



CITIZENS FOR PRISON REFORM

HOPE & HEALING

TOOLKIT FOR CAREGIVERS
OF YOUTH AND CHILDREN



MICPR.ORG

A MICPR Guide to
Support Children
Affected by
Incarceration

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INTRODUCTION

Caring for children while having an incarcerated loved one can be an incredibly stressful and overwhelming experience. The emotional toll of separation, combined with the financial and logistical challenges, often leaves caregivers feeling drained and unsupported. In addition to managing their own feelings of worry and anxiety, caregivers must navigate the complexities of raising children, who may also be struggling with their own emotions and trauma from the incarceration.

It's crucial for caregivers to acknowledge the immense stress they are under and prioritize self-care, for themselves and the children. Taking time to rest, seek emotional support, and engage in activities that nurture their own well-being can help them maintain the strength needed through the incarcerated journey.

In this toolkit, we discuss how incarceration has a profound impact on both the emotional well-being of children and the practical realities faced by families while also providing numerous resources. While we encourage families to maintain connections during the incarceration process, we understand that, in some situations, this may not be possible or in the best interest of the child. Regardless of your situation, this toolkit was created with you in mind.

This toolkit is designed for the parents, caregivers, service providers, educators and policy makers who have a direct hand in working for and with children with incarcerated parents. This guide is meant to assist you in finding the support needed to help the Michigan youth of today that are impacted by incarceration.

The toolkit is a collection of resources that are broken into 4 main sections. Each section is filled with numerous resources, links and tips.

This toolkit was written and edited by **Raquel Mance** and Citizens for Prison Reform's Family Participation Director, **Tiffany Walker**.

Additional edits to this toolkit will be completed by Citizens for Prison Reform staff and volunteers.

INTRODUCTION

This Toolkit will help you if...



You are a parent with an incarcerated spouse.

You are a caregiver of a child with an incarcerated parent or loved one.



Your child witnessed law enforcement arresting a loved one.

You are a teacher or counselor receiving questions from a student who has a loved one in jail or prison.



You are a social worker looking for resources to give to foster parents with incarcerated children.

You are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated and are looking for resources for an impacted child.



DID YOU KNOW?

More than half of incarcerated parents in state prisons and almost half of parents in federal prisons have never had a personal visit from their children.

Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

When a parent is incarcerated, both the child and the caregiver experience profound emotional and psychological trauma. The caregiver of a child with an incarcerated parent often faces significant financial and emotional strain. The loss of a primary income earner due to incarceration can cause financial instability, forcing the caregiver to either adjust their own work hours or find additional sources of income, which may not always be sufficient. This economic burden is compounded by the emotional stress of taking on the dual role of both provider and emotional support for the child.

As they navigate the complexities of maintaining stability, caregivers may also be grappling with their own grief over the absence of the incarcerated family member, particularly if the caregiver had a close relationship with that person. This grief can lead to feelings of helplessness, as they may feel powerless in addressing the needs of the child while managing their own sorrow. Caregivers may also experience guilt, questioning their ability to protect the child from the trauma of parental incarceration, and anger, either at the incarcerated parent or at the system that caused the separation. These conflicting emotions create a heavy emotional load, making it difficult for caregivers to maintain a sense of normalcy or to fully support the child in their emotional struggles.

The emotional and psychological impact of a parent's incarceration on a child is profound, often leading to trauma and stress that manifests as anxiety, depression, and confusion. Children may struggle with feelings of abandonment, guilt, and shame, especially if they are unable to understand the reasons behind their parent's imprisonment. This disruption can also lead to attachment issues, creating insecurity and emotional withdrawal, as the child struggles to trust others or form healthy connections. The stigma surrounding parental incarceration exacerbates feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and fear of judgment, leading to social and behavioral challenges.

Children may experience difficulties in school, with lower academic performance, behavioral problems, and absenteeism, all stemming from the emotional strain of their circumstances. Furthermore, the absence of a positive parental role model increases the risk of delinquency, as children are left vulnerable to negative influences. Economic hardship compounds these challenges, as the loss of a parent's income often leads to financial instability, food insecurity, and lack of access to resources like extracurricular activities or academic support.

Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

The child may also experience disrupted living arrangements, with many placed in foster care or shuffled between relatives, creating a sense of instability that deepens their stress. These challenges disrupt family dynamics, straining relationships between children and caregivers, who may be overwhelmed with their own emotional and financial struggles. In some cases, older children may take on caregiving roles, sacrificing their own development and well-being.

The **Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) test** is a crucial tool in understanding the impact of early life stressors on long-term health and well-being, especially for children affected by incarceration.

Impacted children often face unique challenges, including emotional distress, instability, and stigma, which can significantly increase their ACE scores. By assessing experiences such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, the ACE test helps identify these vulnerable children, highlighting their increased risk for both physical and mental health issues later in life.

Additionally, addressing the ACEs associated with incarceration can help break the cycle of trauma. By highlighting the importance of early intervention and support, the ACE test contributes to building a more empathetic and informed society, ultimately leading to better outcomes not just for the children themselves, but for their families and communities as a whole.

Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

The trauma for both parties is compounded by the societal and systemic challenges they face, making healing and recovery a difficult, ongoing process. Telling a child that their parent is incarcerated is an incredibly sensitive and challenging conversation that requires careful consideration of the child's age, emotional maturity, and understanding. It's important to be honest, but also to tailor the information to what the child can comprehend.

Begin by creating a calm and safe environment where the child feels supported and secure. Use simple, clear language to explain the situation, avoiding complicated legal terms or details that might be confusing or frightening. Acknowledge the child's feelings and encourage them to ask questions, ensuring they feel heard and validated.

Depending on the child's age, you might explain that the parent made a mistake, is in a place where they can't be with the family right now, and that they will be safe during this time. Offer continued emotional support and let the child know that the parent still loves them, even though they are not physically present. It's crucial to remain patient, as the child may need time to process the information, and to be ready to revisit the conversation as they continue to ask questions and express their emotions.

It is important to keep in mind that children often feel that discussing their parent's incarceration is not acceptable or that they may not know how to articulate their feelings. Experts recommend emphasizing key messages, such as:



Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

In addition to these affirmations, it's also important to reassure the child that they are not to blame for the situation, as children often internalize guilt or confusion when a parent is removed from their life. Breaking difficult news is a delicate process that requires sensitivity, empathy, and thoughtful communication.

While some situations may allow for personal handling, there are instances where seeking professional assistance is advisable. This is particularly true when the news involves complex emotional, psychological, or social factors that could have a significant impact on the individuals involved.

If you feel that professional assistance is required for your situation, please reference page 21.



Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

Building strong bonds during a challenging time, such as when a loved one is incarcerated, requires fostering open communication and creating a safe environment where feelings can be shared openly. It's important to encourage honest dialogue, where every family member feels comfortable expressing their emotions without fear of judgment or dismissal. This can start by setting aside dedicated time each day or week for check-ins, where everyone, including the child, can share their thoughts, worries, and feelings.

Active listening is key in these conversations, as it helps each family member feel heard and validated. In particular, explaining the situation to the child in a clear, age-appropriate way provides them with a sense of understanding, reducing confusion and fear. Ensuring the child knows they can always approach their caregiver with questions or concerns helps reinforce emotional security within the family unit.

Spending quality time together and engaging in family activities is another powerful way to strengthen bonds. Engaging in simple, enjoyable activities like playing games, cooking meals, reading, or going for walks provides opportunities to connect on a deeper level. These moments allow for shared experiences, creating positive memories that counterbalance the stress and uncertainty of the situation.

For children, these moments of closeness can offer stability and a reminder of the love and support they have, even when circumstances are difficult. Additionally, family activities allow for natural moments to check in emotionally, reinforcing the sense of support and unity that's crucial during times of separation or hardship.

Ultimately, the combination of open communication, emotional support, and shared experiences helps families navigate difficult transitions and emerge with stronger, more resilient bonds.

Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

Staying connected with an incarcerated parent can present numerous emotional and logistical challenges, making it hard to maintain a close relationship. Limited visitation, phone call restrictions, and the impersonal nature of letters can leave families feeling disconnected, often leading to feelings of abandonment, confusion, and frustration.

However, there are multiple ways families can stay engaged.

