

# Living with a family member in prison

Everyone's experience of having someone in prison is unique. The feelings of loneliness, worry, anger, guilt and of simply missing your relative may mean that you need to make an effort to find sources of support, including friends, family or other social networks, or professional counselling.

## Grief and loss

Many relatives of prisoners have said that the grief they felt when their family member went to prison was similar to the death of a loved one. Even though a prisoner can still be visited and spoken to on the phone sometimes, the loss for the family is a very real one.

However, the process of grieving that loss is quite difficult for prisoners' families. When someone dies, neighbours, friends and family will usually be very supportive and understanding. The same support is generally not offered to the families of prisoners, and you can feel that you are being judged along side the offender.

Funerals, laying of flowers, and other rituals associated with death all help bereaved relatives to express their emotions, find meaning in their experience, and ultimately to move on, with the support of the community. There are no rituals to help prisoners' families cope with their loss. Your pain may not be regarded as 'legitimate' in the same way.

This lack of social support can make it difficult for you to express your sorrow openly. As a result, families often hide their feelings from others and try to cope on their own. Not expressing sadness and grief can mean that it is difficult to move on and can lead to health issues such as anxiety and depression. It is important to have the opportunity to talk about what you are going through and how you feel and ways to deal with your experiences.

## Guilt by association

Families of prisoners have been called the 'invisible victims of crime'. Stereotypes of prisoners and widespread fear of crime and criminals can also lead people to discriminate against the families of prisoners. In the case of a trial attracting media attention or sexually based, for instance, judgment and fear within the local community and even among family and friends may be strong.

As the partner of a prisoner, people may give you a hard time for wanting to maintain a relationship with someone sentenced for a crime. It can be difficult for extended family to deal with their own shame and fear of being judged by others. This may cause friends and relatives to avoid contact with you as well as your imprisoned partner. This is because family and friends can feel so ashamed of the prisoner, that they assume others will judge them and so, they isolate themselves. Your children can become the unintended victims of this sudden, unexplained disappearance of support from friends and family.

Often these fears of judgment or lack of support can be completely unfounded. It is important to give close, trusted friends and family a chance to support you.

The support of a counsellor, social worker, or support group can also be invaluable, even to work through what you will tell people or how to look after yourself.

## Financial loss

Supporting someone in prison may cause increased levels of financial insecurity due to:

- The loss of one income
- The loss of the main carer for the children
- Increased costs of maintaining family contact, such as providing goods and money for the prisoner, travelling to prisons and potential loss of or moving from the family home
- Managing debts that are left behind such as court costs and outstanding bills

*'I can't even afford to buy my grandchildren presents, as I am always running back and forth to see my son'*

It is important to be aware of how imprisonment might impact on your financial stability.

- Think about speaking with a financial counsellor for assistance in managing these financial changes. Speak to the Financial and Consumer Rights Council on **1800 134 139** or visit [www.fcrc.org.au](http://www.fcrc.org.au) for a list of counselling services
- More information is available on how an Office of Housing property can be maintained while someone is in prison at [www.vacro.org.au/fork](http://www.vacro.org.au/fork)

## How can VACRO support you?

**You can contact VACRO for a range of information, resources and support that can assist you to manage the difficult experience of having someone within the Criminal Justice System.**

### Family and Children's Services

- Family Support Team providing information and referral for families who are navigating Victoria's Criminal Justice System
- A counselling and support service for families of offenders, including those convicted of major crimes

- A counselling service for the children of offenders
- A mentoring service for children and young people
- A support group for families of offenders
- A family worker at the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Collingwood
- A Family Liaison Worker at the Melbourne Assessment Prison, providing support to prisoners and families at this location
- Rail travel assistance program for people using V-line trains to visit a prison
- Aboriginal Family Travel Program, providing assistance for families to visit their imprisoned Aboriginal family members
- Limited low cost accommodation near some prisons for prisoners' families
- Visitor Centres outside Port Phillip Prison and Fulham Correctional Centre. Red Cross volunteers can provide information and support at the time of the visit
- Video Visits between prisoners and their families may be available at some prisons, to assist families who are unable to visit at the prison

### Post Release Offender Services

- The *Link Out Program* and *Women's Integrated Support Program* provides intensive pre- and post-release support to offenders with complex needs, who are considered to be at high risk of re-offending
- The *Women's Mentoring Program* matches women who are soon to be released from prison with a volunteer mentor from the community, who provides practical and emotional support during the transition back into the community
- The *Child Care and Transport Service Program* assists women who are on community orders to access financial support for child care and travel that will assist them to complete their orders