

Coping Mechanisms For Children Of Incarcerated Parents Embu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Parental incarceration exposes children to financial, emotional, and psychological difficulties that disrupt their development and well-being. Despite these challenges, many demonstrate resilience by adopting various coping strategies. This study explored the coping mechanisms of children with incarcerated parents at Embu Main Prison, Kenya. A concurrent mixed-methods design was employed, guided by Attachment Theory and Stress and Coping Theory. Data were collected from 384 children aged 13–17, and 20 key informants through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 26) and presented as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically and reported through narratives and quotations. The findings showed that children primarily relied on problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-based coping mechanisms. Common strategies included engaging in extracurricular activities, seeking family support, withdrawal, and keeping the incarceration a secret. While many demonstrated resilience, others experienced stigma, isolation, and in some cases engaged in risky behaviours such as early marriage and substance abuse. Coping was influenced by financial stability, emotional support, school environment, contact with the incarcerated parent, and the child's understanding of the situation. Qualitative findings highlighted the additional impact of poverty, school transfers, and limited psychosocial support. This study contributes context-specific evidence from Africa, where such research remains limited. The findings reveal critical policy and program gaps and emphasize the need for structured psychosocial interventions and Strengthened collaboration among communities, correctional institutions, and schools to safeguard the well-being of children and promote their long-term adjustment.

Keywords: Coping Mechanisms, Incarcerated Parents, Resilience.

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I. Introduction

Parental incarceration is a common practice and global social concern with profound implications for child development and family stability. Studies in high-income countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have consistently documented the adverse effects of this phenomenon on children's psychological, social, academic, and physical well-being, as noted by Condry & Minson [1] and Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney [2]. A study by Condry & Minson reported that children of incarcerated parents are among the most vulnerable populations, often facing emotional distress, economic deprivation, and disrupted schooling. Studies have documented the effects of parental incarceration on the left behind children, reporting that parental absence frequently leads to anxiety, confusion, and feelings of abandonment, with many children placed under extended family or foster care, creating instability in their home environments. Research in the United States by Kjellstrand et al. [4] links parental incarceration to elevated risks of depression and behavioural deviance, while studies in Europe, such as research done by Morgan et al. [7], report stigma and reduced self-esteem among affected children.

On the other hand, in Sub-Saharan Africa, children of incarcerated parents in face a unique set of compounding challenges, including food insecurity, Ogunbosi & colleagues, [10], poverty limited access to education and health services as noted by Butler & Misinde, [5], Apiyo, [16], and weak child protection systems (Mutunga, 2019). Studies from Uganda and Ghana by Kasirye [8] and Lunkuse [9] reveal that children of incarcerated parents often face unmet basic needs, stigma, food insecurity, and limited supervision. In Nigeria, Ogunbosi et al. [10] found similar patterns, with children reporting school dropout, financial strain, and psychosocial difficulties. Another study by Amankwaa [25] in Ghana found that parental incarceration resulted in financial hardship and a strained child-parent bond, with limited support from social services. These studies collectively point out that children in African contexts not only endure the trauma of parental separation but also face systemic vulnerabilities that intensify their struggles.

Despite these hardships, children adopt various coping mechanisms shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Research from high-income countries, such as studies done by Murray [11] and Wakefield & Wilderman [12], shows that coping can take maladaptive forms such as aggression, withdrawal, or secrecy, while adaptive strategies include seeking support from peers, teachers, and counsellors Brown [13]. In Africa, previous studies by Ofori-Duet et al. [14] have shown that spiritual coping is particularly significant, with children and families relying on prayer and church networks for resilience. A Ugandan study by Lunkuse [9] highlighted that children of incarcerated parents cope through peer interactions, sports, and secrecy, depending on the length of the sentence. Reliance on extended family networks is common in Kenya, though structured interventions remain scarce, as noted by previous studies by Mutunga [15] and Apiyo [16]. Notably, most Kenyan studies privilege parents' or caregivers' perspectives, leaving children's voices muted, Okaya [17].

