

# IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

Impacts of Incarceration on Families

Survey Conducted March-April 2021

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## IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

<b>Background</b>	2
<b>Methodology</b>	2
<b>Demographics</b>	2
<b>Prejudice and Ostracism</b>	2
Figure 1.1 Where Was Ostracism Experienced	3
Table 1.1 Comments on Prejudice and Ostracism from Families [Qualitative Data]	4
Figure 1.2 Where Was Ostracism Experienced (Children)	5
Table 1.2 Comments on Prejudice and Ostracism from Children [Qualitative Data]	5
<b>Psychological Stresses</b>	6
Figure 2.1 Factors of Psychological Stress	6
Table 2.1 Comments on Psychological Stresses from Families [Qualitative Data]	7
Figure 2.2 Factors of Psychological Stress (Children)	8
Table 2.2 Comments on Psychological Stresses From Children [Qualitative Data]	9
<b>Financial Stresses</b>	10
Figure 3.1 Financial Stress Pie Chart	11
Figure 3.2 Factors of Financial Stress	11
Table 3.1 Comments on Financial Stress From Families [Qualitative Data]	12
<b>Conclusion</b>	12
<b>Appendix A- Survey Questions</b>	13

### Background

The HINDA Institute provides counseling, visitation, and support to (predominantly) Jewish individuals and families who encounter the criminal justice system. This includes ex-offenders, spouses, parents, and children. The organization strives to lower recidivism rates and ensure that those coming out of prison do not return. The support they provide includes job placement, job training, housing assistance, social support, counseling, and spiritual guidance. Specifically, the HINDA CARES (Counseling, Advocacy, Restorative justice, Education, Support) program assists families and children who have experienced the criminal justice system through a weekly support group. Through this group, women spoke repeatedly of ostracism and stress within the community, which led us to formally gather data to better understand these challenges. The HINDA Institute prepared a survey to gain information on implications of incarceration on the families who have encountered the criminal justice system.

### Methodology

Three main categories were assessed in the survey: A) ostracism and community perceptions, B) psychological and social impacts, and C) financial impacts. The survey was sent to the families through an online format, Google Forms, on March 23, 2021 and was open until April 7, 2021. Those who were not able to complete the survey electronically spoke their responses to a researcher, who recorded their responses directly into the form itself. Of 150 families serviced by the HINDA Institute, 41 of our consistently active families responded to the survey.

