

Family Functionality Under Conditions of Incarceration: A Systemic Perspective*

Marija Maljković¹  and Sofija Dovijanić² 

Introduction: Family member leaving to serve a prison sentence is a significant stressor that requires a forced reorganisation of family roles and responsibilities. Incarceration greatly affects the family functioning and dynamics, given that the convicted family members are someone's parents, spouses or children. This change can lead to dysfunctionality, because the remaining members face not only organisational, but also emotional, social and economic difficulties. *Objective:* The objective of this paper is to show and summarize the results of research dealing with the impact of incarceration on the family functionality, with special emphasis on the system perspective. *Methods:* When reviewing the available literature in accordance with the selected keywords, the service of the Consortium of Serbian Libraries for Unified Acquisition was used, as well as the Google Scholar and Research Gate search engines. *Results:* Children of parents deprived of freedom are a vulnerable category. Research shows that there is an increased likelihood that a number of symptoms and dysfunctions will appear, such as: behavioural problems and hyperactivity, use of psychoactive substances, deteriorating school performance, internalized problems, greater disobedience, difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with peers, but also housing instability, poverty and physical diseases. Also, it is established that incarceration leads to significant changes in partner relationships, and that it is associated with an increased likelihood of divorce, depression and worsening satisfaction with life of the partner who remains within the family. Families have more frequent difficulties in organising family life, as well as diminished socioeconomic stability. *Conclusion:* Taking into account the complexity of the impact of the incarceration process on both the individual and the family as a whole, it may be concluded that families which experience incarceration face numerous emotional, relational, social and organisational

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¹ University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Serbia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1003-3490>

² University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Serbia
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4686-070X>

Correspondence: Marija Maljković, Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Visokog Stevana 2, 11158 Belgrade, Srbija. Email: mar.maljkovic@gmail.com

problems and challenges. That is why, in penal rehabilitation, special attention must be paid to the maintenance, preservation and improvement of family functioning, so that the effects of institutional resocialization are not only maintained, but also generalized after leaving the institution.

KEYWORDS: incarceration / family functioning / system approach

Introduction

Modern family faces numerous challenges and stresses, including economic problems, increased tempo of living, more divorces etc. which consequently leads to changes within the structure and functioning of families. In this paper, special attention is focused on incarceration, i.e., family member leaving to serve a prison sentence, as a significant event – stressor, which makes the family do a forced reorganisation of their roles and responsibilities. The increase in prison population is a global social problem, and Serbia is among the European countries with an extremely high rate of imprisonment and a high density of prison population (Đorđević & Hrnčić, 2023). Incarceration in the family context implies short-term or long-term isolation from the family environment, difficulty in the functioning of other family members due to one person significantly reducing or completely suspending their role of partner and parent (Kieszkowska, 2017).

Most existing practices for prevention of adult recidivism have the same approach – they are directed primarily at the *individual* as the primary, and oftentimes the only actor in interventions (Sexton, 2016). Although criminal responsibility is personal, the consequences of incarceration of an individual affect the entire family (Bourgeois et al., 2022). A parent and/or a spouse leaving to prison changes the family dynamics, causing emotional, relational, economic and social challenges. Shifting the focus from the individual to the entire family is the basic idea of the system approach (Milojković et al., 1997), which views the family as a complete system in which relationships are interconnected and significantly influence one another.

Fundamentals of the System Approach

Using a system approach contributes to the understanding of the family as a developmental system. It is based on the General System Theory, established in the 1960s by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, defining a system as a set of interacting elements (Milojković et al., 1997). The primary goal of this theory is to explain the principles of origin, organisation and evolution of systems. Furthermore, this theory conceives the living system "as a continuum of hierarchically based subsystems and emphasizes the importance of reciprocal regulation within them"

(Petrović, 1992, p. 86, as cited in Zuković, 2008). The functioning of the family depends on its organisation, structure and mutual interactions of its subsystems, as well as on the influence of external systems outside the family itself, including society as a whole (Milošević, 2009). Also, ecological approach developed by Bronfenbrenner (1989) claims that the constant interaction of an individual with the environment is crucial for development, while the external influences of the environment are crucial for encouraging changes in that process (Popović-Čitić & Žunić-Pavlović, 2005). Therefore, the basic idea of the system approach is viewing the family as a complete system where members are interconnected and influence one another. This approach focuses on the dynamics of relationships within the family, where changes related to one member affect the entire family. Instead of analysing individuals in isolation, the system approach studies interactions, communication patterns, and how the family functions as a unit, with an emphasis on balance and adaptability of the system to changes.

The Impact of Incarceration on Functioning of the Family

Leaving to serve a prison sentence significantly affects the functionality and dynamics of the entire family, since the convicted persons are someone's parents, spouse or children. As a complex system, the family is forced to reorganise itself, which to a great extent depends on existing resources and capacities. This change may cause dysfunctionality, because the remaining members face emotional, relational, social and economic problems in addition to the organisational ones. Other family members, primarily children, may also face a sense of loss, anger, stigmatization and insecurity (Bourgeois et al., 2022). Research into family functionality shows that close and supportive family relationships are a key factor in the successful rehabilitation of offenders, as well as that intimate partners and minor children can play a key role in that process (Datchi & Sexton, 2013).

