

## VULNERABILITIES AND INEQUALITIES FACED BY CHILDREN WITH IMPRISONED PARENTS: CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES TO ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Sofia LUCA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** A significant number of children around the world are affected by separation from one or both parents as a result of the latter's incarceration. This article, a theoretical synthesis, aims to explore the impact of parental imprisonment on children from the perspective of legal sociology. It highlights the multiple challenges and vulnerabilities faced by children throughout the different stages of the criminal justice process involving their parents, as well as the ways in which the state, society and individuals can actively contribute to reducing stigmatization, discrimination and social inequalities affecting these children. The analysis draws on international scholarly literature, institutional reports, and empirical studies, selected based on their relevance and timeliness. Breaking cycles of inequality and alleviating the negative consequences experienced by children separated from incarcerated parents requires a paradigm and perspective shift, involving specialists, individuals and society as a whole. Social, psychological and educational support, together with inter-institutional co-operation and legal reforms, are essential to harmonise opportunities for children affected by parental detention. Reducing disparities and combating discrimination and stigmatisation is not only a moral obligation, but also a fundamental condition for an inclusive society that provides every child with support, protection and equal opportunities, regardless of the legal status of the family.

**Keywords:** children of prisoners, vulnerabilities, inequalities, stigmatisation, support, inclusion.

**Résumé :** Un nombre significatif d'enfants à travers le monde sont affectés par la séparation d'avec l'un ou les deux parents à la suite de l'incarcération de ces derniers. Cet article, une synthèse théorique, vise à explorer l'impact de l'emprisonnement parental sur les enfants du point de vue de la sociologie juridique. Il met en évidence les multiples défis et vulnérabilités auxquels les enfants sont exposés aux différentes étapes de la procédure pénale intentée contre leurs parents, ainsi que les moyens par lesquels l'État, la société et les individus peuvent coopérer activement pour réduire la stigmatisation, la discrimination et les inégalités sociales auxquelles ces enfants sont confrontés. L'analyse est basée sur la littérature internationale, les rapports et la recherche empirique, sélectionnés sur la base de leur pertinence et de leur actualité. Pour briser les cycles d'inégalité et atténuer les conséquences négatives subies par les enfants séparés de leurs parents incarcérés, il faut

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<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi; trainer at the National Institute of Magistracy (INM). E-mail: sofialuca2000@yahoo.com.

changer de paradigme et de perspective, en impliquant les spécialistes, les individus et la société dans son ensemble. Le soutien social, psychologique et éducatif, accompagné de la coopération interinstitutionnelle et des réformes juridiques, est essentiel pour harmoniser les chances des enfants affectés par la détention parentale. La réduction des disparités et la lutte contre la discrimination et la stigmatisation ne sont pas seulement une obligation morale, mais aussi une condition fondamentale pour une société inclusive qui offre à chaque enfant soutien, protection et égalité des chances, quel que soit le statut juridique de la famille.

**Mots-clés :** enfants de détenus, vulnérabilités, inégalités, stigmatisation, soutien, inclusion.

**Abstract:** Un număr semnificativ de copii din întreaga lume sunt afectați de separarea de unul sau ambii părinți ca urmare a încarcerării acestora din urmă. Acest articol, de tip sinteză teoretică, își propune să exploreze impactul detenției părinților asupra copiilor, din perspectiva sociologiei juridice. Sunt evidențiate provocările și vulnerabilitățile multiple la care sunt expuși copiii în diferitele etape ale procesului penal intentat părinților, precum și modalitățile prin care statul, societatea și indivizii pot conlucra activ la reducerea stigmatizării, discriminării și inegalităților sociale față de acești copii. Analiza are la bază literatura internațională de specialitate, rapoarte și cercetări empirice, selecționate pe criterii de relevanță și actualitate. Pentru întreruperea ciclurilor de inegalitate și atenuarea consecințelor negative resimțite de copiii separați de părinții încarcerați este necesară schimbarea paradigmelor și a perspectivelor, cu implicarea specialiștilor, a fiecărui individ și a societății în ansamblul ei. Sprijinul social, psihologic și educațional, alături de cooperarea interinstituțională și reformele juridice, sunt esențiale pentru a echilibra șansele copiilor afectați de detenția părinților. Reducerea disparităților și combaterea discriminării și stigmatizării reprezintă nu doar o obligație morală, ci și o condiție fundamentală pentru o societate incluzivă, care asigură fiecărui copil sprijin, protecție și șanse egale, indiferent de statutul juridic al familiei.