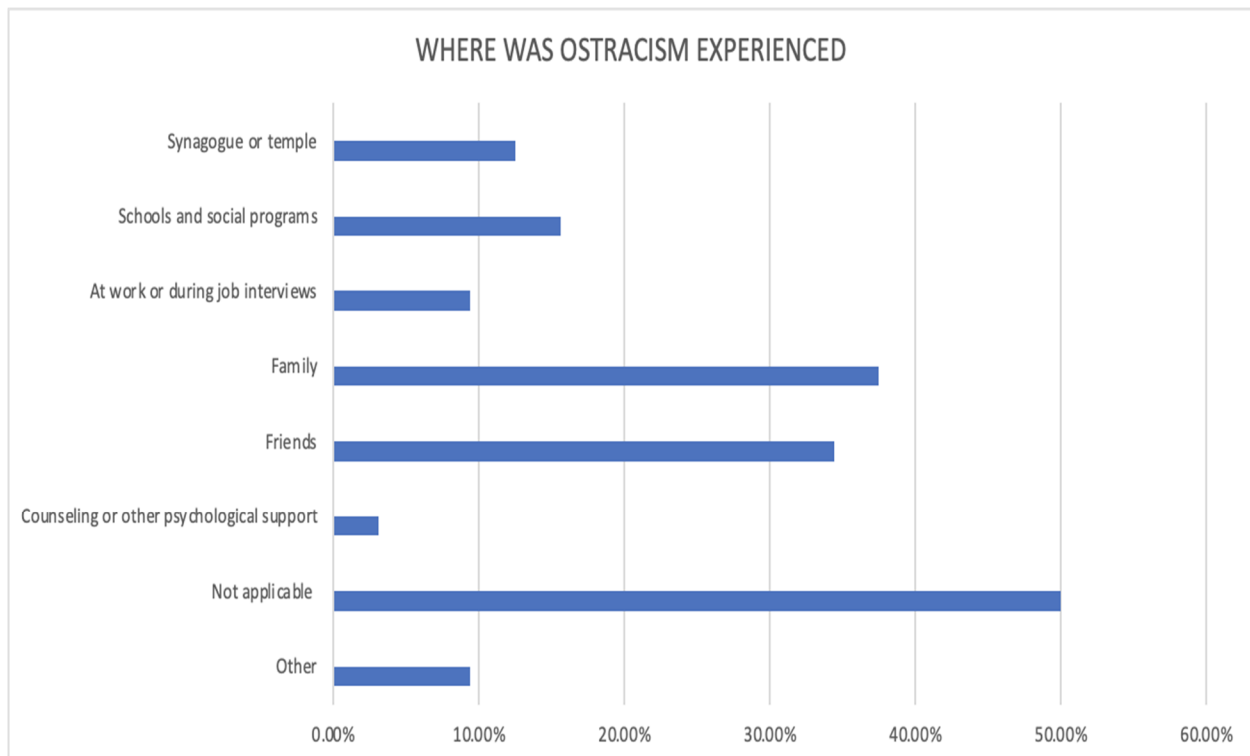
### Demographics

The majority of the HINDA CARES group participants are women (83%) Jewish (99%), Caucasian, and live in the Chicagoland area or surrounding suburbs. Many families who did not respond to the survey expressed concern over the fear of judgement and shame and maintaining anonymity, while some had difficulty accessing the internet or email.

## Prejudice and Ostracism

The survey found that over 35% of those surveyed identified as victims of prejudice in their community. This includes synagogues (12%) and school and social programs (15%). The most common form of ostracism came from family (37%) and friends (34%). Prejudice was also experienced at work (9%), and surprisingly, some reported prejudice within counseling settings (3%). Anecdotally, some of our family members reported losing their jobs or businesses, leaving their respective communities, or feeling rejected from social organizations. For certain crimes, it is clear that the effect is much higher. Specifically, families of sex offenders experience even more intense prejudice and ostracism in their communities.

*Figure 1.1 Where Was Ostracism Experienced*



*Table 1.1 Comments on Prejudice and Ostracism from Families [Qualitative Data]*

<p><i>Social Circles</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “(I) no longer have friends who call or include us in social situations”</li> <li>- “I was ignored in the synagogue so I stopped going. The social networks that we had in xx turned their backs on me, as they were victims. They assumed that I knew about the scheme. I was actually left in a car, following a car accident, while taking my kids to school. Parents passed my car and did not stop to see if the kids and I were okay. There was no doubt that we were in the car.”</li> <li>- “Friends backed off. I learned who were true friends.”</li> <li>- “Judgements from friends and family.”</li> <li>- “My friend of a very long time suddenly dropped us as friends (after our son was incarcerated). It was my best friend of forty years and it was absolutely gut wrenching.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Professional Environments</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Work was uncomfortable.”</li> <li>- “(Discriminated against) by law enforcement and hospitals.”</li> </ul>

The survey found that the impact of prejudice was actually greater for innocent children. Of the families who indicated having children, over half of these children experienced prejudice and ostracism. There is a tremendous effect on children as the loss of income, housing insecurity, and material hardship persists both during and post-incarceration. With such large familial changes going on, children must rely on the constants in their lives such as school, friends, employment, and extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, as indicated by the survey, children tend to experience prejudice in those areas, as well. This lack of order in their everyday lives can lead to emotional distress, as we see later in the survey. In addition, we see that as the children grow up, their family member’s incarceration follows them, as participants indicated exclusion from employment opportunities.

## IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

Figure 1.2 Where Was Ostracism Experienced (Children)

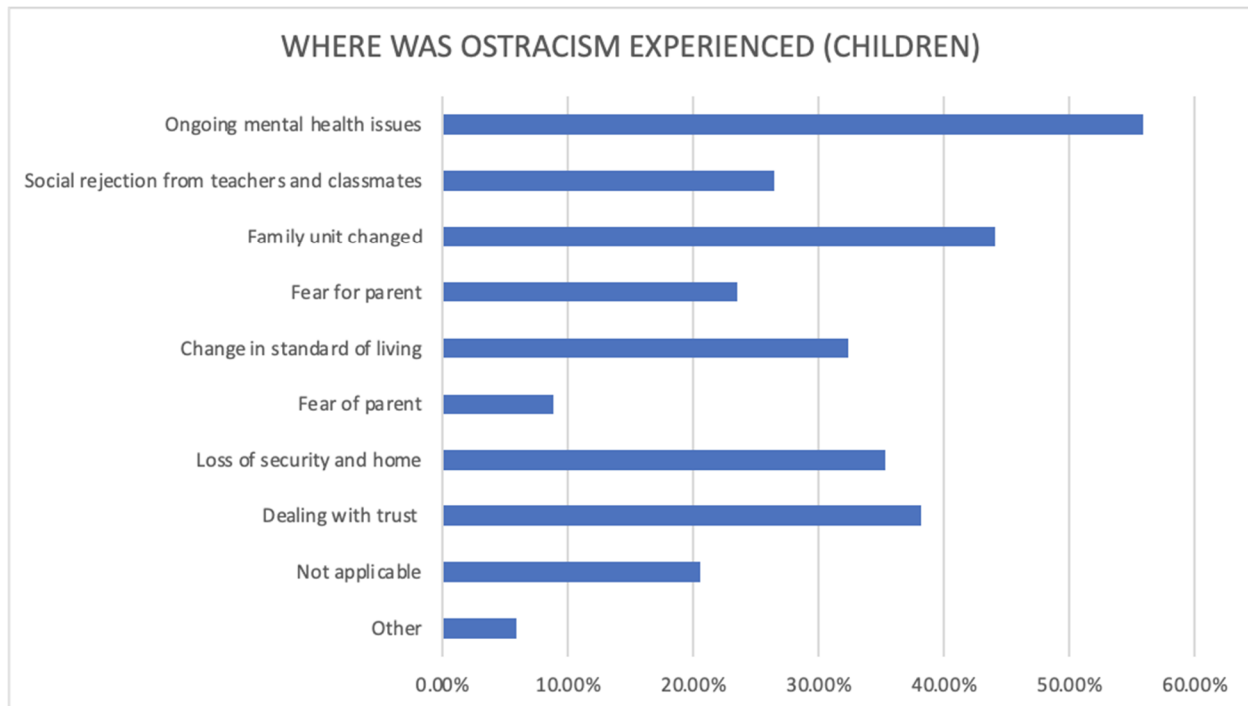


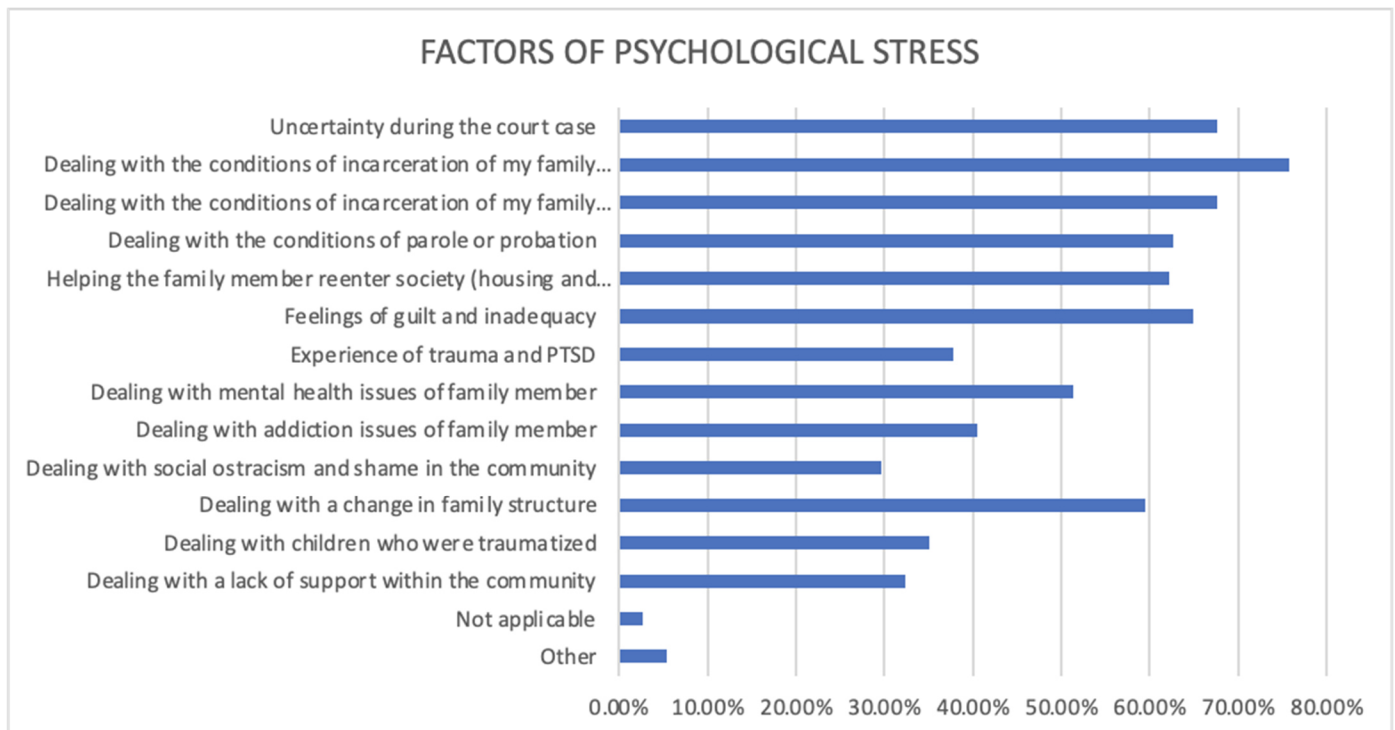
Table 1.2 Comments on Prejudice and Ostracism from Children [Qualitative Data]

<p><i>School</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “My school aged children (5 and 8) were shunned by the children of the parents (classmates).”</li> <li>- “My grandchildren were ostracized in school and somewhat in community.”</li> <li>- “At school, my child was told to take off her Star of David necklace because it was a gang sign and it was inappropriate.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Employment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “My son was excluded from numerous employment opportunities (due to his father).”</li> <li>- “My son feels he didn’t get a residency last year, as he disclosed his father’s incarceration.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Social Circles</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “My 12-year-old son was picked on and couldn’t continue his regular activities, as well as lost contact with many friends he grew up with because the parents would not allow friendship.”</li> <li>- “My son was not allowed to join a karate class. One of the other moms insisted he might be a danger to the other kids because of what his father had done.”</li> </ul>

## Psychological Stresses

The participants surveyed identified that they undergo significant psychological stress (over 45% of participants). The participants shared feelings of guilt and inadequacy (65%), trauma, PTSD (37%), guilt, shame, and self-judgement. Predictably, the participants identified that their most significant stresses related to the sequence of incarceration including uncertainty during the court case (68%), dealing with the horrific conditions of incarceration of a loved one (76%) (e.g. beaten up or bullied in prison), dealing with the conditions of parole (62%), and the challenges of re-entry of the family member into society. As the uncertainty increased, so did the anxiety. Our families also identified that they dealt with a variety of challenges including the change in family structure (60%), dealing with children who were traumatized (35%), the stresses of relocation, finding employment for themselves, and sadly, lack of support within their community (32%). In addition, many of these participants have been dealing with their family members' ongoing mental health issues (51%) and addiction issues (40%) for years. The survey participants identified many illnesses and health conditions that subsequently surfaced due the related stresses: 33% had physical health issues which included fatigue / lethargy, depression, insomnia and GI issues. Of these families, 68% said that these were long term effects that persisted years after. As noted by the participants, the release of a family member from incarceration does not eliminate the psychological stress associated with their situation. Many acknowledged the continued fear of re-sentencing and the lasting trauma for the entire family.

