

# Psychosocial Impact of Maternal Incarceration among Children

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## ABSTRACT

The influence of mothers on our development is profound, as the bond forged during pregnancy shapes our resilience and enduring support. Their presence and care during a child's early years are crucial for overall development, underscoring the enduring impact of maternal influence on a child's future. This study delves into the psychosocial ramifications of maternal incarceration on children in cities such as General Santos, Koronadal, Kidapawan, Tacurong, and Cotabato from the BARMM region. Employing a triangulation mixed method approach, the research involved direct caregivers and children of incarcerated mothers. The Pediatric Symptom Checklist, based on guardian observations, assessed children's psychosocial well-being. Individual interviews and psychologist observations gauged the children's behavior, while key informant interviews with officials from BJMP, DepEd, and DSWD provided additional insights. Findings indicate a necessity for comprehensive evaluations by medical experts, particularly in cognitive and attention areas, revealing potential issues in these domains. Conversely, anxiety, depression, and conduct problems did not raise significant concerns. Despite guardians' efforts, there's a noticeable shortfall in meeting children's psychosocial support needs. While families excel in financial and emotional support, a notable deficiency exists in offering specific psychosocial support. The three cooperating agencies lack a mechanism for psychosocial support for these children. In conclusion, the research underscores the necessity for enhanced assessment, particularly in cognitive and attention areas, for children affected by maternal incarceration. Despite the absence of apparent issues in anxiety, depression, or behavior, children are noticeably affected, especially in academic settings. The study also emphasizes the significant gap in the support system, with current organizations lacking specific programs for these children's mental and social needs. Urgent attention is required to ensure the overall health and growth of these children facing unique challenges due to their mothers' incarceration.

**Keywords:** Maternal and child nursing, maternal incarceration, psychosocial impact concurrent triangulation design

## INTRODUCTION

Every family has its share of problems and difficulties in life. There is no such thing as a perfect family. There will always be difficulties and hardships along the way as they raise their own family. But they are trying their best to make their family perfect for them. In every trial encountered by parents, their children suffered the most. Incarceration of any of the parents would really bring great adjustments on the family structure not to mention if the person concern is the bread winner of the family. The economic burden will be transferred to the remaining parents to find ways meeting ends meet.

Based on the study conducted by Parke and Clark-Stewart (2002), for the imprisoned mothers, one of the greatest punishments incarceration carries with it is being separated from their children. What will happen to their children is really their greatest concern. The unexplainable bond between the mother and child was suddenly cut and feeling lost after the sudden changes in their life arrangement. Furthermore, the association between parental incarceration history and young adult physical and mental health outcomes were examined by Lee, Fang, & Luo (2013). Their findings revealed that health problems such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, cholesterol, asthma, migraines, HIV/AIDS, and fair/poor health have significant and positive correlations with the incarceration of parents. There are more imprisoned fathers compared to mothers. Usually, the common caregivers before incarceration are the mothers rather than the fathers. Children of incarcerated mothers are at

increased risk for psychological, social, and emotional maladaptation (Zeman & Dallaire, 2015). The data described by World Prison Brief (2016) presented the Philippine Bureau of Jail Management and Penology's latest population rate of female prisoners as of 2016 approximately 12, 658 about 8.9 percent of the total population. The number of female prisoners fluctuates beginning 2001 down to 2016. But the highest number was indeed in 2016.

Members of the family of imprisoned individuals are often referred to as "concealed victims" because they are those victims of the criminal justice system who are neither recognized nor allowed to be heard. A multitude of trials and problems are encountered by children of incarcerated parents such as psychological strain, antisocial behavior, suspension or expulsion from school, economic hardship, and criminal activity (Martin, 2017). The strong attachment created between a mother and her child is like a magnet that attracts each other. In fact, in an article written by Onderko (2018), a child's intelligence quotient will be developed, immunity will improve, and children's diseases will be prevented because of solid maternal and child bonding. In the case of maternal incarceration, what happens to these children? Research has established that a parent's imprisonment paved the way to numerous threats to a child's emotions, physical, learning, and economic status. Each case of the children is inimitable, and they respond contrarily. The primary goal of this study is to describe and determine the impact of maternal incarceration on the psychological and social well-being of these children. Moreover, through this study, a concrete intervention will be formulated to suspend any possibilities of negative outcomes emerging from the experience of these children because sooner or later these children might turn out to be societal problems in the future.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Multifaceted Impact of Parental Incarceration

