

To help family ministry volunteers, we've prepared a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the children of prisoners.

1. How many children in the U.S. have a parent that is incarcerated?

"2.7 million children have a parent behind bars — 1 in every 28 children (3.6 percent) has a parent incarcerated, up from 1 in 125 just 25 years ago. Two-thirds of these children's parents were incarcerated for non-violent offenses." (Western)

Approximately 1 in 110 white children, one in 15 black children, and one in 41 Hispanic children have a parent who is incarcerated. (Christian)

"Black children (6.7%) were seven and a half times more likely than white children (0.9%) to have a parent in prison. Hispanic children (2.4%) were more than two and a half times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison." (Glaze)

2. Do children always know their parent is in prison?

No. A study revealed that "a quarter of female prisoners' children did not know that their mothers were in prison." But most experts agree this is unhealthy for children and they need to be told the truth. (La Vigne)

Children are sometimes told their parents are out of town attending college or helping other family members who are ill. Sometimes the caregiver simply tells them they are the parent, not even acknowledging who their real parent truly is. (De Masi)

While someone might not tell a child because they want to protect them, in the end it causes the child more confusion and leads the child to believe that being in prison is "so shameful that their caregivers were unwilling, unable, or too humiliated to reveal it to the children." (De Masi) Protecting a child from the truth may cause worry, uncertainty, fear, and distrust. Children may wonder if they too will mysteriously disappear or they may find out about the incarceration through other sources and distrust those closest to them. (La Vigne)

3. What are some feelings children experience when a parent is incarcerated?

Children between the ages of 2-6 can feel separation anxiety, impaired socio-emotional development, traumatic stress and even survivor guilt. (Travis) Children between the ages of 7-10 may experience developmental regressions, poor self-concept, acute traumatic stress reactions, and impaired ability to overcome future trauma. (Travis) Children from ages 11-14 may experience rejection on limits of behavior and trauma-reactive behaviors. (Travis) Children from the ages of 15-18 may experience a premature termination of dependency relationship with parent, and it may lead them to intergenerational crime and incarceration. (Travis)

4. What are some emotional issues children of incarcerated parents face?

Children often experience chronic sleeplessness, difficulties concentrating, and depression. Also, “16 percent of children with a parent behind bars developed temporary school phobias that made them unwilling to attend school for up to six weeks following their parent’s incarceration.” (La Vigne)

“A national study of children encountered by Child Welfare Services estimated that among children with recently arrested parents, one in five children had clinically significant internalizing problems (depression, anxiety, withdrawal) and one in three had clinically significant externalizing problems (aggression, attention problems, disruptive behavior) compared to roughly one in ten children in the general population.” (La Vigne)

5. Do children react differently to their parent’s incarceration?

Yes. Younger children tend to experience “disorganized feelings and behaviors upon their parent’s incarceration and older children displaying more antisocial behavior, conduct disorders, and signs of depression.” (La Vigne)

While traditionally it has been believed that males suffered more intensely from a parent being put behind bars, some research has shown that males and females just have different reactions to a parent’s incarceration, “with boys of fathers behind bars displaying more delinquency and aggression and girls exhibiting more internalizing behaviors and attention problems.” (La Vigne)

6. What is the effect of social stigma on a child of an incarcerated parent?

Most children experience embarrassment when their parent goes to jail. Some children also assume they are at fault or have done something that led to their parent’s incarceration, even when there was nothing they could do to prevent their parent from going to jail. (De Masi)

Children with a parent in jail or prison are teased more often at school and “may internalize the stigma and experience lower self-esteem, especially if they identify with the incarcerated parent...Others may react with anger, defiance, and a desire for retaliation against those who reject and taunt them.” (La Vigne)

7. Does having an incarcerated parent mean a child will eventually go to prison?

There is some controversy concerning this issue. Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director of the National Resource Center of Children and Families of the Incarcerated in Philadelphia, PA, says: “Without adequate research we cannot say they are more likely to go to prison or jail.”

But according to the Department of Health and Human Services, “children of incarcerated parents are seven times more likely to be locked up one day.” And according to the Women’s Prison & Home Association, Inc., “Children of offenders are five times more likely than their peers to end up in prison themselves. One in 10 will have been incarcerated before reaching adulthood.”

8. Who do most incarcerated parents rely on to take care of their children?

88% of incarcerated fathers rely on the mother of the children to provide daily care and 2% rely on foster care. 37% of incarcerated mothers rely on the father to provide primary care, 45% rely on the children’s grandparents, 23% rely on other friends and relatives, and 11% rely on foster care. (Hairston)

Sadly, “one in four children living with a grandmother lives in poverty, and a third do not have health insurance, while two-thirds of caregivers of children with incarcerated mothers reported not having the financial support needed to meet the necessary expenses for the child.” (La Vigne)

9. How does having an incarcerated parent affect a child’s education?

“Children with fathers who have been incarcerated are significantly more likely than other children to be expelled or suspended from school (23 percent compared with 4 percent).” (Western)

They usually perform below average academically, “even when compared to children of mothers on probation (70 percent compared to 17 percent), and are more likely than similarly disadvantaged children to fail or drop out of school.” (La Vigne)

10. How often do children visit their incarcerated parents?

“Seventy percent of parents in state prison reported exchanging letters with their children, 53% had spoken with their children over the telephone, and 42% had a personal visit since admission. Mothers were more likely than fathers to report having had any contact with their children...In federal prison, 85% reported telephone contact, 84% had exchanged letters, and 55% reported having had personal visits.” (Glaze)

Children who continue to stay in touch with their parent in prison exhibit fewer disruptive and anxious behaviors. There is also evidence that it helps the parents as well by lowering recidivism rates and making reunification easier and more likely once the parent is released from prison. (La Vigne)

11. What are some obstacles that hamper visiting opportunities?

Families usually are strained for money, so it is a huge sacrifice for them to even decide to go and visit a loved one. Plus there is always a chance the prisoner could have been moved. As a security precaution, current prison practice is to inform family members of an inmate’s transfer to another prison only after the transfer is completed. (De Masi)

Visiting procedures vary, but many jails and prisons force family members to be separated from the incarcerated relative by a thick glass window, which means they have to talk to each other using telephones. Also many jails and prison make visitors undergo frisk and search procedures. Crowded visiting rooms and long wait times are common. These conditions often deter family members from wanting to visit their incarcerated loved one. (Hairston)

Many children feel that the controlled environment and the limited time they could spend visiting their parent did not “allow them to have the kind of interactions they might have in less controlled environments.” (De Masi)

12. Should all children ultimately be reunited with their parents?

There are many situations where it is safer for a child not to be reunited with their incarcerated parent once that parent is released. One study found that “one out of eight children who are reported victims of maltreatment have parents who were recently arrested; in 90 percent of cases, it was the child’s mother who was arrested.” (La Vigne)

Children are sometimes concerned about bonding with their parents again because they don't see their parents as "reliable" or "dependable." Often children have a different expectation of how their parents will behave than how the parents carry out their role upon reunification. (De Masi)

Parents really had to earn their child's respect upon reunification. They had to prove to their children that they had changed. "Many parents acknowledged that the time spent in prison helped them rectify many of the issues that brought them there and used their time for self-improvement." But others did not. Some parents continued to go in and out of prison, which made the prospect of long-term reunification nearly impossible. (De Masi)

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