- **Writing regular letters or sending drawings** can provide an emotional outlet for both parent and child, helping to bridge the gap created by physical separation.
- **Scheduling phone calls** when possible allows for voice communication, fostering a sense of closeness.
- For families with small children, sending books to the incarcerated parent or **organizing small care packages** with meaningful items can offer comfort and a sense of continued connection.
- Some families also **create shared routines**, like watching the same TV shows or reading the same books, so they have topics to discuss during their limited conversations.

While the distance is undeniable, these activities can help maintain a bond, offering both parents and children a sense of continuity and emotional support. [By staying connected](#), families not only offer love and hope but also contribute significantly to the incarcerated individual's chances of leading a successful and fulfilling life post-release.

In some cases, children are unable to stay connected with an incarcerated parent, and the decision to limit or sever contact can be an incredibly difficult one for both the child and the family.

Emotional Wellbeing of the Family

There are various reasons for this, such as emotional or psychological trauma, unsafe or inappropriate behavior from the incarcerated parent, or even logistical challenges like long distances, strict prison policies, or financial limitations.

Navigating this decision is rarely straightforward—it can create feelings of guilt, confusion, or sadness for both the child and the parent, leaving them questioning whether the separation is permanent or if they should attempt to reconnect. For the child, it may feel like a betrayal, while for the parent, the lack of contact can add to feelings of guilt and isolation. The primary guardian must weigh the emotional well-being and safety of the child against the potential for re-establishing a healthy relationship, which is a delicate balance that often requires time, support, and careful consideration from all parties involved.

In situations where children are struggling to navigate the complexities of maintaining or severing contact with an incarcerated parent, it is crucial to recognize when professional help is needed. Therapists, counselors, and social workers can provide invaluable support by helping children process their emotions, manage feelings of guilt, anger, or confusion, and develop coping strategies for dealing with the loss or separation. These professionals can also guide families in creating healthy boundaries and communication strategies, ensuring that the emotional well-being of the child is prioritized.

Seeking professional help can empower both children and parents to heal from the trauma of separation and build a path toward emotional resilience and well-being. If you feel that professional assistance is required for your situation please reference page 21.

DID YOU KNOW?

Children with an incarcerated parent are more than **three times as likely to experience behavioral issues** or depression compared to children whose parents are not incarcerated.

What to Expect

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JAIL & PRISON

Jails and prisons are both correctional facilities designed to house individuals who have been arrested or convicted of crimes, but they serve different purposes and differ in several key aspects. Jails are typically short-term facilities that hold individuals who have been arrested and are awaiting trial or sentencing. They may also house individuals who have committed minor offenses and are serving shorter sentences, usually less than a year.

During the sentencing process, individuals may be detained in jail if they have not been released on bail, or they may be awaiting the finalization of their trial. Jails are operated by local governments, such as counties or cities, and are designed to manage individuals who have yet to go to trial or are in the early stages of their legal process.

Prisons, on the other hand, are long-term facilities designed for individuals who have been convicted of more serious crimes and sentenced to serve time for extended periods, often years or even life. The sentencing process for individuals sent to prison typically follows a conviction after a trial or a plea agreement.

Prisons are typically managed by state or federal governments, depending on the severity of the crime. These facilities house individuals who have been sentenced for felonies and are intended to provide a more structured environment with programs for rehabilitation, education, and vocational training. Unlike jails, where individuals may still be going through the legal process, prisons are for those who have completed their trial and are serving long-term sentences.

The key difference lies in the length of stay and the level of services provided. Jails focus more on short-term detainment during the trial and sentencing process, while prisons focus on long-term incarceration and rehabilitation for those who have been sentenced for more serious crimes.

What to Expect

Jails operate independently, so it's important to search for the specific county jail website to find detailed information about visitation policies, phone calls, sending mail, and adding money to an inmate's account.

Each facility may have different rules and regulations regarding visiting hours, the number of visitors allowed, dress codes, and the process for scheduling visits, so it's essential to familiarize yourself with those specifics.

Video calls typically take place at the facility, not from home, and if the video equipment is down or broken, you should contact Citizens for Prison Reform for advocacy assistance.

Additionally, it's crucial to request a HIPAA release of information form, which must be filled out by the incarcerated individual. Here is an example of a blank [HIPPA Form](#).

If your loved one has mental health issues and needs further support please reach out to Citizens For Prison Reform directly. Some jails contract with a 3rd party mental health company, but not all do.