How children cope with parental imprisonment depends on multiple interacting factors. Stigma often compels them to conceal their parents' status, avoid social activities, or withdraw from peers, which deepens exclusion as documented by Pettit and Gutierrez [18]. In contrast, positive caregiving relationships and continued bonds with incarcerated parents have been shown to foster resilience (Zhang & Flynn, 19). Research by Boch et al. [20] found that Age, gender, and cultural values also play important roles, with girls tending toward internalized coping and boys toward externalized behaviours. However, most studies focus on isolated factors rather than adopting a holistic ecological lens that considers the broader context shaping coping responses. Globally, interventions such as school-based programmes, mentoring, and counselling have been shown to buffer parental imprisonment's negative impacts, as Johnson noted [21]. Effective programmes provide structured mentorship, trained facilitators, and adequate resources, improving social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Stump, K., et al. [22]. However, studies such as Lunkuse, [9], and Ogunbosi, [10] evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa highlights barriers such as stigma, weak institutional support, and lack of awareness, which limit children's access to effective interventions in Kenya, Mutunga, [15], and Apiyo, [16] also point a gap in existing policies and practices citing that criminal justice system mostly prioritize offender rehabilitation over children's wellbeing, leaving significant gaps in support systems

This study addresses these critical gaps by examining the coping mechanisms of children whose parents are incarcerated in Embu Main Prison, Kenya. It specifically explores the challenges these children face, their coping strategies, the factors influencing their choices, and the available support programs. Anchored in Attachment Theory by Bowlby [23] and Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman [24], the study conceptualizes parental incarceration as a significant stressor that disrupts attachment bonds and compels children to adopt coping strategies shaped by resilience, available resources, and contextual conditions. By documenting vulnerability and resilience, the findings provide child-centred, context-specific evidence from a low-income setting. This contribution is significant as it offers insights to guide policymakers, educators, and social service providers in developing culturally sensitive interventions that strengthen child-focused policies and reduce the intergenerational effects of incarceration in Kenya.

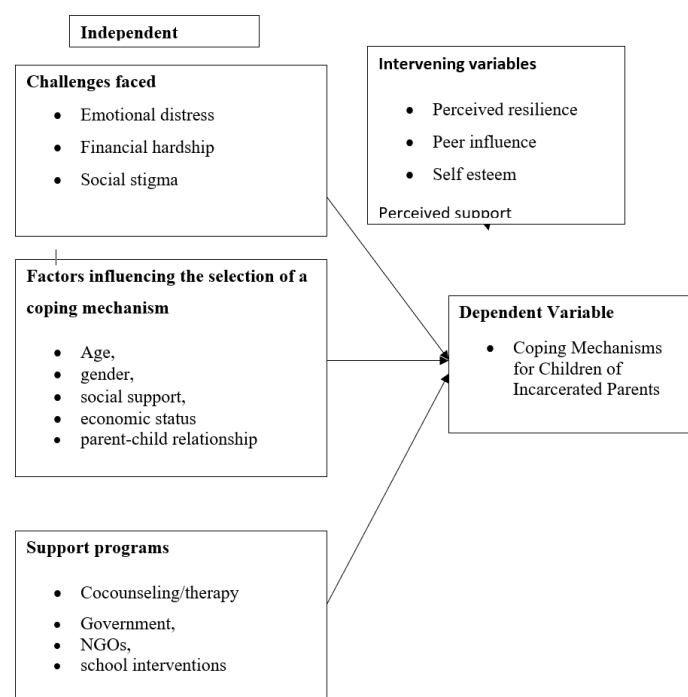


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Coping Mechanisms of Children with Incarcerated Parents

The framework illustrates how independent variables such as emotional distress, stigma, financial hardship, and limited support programmes directly and indirectly affect children's coping mechanisms. Intervening variables mediate these effects—psychological resilience, peer influence, and perceived community support. The dependent variable represents coping mechanisms, which may be adaptive (seeking social support, engaging in school or spiritual activities) or maladaptive (withdrawal, secrecy, risky behaviours).

II. Methodology

The study was conducted in Embu County, Kenya, focusing on adolescents aged 13–17 with a parent incarcerated at Embu Main Prison. A concurrent mixed-methods design combined questionnaires with focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Stratified random sampling produced 384 child respondents, while 20 key informants, such as caregivers, teachers, and social workers, were purposively selected. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Reliability was ensured through piloting, triangulation, and test–retest procedures. Ethical approval was granted by NACOSTI and other authorities, Embu Main Prison, the County Government of Embu, and the Ministry of Education, with informed consent and child assent secured. Confidentiality and psychosocial support measures were strictly observed.

III. Results

Demographic Results.

The study achieved a response rate of 78.1%, with 300 out of 384 children participating. Most respondents were between 13 and 17 years, nearly evenly split between 13–15 (48.7%) and 16–17 (51.3%). This reflects the study's focus on middle to late adolescence, a developmental stage in which children are particularly vulnerable yet capable of resilience. Christianity dominated religious affiliation (90%), with 10% identifying as Muslim. Faith-based institutions emerged as important psychosocial anchors, with many children turning to prayer and religious gatherings as coping outlets.

