



SHADOWS OF SEPARATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN NAVIGATING LIFE WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20466544>

ABSTRACT

Children of incarcerated parents often experience emotional distress, social stigma, and increased responsibilities that significantly affect their well-being and development. Guided by Attachment Theory and Trauma Theory, this qualitative study explored the lived experiences of children with incarcerated parents in Barangay Zone 1, Koronadal City, particularly their emotional struggles, coping mechanisms, resilience, and future aspirations. A phenomenological research design was employed, and five participants were purposively selected for semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common meanings and patterns across participants' narratives. Findings revealed that parental incarceration resulted in sadness, fear, insecurity, longing, economic hardship, and the premature assumption of adult responsibilities within the household. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated resilience through adaptive coping strategies such as contributing financially, seeking support from family and faith, developing self-reliance, and resisting social stigma. Education emerged as a significant source of hope and motivation, while success was redefined in terms of responsibility, personal growth, stability, and peace. The findings highlight both the vulnerability and resilience of children affected by parental incarceration and emphasize the need for trauma-informed and child-centered interventions within schools, communities, and social welfare systems to support psychosocial well-being, strengthen protective factors, and promote long-term development.

Keywords: *Incarcerated parents, lived experiences, separation, social work, City of Koronadal*

INTRODUCTION

Parental incarceration is a growing global concern that significantly affects children's emotional, social, and psychological well-being. When a parent is imprisoned, children are often left to cope with separation, disrupted family relationships, and sudden changes in their daily lives. According to Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2020), children of incarcerated parents commonly experience emotional distress, unstable family environments, and developmental challenges that may continue into adulthood. Similarly, Martin (2017) found that these children are more vulnerable to mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of abandonment. The absence of a parent due to incarceration often creates long-term emotional and social consequences that affect children's overall well-being and future development.

Beyond emotional struggles, children with incarcerated parents also encounter social stigma, economic hardship, and difficulties in school and peer relationships. Many are judged because of their parents' situation, leading to social isolation and discrimination. Glodove et al. (2024) emphasized that society often focuses on the vulnerabilities of these children while overlooking their strengths, resilience, and coping abilities. Despite these challenges, studies have shown that support systems such as family support, mentoring programs, education, and community involvement can help children adapt positively and develop resilience. These protective factors allow children to maintain hope and continue striving for a better future despite the hardships they face.

In the Philippine context, studies focusing on children of incarcerated parents remain limited. Existing research often centers on incarcerated individuals, particularly mothers, while the experiences of the children left behind receive less attention. According to Ceballo and Absin (2022), Filipino children with detained parents commonly experience loneliness, disrupted education, and social marginalization. Studies conducted by Rappai (2015) and Pascua and Nanglihan (2018) further revealed that parental incarceration frequently results in psychological distress, financial instability, behavioral problems, and weakened family relationships. However, despite these difficulties, many children demonstrate resilience by relying on family support, faith, optimism, and personal determination as coping mechanisms.

The limited local literature highlights a significant research gap regarding the lived experiences of children with incarcerated parents in the Philippines. While international studies provide valuable insights into the emotional and developmental effects of parental incarceration, there remains a need for localized and child-centered research that captures the unique realities of Filipino children. Understanding their experiences is essential in developing responsive interventions, support systems, and policies that address their psychosocial needs and strengthen their resilience.

Given the increasing number of families affected by incarceration and the lack of focused local studies, this topic remained timely and socially relevant. This study sought to address the existing gap by exploring the lived experiences of children with incarcerated parents in Barangay Zone 1, Koronadal City. Specifically, it aimed to understand their emotional experiences, coping strategies, challenges, and sources of resilience as they navigated life in the absence of their parents.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by children navigating life with incarcerated parents.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do children describe the emotional journey associated with the arrest, trial, and incarceration of a parent?
2. What forms of resilience and strength emerge in children as they navigate life with an incarcerated parent?
3. How do children envision their future in light of their lived experiences of parental incarceration?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand and describe the essence of individual's lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon. According to Van Manen and Van Manen (2021), phenomenological research focuses on exploring how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences without imposing prior assumptions. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of children navigating life with incarcerated parents.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Barangay Zone 1, Koronadal City, South Cotabato. Barangay Zone 1, formerly known as Poblacion, is one of the urban barangays in Koronadal City characterized by a diverse population and varying socioeconomic conditions. According to PhilAtlas (2020), the barangay had a population of 4,125, representing 2.11% of the total population of Koronadal City.