**Cuvinte cheie:** copiii deținuților, vulnerabilități, inegalități, stigmatizare, sprijin, incluziune.

## 1. Introduction

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) estimates that approximately 2.1 million children in Europe have a parent in prison at any given time. Children with incarcerated parents represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, frequently overlooked by national social and educational policies. At the same time, judicial systems - which are primarily focused on offenders - tend to ignore the collateral consequences of imprisonment on the children of incarcerated parents (COPE, 2021a; Council of Europe, 2022; European Commission, 2021).

Thus, although they have committed no crime, these children suffer the consequences of their parents' actions. They are exposed to numerous vulnerabilities and various forms of stigmatization and discrimination, which may significantly hinder their social, educational and emotional development, thereby perpetuating inequality and social exclusion (Arditti, 2012; Condry & Smith, 2018; Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

This article, conceived as a theoretical synthesis, aims to explore the impact of parental incarceration on children from a socio-legal perspective, with a focus on the vulnerabilities and risks associated not only with the incarceration itself, but also with the various procedural stages of the criminal justice process involving the parent. Experiences such as house searches and the arrest of a parent, both carried out through violent means and without regard for the presence of children, barriers to maintaining the parent - child relationship during the parent's detention, social stigmatisation, the lack of adequate psychological and material support, and the absence of inter-institutional intervention protocols all contribute to deepening the trauma experienced by these children (COPE, 2021b; Simmons et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the study underlines the need to break cycles of inequality and to mitigate the negative consequences experienced by children separated from incarcerated parents. Achieving this goal requires a paradigm shift involving professionals, individuals, and society as a whole, along with comprehensive legal, social, and educational support systems rooted in equity, inclusion, and child protection.

The paper aims to propose directions for systemic and individual interventions and to raise awareness among professionals in the social, educational, and legal fields, encouraging them to take an active role in breaking the cycles of disadvantage affecting children with incarcerated parents. It is essential that these children are no longer treated as "invisible," and that their protection becomes a genuine priority in public policies.

The study draws on relevant academic sources, institutional reports, and recent empirical research, selected based on criteria of timeliness, thematic relevance, and scientific validity. The structure begins with an overview of the context, followed by an analysis of the different stages of the criminal justice process initiated against the parent, which serves as a framework for highlighting the specific vulnerabilities and challenges faced by children at each point. The following sections examine how parental detention affects children, contributes to the perpetuation of multiple forms of disadvantage, and identify possible roles and intervention strategies.

## **2. Background**

Globally, unprecedented numbers of people are incarcerated and in many countries detention is on the rise (Okereke, 2013). Proportionately, the number of children whose parents are in detention is also increasing.

The actual number of children with incarcerated parents is difficult to establish due to under-reporting and the absence of systematic data collection. Lack of knowledge of the true extent of the phenomenon of separation of children from their imprisoned parents, coupled with insufficient knowledge of their negative experiences is reflected in the lack of policies and programmes to support and intervene with this vulnerable group (Condry & Smith, 2018).

Romania is not spared from this issue, recording an increase in the incarceration rate between 2018 and 2024 of around 11.71 percent (Fair & Walmsley, 2021; Fair & Walmsley, 2024), without the exact number of children affected by separation from their incarcerated parents being known.

