

Johnny was a good kid who grew up in a bad situation. Everything was going well for the young teen. He had friends at school and in the neighborhood. His grades were above average, and he enjoyed team sports. Mom and Dad were there to support and encourage him. He had many of the material things he needed and even some of the things he wanted. It was a pretty good life for a kid until his father got arrested on a felony charge.

When Johnny's friends heard that his father was in prison, everything changed. Johnny became the butt of jokes and former friends became bullies. His Mom was upset by her husband's criminal activity and became distracted by her additional responsibilities.

Money was tight, and there were not enough hours in the day to work, fulfill family chores, and take care of Johnny as she had in the past. Mom was emotionally drained, and she had little energy left for Johnny.

The incarceration of a parent changes the entire family dynamic. It is a life-altering experience for both the spouse and the children. Incarceration reshapes the emotional, social, and economic realities of their family life, leaving them grappling with the absence of the loved one, the stigma associated with the outcomes of the criminal justice system, and the challenges of navigating life in a changed familial environment.

The care and support for children of incarcerated parents is a delicate and frequently overlooked issue with profound implications on society. These children are an integral part of families, neighborhoods, and communities. They must be offered the tools and support they need not only to survive but to thrive despite adversity.

Children of incarcerated parents face numerous challenges:

Emotional Landscape

The sudden removal of a parent from their lives can lead to feelings of abandonment, confusion, and grief, an upheaval of their entire emotional landscape. Their struggle to comprehend the reasons for a parent's absence can manifest in anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues. The stigma of having a parent in prison compounds these feelings and leads to isolation from peers and a diminished sense of self-worth.

Educational Challenges

The stigma of parental incarceration often leads to bullying or exclusion in school and exacerbates feelings of self-worth. These children soon face educational challenges and struggle academically, not because of a lack of potential, but because they are burdened with stress and instability at home. This results in lower grades, higher dropout rates and diminished prospects for continued education.

Social Isolation

Socially, the absence of a parent disrupts familial structures. Grandparents, relatives, or foster systems often step in to fill the void, but these temporary arrangements may lack the stability and security that children need to flourish. Social isolation results from the shifting dynamics within families leaving children feeling disoriented and uncertain about their place in the world.

Economic Strain

For many families, the incarceration of a parent brings about significant economic and financial strain. The loss of income can plunge households into poverty, forcing children to contend with issues such as food insecurity, inadequate housing, and limited access to healthcare. Moreover, the costs associated

with visiting incarcerated parents— transportation, legal fees, and phone calls— further compound the financial burden on these families.

Economic instability often affects children in ways that go beyond the immediate financial challenges. It can limit their access to extracurricular activities, educational resources, and other opportunities that foster growth and development. Addressing these disparities requires systemic changes that prioritize the needs of families impacted by incarceration.

However, there is some good news even in these complex and harrowing scenarios.

Good people and good organizations are making headway in developing support networks and providing interventions to support children of incarcerated families.

Fr. Richard J. Zelik, OFM Cap., a priest of the Capuchin Franciscan Province of St. Augustine in Pittsburgh, PA (www.capuchin.com), serves as a chaplain at the Allegheny County Jail among other ministries. He's taken a special interest in these children. He first experienced the cost of parental incarceration when he worked in various roles in parishes in Pittsburgh neighborhoods throughout Western Pennsylvania.

Father noted, "I often ask inmates at the County Jail: Did you vote on who your parents would be? Did you vote to be born? Did you vote on your siblings? Did you vote for the community in which you were raised? With inquisitive looks on their faces, each inmate answers those questions, 'No'. I explain that we all start the same in life, and in fact, each one is shaped long before being free to choose."

He met the kids face-to-face. He heard their stories. He met their families. And then, as a chaplain, he met the incarcerated parents who suffered not only the consequences of their own behavior, but also from the impact their choices made on their families.

Fr. Rich instinctively recognized the value of collaboration and sought out local folks, agencies, and organizations for possible partnerships. He was confident that resources were available and there were ways to provide hope and support for children of incarcerated parents. Community organizations, schools, and social services play a crucial role in establishing support networks that cater to the distinct needs of these children. Mentoring programs, counseling services, and peer support groups can offer emotional support and a sense of belonging for children navigating challenging times.

One promising approach is the concept of restorative justice, which focuses on repairing the harm caused by incarceration and fostering connections between affected families and communities. Restorative justice initiatives often include family-focused programs that encourage communication.

Primary among the partnerships Father sought to connect with was *Amachi*. Executive Director Anna Hollis Kander leads *Amachi* Pittsburgh (www.amachipgh.org) which raises awareness and delivers services to give children a fighting chance in Allegheny County. When the community is knowledgeable about the challenges it faces, children have the support they need to thrive. This awareness creates policy-level change so that youth are unburdened from a system that has made them more vulnerable to the criminal justice system.