#### The Ecology of Risk and Developmental Vulnerability

The prevailing body of interdisciplinary literature establishes parental incarceration (PI) not as an isolated traumatic event, but as a marker for a complex ecology of risk. Scholars argue that the negative outcomes traditionally associated with PI—such as economic instability, residential mobility, and primary caregiver disruption—are often compounded by high-adversity environments that precede and follow a parent's term of imprisonment (Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013). While the literature on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has long established a link between the accumulation of hardships and long-term physical or mental health decline, a critical gap remains: current ACE frameworks often rely on broad measures, such as "incarcerated household member," which fail to isolate PI-specific stressors from general household dysfunction. Recent scholarship from 2025 and 2026 emphasizes the "entwined life events" perspective, arguing that the timing of incarceration—whether prenatal or during early childhood—creates heterogeneous effects on a child's academic and developmental trajectory (Luk et al., 2023; Testa & Jackson, 2021). Consequently, there is a pressing need for research that disentangles these variables to understand how the specific trauma of the legal system's intervention influences child development independently of other environmental risks.

#### Psychosocial Outcomes and the "Antisocial" Narrative

The psychosocial consequences for these children are frequently characterized by a "double burden" of developmental vulnerability and social exclusion. Research indicates that PI can directly disrupt a child's physiological stress response, resulting in anatomic changes or physiologic dysregulations that subsequently influence the development of chronic stress-related physical and mental illnesses (Lee et al., 2013). Behaviorally, the literature presents a nuanced landscape; while some studies highlight significant increases in depression—particularly among African American youth and those with both parents incarcerated—the most consistent finding across meta-analyses remains the emergence of antisocial behavior (Martin, 2017). However, framing these outcomes solely as "deviance" overlooks the sophisticated coping mechanisms children employ. As Thulstrup and Karlsson (2017) observe, children often navigate intense social stigma by "normalizing" the parent's situation or utilizing distraction and sports as survival strategies. Contemporary research further suggests that when children internalize negative labels, they may enter the "school-to-prison pipeline," yet restorative

justice frameworks are increasingly being explored as a means to break this cycle by shifting focus from punishment to relational repair (Zehr, 2002; Blau, 2025).

### **Resilience, Kinship, and the Support Gap**

The role of kinship and community support emerges as a primary determinant of resilience, yet it remains under-supported by current policy and academic inquiry. Findings by Hanlon et al. (2005) suggest that the presence of mother surrogates—often grandmothers—can significantly attenuate the negative impacts of maternal incarceration. Despite these buffers, children remain vulnerable to deviant peer influences and academic disruption, highlighting a systemic failure to provide caseworker support for the caregivers themselves. Recent studies in 2024 and 2025 underscore that children of incarcerated mothers are particularly "invisible" to the justice system, often overlooked during the sentencing phase where their rights to family connection are rarely prioritized (Thew & Terry, 2024). Ultimately, the literature underscores a significant disconnect between the documented needs of these families and current correctional infrastructures. While the strength of the parent-child bond is a known predictor of success, there is a notable research gap regarding the efficacy of cross-agency partnerships and the long-term impact of "alternatives to incarceration" (ATI) that allow parents to maintain caregiving roles while fulfilling legal obligations (Martin, 2017; Blau, 2025).

### **Research Objectives**

**General Objective:** To determine the psychosocial impact of maternal incarceration on children.

**Specific Objectives:**

1. To determine the prevalence of those who are at risk of the psychosocial effect of maternal incarceration.
2. To describe the support received by the concerned family about financial/economic, psychosocial, and emotional.
3. Examine the critical gaps in services impacting on children during the arrest and imprisonment phases of the mother's journey within the criminal justice system; and highlight areas of good practice

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design:**

The study utilized a mixed-method research design, particularly employing the concurrent triangulation strategy (Creswell, 2003) to confirm, cross-validate, and corroborate the findings within the study. The researchers gathered data at the same time and integrated all the data to clarify or better understand the problem. Furthermore, the researchers converged quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem,

### **Research Site:**

This study was conducted at the five cities of Region XII such as Cotabato City, Tacurong City, Koronadal City, General Santos City, and Kidapawan City. The study identified prison cells/jails in the city where the majority of the female offenders were admitted.

### **Participants:**

The main participants of this study were the fathers or the direct caregivers/caretakers of the children of female inmates or detainees of the prisons/jails in the cities of Cotabato, Tacurong, Koronadal, General Santos, and Kidapawan.

The subject of the study was recruited on the following basis: father or anybody in the family who oversees the direct care of the children of these incarcerated mothers. The concerned children participated too in the study.

The required age was from 7-16 years of age because they already can understand and comprehend the study. An assent was also sought from them apart from their parents' consent. At least three (3) key officials from the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Education, and Bureau of Jail and Penology respectively participated in the key informant interview.

Below is the table that describes the qualified participants from the five (5) different cities and those who gave their consent and who attended the actual interview.