In a study conducted by the Romanian NGO Alternative Sociale in 2015, it was established that 16,764 children had one or both parents in detention, 39 percent of those incarcerated were parents of at least one child, and of these, 68 percent had two or more children. Only 867 children were being assisted by child protection services, and mapping the areas with the most children separated from their parents as a result of incarceration revealed that Bucharest, Constanța and Iași had the most children with detained parents.

In the absence of systematic data collection, estimates are the only available method for assessing the number of children with incarcerated parents in recent years. According to COPE (2021a), approximately 28,306 children in Romania had a parent in detention in 2021. This estimate is based on data from the Council of Europe's SPACE I Programme, which reported a prison population of 21,774 in Romania in 2021 (Aebi et al., 2022, Table 3, p. 26). The estimated number of children with a parent in detention was derived by applying a rate of 1.3 children per incarcerated individual, as suggested by Cassan (2002).

The data provided by the Romanian National Penitentiary Administration (2025) show that in April 2025, there were 24,544 persons deprived of their liberty in Romanian detention centres. Applying the same parenthood rate of 1.3 children per incarcerated individual (Cassan, 2002), it is estimated that approximately 31,907 Romanian children were affected by the separation from one or both parents due to imprisonment during the same reference period.

It is of concern that in Romania the average length of custodial sentences served is approximately 24.8 months, among the highest in Europe (Aebi et al., 2022, p. 15), which implies an extended period of separation between the affected children and their incarcerated parents.

Regardless of geographic context, however, as Liz Gordon (2021, p. 4) emphasised, "the experiences of children in prison are very similar across nations and jurisdictions, despite the many differences in numbers and prison systems."

Parental incarceration is documented to be a negative experience in itself for many children, which also exposes them to other possible collateral traumatic consequences such as separation anxiety, emotional distress, physical and mental health conditions, increased impoverishment, family and relationship dysfunction, stigmatisation, discrimination, and social exclusion. In addition, they may experience educational difficulties, alcohol or drug misuse, behavioural problems, and even contact with the criminal justice system (Arditti, 2012; Järvinen et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2012).

Separation from one or both parents may occur during the criminal proceedings initiated against the parent, either in the context of pre-trial detention or subsequently, following the imposition of a custodial sentence.

Legal proceedings initiated against a parent in conflict with the criminal law can affect children, because each stage of the judicial process generates specific vulnerabilities for children, who directly experience the consequences of the actions or inactions of the authorities, without their needs being adequately taken into account. Adele Jones (2017) has expressed by the phrase “blind justice for children” how children are harmed and ignored by the system at every stage of the judicial process brought against the parent, from arrest, through the criminal trial, and following incarceration to serve their sentence.

As can be seen from the table of contents of this article, at the various stages of the criminal proceedings brought against the parent, children are exposed to numerous vulnerabilities and various forms of stigmatisation and discrimination, which can negatively affect their health, opportunities and well-being, perpetuating social inequalities (Condry & Smith, 2019; Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024).

### **3. Evidentiary procedures and taking preventive measures**

A house search, as part of an evidentiary procedure, can constitute a traumatic first encounter with the justice system. Children often experience intense fear, confusion and distress as they witness the sudden and forceful entry of law enforcement officers into their home, typically early in the morning or, conversely, in the late hours, accompanied by loud and intrusive searches for evidence related to criminal offences and the seizure of personal property (Condry & Smith, 2019).

It is possible that, in those circumstances, children may witness their parent being slammed to the ground, immobilised and handcuffed, orders given in a harsh, violent tone, without the needs and rights of the children being provided for or considered by members of the investigation team. Nell Bernstein emphasises that “for many children, a parent’s arrest is the moment when their invisibility becomes visible” (*apud* COPE, 2021b, p. 1), a visibility that is often painful, unwanted and stigmatising.

