



## Clinical and Policy Implications for Working with Women in Romantic Relationships with Incarcerated Men

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Incarceration has significant **implications** for romantic relationships, affecting various aspects of individuals' lives and posing challenges to maintaining healthy connections. The impact incarceration has on relationships can be unique while also exhibiting similar patterns for both the incarcerated person and those who are romantically involved with the incarcerated person. It also demonstrates a need for understanding, support and interventions.

### Understanding Stigma and its Societal Implications

Stigma follows an individual and their family both during and after incarceration. It creates uncomfortable situations and hampers personal relationships, resulting in feelings of shame, isolation, and loneliness. The judgment and stigma faced by incarcerated individuals make it **difficult for them** to find employment, and housing, and meet basic needs after release.

### Maintaining Relationships Helps with Mental Health

For incarcerated individuals, being engaged in a romantic relationship has many benefits both during and after incarceration. The likelihood of recidivism is reduced, and the overall well-being of the incarcerated individual is increased during incarceration. Receiving emotional support can assist incarcerated individuals in managing their stress and committing to **avoiding disciplinary punishment** while incarcerated. The incarcerated individuals who receive support from close relational others are protected by the belief that they are cared for and are therefore able to cope with the various problems connected with incarceration.

### Access to Communication and Quality Time is Essential

Communication to maintain closeness with an incarcerated partner has resulted in stronger emotional bonds and overall better relationship quality. Additionally, incarcerated individuals who receive frequent visits, have fewer symptoms of depression, and engage in **less rule-breaking behavior**).

There are not very many benefits to incarceration and the overall literature demonstrates that incarceration of a male increases the likelihood that his female partner will **separate from** him and even date another person. Incarcerated people feel lonely and disconnected from others. The repercussions of incarceration carry over into family life, affecting not just currently and formerly imprisoned men, but also their female partners' employment.

However, our findings do show that the impact of incarceration on a relationship can be positive as a few individuals had a positive outlook on their experience regarding the incarceration of their romantic partner. This included bonding experience, giving kids their full attention, getting to know their partner on a deeper level, and making them closer. Incarceration can also be beneficial when it **disrupts poor lifestyle** aspects such as substance abuse.

## Barriers on Communication

Many family members find it hard to contact and visit their partners due to **prison restrictions on interactions** and expensive visitation and telephone costs. A limited, but growing body of studies has looked into the advantages of having contact with a jailed parent for children. Contact may provide an opportunity for children to **express their feelings** about an ambiguous loss.

Despite the evidence demonstrating how essential communication is for incarcerated people, more restrictions have been placed. COVID-19 has dramatically impacted incarceration; for example, **visitation hours in various prison** settings have been reduced or canceled. Other restrictions participants mentioned were emails being delayed and the prisons not allowing family visits. Maintaining relationships is crucial during incarceration since increased family connectivity is predicted by having greater contact with family.

## Clinical Implications and Future Directions

- Expanding **family-focused interventions**, including case management and psychoeducational programs, within correctional facilities is essential for supporting incarcerated individuals and their families.
- **Gender-responsive feminist family therapy** can help with transitioning a family in and out of jail.
- **Incorporating video services** for relationship therapy would be helpful for loved ones and the incarcerated partner.

Given that the findings of this study and other research indicate that both forms of visitation are linked with lower recidivism, correctional organizations should try to maximize the utilization of both in-person and video visits.