Fr. Rich knew something had to be and could be done, and he wanted to be a bridge of hope to the affected children. When Father got acquainted with *Amachi*, he soon learned that "the organization could positively impact children to review and to reassess their 'social DNA' via loving and honest adults with assistance from peers. As one's physical DNA can be faulty, likewise one's 'social DNA' can have flaws! *Amachi* was part of the answer, I sought." *Amachi* is derived from the Igbo language of Nigeria and means "Who knows what God has brought us through this child." This attitude of respect, love, and hope for children of incarcerated parents is what makes the difference in their lives.

Amachi Pittsburgh offers mentoring and empowerment opportunities for children in need. For a child with one or both parents incarcerated, the commitment and support of a mentor can help build

confidence, improve school performance, and result in a lifetime of healthier choices. Mentors working with youth can gain perspective, self-esteem, and new relationships.

Research shows that mentoring works:

- Increased youth self-confidence and better school performance and behavior.
- Mentored youth are 46% less likely to get involved with drugs or alcohol.
- 86% of mentored youth go on to higher education.
- Mentored children develop better relationships with their families and other adults.
- Mentored children have experienced a reduction in feelings of hopelessness.
- Mentored children have a reduction in delinquent behavior such as skipping school and class, initiating drug and alcohol use, and getting into physical fights.

Mentors can make a difference in the lives of children and youth impacted by parental incarceration by:

- Challenging young people to excel academically and in extracurricular activities that promote healthy social interaction, team-building, collaboration and mutual benefit.
- Helping young people improve their relationships with others.
- Working alongside caregivers to reinforce a stable environment grounded in values and a belief in family.
- Exposing young people to educational and cultural events and opportunities.

Empowerment Through *Amachi* Ambassadors

Amachi Ambassadors is a specialized youth organizing, advocacy, and leadership development program for high school students impacted by parental incarceration, which:

- Equips students to become civically engaged and champion education reform and system change
- Amplifies youth voices
- Enriches the educational experience of students
- The objectives are for students themselves to lead efforts to:
 - Raise awareness, concern, and responsive actions in schools and the community around children and families with incarcerated loved ones;
 - Dispel debilitating stigmas and prejudices related to familial incarceration; and
 - Improve institutions that directly affect their lives

Strengthening Family Life

Amachi Pittsburgh views parental incarceration as a family "issue" that affects children and adults, their relationships, and family functioning. Families often need various types of support, including instrumental, emotional, and social support. Our services are designed to help reduce trauma for children and families and increase healthy family functioning. We collaborate with a diverse range of community partners to deliver strengths-based support.

Anna Hollis Kander is confident that *Amachi* Pittsburgh continues to make a difference in the lives of families. Initiatives such as *Here4You*, a mobile prayer ministry that visits local neighborhoods.

Fr. Rich recognized that Capuchin Franciscan values align with those of *Amachi* Pittsburgh and acknowledged the impact of their partnership in making a difference in the lives of children of incarcerated parents.

- Capuchin Franciscans emphasize the importance of living as brothers among brothers, fostering a strong sense of community and fraternity.
- They are dedicated to promoting justice and showing compassion to all, particularly those in need. Their focus is typically on the marginalized, those on the periphery.
- They aim to empower individuals and communities, enabling them to realize their full potential through active community engagement.

The children of incarcerated parents are among the most vulnerable members of society, yet their needs are often overlooked. Addressing the emotional, social, and economic challenges they face requires a collaborative effort from families, communities, and institutions. By fostering understanding, reducing stigma, and building comprehensive support systems, we can change the narrative for these children and provide them with the stability they need to realize their full potential. Their resilience and strength serve as a reminder that even in the face of adversity, hope and progress are possible.

Together, *Amachi* Pittsburgh and the Capuchin Franciscans of the Province of St. Augustine can successfully coordinate their efforts in education and advocacy.

Education is a powerful tool for empowering children of incarcerated parents. Schools can implement special programs to support these students, including tutoring, counseling, and awareness initiatives aimed at combating stigma. Advocacy efforts at the local and national levels can lead to policy changes that prioritize the needs of these children, such as improving access to affordable childcare, healthcare, and education.

Together, *Amachi* Pittsburgh and the Capuchin Franciscans of the Province of St. Augustine can break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration. Studies have shown that children who grow up with incarcerated parents are more likely to encounter the criminal justice system themselves. By providing robust support systems, fostering resilience, and creating opportunities for success, society can help mitigate these risks and ensure that children of incarcerated parents like Johnny have a chance not only to survive but also to thrive.