*Figure 2.1 Factors of Psychological Stress*



*Table 2.1 Comments on Psychological Stresses from Families [Qualitative Data]*

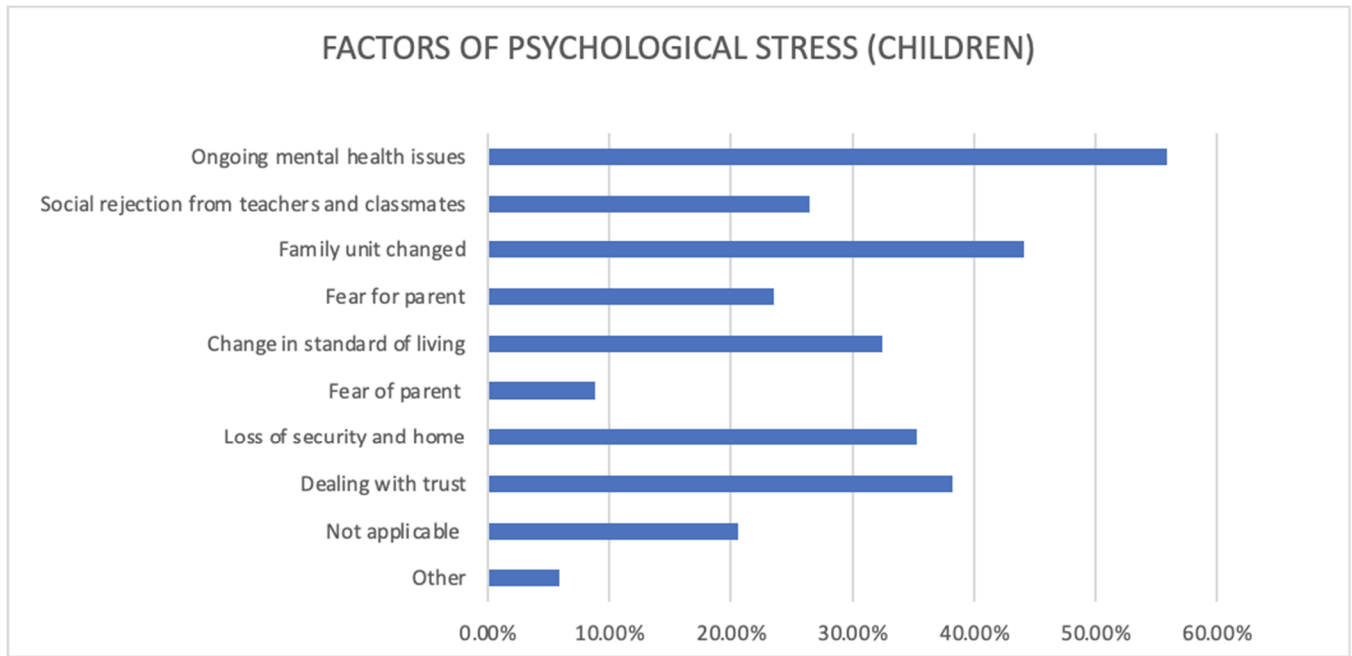
<p><i>Relocation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “We got evicted for our apartment the same week my husband got his sentence.”</li> <li>- “We had to leave xx and relocate to Chicago, following a move to my parents’, a move to my brother’s house, and a move to my in-laws’ house. Each move meant reorganizing our lives and further reinforced the unknown about where we would finally live (the future). I had to find a job that would let me balance the needs of the children and provide a livable income.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Mental health and Stress</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “My husband and I felt a great deal of stress in our marriage ranging from blaming self, each other, and the incarcerated family member. Not very constructive behaviors.”</li> <li>- “...depression for sure.”</li> <li>- “I had to go on anti-anxiety medicine, lost sleep, and was under the most stress I’ve ever experienced in my life.”</li> <li>- “Recurrence of reflux, inability to sleep, overall stress.”</li> <li>- “Mental tension led to physical tension.”</li> <li>- “...depression, lethargy, trouble sleeping, fear of the future for family members.”</li> <li>- “The scarcity of mental health support and mental health placements means that we are afraid that he will never get the mental health care that he needs and that he will be desperately unhappy, as well as in and out of prison his whole life.”</li> <li>- “Just ongoing mental stress for my son who was released.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Long term impacts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Developed mental health illness and health conditions because of stress.”</li> <li>- “I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis within two years of the trauma. One daughter wet the bed until she was ten. One daughter could never settle down at night and had rage attacks. My son eventually fought alcoholism.”</li> <li>- “My son will always be in recovery although he has been sober for many years. One daughter still has rage attacks and has unrealistic expectations of marriage and relationships. It took many years to be able to trust enough to develop a relationship...”</li> <li>- “We still have feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Our son still has the same mental health issues and we don’t know how to get him help. We are afraid of what trouble he may get himself into, whether in jail, in prison, or on the street. We don’t know how he may harm himself or others. We worry about what he might do to us (when he is out). It is an ongoing tragedy that is always in the back of our minds: that we cannot help him.”</li> <li>- “The trauma is never gone, even years later, it arises at unexpected times.”</li> <li>- “(My kids’) father has been unable to successfully reenter. (He) was deported; not physically present; not contributing financially for the kids... I work 6 days a week, everything falls on me.”</li> <li>- “When bad things happen, they cannot be erased from memory. The question comes up: can/will it happen again?”</li> </ul>



## IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

Particularly important to consider is the psychological stress experienced by children in our survey. 56% identified that they had mental health issues. They experienced stress due to the social rejection of teachers and friends (27%), the changing family unit (44%), fear for parents (24%), change in the standard of living (32%), and dealing with trust (38%). Many participants indicated extreme changes in behavior such as substance use, acting out, rage attacks, and more. A sense of fear was also noted by multiple participants. These changes and intense emotions further increase stress for parents who are simultaneously dealing with the challenges of the judicial system, financial stresses, and their family members.

*Figure 2.2 Factors of Psychological Stress (Children)*



## IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

*Table 2.2 Comments on Psychological Stresses From Children [Qualitative Data]*

<i>Mental Health</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- “My son has severe mental illness.”</li><li>- “I have PTSD and so does my son.”</li><li>- “The sudden ‘disappearance’ of their father was traumatic.”</li><li>- “PTSD is an issue for my older son.”</li></ul>
<i>Change in Behavior</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- “My eldest son started drinking and stopped taking his psych meds, eventually deteriorating to the point of hospitalization.”</li><li>- “Sister of the incarcerated child began acting out, lying, and felt insecure about her place in the family. She felt the incarcerated child was who we cared most about.”</li><li>- “Adjusting to a very different, difficult, extremely stressful lifestyle.”</li></ul>
<i>Fear/Shame</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- “Uncertainty for the future, fear if they (children) will be able to work, have nice housing, etc.”</li><li>- “My children are adults but have voiced profound stress, shame and concern for my incarcerated family member.”</li><li>- “In particular, our youngest daughter felt extremely unsafe in the home.”</li></ul>

### Financial Stresses

The survey identified that over 69% of the families identified that there was a significant financial burden during and post incarceration. In turn, this affects the family's ability to access resources within the community. The most significant burdens identified in the survey included the cost of legal fees (69%), the cost of visiting family members in distant correctional institutions (50%), the cost of supporting family members while in an institution (65%) and the loss of the family breadwinner (30%). It's important to note that the families have to supply basic needs like food, soap, and clothing, and pay for email and phone calls through the commissary. Often, the parents left behind are thrown into poverty, while sometimes still supporting their grandchildren or loved one's families. Additionally, they may be supporting the expensive mental health or addiction treatments. In the survey, participants reported losing their home, car, assets, retirement savings, and businesses and partnerships. Many lost their jobs and declared bankruptcy. Some of the participants are working 2 to 3 jobs or work past the age of retirement to pay back loans or support family members. They become the working poor, which of course affects the children, as well.