The experience of witnessing the arrest of one or both parents arouses a wide range of reactions, emotions and feelings: shock and fear as a result of witnessing violent acts; confusion and concern for the well-being of the parent; feelings of abandonment and loss of hope; reactions of guilt for the parent’s offence and shame felt as a result of the stigma of having someone arrested (Condry & Smith, 2019; COPE, 2021a; Tijerina & Tijerina, 2021).

Phillips and Zhao (2010) suggest that those children who have witnessed a parent being arrested are 73 percent more likely to develop higher symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder than those who have not experienced the arrest.

The interaction of law enforcement with these children is defining for their subsequent relationship with the police or “authority” in general (COPE, 2021b). Currently, there are no clearly defined procedures for conducting arrests in a way that takes into account the needs of children whose parents are in conflict with the criminal law. Similarly, there are no established protocols for collaboration

between the police, child protection authorities, social services and schools to ensure a consistent and effective cross-sectoral approach. This lack of coordination can lead to situations where children are traumatised through direct exposure to their parents' arrest, without adequate support or protection from the inherent emotional and psychological effects of these experiences. In most cases, the quality of interactions between law enforcement officials and the children of individuals in conflict with the criminal law relies more on the personal experience, goodwill, and innate interpersonal skills of police officers than on the use of child-sensitive procedures or competencies acquired through specialised training. Such training would ideally consider the potential psychological impact of trauma on children (COPE, 2021b).

In the same context, an additional source of stress is the placement of children, whose primary or sole carer is arrested, in a form of special protection (foster care or emergency placement) and the uncertainty of the child as to what will happen to them in the future. The impact of a parent's arrest extends beyond the immediate event because when a child is placed in substandard care or, in extreme cases, when a child is left unattended, this can pose a significant danger to the child's safety and well-being (COPE, 2021b).

Moreover, in the situation of arrest, in addition to the abrupt absence of the parent, the child also faces a lack of age-appropriate information about what will happen to the arrested parent and how long the parent will be missing. It is an extremely stressful time of maximum uncertainty, likely to distress both children and adult family members (Condry & Smith, 2019).

Researchers studying families involved in the criminal justice system have conceptualised parental incarceration as a type of "ambiguous loss", characterized by the physical absence of the parent alongside their continued psychological presence. This type of loss is unresolved, confusing, and deeply distressing, as it lacks the clarity or information needed for children to experience closure or to integrate the loss into their emotional lives (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2021).

Moreover, pre-trial detention is usually accompanied, for reasons related to the tactics of the criminal proceedings, by a ban on contact, with limited communication between those under criminal investigation and their families.

Financial difficulties arise or worsen, caused by the cessation of the arrested person's sources of income, but also due to additional expenses incurred by the family for the person placed in state custody (expenses related to providing necessary legal assistance, travelling to court hearings, visits to the place of detention, food and clothing packages etc.).

#### **4. The stage of court proceedings and sentencing to imprisonment**

The period when the criminal proceedings against the parent are being judged is also a stage with a strong emotional impact. Children may feel powerless in their desire to help their parent or to make their voice heard in relation to their

parent's conviction. Despite the direct impact that parental sentencing has on children, courts frequently disregard their right to be heard (Smith, 2018).

Social and financial hardship tends to intensify over time, as prolonged court proceedings generally result in a greater socio-economic burden on detainees and their families, particularly when individuals are taken into custody during the course of the trial process (Schönteich, 2021).

The moment when the parent is sentenced to a custodial sentence leads to important changes. There are changes in family structure, loss of opportunities and social status, as well as the exposure of children to the stigma of having a parent in detention. Family members face long-term separation, depending on the severity of the sentence, and children may feel abandoned by the incarcerated parent with whom they can no longer share the important moments in their lives. No matter how complicated the children's lives were, the incarceration of the parent is felt as a great loss, even associated with the mourning period (Tijerina & Tijerina, 2021).

Some families face the dilemma of whether to disclose or conceal the fact of a parent's incarceration from their children, other family members or the community. However, Long et al. (2022) draw attention to the consequences of a lack of transparency, which can fuel a child's sense of not having someone trustworthy around them. In addition, such behaviour deepens children's invisibility, thus depriving them of the material or psychological support they are in such great need of.