If you suspect that your loved one is currently being held within a jail facility you can search them using

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Phone calls are often limited by time and frequency, and some jails may use third-party services for billing, which means understanding how to set up and fund an account is important.

Sending mail also often comes with strict guidelines, including restrictions on what can be sent and how items must be packaged.

Jails do allow deposits into an inmate's commissary account to purchase items from the facility store, but the process for adding money varies by county.

VINELINK

Vinelink can be utilized to search all jails within Michigan and other states using their name, case number, or ID number.

What to Expect

All inmates in prison can be searched using the **Offender Tracking Information System (OTIS)**. With OTIS you will be able to see your loved ones current status, location, and Prison Sentences. Once you have determined what facility your loved one is at you can use the **Prison Directory** to visit the facility's website.

When a person enters the prison system, they undergo a significant and often disorienting transition. Initially, they are processed through intake, where personal information is recorded, fingerprints are taken, and they undergo medical and psychological assessments. Afterward, they are assigned to a specific facility based on factors like the

severity of their offense, security needs, and any specific health requirements. Once inside, individuals face a structured environment with strict rules and routines, including limited personal freedom, restricted communication with the outside world, and a constant surveillance system. Inmates may experience a range of emotions, from fear and anxiety to anger or isolation, as they adapt to the harsh realities of prison life.

Over time, many are offered opportunities for rehabilitation, such as educational programs, therapy, or vocational training.

DID YOU KNOW?

Close to 10 million youth have had a mother or father—or both—spend time in incarceration.

What to Expect

When visiting a loved one in prison for the first time, these are the rules and guidelines of the MDOC Visiting Standards.

Visitors are typically required to follow strict dress codes, which often prohibit revealing or inappropriate clothing, and may include restrictions on items like jewelry or belts.

During the visit, everyone must remain seated at designated areas, and children are expected to stay by their guardian's side—running or loud behavior is generally not allowed. If you're bringing a young child, be aware that some facilities might have limited space for handling practical matters like diapers or changing needs.

Many prisons have vending machines for snacks and drinks, but these usually accept cash or a special vending card, so it's important to bring the right form of payment. Visits are not guaranteed, and sometimes circumstances—like lockdowns, security issues, or scheduling conflicts—may prevent the visit from happening.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

There are many instances where visits have been cancelled for safety or staffing reasons making it imperative that the child is prepared for the reality that visits may not always occur when scheduled.

Preparing the child in advance will help them understand the emotional complexities of this process, emphasizing the importance of patience and flexibility.

SPECIAL PROGRAMMING

Depending on the facility your loved one is placed at, there may be programming available that will assist in strengthening the bond between child and loved one. To learn more about parenting programming available at your loved one's facility, reach out to the facility's Administrative Assistant.

Michigan Support Resources



GUARDIANSHIP

- [Family | Michigan Legal Help](#) (guide to legal help Family)
- [MDOC Foster Care](#)
- Michigan Adopt Resource Exchange: [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Michigan State University Kinship care PDF](#)
- Michigan [Grandfacts](#)

COURT

- [Conviction Integrity Unit](#)
- [Innocence Project](#) - Michigan
- [The Children's Center](#) (Detroit)
- [State Appellate Defender Office](#) (SADO)
- [The Dispute Resolution Center](#)

Michigan Support Resources



FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS

- [MI Bridges](#)
- [CDC Income Eligibility Scale and Family Contribution \(FC\)](#)
- Programs - [Wayne Metro Community Action Agency](#) (Dial 211)
- [SNAP Eligibility](#) | Food and Nutrition Service
- [Gleaners](#) (add info in)
- [Habitat for Humanity](#) (add info in)
- [United Way](#) (add info in)

EDUCATIONAL

- [Dolly's Imagination Library](#)
- [Big future: BigFuture](#)
- [School Student Advocacy Center](#)
- [Special Needs Children's Special Health Care Services](#)

Michigan Support Resources



MENTAL HEALTH

- CPR's Mental Wellness Toolkit
- MI Department Health & Human Services: Trauma & Toxic Stress
- Nation Alliance on Mental Illness - NAMI
- Understanding Trauma
- Supporting Relationships Between Children & Incarcerated Parents
- SMART Recovery Meetings
- We Got Us Now

PHYSICAL HEALTH

- [YMCA of Metropolitan Detroit](#)
- [Metro Detroit Youth Clubs](#)
- [Youth Haven On-Site Adventures](#)

