

# Understanding the Experiences and Impacts of Incarceration on Adult Family Members

Countless immediate and extended family members are affected by the incarceration of a loved one\* in Canada. Yet, little research exists on how incarceration affects adult family members. This resource aims to increase understanding of the experiences and impacts of incarceration on adult family members to support their well-being and reduce stigma.

## MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

Adult family members may experience stress, worry, fear, anger, depression, anxiety, sadness, shock, devastation, guilt, shame, pain, the absence of joy, hopelessness, loneliness, helplessness, blame, and isolation. They may also experience grief and loss as they adjust to being separated from their loved ones or witness the impact of the correctional system on their loved ones.

*"It's like a death in the family where your grieving process just never ends"*  
- Helena, a parent

## ROLE OF PHONE CALLS

Phone calls are vital to maintaining a relationship with a loved one. However, family members may hear upsetting information when their loved one calls. The anticipation of phone calls can also cause stress while affecting the day-to-day lives of family members. A lack of calls can also cause family members to worry that their loved one is sick, hurt, in trouble, or has been moved to another institution without the family being informed.

*"I feel like I'm always on edge, waiting for the phone to ring and organizing my time around his phone schedule"*  
- Nikki, a spouse

## LIFE PUT ON HOLD

Many family members put their lives on hold as they await the release of their loved one or deal with uncertainty about how to move forward with their own lives. Family members may postpone major life events, such as moving, starting a new job, or getting married in their loved one's absence.

*"It feels like I'm holding my life back because I have to wait for him"*  
- Nadia, a sibling

## FOCUS ON INCARCERATED LOVED ONE

Family members focus much of their time and energy on their loved one, including providing emotional and financial support, answering phone calls at all times of day, sending goods to the institution, visiting, and preparing for their release. Family members often put their needs aside to support the needs of their loved ones.

*"I can only do my best and be there to support him, love him, and listen to him and be there for him whenever he calls"*  
- Deidre, a spouse

## ACCEPTING THE UNKNOWNNS

For family members, adjusting to their new reality includes dealing with the constant unknowns around them, such as what is going on in the institution, the health and well-being of their loved one, worries for the future, and not knowing how to move forward with their own lives.

*"How are we gonna get through this? Is it possible to even get through this?"*  
- Lourdes, a spouse

\*The term "loved one" is used to refer to an incarcerated family member. In this study, an inclusive definition of family was used in recognition of diverse family relationships beyond the bonds of birth, marriage, and adoption.

Note: Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of study participants, their incarcerated loved ones, and their families.

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## STAYING CONNECTED

Family members rely on phone calls, letters, and visits to maintain their relationships with their loved ones. Phone calls can be sporadic, and visits can be cancelled or denied even after many hours of travelling. Visits can also be mentally and emotionally draining as family members may be unable to hug their loved ones and struggle with seeing them within prison walls.

*"I tell him write letters, put it down when we can't talk to each other. Let's write each other"*  
- Eva, a spouse

## IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

Family members' relationships with others can be affected by the incarceration of a loved one, including not having time for others, severed communication, avoiding conversation, and others turning their backs on them. Despite this, many family members receive support from family, friends, and their communities.

*"It's affected my relationship with my other kids because it takes a lot of time, energy and money, and so there's not as much time, energy and money for everybody else"*  
- Uma, a parent

## GUILTY BY ASSOCIATION

Family members are often viewed as "guilty by association" by the correctional system and its staff. Being viewed poorly or as a bad person simply because of their connection to their loved one can lead to negative interactions with correctional staff over the phone and in person, such as rude, unkind, or insensitive comments.

*"Being treated like I'm a criminal because I'm a family member and treating me as though I'm some kind of subpar human being"*  
- Pat, a parent

## STIGMA IS REAL

Family members experience stigma as others make assumptions about them because they have an incarcerated loved one. Family members often rely on privacy and secrecy (not telling others about their loved one) to avoid being viewed poorly, judged by others and stigmatized.

*"We're not seen as the victims, but we are victims too. Nobody feels any sympathy for us"*  
- Dylan, a parent

## COPING MECHANISMS

Family members cope with their loved one's incarceration by networking with others in the same situation, leaning on others for support, spending time with friends and family, exercising, going outside, accessing support from professionals, and relying on their faith or spirituality.

*"I have a dog, and that helps not just the exercise but the warmth, the love, and the cuddling too"*  
- Ellie, a parent

**For family members, the incarceration of a loved one is a life-changing experience impacting every aspect of their lives and well-being. While this experience may be time-limited, the impacts on a family member last forever. Understanding the experiences and impacts on family members is vital to supporting their well-being and reducing the stigma.**