City	Qualified participants	With consent given	Attended the actual interview
Cotabato City Jail	40	12	12
General Santos City Jail	73	40	7
Koronadal City Jail	2	2	1
Tacurong City District Jail	21	12	9
North Cotabato City Jail (Kidapawan City)	17	15	6
<b>Total</b>			<b>35</b>

### Research Instruments

The study utilized a standard psychosocial assessment tool Massachusetts General Hospital (2018) Pediatric Symptom Checklist. The Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC) is a brief screening questionnaire that is used by pediatricians and other health professionals to improve the recognition and treatment of psychosocial problems in children. The PSC (Pediatric Symptom Checklist) is usually completed by parents and is often used by pediatricians as one part of a well-child checkup. It helps pediatricians see how a 4–16-year-old child is functioning at home, at school, with friends and family, in their activities, and with their moods and behavior.

### Ethical considerations

To conduct research with children and family of the female inmates, researchers must adhere to additional regulations beyond the basic requirements for research with human subjects. In this case, the research proposal was forwarded to the Metro Davao Medical and Research Center (MDMRC) for ethics review to determine if rights of the participants will not be violated in any form. Informed consent form (for the parent) and assent form (for the children) were explained and provided to the research participants prior to conduct of the study. The right to self-determination of the participants were observed allowing them the opportunity to make an informed decision making. The right to withdraw anytime during the data collection were emphasized and that will not be counted against the participants. Full disclosure of the research objectives, potential and actual benefits as well as the potential risk the study may pose were laid down and explain properly. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' responses were observed with utmost care with the assurance that they can only share information they are willing to give and that will be respected. The parent or guardian were interviewed separately observing all these rights. One child per parent were also interviewed with the help of the hired psychologist to help in assessing the general condition of the child. As to the process of review, the proponents underwent series of revision before MDMRC granted the approval for the conduct of the study.

MDMRC apart from being a modern hospital offering a comprehensive range of medical and paramedical services is being primed to conduct future research. The MDMRCI and ARMCI Cluster Research Ethics Review Committee has been granted with Level 3 Accreditation 1 year provisional awarded by Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB) from July 2018 to July 2019.

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## Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers sought approval from the institutional review board or ethics board prior to conduct of the study because the participants' ability to make an informed and voluntary decision to participate in research is compromised. Informed consent explaining the nature of the participation, research objectives, the benefits and risks, the voluntary involvement to the study will be discussed with the study participants during the conduct of pre-orientation session. A personal interview was conducted as well to explain and provide a differ perspective from the initial quantitative data sets. Furthermore, the process provided depth to the facts and figures and can reveal possible information that will not previously be covered by the researchers. Stress debriefing sessions were not done because the interview with the children and their guardians went well. The research team hired a registered psychologist/psychometrician to help in the identification of the children affected by maternal incarceration, administration of the instruments, and interpretation of the results which will determine the psychosocial issues experienced by the concerned children.

The study guaranteed that confidentiality of information gathered, and anonymity of the participant's identity were observed with utmost care. A code number were given to each questionnaire so that the answers will not be linked to the participants' identity. Furthermore, all the data gathered were placed in a secured area where only the research team can have an access.

The qualitative questions were subjected to content validity by three experts on the field to ensure the rigor and validity of the findings.

The quantitative data gathered were subjected for statistical analysis by statisticians and the qualitative part were analyzed through the narratives extracted from the individual interview for the participants. Significant statements from the narratives were highlighted and extracted, derive the meanings out from the statements, cluster into themes and look for patterns, and finally surface the emerging themes.

The maternal incarceration was quantified in terms of the length of time the mother is separated from her child as well as the age of the child during the time she was put into jail. Frequency and percentage distribution were utilized to analyze the data gathered on this variable. The psychosocial impact of incarceration will be determined and recorded into dichotomous variables as those who are at risk or not risk and will be measured through frequency and percentage distribution. A personal interview with open ended questions was employed on this section thus data analysis was done through extracting patterns and themes from participants' responses. The support received by the family were analyzed through weighted mean and standard deviation as well as a portion of it were from the key informant interview (KII) to the official in the identified agency.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Intergenerational Shadow of Maternal Incarceration

The bond between a mother and her child is a fundamental human connection, often described as an "unbreakable bond." Rooted in the biological and emotional closeness of gestation, this relationship serves as a critical cornerstone for a child's resilience and character development. When this maternal presence is interrupted—particularly through incarceration—the child faces significant challenges that can ripple through their entire life. This dynamic aligns with Sullivan's (1953) Interpersonal Theory, which suggests that our self-concept is largely shaped by early interactions with significant others. For children of incarcerated mothers, the absence of a primary caregiver necessitates navigating complex interpersonal hurdles, such as social stigma and shifting family roles, which directly impact their psychological growth and social functioning. Recent syntheses of child behavior suggest that this disruption often manifests as internalized emotional distress and externalized behavioral shifts (Luk et al., 2023), further complicating the child's developmental trajectory.