Legal fees have drastically impacted families' finances. In order to try and advocate for the incarcerated family member, a family must be in touch with a lawyer. Many families do this if their family member is incarcerated and not receiving proper medical attention while incarcerated, or is being mistreated.

The whole family shares the burden of parole and probation and it is often difficult to find employment and housing for their family members. Families sometimes look for housing for months or have to move a family member multiple times. As previously mentioned, this instability takes a toll on the entire family, including the children. Lack of financial resources directly affects children's ability to have a stable home, live in a safe environment, and have what they need to grow into well-adjusted adults. As the participants noted, extended family members often help in order to keep the family afloat.

## IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

Figure 3.1 Financial Stress Pie Chart

Has the incarceration of your family member caused financial stress to your family?

39 responses

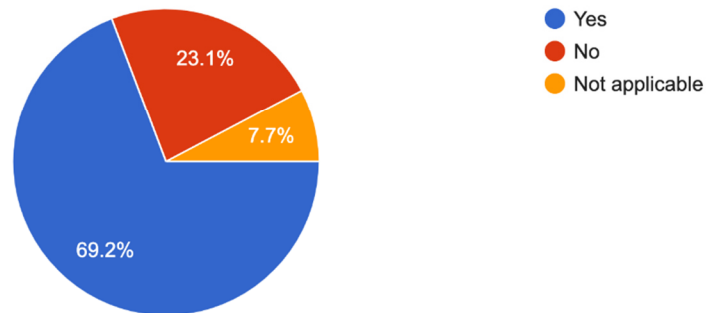
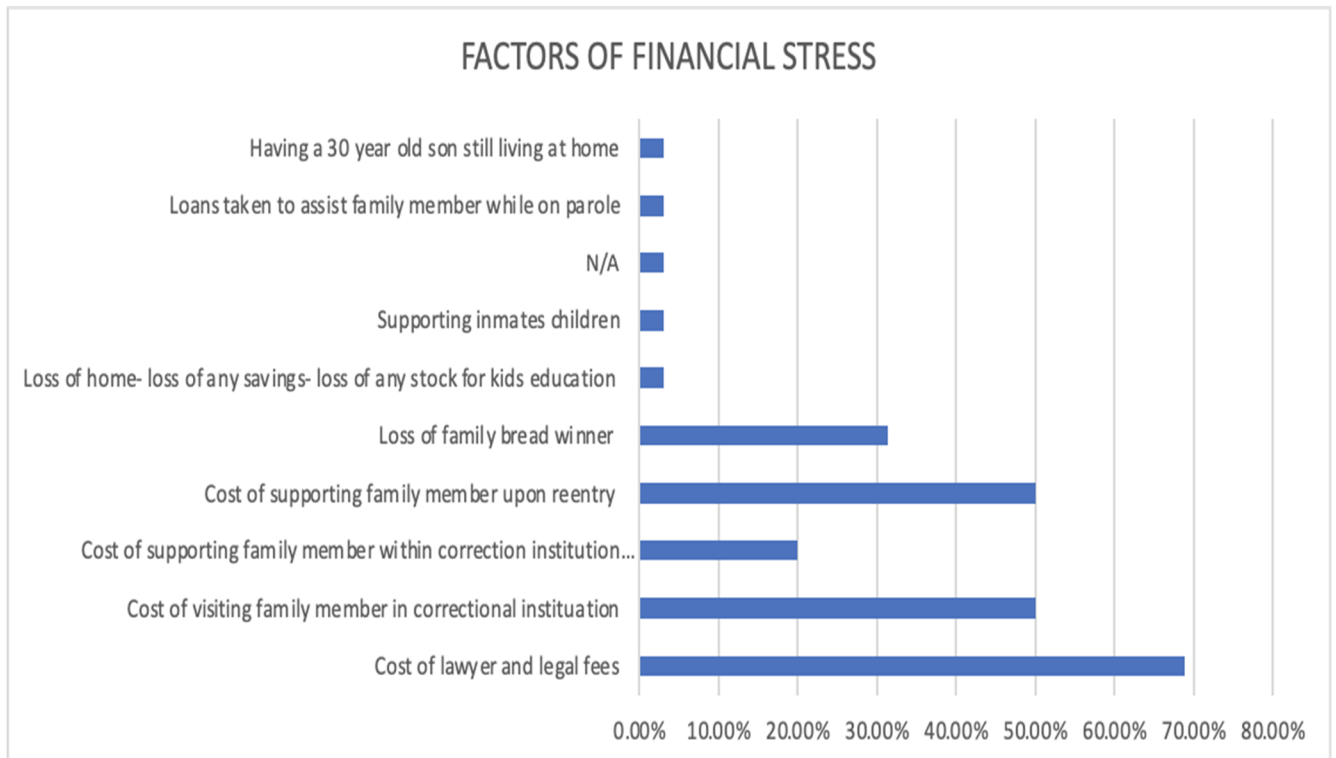