The locale was selected because it reflects a realistic community setting where some families experience social challenges such as parental incarceration. Conducting the study in this area allowed the researchers to better understand the emotional, social,

and psychological experiences of children with incarcerated parents within their local cultural context.

Research Participant and Sampling Methods

The participants of the study were children residing in Barangay Zone 1, Koronadal City, who currently have one or both parents incarcerated. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who possessed specific characteristics relevant to the study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research in which participants are intentionally selected based on their experiences and ability to provide rich and relevant information (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024).

The following criteria were used in selecting the participants: (1) they must be legitimate residents of Barangay Zone 1, Koronadal City; (2) one or both of their parents must currently be incarcerated; (3) they must be willing to participate and share their experiences; (4) they must be available during the interview schedule; and (5) they must be accessible to the researchers.

A total of five (5) participants were selected for the study. According to Samuel and Jerusalem (2025), qualitative studies may involve a small number of participants to allow in-depth exploration and understanding of lived experiences rather than generalization to a larger population.

Research Instrument

The researchers utilized a self-developed semi-structured interview guide to gather data from the participants. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to ask prepared questions while providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their responses (George, 2022). The interview guide was based on the objectives of the study and consisted of open-ended questions focusing on the participants' emotional experiences, coping mechanisms, resilience, and future aspirations. The interview guide underwent expert validation to ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the questions. Necessary revisions were incorporated based on the validators' recommendations before the conduct of the interviews.

Data Collection

The researchers followed a systematic procedure in gathering the data. First, a semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the objectives of the study. Second, the interview questions were validated by experts to ensure their reliability and appropriateness. Third, formal letters were provided to the participants and guardians to explain the purpose of the study and seek informed consent. Fourth, schedules for the interviews were arranged based on the participants' availability and convenience.

Prior to the interview, the researchers explained the objectives of the study, the interview process, and the participants' rights, including their right to withdraw from the

study at any time. Face-to-face interviews were conducted individually in a quiet and comfortable setting. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded using smartphones to ensure accuracy in data gathering. All collected information was treated with strict confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers carefully transcribed the recorded interviews and reviewed them multiple times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data. Significant statements and recurring ideas were identified and grouped into themes and subthemes that reflected the participant's lived experiences. Thematic analysis enabled the researchers to interpret the emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of the participants' experiences. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers employed data triangulation and expert validation throughout the analysis process.

RESULTS

Table 1. Emotional Journey Associated with The Arrest, Trial, And Incarceration of a Parent

Table 1 shows how children describe the emotional journey associated with the arrest, trial, and incarceration of a parent.

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|---|---|
| A. Immediate Psychological Distress B. Sense of Unfair Treatment C. Emotional Turmoil and Uncertainty | Emotional Turmoil During Arrest and Trial Process |
| A. Economic and Survival Anxiety B. Emotional Grief and Sense of Abandonment C. Increased Responsibility and Burden | Emotional Distress and Insecurity |
| A. Hurt and Disappointment B. Emotional Wounds and Lingering Pain | Conflicted Emotions Toward Parental Incarceration |
| A. Loss of Family Stability B. Insecurity and Uncertainty About the Future | Emotional and Economic Vulnerability |

| | |
|--|---|
| C. Weakening of Family Structure and Support | |
| A. Longing and Emotional Emptiness B. Yearning for Presence and Connection C. Inner Void and Sense of Incompleteness | Emotional Loss and Longing |
| A. Emotional Burden and Hardship B. Psychological Strain and Exhaustion | Sustained Emotional Struggle |
| A. Emotional fatigue B. Chronic Stress and Burnout C. Numbness and Emotional Shutdown | Emotional Weight of Sudden Responsibility |

Emotional Turmoil During Arrest and Trial Process

Children described the arrest and trial of their parent as a highly distressing and traumatic experience. The suddenness of the arrest, often witnessed directly by the child, evoked feelings of shock, fear, confusion, and emotional chaos. One participant recounted how the arrest happened unexpectedly and violently, leaving a lasting emotional scar.

P1/Yong: *“What happened was really painful because my father was suddenly handcuffed, restrained from behind, and we were even the ones who had to apologize. It felt like the situation was made worse instead of being resolved.”*

Emotional Distress and Insecurity

Following the incarceration of a parent, children experienced persistent emotional distress marked by sadness, fear, and insecurity. Participants expressed deep emotional pain resulting from the sudden absence of a parent, especially when that parent served as the primary source of emotional and financial support.