## **5. Prison visits and reintegration**

Visiting an incarcerated parent at their place of detention can be another potentially traumatic experience for children. The contact with the prison space (usually large, grey buildings surrounded by high fences and barbed wire), with rigid internal rules that are incomprehensible to young children (strict visiting hours that do not take into account the children's availability or schedule, prohibition of physical touching, etc.) and security procedures specific to places of detention (body searches in conditions that do not take into account the vulnerability of minors in a context that is doubly vulnerable) can negatively imprint both the parent-child relationship and the underdeveloped psyche of children and can be as negative experiences, feelings and emotions for them (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018).

Nonetheless, researchers emphasize the mutual benefits of maintaining the parent-child relationship when there is no compelling reason to restrict it. For incarcerated parents, strong family bonds cultivated during imprisonment are associated with a reduced risk of recidivism and more successful social reintegration after release (Condry & Smith, 2018). At the same time, children benefit from such sustained connections by exhibiting fewer behavioural problems, lower levels of stress, reduced substance misuse, and improved academic performance (Kjellstrand et al., 2020).

Despite these advantages, maintaining the parent-child relationship can be challenging or may not occur at all due to long distances, financial constraints that

prevent travel to the detentional facility, or the other parent's decision to sever ties with the incarcerated parent.

Although the Romanian prison system allows for online communication between prisoners and their family members, bureaucratic procedures and limitations considerably reduce the accessibility of this right. Moreover, effective access to these online communications requires family members to have an internet connection and adequate technical means, which can be an additional obstacle, especially in the case of families in situations of social or economic vulnerability.

The reintegration of the parent into the family relationship after release from detention can also present a number of challenges, especially if the detention has been over a long period of time. A renegotiation of roles takes place, issues of insufficient living space, lack of employment, increased social stigmatisation may arise, which in turn negatively imprints children (Condry & Smith, 2019).

## **6. The negative impact of parental detention on children**

The literature highlights that children are exposed to multiple vulnerabilities and risks throughout the entire trajectory of parental incarceration: from sentencing, through the period of detention, and even after release. The negative consequences for children include psychological and emotional distress, stigmatisation, tendency toward secrecy and social isolation, disruptions in educational pathways, behavioural problems, economic hardship, discrimination, and the perpetuation of social inequalities – which can undermine the child's physical and mental health, well-being, and long-term development (Condry & Smith, 2019; Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013; Luther, 2023).

Parental incarceration is listed among the top 10 adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – potentially traumatizing events occurring between the ages of 0 and 17 – that significantly impact a child's physical, mental, and behavioural development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The cumulative presence of such experiences is associated with reduced life span and increased risk of developing physical and mental health problems over the course of one's life (Felitti *et al.*, 1998).

Research from the COPING project (2010–2012), which included Romania, found that children with incarcerated parents face a 25-50 percent higher risk of developing mental health problems (particularly the children over the age of 11). For Romania, the COPING project marked the first systematic attempt to document the needs and experiences of children affected by parental incarceration.

In a recent review of the literature, Syauqila & Kaloeti (2024) also show that the predominant impact of parental incarceration manifests itself in the *mental health* of children, where various affective and behavioural manifestations interact, amplify and condition each other.

Parental incarceration has become an identifiable source of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children, with manifestations such as depression, anger, aggression, self-isolation and self-harm behaviours (Morgan-



Mullane, 2018). The trauma of parental separation is often accompanied by feelings of shame, stigma and emotional insecurity, all of which contribute to creating a breeding ground for the onset of depression and anxiety (Johnson et al., 2018; Kremer et al., 2020), decreased self-esteem (Kjellstrand et al., 2020), social withdrawal, and even suicidal tendencies (Pfluger et al., 2023). In some cases, developmental delays may occur (Marie-Mitchell et al., 2019) or dysfunctional defence mechanisms such as narcissism and emotional insensitivity may be activated (Li & Ang, 2019), further complicating the psychosocial adjustment of these children.