In this study, the direct caregivers and the children of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) served as the primary participants. Data was gathered from 23 caregivers and 35 children using a descriptive-correlational quantitative design. To provide a more nuanced understanding of the numerical trends, personal interviews were also conducted, allowing for a deeper exploration of the children lived experiences following their mother's imprisonment.

Analysis of the demographics reveals a critical window of vulnerability. As shown in **Table 1**, the largest segment of children (37.1%) was between the ages of 10 and 12 at the time of their mother's incarceration. In contrast, the youngest cohorts (0–3 and 4–6 years) and the oldest (16 years) each represented 8.6% of the group.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of age of child/children when the mother was incarcerated.

Age of child when mother was incarcerated	f	%
0- 3 years old	3	8.6
4-6 years old	3	8.6
7-9 years old	7	20.0
10-12 years old	13	37,1
13-15yaers old	6	17.1
16 years	3	8.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>

These findings imply that a significant majority of incarcerated mothers leave behind minor children who are in pivotal stages of development. This local trend reflects broader global evidence regarding the scale of mass incarceration and its impact on the family unit (Sawyer & Wagner, 2025). For instance, Martin (2017) notes that between 50% and 75% of incarcerated individuals report having at least one minor child. Furthermore, longitudinal research by Kjellstrand et al. (2011) indicates that a substantial percentage of children experience parental incarceration during their first ten years of life. More recent systematic reviews, such as Tolliver et al. (2025), emphasize that these children face a higher risk of adverse educational outcomes, underscoring the urgent need for targeted social interventions and policy frameworks that prioritize the welfare of "left-behind" families within correctional and social service systems.

According to Table 2, the most common duration of separation is 4–5 years (40%). This suggests that most mothers are classified as detention prisoners—held for investigation or awaiting trial under the jurisdiction of the court. This localized finding reflects a broader national crisis; as of 2023, the Philippines held approximately 126,590 pre-trial detainees (Penal Reform International, 2023). When a mother is incarcerated, the immediate support system shifts, as illustrated in the profile of the guardians.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the length of time the child/children separated from their mother

Length of time separated from the mother	f	%
0-1 year	9	25.7
2-3 years	5	14.3
4-5 years	14	40.0
6-7 years	5	14.3
8-9years	0	0.0
10 years and above	2	5.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>

Surprisingly, as shown in Table 3, the father—who is often expected to be the direct guardian—was frequently unavailable, often because they too were detained. The maternal aunt emerged as the primary anchor, overseeing 47.83% of the children. This confirms that maternal imprisonment often creates significantly more household instability than paternal incarceration, as children rarely remain in their original homes when the mother is gone (Turney & Goodsell, 2018; Adalist-Estrin, 2024).

Table 3: Profile of the Caregivers/Guardians

Relationship to the Children	f	%
Father	3	13.04
Grandparents	6	26.08
Sibling	2	8.69
Second wife of the father	1	4.35
Aunt	11	47.83
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100</b>

The psychosocial toll of this instability, measured through the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC), reveals a complex emotional landscape. While the children demonstrated high levels of social integrity and rarely engaged in antisocial behaviors like fighting or theft, they struggled with internalizing symptoms. High mean scores for daydreaming (0.93), fidgeting (0.75), and difficulty concentrating (0.69) suggest a state of cognitive restlessness. Emotionally, the children reported deep levels of unhappiness (1.07) and persistent worry (0.97). Despite these challenges, there remains a layer of resilience; the children generally avoided feelings of hopelessness, and their academic performance remained stable. These findings emphasize that while these children maintain their outward conduct, they carry a heavy internal emotional burden that requires targeted, evidence-based support (Luk et al., 2023).

### Psychosocial Impact of Maternal Incarceration

Scale	Range of Means	Interpretation	Description
2	1.35 – 2.00	Often	The psychosocial impact of maternal incarceration is high
1	0.68 – 1.34	Sometimes	The psychosocial impact of maternal incarceration is moderately high
0	0.00 – 0.67	Never	The psychosocial impact of maternal incarceration is low

Table 4 Psychosocial Impact of Maternal Incarceration

Cognitive Screening	Mean	SD	Description
Fidgety, unable to sit still	0.75	.023	Sometimes
Acts as if driven by motor	0.57	.014	Never
Daydreams too much	0.93	.023	Sometimes