P2/Jeb: *“It is painful because it feels like you no longer have any support in your life. He was the only one providing for us, and now he is already in prison.”*

Conflicted Emotions Toward Parental Incarceration

Some participants expressed conflicting emotions toward their incarcerated parent, particularly when the imprisonment was linked to behaviors such as substance

abuse. Feelings of love and concern were often intertwined with disappointment, anger, and resentment.

P3/John John: "It is really painful that my father was arrested. I do not want him to be in prison because of his vices."

Emotional and Economic Vulnerability

The incarceration of a parent also exposed children to heightened emotional and economic vulnerability. Participants described the loss of a parent as the loss of a family provider, leading to financial hardship and emotional insecurity.

P4/Balong: "We lost the head of our family. We became even more burdened and were truly lacking financially."

Emotional Loss and Longing

A strong sense of emotional loss and longing for the incarcerated parent was evident in the participants' narratives. Children expressed sadness over the absence of everyday parental presence, particularly during intimate moments like sleep routines and family bonding.

P1/Yong: "It feels really heavy not having my father with me every night. We used to sleep beside each other."

Sustained Emotional Struggle

Beyond the initial shock, participants revealed that emotional pain persisted over time, manifesting as continuous emotional struggle and psychological exhaustion.

P2/Jeb Jeb: "Life is painful and difficult because he was the only one helping us, and now there is no one else."

Emotional Weight of Sudden Responsibility

Several participants reported bearing the emotional weight of sudden responsibility after their parents' incarceration. Children were compelled to assume adult roles, including caregiving and financial contribution, leading to emotional fatigue.

P5/Bogrong: "It is exhausting because their responsibilities have become my responsibilities as well."

Table 2. Forms Of Resilience and Strength Emerge in Children as They Navigate Life with an Incarcerated Parent

Table 2 shows forms of resilience and strength that emerge in children as they navigate life with an incarcerated parent.

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|---|---|
| A. Coping Through Work B. Distraction and Temporary Relief | Adaptive Coping Strategies |
| A. Early Assumption of Responsibility B. Pressure To Provide and Protect C. Loss Of Childhood Freedom | Economic Resilience |
| A. Self-Sacrifice B. Strength Through Giving Up Comfort C. Enduring Pain in Silence | Familial Responsibility as Resilience |
| A. Emotional Support from Family B. Healing Through Connection | Relational Sources of Strength |
| A. Faith-Based Coping B. Turning To Prayer and Spirituality | Spiritual Resilience |
| A. Self-Reliance B. Independence In Problem-Solving C. Accountability and Responsibility | Internal Resilience |
| A. Ignoring Stigma B. Resisting Social Judgment | Psychological Resilience Against Stigma |

Adaptive Coping Strategies

Children employed adaptive coping strategies to manage emotional pain and reduce psychological distress. One of the most common coping mechanisms involves distracting oneself through work or daily activities to avoid constantly thinking about the incarcerated parent.

P1/Yong: “I keep myself busy with work every day so that I do not constantly think about the fact that he is in prison.”

Economic Resilience

Economic resilience emerged as children actively sought ways to contribute to their family’s survival after the incarceration of a parent. Participants described taking on informal work and labor to meet basic needs such as food and daily expenses.

P3/John John: “We look for work anywhere just so we can have food every day.”

Familial Responsibility as Resilience

Participants demonstrated resilience through a strong sense of familial responsibility, particularly toward younger siblings. Many willingly sacrificed personal comfort and childhood experiences to support their family.

P3/John John: "I truly sacrificed and did manual labor so that I could provide food for my younger siblings."

Relational Sources of Strength

Support from family members, particularly grandparents and the incarcerated parent, played a vital role in helping children cope with adversity. Emotional encouragement and guidance provided reassurance and stability.

P1/Yong: "They always advised me to stay strong; that is what my father and grandmother constantly tell me."

Spiritual Resilience

Spirituality emerged as a powerful source of strength for many participants. Turning to prayer and faith provided emotional comfort and hope during times of distress.

P4/Balong: "We simply pray to God because we believe that we can get through this."

Internal Resilience

Some participants emphasized self-reliance as a core source of strength. In the absence of consistent external support, children learned to depend on themselves to survive emotionally and practically.

P1/Yong: "I still rely only on myself."

Psychological Resilience Against Stigma

Participants also demonstrated psychological resilience by resisting the social stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent. Instead of internalizing negative judgments, they chose to ignore gossip and prove their worth through actions.

P3/John John: "We simply ignore the gossip and prove that we are capable."

Table 3. How Do Children Envision Their Future in Light of Their Lived Experiences of Parental Incarceration

Table 3 shows how children envision their future in light of their lived experiences of parental incarceration.