Emotional distress is often exacerbated by the *social stigma* associated with parental incarceration, which also contributes to significant difficulties in the social and educational integration of affected children (Besemer et al., 2019). Children fear negative labels from their communities, and the fear of being labelled as "children of offenders" can discourage them from participating in educational and community activities, exacerbating feelings of isolation and the risk of social exclusion, especially when social or institutional support is insufficient.

While separation caused by parental incarceration can be as painful as other forms of parental loss (such as death or divorce), it can be further complicated by the stigma, ambiguity and lack of social support and compassion that accompany it (Arditti, 2012; Kramer & Burton, 2021).

Stigmatisation manifested in the social environment is often accompanied by the *discriminatory social treatment* to which children are subjected (Long et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2021). Many individuals and institutions associate parental incarceration with criminal tendencies, assuming that their children will follow a similar pattern. Educational institutions, which should serve as a support system, sometimes contribute to the discrimination these children face. Unconsciously, teachers may have low expectations of academic success for a child with parents in detention, assuming that the child does not receive adequate parental guidance, just as they may assume that the child will also exhibit behavioural problems (Wildeman et al., 2017).

Also, the accumulation of adverse childhood experiences, such as parental incarceration, has over time been significantly associated with *children's behavioural problems*, including various *forms of contact with the criminal justice system*.

A review of research on the likelihood of children with incarcerated parents becoming involved in the justice system highlights both the limitations of previous studies that did not take into account the overlap of pre-existing risk factors specific to vulnerable family backgrounds (such as low socio-economic status, poor access to education, family instability or lack of support networks, structural inequalities) as well as the unintended consequences of these findings, which, rather than supporting children with parents in detention, risk amplifying their stigmatisation (Adalist-Estrin, 2021, Conway&Jones, 2015). According to recent reviews of internationally representative studies, approximately 32.8

percent of children affected by parental incarceration come into contact with the justice system (Keays Yeager et al., 2021).

There are also studies that emphasise correlations between parental incarceration and *difficulties in educational attainment* (Fox et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2012). According to them, parental imprisonment may predict poorer school outcomes for their children, both in the short and long term, as well as a higher likelihood for children to drop out of school. Anxiety, depression or social stigmatisation can affect concentration and motivation at school, and financial difficulties following incarceration can limit children's access to appropriate educational resources (textbooks, tutoring, extracurricular activities) or affect their ability to attend school. In addition, the absence of direct educational support from the incarcerated parent, combined with the increased burden placed on the parent remaining at home (who must take on both their own responsibilities and those of the detained parent) can lead to difficulties in supporting the child's education, or even to its neglect.

McCauley (2020) even suggests that parental incarceration may also lead to increased risk of dropping out of school as well as to *the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage*.

The incarceration of a parent can also generate *family dysfunction* as a result of physical and emotional separation between parents and children (Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024). Significant economic and social consequences, such as financial insecurity and housing instability, contribute to increased parental stress and risk of depression (Morgan et al., 2021), as well as an increased likelihood of marital relationship breakdown. Single mothers, in particular, tend to initiate new relationships, which can accentuate instability within the family, and children frequently end up being raised by grandparents or other carers (Turney & Haskins, 2019).

## **7. The cycle of multiple disadvantages**

Parental imprisonment often overlaps with poverty, discrimination and limited access to educational resources, creating a cycle of multiple disadvantage for children. The stigma of having a parent in prison extends beyond childhood, affecting future employment opportunities and social mobility, as individuals with a history of family incarceration often face systemic barriers in higher education and the labour market, and social disparities fuel intergenerational inequalities (Condry & Smith, 2018).