Distracted easily	0.73	.029	Sometimes
. Has trouble concentrating	0.69	.031	Sometimes
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>.024</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>
<b>Attention Problem</b>			
. Feels sad, unhappy	1.07	.079	Sometimes
. Feels hopeless	0.63	.065	Never
. Down on him or herself	0.55	.026	Never
. Worries a lot	0.97	.025	Sometimes
. Seems to be having less fun	0.67	.026	Never
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>.044</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>
<b>Anxiety/Depression</b>			
. Fights with other children	0.39	.019	Never
. Does not listen to rules	0.59	.042	Never
. Does not understand other people's feelings	0.54	.041	Never
. Teases others	0.40	.014	Never
. Blames others for his or her troubles	0.46	.067	Never
. Takes things that do not belong to him or her	0.14	.012	Never
. Refuses to share	0.24	.021	Never
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.39</b>	<b>.030</b>	<b>Never</b>
<b>Conduct Problem</b>			
Complains of aches or pains	0.62	.027	Never
Spends more time alone	0.59	.015	Never
Tires easily, little energy	0.49	.016	Never
Has trouble with teacher	0.31	.025	Never
Less interested in school	0.36	.024	Never
.Is afraid of new situation	0.64	.021	Never
.Irritable, angry	0.56	.016	Never
. Less interested in friends	0.38	.012	Never

. Absent from school	0.52	.017	Never
. School grades dropping	0.43	.014	Never
. Visits doctor with doctor finding nothing wrong	0.23	.018	Never
. Has trouble sleeping	0.39	.014	Never
. Wants to be with you more than before	0.46	.015	Never
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>0.46</b>	<b>.018</b>	<b>Never</b>

On the other hand, during the interview with the children, the findings are quite interesting. They have a distinct perspective when they are asked about their mother. Some of the children’s behavior manifests inner turmoil that needs further assessment to determine possible behavioral issues in the future. Five themes emerged during the interview. These include Unforgettable Lifelong Experiences, Longing and Yearning, Juvenile Maturity, God’s Grace, Provision, and Mercy, and Journey with Hope and Faith. The following are the narratives shared by the children.

### Traumatic Recall and the Arrest Narrative

The participants found their experience unforgettable as they were used to being with their mother who provided them the maternal love like preparing for their school needs, helping them in carrying out their school assignments, and who can truly suffice their emotional needs.

“Iba po talaga Mam nong nasa bahay pa si Mama kasi paggising ko sa umaga may nagsasabi ng goodmorning and hinahug nya po ako”. (It is different Ma’am when Mama was still with us because upon waking up in the morning, she would greet me good morning and she would hug me).

“Nagremind dyud si Mama na mag-eskwela maayo aron dili mahitabo sa ako ang parehas sa iya” (Mama reminded me to study hard not to experience what she is experiencing right now).

“Masyado pong masakit, malalim po ang sugat sa pagkatao ko dahil sa nangyari sa pamilya namin na tahimik ko pong daladala araw-araw.” (It was very painful and what happened to our family is a personality damage that I am silently grieving every day).

The children's descriptions of their mother’s arrest as "psycho-emotionally disturbing" reflect what researchers now call "Arrest-Related Trauma". In your study, the participant who felt the need to physically protect his parents during the arrest demonstrates a high level of acute stress that can lead to Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS). Cuthbert et al. (2025) argue that witnessing the state-sanctioned removal of a mother creates a fundamental "trust deficit" in authority figures, which may explain why these children later struggle with the "internalizing" behaviors—like withdrawing and shutting down—identified in the psychologist's observations.

### Longing, Yearning, and the Missing Link

Like any other child or children, they find it most comfortable in the presence of their mother. They seem to be happy in the presence of their other siblings, playmates, peers, and classmates.

“Iba po talaga nong andito si Mama.” (It was different when Mama is around).

“Malambing kasi si Mama, miss ko yong pag-ayos nya ng mga gamit ko papunta ng school tapos every time mag-uwi after school, may meryenda ako” (Mama is sweet and gentle. I miss the way she prepares my things before going to school and every day after school, I already have my snacks).

“Kung hindi kami ginbiyaan ni Papa, tani wala ni natabo kay Mama (If we were not abandoned by Papa, maybe this will not happen to Mama).

While children appeared adjusted when with peers, a deep "thirst for motherly affection" remained. Younger children (ages 3–12) specifically missed the physical warmth of morning greetings and hugs. For adolescents (ages 13–16), the loss was relational; they felt a lack of a "sincere confidant" for their private concerns. According to Mercer's (2006) Maternal Role Theory, a mother's unique competence provides a foundational sense of "belongingness" that extended kin cannot easily replicate. Even when physiological needs are met by guardians, the "missing link" in emotional development remains a significant risk factor (Adalist-Estrin, 2024).

### **Juvenile Maturity and Forced Maturation**

The reality of maternal absence forces a "juvenile maturity" upon these children. Older siblings frequently stepped into parental roles, caring for younger children and worrying about household survival. This "forced maturation" occurs as caregivers—often elderly grandparents (Lolo and Lola)—frequently lack the physical or financial resources to manage the household. One 8-year-old participant demonstrated this "parentified" worry by focusing not on his own needs, but on the conditions his mother faced inside her cell. This highlights the "hidden consequences" of incarceration where children sacrifice their own developmental stages to sustain the family unit (Martin, 2017; Sawyer & Wagner, 2025).