Educationally, 80% of respondents were in primary school and 20% in secondary school, underscoring the risk of disrupted learning during parental incarceration. Parental employment before incarceration showed 50% self-employed, 20% in government jobs, and 30% unemployed, indicating economic fragility. Caregiving fell mostly to mothers (50%), followed by well-wishers (40%) and relatives (10%). This shift from kin-based care to reliance on outsiders reveals resilience and vulnerability, as children sometimes lacked consistent nurturing. About 10% of older adolescents, mainly boys, engaged in casual labour to support household needs, highlighting economic pressures that often compromise schooling. Sentence lengths showed that most incarcerated parents (35%) were serving 11–15 years, while 10% served terms exceeding 20 years. Such prolonged absence magnifies children's emotional strain, financial insecurity, and exposure to stigma. Collectively, the demographic profile paints a picture of children navigating multiple layers of vulnerability that shape their coping choices.

Challenges Faced by Children of Incarcerated Parents

The study revealed that children with incarcerated fathers face overlapping emotional, social, educational, and economic challenges. Quantitative findings showed high levels of sadness (90%), worry about parental safety (83%), and poor concentration in school (76%), linking emotional distress directly to academic decline. Stigma and discrimination were also widespread, with 68% reporting shame and 63% experiencing bullying, often leading to withdrawal and reluctance to seek support. Qualitative data reinforced these results, with children describing grief-like feelings, recurring trauma from arrests, and constant anxiety over their fathers' well-being. Economic strain emerged as a central theme, with some older children assuming adult responsibilities through casual labour to meet family needs. Stigma and rejection within communities further deepened isolation, with many children describing themselves as “outcasts.” Educational disruption was common, as emotional stress and financial hardship undermined school attendance and performance.

Table 1: Regression Coefficients for Challenges Faced by Children of Incarcerated Parents

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	8.551	3.677		2.326	.001
Financial challenges(x_1)	2.383	1.018	.194	2.341	.002
Psychological challenge(x_2)	1.581	.577	.173	2.739	.003
Emotional challenge (x_3)	0.678	.888	.068	0.763	.000

The table shows that all the Indicator variables for challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents significantly ($p < 0.05$) influence or predict the choice of coping mechanisms.

The multiple regression model was presented as follows;

$$Y = 8.551 + 2.383X_1 + 1.581X_2 + 0.678X_3$$

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that financial hardship ($\beta = 2.383$) was the strongest predictor of coping choices, followed by psychological strain ($\beta = 1.581$) and emotional challenges ($\beta = 0.678$). This indicates that poverty, trauma, and stigma jointly shape how children respond to parental incarceration.

Coping Mechanisms Used by Children of Incarcerated Parents

Children relied on a mix of family support, distraction, and avoidance to cope with parental incarceration. Family support was the most common strategy ($M = 4.27$), with many turning to grandparents or siblings for emotional and material help. Distraction through extracurricular activities such as sports, television, and games was also widespread ($M = 4.93$), temporarily relieving stress. At the same time, avoidant strategies were highly prevalent. Many children concealed their parents' incarceration ($M = 3.73$) or spent time alone to avoid conversations ($M = 3.76$), reflecting stigma management but also heightening isolation. Cognitive self-reassurance was noted, with 63% using positive self-talk to manage worry. By contrast, peer and institutional support were least used, with talking to friends ($M = 2.37$) and seeking help from teachers or counselors ($M = 2.77$) ranking lowest. Qualitative data highlighted secrecy, withdrawal, and occasional risky behaviors like substance use, though some children benefitted from supportive teachers or close friends.

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA Results Showing Differences in Mean Scores of Coping Mechanisms Adopted by Children of Incarcerated Parents.

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	36.815	3	12.272	17.878	.000
	Within Groups	203.185	296	.686		
	Total	240.000	299			

ANOVA results ($F = 17.878$, $p < .001$) confirmed significant differences across coping strategies, underscoring diverse responses shaped by family, stigma, and available support.

Factors that Influence the Selection of Coping Mechanisms

Findings revealed that children's coping was shaped by limited parental contact, unclear communication, emotional strain, financial hardship, and social stigma. About 70% reported difficulties visiting or communicating with their incarcerated parent, while 40% did not understand the reason for imprisonment, reflecting secrecy from caregivers. Emotional vulnerability was common, with 63% often feeling anxious, and 73% lacking peer support, leading to withdrawal and isolation. Although 77% felt close to family, caregiver listening and extended family support were inconsistent, while teacher support was moderate. Financial strain was the most critical factor, with 90% citing inadequate resources, sometimes forcing children into casual work or school disruption. Qualitative accounts echoed these findings, highlighting secrecy, stigma, and economic hardship as central to coping choices.