The lack of targeted interventions and support programmes worsens the situation of these children, isolating them and leaving them to struggle alone to overcome personal and educational obstacles. Social services and the justice system do not adequately take into account the specific needs of these children (lack of consistent material support, psychological counselling and emotional support, limited access and visitation rights for incarcerated parents, punitive penal policies that do not take into account the collateral effects of parental detention), limiting their opportunities.

Also, the lack of professional specialisation of community social workers leads to the provision of social benefits without guiding families to reduce the causes of poverty, thus contributing to keeping these families vulnerable. At the same time, a complete failure to address emotional difficulties, problems with school performance and attendance or poor peer relationships can create additional barriers for children facing separation from incarcerated parents (Foca, 2017).

Highlighting the severity of the social and emotional risks to which they are exposed, Luther (2015) points out that children with parents in detention are among the most defenceless populations in the world. When a child grows up in an environment characterised by poverty, social exclusion, stigmatisation and limited access to education and support resources, their chances of overcoming this condition become significantly lower – particularly in the absence of active public policies for intervention and protection.

### **8. Intervention roles and strategies**

Reducing the risks and effectively managing the challenges faced by children with parents in detention requires a multidimensional approach, involving structural interventions, community education, and policy and legislative reforms. Syauqila & Kaloeti (2024) suggest that the provision of supportive social programmes is an essential first step in building resilience of children with incarcerated parents, as they have a heightened need for psychosocial support and protective relational environments. The ability of these children to cope with adversity is profoundly influenced by the quality of social interactions and the attitudes of those around them (extended family, teachers, peers or professionals in the field of child protection or interacting with the child in their roles) that can significantly contribute to the development of their internal coping resources and the prevention of the negative effects of stigmatisation (Kjellstrand et al., 2020).

To this end, the training of professionals is a key component of institutional interventions aimed at reducing the adverse effects on vulnerable children, particularly those with incarcerated parents.

The school could be one of the main promoters in reducing stigmatisation of children with detained parents, by implementing inclusive policies and training educators to support, rather than stigmatise children who have parents in detention.

Collaboration between social services and schools could lead to the introduction or expansion of mentoring programmes that provide affected children with the necessary emotional and educational resources. Involving children in additional activities that support their hobbies and interests, outside school hours, can contribute to increased self-esteem and make them feel empowered (Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024), and is also a protective factor in combating loneliness and isolation, poor school performance and delinquency (Kremer et al., 2020).

Support from social services and civil society to keep families together can also have significant emotional and social benefits. For prisoners, the bond with

family members contributes to an easier reintegration into society, reduces the likelihood of recidivism and gives them a strong motivation to change their lives. For children, these relationships can provide greater emotional stability and continuity of essential emotional bonds (Condry & Smith, 2018).

Community-based interventions could also educate others about the impact of stigma on children of prisoners (Long, 2022).

Legislative reforms to include mandatory best interests of the child assessments into the criminal proceedings against parents could lead to the wider application of alternatives to detention by the judiciary for parents who are the primary or sole carers of the child.

## 9. Conclusion

Parental incarceration has long-term consequences for the children of incarcerated parents, representing a source of emotional, social, educational and economic imbalance. Children of offenders are exposed, as collateral victims, to a range of traumas and vulnerabilities from the onset of the parent's criminal case to their release from custody and beyond, suffering the effects of stigmatisation, family breakdown, economic instability or institutional impoverishment and marginalisation.

Without specialised interventions, these children risk being trapped in a vicious cycle of multiple disadvantages that can negatively affect their health, developmental pathways, social and emotional balance, opportunities and well-being.

Psychological, educational and social support, changing mentalities, together with inclusive public policies and inter-institutional collaboration, are essential to guarantee equal opportunities and to ensure that the society we live in does not punish children for crimes they did not commit.

The situation of children with parents in detention can no longer be treated as an invisible social problem. It must be recognised as a matter of social justice and equity in the protection of children's rights, and tackling the stigmatisation of these children is not just a moral responsibility, but a condition for a fair and just society (COPE, 2021a).

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