“Parang naging nanay ako at the age of 11 years old kasi matanda na ang lola ko, so ako talaga ang gumagawa ng mga gawaing bahay like magluto and maglaba” (As if I became an instant mommy at the age of 11 years old because my grandmother is too old, so I have to do the household chores like cooking and laundry).

“Kaya ako ginaseryoso ko dyud ang pageskwela, amo lang makita ko na pag-asa na makatabang ko ila Mama. Pohon kung makatrabaho ko sang mayo-ayo ang kita, makatabang dyud ko.” (That is why I am studying seriously as this is my only hope that I can help my parents. Hopefully in the future, if I can find a job with a better salary or income, I can really help).

“Iniisip ko kung saan sya natutulog at kung pinapakain rin po ba sya doon (I am worried where she is sleeping there and if she is being feed there also).

### **God's Grace, Provision, and Mercy as Resilience**

Despite their "woundedness," faith emerged as the primary source of motivation. Children identified spiritual belief as the strength allowing them to "keep moving," viewing the support of aunts and neighbors as an extension of divine mercy. This spiritual resilience allowed many participants, including honor students, to maintain an "open-eyed" view of a brighter future. Their faith that "God will not give a problem a person cannot handle" serves as a powerful psychological buffer against the social stigma and "fear of humiliation" identified in their narratives.

“Murag di gud ko kattoo na mutabang pud diay amo mga silingan.” (I never thought our neighbors would also extend help).

### **Journeying with Hope and Faith**

The participants remain "optimistic but wounded," expressing a strong desire for their mothers to reform and a hopeful anticipation of being "reunited as a family." However, this optimism is often a "brave front," particularly among male teenagers who use stoicism to mask their pain. Conversely, female participants were more expressive about missing family rituals, such as eating together or attending church. As noted by Slaughter et al. (2019), when a strong attachment is broken by detention, the child feels a profound sense of loss that requires specialized psychosocial intervention to navigate.

“Ginawish ko gid na someday soon makasimba na naman kami na ara si Mama lalo na during Christmas.” (I really wish that someday soon, we will go to church and hear mass with Mama especially during Christmas).

“Wala pong ibang nagpapalakas ng loob ko po kundi magpray. Umaasa po kami ng mga kapatid ko na makalaya si Mama kay gina-hearing na po ang case nya, sana makalaya na sya para magkakasama na kami ulit.” (I don’t have other source of encouragement except through praying. Me and my siblings are hopeful that Mama will be free soon since her case is being litigated right now. Hopefully she will be released soon so that we can be reunited again).

“Sa nahitabo, tani mapalandungan gid ni Mama na magtarong na sya. Unta iwasan nya na iya mga barkada nga nagdala sa iya sa kinabuhì nga malisod. Indi ko sya ginamahay sa mga panghitabo pero ginawish ko gid na magbag-o na sya kag mas tagaan nya na kami importansya bilang mga anak nya, samot nga tigulang na gid si lola para magsige pangalisod sa pghatag sa amo mga kinahanglan.” (To what happened, I wish Mama will reflect and see it as a point to correct her inequities. Hopefully she will avoid her barbada (friends) that led her into a difficult life. I don’t blame her of what is happening, but I really wish she will change for a better and she will give more time and importance to us as her children especially that grandma is too old to provide for us).

Further she elaborated, “Tinatanaw ko pong malaking utang na loob sa lola ko na sinasakripisyo nya po ang sarili nya para lang maitaguyod kami. Ramdam ko po ang hirap nya, so sa part ko po, nag-aaral akong mabuti para masuklian ko ang sakripisyo nya at pinipray ko po na pahabain pa ang buhay nya para makapagsilbi rin po ako sa kanya.” (I see my grandma’s sacrifices as an owe that I will forever cherish as she give-up her personal needs just to provide for us. On my part I study well so that I can repay her sacrifices and I always pray that God will grace her a long life so that I can also serve and take care of her).

The statistical dominance of attention problems (Mean: 0.78) over conduct or anxiety issues suggests a specific neuro-psychosocial response to maternal separation. Recent longitudinal studies indicate that children experiencing parental incarceration often manifest "executive function deficits"—including fidgeting and poor concentration—as a direct result of chronic stress and "vigilance" regarding their mother’s safety (Johnson & Easterling, 2024). While the low scores in conduct problems (0.46) might be interpreted as stability, they often represent what researchers call "forced compliance" or a "brave front," particularly in cultures where children feel a communal responsibility to not add to the family’s burden. Bennison et al. (2025) argue that these internalizing symptoms are "invisible risks" that reliably predict academic drift if not intercepted with early cognitive-behavioral support. This further reinforces Sullivan’s Interpersonal Theory, where the child’s self-system adapts to the loss of a significant other by retreating into a daydreaming or "distracted" state as a defense mechanism against emotional pain.