Figure 3.2 Factors of Financial Stress



*Table 3.1 Comments on Financial Stress from Families [Qualitative Data]*

<p><i>Change in Income</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “The major bills, such as mortgage, were difficult to pay and keep up with the previous standard of living.”</li> <li>- “I had to make a living to support myself and 3 children. My parents helped, or I would’ve been homeless. I lost my house, my car, and any savings were stolen.”</li> <li>- “My ex-husband went to prison and I became the only breadwinner for a family of 9 children.”</li> <li>- “All our assets were taken away: money, properties, retirement funds, as well as loss of company business that was the only source of income for our family.”</li> <li>- “(We) became 1 income household.”</li> <li>- “(We) continuously and unexpectedly needed money.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Legal Fees</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Tremendous legal fees.”</li> <li>- “Lawyer fees.”</li> <li>- “Legal fees were quite a drain.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Supporting Incarcerated Family Member</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Continuously and unexpectedly needing money (while incarcerated).”</li> <li>- “Sending the detainee clothing and belongings has caused a burden. Especially with COVID-19, I am barely working.”</li> <li>- “I needed to support my son’s family while he was incarcerated...”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Educational Support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “I co-signed my son’s educational loans. When he went to prison, I had to declare bankruptcy.”</li> <li>- “College loans.”</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

The results from this survey show the complexities surrounding incarceration. Just at the time that families need the most support, they experience the most ostracism in the community. These families are facing significant prejudice, psychological stresses, and financial stresses. The information gathered will help the HINDA Institute to better identify the needs of the families in the future. Most importantly, this information will help advise the community of these existing issues. As we have learned, there is not one specific type of family that struggles through the criminal justice system. It can happen to anybody, and as professionals in this field, it is our responsibility to increase this awareness, as well as make resources accessible to those who need support.

## Appendix A- Survey Questions

1. Would you be interested in attending sessions with a lawyer or other experts?
2. Has the incarceration of your family member caused financial stress to your family?
3. Identify which of the following factors have created SIGNIFICANT financial stress for your family. Check off as many boxes as applicable.
4. Please describe any financial stresses.
5. Have you experienced ostracism, prejudice, or social rejection in your community?
6. Where did you experience ostracism, prejudice or social rejection in your community?  
Check all that applies.
7. Did your children experience ostracism, prejudice or social rejection in your community?
8. Please describe all situations of social ostracism and prejudice.
9. Describe which of the factors described below created SIGNIFICANT psychological stress for you? (Check all that apply)
10. Describe which of the factors described below created SIGNIFICANT psychological stress for your children? (Check all that apply)
11. Did you or members of your family experience physical health issues as a result of this incident?
12. Is your family still impacted by this incident years later (long term)?
13. Please describe any long-term effects.