Criminal Justice Organizations

- [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#)
- [Angel Tree](#)
- [Citizens for Prison Reform](#)
- [Family Book Club](#)
- [First Step Domestic Violence Shelter](#)
- [Focus Hope](#)
- [Forgiven Ministry](#)
- [Friends of Restorative Justice](#)
- [Here to Help Foundation](#)
- [Humanity for Prisoners](#)
- [Michigan Center for Youth Justice](#)
- [Michigan Children's Trauma Initiative](#)
- [Michigan Liberation](#)
- [MI-CURE Dare to Care](#)
- [Nation Outside](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#)
- [Project Avery - National Group Mentoring](#)
- [Pure Heart Foundation](#)
- [Safe and Just Michigan](#)
- [Staying in Closer Touch](#)
- [TEAM WELLNESS CENTER](#)



CITIZENS FOR PRISON REFORM



PROJECT AVARY



Pure Heart Foundation



Angel Tree



Focus: HOPE



MI-CURE DARE TO CARE



MICHIGAN CENTER for YOUTH JUSTICE



RETURNING HOPE TO RETURNING CITIZENS



FirstStep
Peaceful Families • Safe Communities



FORGIVEN MINISTRY
JEREMIAH 29:11



Humanity for Prisoners
Action with Compassion



Nation Outside
The Voice of Formerly Incarcerated People

Criminal Justice Organizations

ADOLESCENT

- The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to Expect When Someone You Love Goes to Jail (Life's Challenges) by Melissa Higgins
- My Daddy's In Jail by Anthony Curcio
- You Weren't with Me by Chandra Ghosh Ippen
- Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family when a Loved One is Incarcerated by Becky Birtha
- Kofi's Mom by Richard Dyches
- Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream For Me by Daniel Beaty
- Dear Dad: Growing Up with a Parent In Prison- and How We Stayed Connected By Markia Jenai

TEENAGER

- Disappearing Act: A True Story by Jiordan Castle
- Ruby on the Outside by Nora R. Baskin
- Slugg: A Boy's Life in the age of Mass Incarceration by Tony Lewis
- Teen Guide to Living with Incarcerated Parent: Self- Help Book for Coping During an Age of Mass Incarceration by Anye Young
- Hey, Kiddo by Jarret J. Krosoczka
- How to Deal with an Incarcerated parent as a Teenager by FAMM Video
- Echoes of Incarceration | Youth Turning the Lens on the Criminal Justice System

ADULT

- Corrections Life skills
- Smart Recovery Workbook
- Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents: Research, Policy, and Practice by Mark Eddy & Julie Poehlmann-Tynan
- Children with Incarcerated Parents | University Place
- Conversations About a Brighter Way Podcast
- COPE Webinar on Strategies to Mitigate Uncertainty for Children with an Parent in Prison



WHO WE ARE

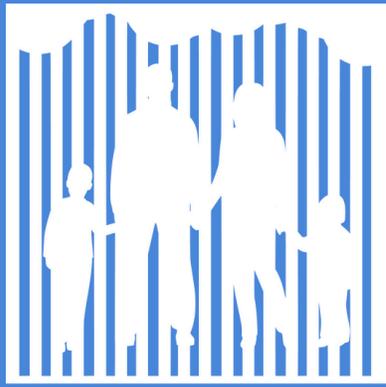
CPR is a grass-roots, family-led initiative that engages, educates and empowers families and those affected by crime and punishment to advance their constitutional, civil and human rights.

The **Family Participation Program** (FPP) is dedicated to engaging, educating, and empowering families impacted by incarceration.

FPP provides a safe and supportive space for families to connect, share experiences, and build community through virtual and in-person meetings.

Our assistance to impacted families includes direct advocacy, sharing crucial resources, and organizing meaningful family programs and events. We also actively advocate for legislation, policies, and programs that promote family reunification and mitigate the collateral consequences of incarceration.

We believe that strong family bonds are crucial for successful reentry and long-term well-being. By supporting families, we can help break the cycle of incarceration and build stronger, healthier communities. We can offer resources, support, and guidance to help them navigate the challenges of incarceration and build a brighter future.



**CITIZENS FOR
PRISON
REFORM**

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FOR QUESTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

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