Table 3: Correlation between challenges faced by children and the choice of coping mechanisms

		Children-related factors	Coping mechanism
Challenges faced by children	Pearson Correlation	1	.611**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	300	300
Coping mechanism	Pearson Correlation	.611**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	300	300

The analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.611$, $p < 0.01$) between challenges faced and coping mechanisms, indicating that greater adversity drove children to adopt adaptive or maladaptive strategies.

Support Programs Available

Table 4.15 shows that parents and guardians were the primary source of support (86.6%), followed by family members (63.3%) and faith-based organizations (73.3%). Support from NGOs, government, and the community was minimal, with 73% reporting "never" or "rarely" receiving assistance. FGDs and interviews revealed that formal support is largely absent, with caregivers and relatives providing most emotional, material, and educational aid: stigma and social exclusion limited community support. Faith-based interventions were occasional, while NGOs and government programs rarely targeted children of incarcerated parents.

Influence of Challenges, Child-Related Factors, and Support Programs on Coping: Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	7.898	3.486		2.266	.001
Challenges x_1	2.740	.659	.223	4.155	.000
Children related x_2	2.525	.337	.398	7.500	.000
Support program x_3	1.667	.470	.186	3.545	.000

The predictive model:

$$Y = 7.898 + 2.740X_1 + 2.525X_2 + 1.667X_3$$

Y = choice of coping mechanisms, X_1 = challenges, X_2 = child-related factors, X_3 = support programs. These results indicate that emotional, social, and material factors jointly shape children's coping, with greater challenges, supportive relationships, and accessible programs promoting adaptive strategies.

IV. Discussion

Parental incarceration presents a significant disruption to the developmental, social, and emotional well-being of children. This study found that children of incarcerated parents face interconnected challenges, including emotional distress, social stigma, economic hardship, and educational disruption, with is consistent with findings by Condry & Minson, [1] and Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, [2]. The findings noted that the absence of a parent destabilizes children's sense of security, consistent with attachment theory, and creates chronic stressors that can overwhelm coping resources. These findings support attachment theory, Bowlby [23], and Lazarus & Folkman [24]—stress and Coping Theory, which proposes that people adopt problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Emotional distress manifested as prolonged sadness, anxiety, and fear for the well-being of the incarcerated parent, reflecting the psychological consequences of ambiguous separation. The pattern observed aligns with Kjellstrand et al. [4] and Murray [11]. Social Stigma was also noted as a barrier to healthy development. Children reported facing discrimination and derogatory labelling from peers, teachers, and community members, experiences that reinforced harmful stereotypes of criminality. These findings align with previous studies by Turney and Wilderman [6] and Morgan, K., et al. [7]. Such marginalization erodes trust and restricts access to support, undermining self-esteem and encouraging social isolation, with children concealing their circumstances to avoid ridicule, limiting access to protective peer and community networks.

Economic vulnerability further compounded these challenges, as the loss of a breadwinning parent restricted access to basic needs and contributed to school absenteeism or dropout. These results align with Austin et al. [3] and Kasirye [8]. The study findings indicated that some children assumed household or income-generating responsibilities to cater to their unmet needs, negatively impacting their educational engagement. These findings align with previous studies highlighting the multifaceted impact of parental incarceration on child development Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, [2] and Wakefield & Wilderman, [12].

Institutional barriers, including restricted visitation and limited communication with incarcerated parents, further undermined children's emotional resilience. Geographic distance, high travel costs, and restrictive prison regulations hindered meaningful contact, which is critical for maintaining parent-child bonds and mitigating psychological distress as advocated by Lunkuse [19]. Additionally, schools and social services were largely unprepared to address the unique needs of these children, reflecting systemic gaps in formal support, as noted by Brown [13] and Mutunga [15].

The study established that Children adopted various coping mechanisms in response to the challenges. Problem-focused strategies, such as seeking support from family members and engaging in extracurricular activities, were the most common and effective coping mechanisms, resembling a similar pattern noted by Lunkuse [19] and Ogunbosi et al. [10]. Emotion-focused strategies, including withdrawal, secrecy, and avoidance, were also prevalent, reflecting the influence of social stigma and the need to protect family reputation (Pettit & Gutierrez, [18]. Individual factors, such as developmental stage, gender, and self-efficacy, influenced coping strategies. Younger children often relied on passive emotional coping, whereas adolescents employed a combination of problem-solving and risk-taking behaviors, reinforcing findings by Boch et al. [20]. Relational factors, particularly the quality of caregiver support and frequency of parental contact, shaped coping outcomes, with children receiving consistent emotional support demonstrating more adaptive coping. The findings were consistent with studies done by Turney and Wilderman [6] and Murray [11].