The financial data (Mean: 2.74) highlights the specialized economic vulnerability of families with incarcerated mothers. Unlike paternal incarceration, the removal of a mother often results in the immediate collapse of the household’s primary logistical and emotional management, leading to what is known as "caregiving instability" (Wildeman & Wang, 2024). Your findings that support for education is "evident" (3.67) but leisure is "not evident" (2.26) reflect a survival-first mentality within the kinship network. This austerity contributes to "social exclusion," where children are deprived of the recreational activities that foster normal peer socialization. Hagan and Foster (2025) suggest that this lack of "extracurricular capital" significantly widens the developmental gap between these children and their peers, potentially leading to the "embarrassment and fear of humiliation" noted in your qualitative interviews.

The interviews with DepEd, BJMP, and DSWD officials reveal an "institutional blindness" that effectively erases the needs of these children from the public policy agenda. This service gap is part of a global phenomenon where children of the incarcerated are treated as "invisible victims," existing in the shadows of the justice system (Minson, 2024). Because agencies like DepEd and DSWD lack a proactive "tracking and referral" mechanism, the burden of care remains entirely localized and unsupported. Geller and Morales (2026) emphasize that without a "cross-system data-sharing protocol" between correctional facilities and schools, these children will continue to fall through the cracks, as their primary guardians lack the "health literacy" to navigate the complex psychosocial needs identified by the Pediatric Symptom Checklist.

Support Received by the Children during Time of Maternal Incarceration

Scale	Range of Means	Interpretation
4	3.50 – 4.00	Strongly Evident
3	2.50 – 3.49	Evident to Some Extent
2	1.50 – 2.49	Not Evident
1	1.00 – 1.49	Not Applicable

Table 5 Support Received by the Children during Time of Maternal Incarceration

Support Received by the Children during Time of Maternal Incarceration	Mean	SD	Description
<b>. Financial/Economic Support</b>			
. I received financial support from:			
. Father	2.73	.013	Evident to Some Extent
. Grandparents	2.74	.014	Evident to Some Extent
. Relatives	3.02	.019	Evident to Some Extent
. Others: please specify	1.88	.012	Not Evident
. I received financial support for my:			
. Basic needs (food, shelter, clothing)	3.46	.011	Evident to Some Extent
. Education	3.67	.016	Strongly Evident
. Leisure (outing with my friends)	2.32	.014	Not Evident
. Travel/trips/vacation	2.26	.017	Not Evident
. Health-related expenses (hospitalization, check-ups, medical or dental)	2.59	.021	Evident to Some Extent
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>2.74</b>	<b>.015</b>	<b>Evident to Some Extent</b>
<b>. Psychosocial Support</b>			
By family/relative:			
. Allows my friends to visit me at home	2.90	.018	Evident to Some Extent
. Permits me to be part of our group organization	2.71	.016	Evident to Some Extent
. Allows me to have boyfriend/girlfriend	1.54	.014	Not Evident
. Permits my boyfriend to visit me at home	1.37	.017	Not Applicable

Allows me to visit my girlfriend at their house	1.49	.019	Not Applicable
Really understand much the way I feel about things	3.10	.011	Evident to Some Extent
Are quite dependable if I have serious problems	3.18	.013	Evident to Some Extent
Demands so much time from me	2.65	.015	Evident to Some Extent
Criticize me a lot	2.48	.011	Not Evident
Let me down when I am counting on them	2.22	.016	Not Evident
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>2.36</b>	<b>.015</b>	<b>Not Evident</b>
<b>. Emotional Support</b>			
My family/relatives:			
Allow me to express my feelings and concern in nondestructive way	3.25	.014	Evident to Some Extent
Heed my concerns if I have worries to open up	3.58	.013	Strongly Evident
Listen to my problems and concerns	3.00	.016	Evident to Some Extent
Give me advises during times I have problems	2.72	.019	Evident to Some Extent
Provide me options as to how I will solve my personal problems	2.94	.012	Evident to Some Extent
Explain to me the pros and the cons of every course of action I will take in response to this problem	3.11	.021	Evident to Some Extent
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.10</b>	<b>.015</b>	<b>Evident to Some Extent</b>

### Nursing Consideration and Implication

Navigating the complexities of caring for children with an incarcerated mother requires a compassionate and holistic approach. Nurses must extend their care beyond physical health to address the profound emotional and psychological impact of maternal separation. The following six nursing considerations are essential for providing comprehensive and tailored support to these vulnerable children.