The Impact of Incarceration on Children

When we talk about developmental difficulties during childhood and adolescence, a large number of studies have confirmed that children of parents deprived of freedom are a vulnerable category. They are more likely to develop a range of symptoms and dysfunctions, such as: behavioural problems and hyperactivity (Geller et al., 2012), use of psychoactive substances, and bad performance at school (Dellaire, 2007; Murray et al., 2009), internalized problems (Travis et al., 2014), increased disobedience in the school environment, difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with their peers (Haskins, 2014), delay in general development and especially speech and language development (Turney, 2014), but also housing instability (Genty, 2003), poverty, homelessness and physical diseases (Morgan et al., 2021). Also, an increased

feeling of not being loved and a lower overall level of social support from parents has been observed in these children. Additional difficulties can be an increased likelihood of inclusion in special classes or schools, low motivation to continue with education, but also an increased tendency to serious self-harm (Nylander et al., 2018). Maternal incarceration has been proven to be associated with child depression symptoms, while paternal incarceration has also been associated with symptoms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as poor general health status (Lee et al., 2013).

Harmful consequences of incarceration occur due to the interruption of contact after a person leaves to serve their prison sentence, and sometimes due to the interruption of the relationship between the child and the parent (Bourgeois et al., 2022; Pucarević & Skrobić, 2021), when these negative consequences are even more evident (Genty, 2003). Difficulties in maintaining relationships with children are particularly evident in the population of female convicts, where short sentences are associated with more frequent contacts and greater efforts to maintain relationships, compared to long sentences (Mignon & Ransford, 2012). In the Republic of Serbia, there are no clear criteria for realizing the children's right to contacts with the parent with whom they do not live (Đorđević & Brkić, 2024), which makes adequate family functioning even harder to ensure.

The Impact of Incarceration on Partner Relationships

It has been established that incarceration leads to significant changes in partner relationships, as well as that it is associated with an increased likelihood of divorce, which not only affects the partner relationship, but also the relationship of the convicted individual with their child (Petrović & Jovanić, 2019). The changes are also reflected in the increase of depression and the decrease in satisfaction with life of the partner who remains within the family (Wildeman et al., 2012). A range of predictors of low satisfaction of these women has been found, such as: financial difficulties, stress of single parenting, distant and conflicted relationship with the partner, absence of marital relations and incarcerated partner's lack of interest in maintaining the relationship. Often, marital relations lose their quality, and due to the drastic reduction of the time that spouses spend together, the probability of divorce also increases (Massoglia et al., 2011). Furthermore, incarceration can lead to a crisis for free partners. Increased substance use and involvement in criminal activities for survival have also been registered (Cooper et al., 2014; Western, 2006). Also, during the execution of the sentence, there are changes in the daily routines of both spouses, whereby the convicted person may adopt violent problem-solving tactics, which may make maintaining family relationships hard, while the other spouse may get used to independent functioning (Nurse, 2002), which can further reduce the quality of

the partner relationship. Taking that into account, a person may seek a new partnership with another partner.

Research in our country (Ćopić et al., 2024) shows that men and women serving a prison sentence report a relatively positive experience in maintaining contact with the family, with the average values moving well above the threshold value (contact with the family is rated with 3.49, and the limit value is 3).

The Impact of Incarceration on the Organisational and Economic Functioning of the Family

Families whose member is serving a prison sentence have more frequent difficulties in family functioning (Wildeman et al., 2016), as well as reduced socioeconomic stability (Clear et al., 2001). Economic problems may worsen due to loss of income, court expenses, more difficult employability of the convicted person after release from prison and other reasons, while the emotional pressure caused by the absence of parent and/or spouse may make maintenance of the family organisation and stability difficult. Research by Macanović (2018) in the Banja Luka Penitentiary shows that half of the male prison population have no visits from their children, with the dominant reasons cited as lack of financial resources, significant physical distance from the institution and the mother's decision to stop with the visits. Another research (Christian, 2009) shows that the hindering factors can be the policy of the institution that emphasizes the importance of ensuring safety, as well as prison conditions being inappropriate for children.

The incarceration of one parent also affects the functioning of the wider family system, independently of the impact on individual family members. There are often changes in family roles – the other parent, relatives or guardians take responsibility for the children and the household, which can cause additional stress. Thus, the family structure changes due to the separation of the parental dyad, which can affect the level of tension already existing between the spouses (Nurse, 2002), as well as the division of parental duties. Combined with financial difficulties, this change in family structure can lead to negative outcomes for family members (Washington, et al., 2018; Wildeman et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the complexity of the impact of the incarceration process on both the individual and the family as a whole, it may be concluded that families with the experience of incarceration face numerous emotional, relational, social and organisational problems and challenges. Considering that the majority of convicts return to their families after leaving the penal institution, it is important

to actively work on maintaining contact with the family, which significantly contributes to the successful reintegration of convicts into society. In such situations, it could be useful to work on the reconstruction of relationships and support the family in adapting to new circumstances, helping them restore stability and functionality in their relations. In penal rehabilitation, special attention must be paid to the maintenance, preservation and improvement of family functioning, so that the institutional resocialization effects are not only maintained, but also generalized after leaving the institution.

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