system, children and families are sure to experience significant psychological effects associated with the legal involvement (Arditti, 2012). These adverse effects can include a decrease in the family's overall wellbeing, a reduction in children's capacity to adjust to stressful events, a decline in financial resources, and a poor quality of family relationships or even no familial interactions during the period of incarceration. The impact of incarceration can affect all members of the family system.

The effects of parental incarceration on children are associated with mental health difficulties and the tendency to develop behavioral problems. In particular, children with an incarcerated parent are at risk for the development of externalized behaviors such as acting out and hostility towards other individuals and internalized behaviors, for instance, depression and anxiety. Furthermore, children's performance at school could decrease because of parental incarceration. It can lead to disciplinary problems at school, overall poor academic functioning, avoidance of school, or a premature end of formal education. Moreover, depending on when the incarceration period transpires, it may negatively influence the quality of the relationship shared between parent and child. The most significant and enduring outcome of parental incarceration on children is trauma. Childhood trauma is associated with many adverse consequences, and the effects can persist long after the actual traumatic event.

There are various factors, which can help reduce the harmful effects of incarceration on children and families. These include developing protective factors and engaging in intervention programs. Protective factors, in the form of an adequate social support system, healthy coping skills, and resiliency, can help families and children cope better. The use of family and group therapy in combination with support groups can help families who face parental incarceration feel connected and less isolated as they deal with the changes that come with the loss of a loved one in relation to imprisonment.

Community resources that incarcerated families can utilize are the Palm Beach County Youth Services Department (YSD) and the Service Network for Children of Inmates. YSD offers free clinical services such as family therapy, individual therapy, residential treatment, and other supports to county residents. If you or a loved one require assistance, please contact the Education & Training Center Outpatient office at 561-233-4460 or for more information on services, visit www.pbcgov.org/youthservices/EducationCenter.

One community-based agency supported by the Youth Services Department, the Service Network for Children of Inmates, offers different programs to help facilitate visitation for incarcerated parents with their children, arrange wrap services for families, and perform advocacy work. More information can be found on their website at <https://www.childrenofinmates.org>.