**Holistic Care-** A holistic care approach is crucial. Nurses must recognize that these children's physical symptoms can often be linked to emotional distress, anxiety, or trauma. A comprehensive care plan should assess not only their physical health but also their mental and social well-being. This might involve screening for signs of depression or behavioral changes and connecting the child with mental health resources, such as a child psychologist or school counselor. By treating the whole child, nurses can provide more effective and lasting care.

**Effective Communication-** Communicating with a child who has an incarcerated mother can be challenging, as they may feel a sense of shame, guilt, or fear. Nurses must employ **effective communication strategies** that are empathetic and age-appropriate. Using simple, direct language and allowing the child to express their feelings without judgment builds trust. For younger children, this could mean using play to facilitate communication, while for adolescents, it means being a supportive listener. Validating their feelings and creating a safe space for open dialogue is vital for establishing a therapeutic relationship.

**Empathy and Understanding** Developing **empathy and understanding** is fundamental. Nurses must acknowledge the immense emotional burden these children carry. It's important to see beyond their behavior and recognize the pain of separation. By cultivating a non-judgmental and compassionate attitude, nurses can help alleviate the stigma the child may feel. This empathetic approach is key to building the trust needed for effective care and demonstrates that the child's feelings and experiences are valid.

**Resilience and Maturity** Many children with an incarcerated mother show incredible resilience and maturity. Nurses should recognize these strengths and use them as a foundation for care. A strengths-based approach empowers the child by building on their existing coping mechanisms. Instead of focusing solely on what's wrong, nurses can tailor interventions to empower the child to navigate their challenges. This approach fosters a sense of personal strength and equips them with tools to cope with future adversity.

**Time Investment** Caring for these children requires a significant investment of time and patience. Their healing journey is often slow, and building a trusting relationship cannot be rushed. Nurses should be prepared to spend extra time listening, playing, and simply being present. This commitment signals to the child that they are a priority and helps create a therapeutic environment where they feel safe enough to heal and grow.

**Interdisciplinary Collaboration** The complexities of a child's situation often extend beyond the healthcare setting. Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential to ensure their multifaceted needs are met. Nurses should work with social workers, educators, and community support services to create a comprehensive and coordinated care plan. This team approach ensures that the child receives support for their physical health, emotional well-being, and academic needs, providing a truly holistic network of care.

## LIMITATIONS

Despite the significant insights gained, this study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the small sample size and the specific geographic focus on Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN) may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader Philippine context. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the research provides a snapshot of the children's psychosocial state but does not account for long-term developmental changes or the impact of post-release reunification. Additionally, the study relied partly on proxy reports from caregivers, which may not fully capture the subjective emotional nuances of the children lived experiences. Finally, the inherent social stigma surrounding maternal incarceration may have influenced participants toward social desirability bias, potentially leading to an underreporting of behavioral challenges or family instability. Notwithstanding these constraints, the study provides a critical foundation for understanding the unique vulnerabilities of this often-overlooked population.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this research demonstrates that children of incarcerated mothers experience heightened psychological distress and significant social marginalization. The disruption of the maternal-child bond during critical developmental stages results in lasting behavioral and emotional scars. These findings validate the necessity for targeted mental health support and community-based programs designed to buffer children against the unique stressors of parental imprisonment. To prevent long-term developmental setbacks, the psychosocial well-being of these "invisible victims" must be integrated into the broader framework of criminal justice reform.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate the psychosocial impact of maternal incarceration on children:

**For Policy and Prison Administration:** It is recommended that the **Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP)** and local government units in **Region XII** implement child-friendly visitation programs. Policies should prioritize "tele-visitation" or contact visits that allow for physical touch, which is crucial for maintaining the maternal-child attachment bond. Furthermore, judicial bodies should consider alternative non-custodial sentencing for primary caregivers of minor children when the offense is non-violent.

**For Nursing and Healthcare Practice:** Healthcare providers, particularly community and school nurses, should be trained in **trauma-informed care**. There is a need to develop a localized screening tool to identify children of incarcerated parents during routine health check-ups. Nurses should lead the creation of support groups within the community to provide a safe space for these children to process stigma and "disenfranchised grief" without judgment.

**For Social Welfare Services:** The **DSWD** and local social welfare offices should provide targeted economic assistance and psychological counseling not just to the incarcerated mother, but specifically to the **kinship caregivers** (e.g., grandparents). Strengthening the stability of the temporary household can act as a buffer against the child's behavioral regression.

**For Future Research:** Future studies should utilize a **longitudinal design** to track the long-term developmental outcomes of these children into adulthood. Additionally, comparative studies between children in kinship care versus those in foster care in the Philippine context would provide deeper insight into which support structures offer the best psychosocial protection.

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