

## Information for counsellors supporting families where a loved one is in custody

Unfortunately, there are no specific adult counselling services available for people who have a family member in prison or being released from custody. Families in this situation often experience difficulties in areas such as:

- Financial stress
- Emotional distress
- Understanding how the prison and court systems work
- Finding appropriate supports for their family member when they are released from prison
- Supporting children with a parent or other relative in prison

CRC provides a Telephone Information and Referral Service (Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm) that families can access (anonymously if they wish) to find information and seek help. Some families need ongoing support during this difficult time and CRC often needs to refer them to family casework or counselling services.

This information is to help family counsellors and support workers to understand what families of prisoners in NSW experience and what the common issues are.

### Financial and Practical Difficulties

The families from which prisoners come are often among the most vulnerable in society and the imprisonment of a family member frequently serves to further entrench their disadvantage. If the main family breadwinner goes to prison, families often have to cope with the loss of that person's income and then need to deal with Centrelink. Many prisoners are transferred to correctional centres around the state and there is no expectation that they will be housed at a prison close to their family. This means that the cost of travelling for visits to prisons can be a major financial burden as well as involving long and tiring journeys. Families often feel they need to put money into their loved one's prison bank account so the person in custody is able to phone them and buy additional food and other necessities.

### Emotional stress

The arrest and imprisonment of a family member often causes an enormous amount of distress and unwanted, and sometimes unexpected, change within the family. The person's arrest may have taken place at home, and possibly in presence of children, which families often find highly traumatic. Involuntary separation from the family member causes reactions of uncertainty, fear,

grief and loss. Families are often said to be ‘serving a hidden sentence’ and punished for their loved one’s actions. Families often speak of the severe shame and stigma they face along with the isolation they often feel as they have nobody to talk to. Along with feel judged when they need to tell anyone that their family member is in prison. When the family includes children, it is difficult to know how to explain what has happened and how to support the children financially, emotionally and developmentally.

## Relationships

When a family member is in prison, the prolonged, enforced separation causes great stress and relationships often change. Families have to cope with the stress of visiting a prison and all too often, unhelpful and disrespectful treatment by prison staff. It is often difficult to obtain accurate information about the person in custody and how they are coping, so many families worry about their loved one’s physical and mental health and wellbeing in custody. Frightening media stories about violence in prisons can exacerbate concerns for the person’s safety. When the person is released, relationships often have to be rebuilt, renegotiated and boundaries established, particularly if the person will be living with them after release.

## Family support

Family counsellors or caseworkers may be needed to provide support to families experiencing a loved one in custody. Many of the issues that these families face are ones that family counsellors or caseworkers will already be familiar with, including grief, trauma, stress, change and relationship difficulties. Counsellors may find it helpful to read more about what this experience is like for family members. These articles are mainly from overseas but the issues are similar to those faced by families in Australia. The links below are a good place to start:

- <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/250657.pdf>
- <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/bibliography/prisoners-and-their-families>
- <https://www.nij.gov/journals/278/pages/impact-of-incarceration-on-dependent-children.aspx>
- <https://www.workingnotes.ie/item/the-ripple-effects-of-imprisonment-on-prisoners-families>
- <https://prisonchatuk.com/left-behind/the-outsiders/>

CRC’s Telephone Information and Referral Service (TIRS) is available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm for anyone to call for information on how the prison, and more broadly, the NSW criminal justice system works. Family members and those supporting them are very welcome to call for guidance – we can usually explain things or point you in the right direction of who to best talk to within the system.