

Lived Experience: Understanding Families Affected by Incarceration

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The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

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Incarceration has an impact on thousands of families across Canada. When a person is sentenced to time in prison, their families are often profoundly affected; they are separated from a son, daughter, sibling, parent or other relative. Feelings of stigma, guilt and shame are common, and can be compounded when the sentenced family member is also living with a mental health condition – a reality for many incarcerated individuals and their families.

My family life has been profoundly affected by incarceration ever since my son was sentenced in 2001. When the chasm of the prison system had swallowed him up, the world appeared dark with no hope of seeing daylight. Our lives took a drastic turn on that ominous day. Our family's lives and relationships were forever changed.



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As a mother, I couldn't help but wonder over and over again why my son had committed such a serious criminal act. Why did his mind work this way? What could have been done to prevent this catastrophe? Why, after years of treatment in the mental health system, had he still fallen through the cracks? What could I have done differently that would have prevented this crime from taking place and tearing apart two families? Since then, there have been daily reminders as I speak to him and visit him in prison. For us, his family, the impact of my son's action have sunk in gradually over time. The nightmare of prison has played havoc with his mental health conditions with all the ups and downs of a roller coaster, and it's become a constant source of worry for our family.

Incarceration affects family relationships, family traditions and family futures

As we have learned, in-person visits can be traumatic for the visitor. When visiting someone in prison, you have to first pass through layers of security such as the ion scanner (a drug-scanning device known for detecting false positives). Otherwise, you risk being turned away, which can seriously impact the inmate's prison life.

There is no occasion that is celebrated as a family where I don't feel my son's absence. The festivities, the good food and laughter lack the genuine happiness that can come from family gatherings. This is never really talked about openly.

Family members will occasionally ask about my son and he may receive birthday cards from family and friends, but there is a kind of hesitation to discuss such a sad subject and ruin a festive atmosphere. The fact a family member has not been seen among you for almost 16 years registers low on the *Richter scale* of family life.

These days, as I contemplate the possibilities of the future, I wonder if this will be the time that my son will be able to start to turn his life around. Will he convince the authorities that he is deeply remorseful and resolved to never offend again? Will he be seen as worthy of being allowed to be paroled out of prison and into the community, where he can start the long process of healing and repairing the ravages of a lengthy period of incarceration? Will he be able to reintegrate himself into our family, one that misses him terribly but has adapted to life in his absence?

The love and light of support gets families through

While I contemplate these questions daily, I am grateful for the support of those around me. When my son – and my family – first began our journey with the justice system, I felt like I was travelling down an uncharted road. Despite being well connected to community, there was no real support I could turn to where others would understand what it was like to have a son in prison.

In November 2010, a community activist and expert connected to the Church Council on Justice and Corrections and a crisis worker at the John Howard Society (JHS) introduced me to another mother with a son in prison. We all met for the first time at JHS in December 2010 – three mothers coming together with common experiences and goals.

From this shared experience, Mothers Offering Mutual Support (MOMS), a support group for women, was born. The first formal MOMS meeting occurred on December 15, 2010. Our meetings take place at the local JHS building, during the first Thursday of the month. JHS has generously donated this space to us so we can meet in a location with privacy.

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We now total more than 45 members, all of whom feel immensely grateful to be able to come together and climb out of the black hole we fell into when our children were convicted of an offence resulting in their incarceration. Now we come together to support each other and find ways to help them in a meaningful and constructive way. Mothers

whose sons have completed their sentence or are on parole continue to support and guide the new members who join the group.

A loving family on the outside can play an important role in advocating, financially supporting and providing loving contact to offset the indelible ravages of incarceration. Through MOMs, we are able to support each other as we support our incarcerated children.

The harsh realities of incarceration are with us, but together we encourage each other to take one day at a time. We have been working to ensure the justice system facilitates rehabilitation and education, with a focus on physical and mental well-being and supporting our sons or daughters while they serve their sentences and plan for their futures. This has provided us with opportunities to engage in dialogue with government and community leaders about human rights. Policies and programs benefit from understanding our lived experiences and our perspective as mothers. We have been encouraged by increased public awareness of these issues.

As you can imagine, for some moms and family members, issues of stigma and safety keep us fearful of speaking out publicly, even though we are worried sick and lose sleep thinking about the condition of our children. We do not want to add to our shame and worry by being on the receiving end of insensitive or negative comments.

As mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers affected by incarceration, we meet regularly to share our experiences and our shock, pain and heartbreak. Working together gives us energy to focus on strategies to equip ourselves with knowledge and best practices to keep ourselves and our loved ones hopeful and healthy. We are determined to achieve humane and just treatment for our loved ones in prison as we work together to strengthen the ties that bind us in our struggle as families affected by incarceration.

Farhat Rehman is co-founder of Mothers Offering Mutual Support (MOMS), a support group for women with incarcerated family members.



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