Contextual and environmental factors, including community attitudes and economic conditions, further influenced the effectiveness of coping strategies, reflecting findings by Wakefield & Wilderman [12] and Apiyo [16]. The findings confirmed that economic hardship forced some children into labour, and cultural norms surrounding incarceration encouraged secrecy. Access to school- or community-based support was uneven, with many teachers and peers unaware or reluctant to engage. The interaction of these factors determined whether

coping was adaptive or maladaptive: children with supportive caregivers and access to resources coped more positively, while those facing stigma, poverty, and institutional neglect relied on secrecy or withdrawal.

The most striking finding was the absence of formal, structured support systems. Quantitative data showed overwhelming reliance on family (86.6%), churches (73.3%), and extended family members (63.4%), while formal support from government or NGOs was negligible. The study revealed a notable deficiency in formal support systems for children of incarcerated parents. Qualitative accounts confirmed that children felt “forgotten” by institutions, receiving fragmented assistance. Support was predominantly informal, provided by caregivers, extended family members, and religious institutions, and lacked coordination and consistency as noted by Mutunga [15] and Apiyo [16]. While supportive caregivers and faith-based groups offered crucial assistance, these efforts were uncoordinated and resource-limited. Structured interventions, such as school-based counseling, mentoring programs, or NGO initiatives, were scarce, leaving many children without adequate psychosocial support. These findings align with Johnson [21] and Stump, K., et al. [22].

The strong positive correlation of available supports and effective coping ($r = 0.741$) underscores the urgent need for structured interventions to promote resilience. These findings are consistent with studies done by Mutunga [15], Pettit, and Gutierrez [18], who noted the absence of a support system for children of incarcerated parents. The findings highlight the multi-dimensional impact of parental incarceration on children, emphasizing the interplay between emotional, social, economic, and institutional factors. The results reinforce the need for a holistic approach to intervention that incorporates family support, school-based programs, community engagement, and policy initiatives. Strengthening formal support mechanisms and reducing stigma are essential to improving coping outcomes and promoting the well-being of affected children, as noted by Austin, White, and Kim (3); Mutunga (15). The findings affirm that support is not a supplementary resource but a critical determinant of resilience. Consistent, well-resourced programs—such as school-based counselling, mentoring, and targeted NGO initiatives—are needed to address these children's psychosocial and developmental needs. Without such interventions, reliance on fragmented family and religious support risks perpetuating cycles of vulnerability.

V. Conclusion

Parental incarceration profoundly disrupts children's developmental, emotional, and social trajectories, exposing them to economic hardship, stigma, and disrupted education. The study established that financial strain is the most significant predictor of coping, followed by psychological challenges. In response, children rely predominantly on informal family-based support and adopt a mix of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, including secrecy and avoidance, to manage stigma. However, the scarcity of structured formal support and persistent institutional gaps exacerbate their vulnerabilities. These findings highlight the urgent need for coordinated, multi-level interventions involving families, schools, communities, and government agencies to safeguard the holistic well-being of children of incarcerated parents.

VI. Recommendations

Government agencies and policymakers should create and implement child-centred policies that prioritise the well-being of children with incarcerated parents. These policies should aim to mitigate the negative long-term social and emotional consequences. A collaborative framework between the Kenya Prison Service, the Ministry of Education, and social services should be established to ensure a seamless and coordinated approach to providing support. Religious institutions and community organizations, which serve as key informal support systems, should be empowered through resources and training to provide more structured and professional assistance. This includes offering targeted programs that can complement the formal support provided by other institutions.

The study further recommends strengthening formal support programs for children of incarcerated parents, including community interventions, school-based counselling, and mentorship. Programs should be adequately funded, staffed with trained caregivers and mentors, and designed to address emotional, social, and economic challenges while promoting resilience and adaptive coping. Policy frameworks should ensure equitable access to resources, and community initiatives should aim to reduce stigma and enhance social inclusion. Future research should investigate systemic and policy barriers to support program implementation, evaluate strategies to mitigate stigma, and assess the long-term effectiveness of coping mechanisms and interventions across developmental stages and cultural contexts. Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are recommended to inform evidence-based, sustainable interventions for this vulnerable population.

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