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|--|---|
| A. Perseverance in Education B. Commitment to Learning Despite Challenges | Hope Through Education |
| A. Educational Aspiration B. Hope for Improved Life Opportunities | Future-Oriented Determination |
| A. Desire for Stability | Aspiration For a Better Future |
| A. Giving Back to Family | Redefining Success Through Responsibility |
| A. Desire to Break Negative Cycle B. Empowerment Through Action | Moral Realignment and Future Caution |
| A. Simple Life Aspirations B. Contentment with Modest Goals | Redefined Life Goals |
| A. Hope for Family Reunification B. Longing for Togetherness C. Healing Broken Bonds | Future Hope and Healing |

Hope Through Education

Education emerged as a primary source of hope among the participants. Many viewed schooling as a pathway toward personal growth, stability, and improved life circumstances. Even in moments of doubt and exhaustion, participants expressed a desire to persevere in their studies.

P1/Yong: “I continue with my studies even though it is difficult, because there are only a few years left, and I might be able to graduate.”

Future-Oriented Determination

Participants demonstrated strong future-oriented determination, expressing commitment to continue striving despite emotional and economic challenges. Their narratives revealed perseverance and a refusal to surrender to adversity.

P2/Jeb Jeb: “I want to finish my education and find a job so that I can help my family.”

Aspiration for a Better Future

Participants consistently expressed aspirations for a better future characterized by stability, security, and improved living conditions.

P3/John John: "A good life. To become successful so that I can help my family."

Redefining Success Through Responsibility

Success was often redefined by participants in terms of responsibility, gratitude, and the ability to give back to their family. Rather than material achievements, success was viewed as fulfilling familial obligations and repaying the sacrifices made.

P4/Balong: "To become successful so that I can repay the hardships of my parents."

Moral Realignment and Future Caution

Parental incarceration prompted moral reflection and a desire among participants to avoid repeating their parents' mistakes. Children expressed a strong resolve to choose a different path in life.

P1/Yong: "I will never follow in my father's footsteps."

Redefined Life Goals

Participants also articulated simplified and redefined life goals centered on peace, contentment, and basic stability rather than ambition or status.

P1/Yong: "I want to live a peaceful and simple life, as long as there is food, and the bills are paid."

Future Hope and Healing

Despite past pain, participants expressed hope for healing, reconciliation, and family restoration. The desire for emotional repair and unity remained strong.

P2/Jeb Jeb: "I hope everything will change and that the family will no longer be broken apart."

DISCUSSION

Emotional Journey Associated with the Arrest, Trial, and Incarceration of a Parent

The findings in Table 1 revealed that children experienced intense emotional distress during the arrest, trial, and incarceration of their parents. Participants described feelings of shock, sadness, fear, confusion, and emotional instability caused by the sudden separation from a parent. Witnessing the arrest and experiencing the absence of parental support disrupted their sense of security and emotional attachment. These findings support Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1982), which explains that separation from a primary caregiver negatively affects a child's emotional stability. The findings are also

consistent with Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2017), who emphasized that witnessing parental arrest contributes to emotional trauma and insecurity among children.

The study further revealed that parental incarceration resulted in emotional and economic vulnerability among the participants. Many children experienced loneliness, financial hardship, and uncertainty regarding their future. Several participants also assumed adult responsibilities, such as supporting their siblings and helping provide for the family. These findings align with Wakefield and Wildeman (2018), who explained that parental incarceration increases children's exposure to poverty and emotional strain. Similarly, Rappai (2015) and Ceballo and Absin (2022) found that Filipino children with incarcerated parents commonly experience financial instability, disrupted family relationships, and psychological distress.

Despite these emotional struggles, the findings showed that children continued to endure and adjust to their circumstances. However, the emotional burden remained evident through their feelings of longing, emotional exhaustion, and sustained sadness. Herman's Trauma Theory (1992) explains that prolonged exposure to stressful experiences may lead to chronic emotional strain and psychological hardship. The findings therefore suggest that parental incarceration creates long-term emotional and social challenges that significantly affect children's well-being and development.

Forms of Resilience and Strength that Emerge in Children as They Navigate Life with an Incarcerated Parent

The findings in Table 2 showed that children demonstrated resilience despite the emotional and economic difficulties caused by parental incarceration. Participants employed adaptive coping strategies such as engaging in work, distracting themselves through daily activities, and remaining focused on survival. These coping mechanisms helped them manage emotional pain and continue functioning in their daily lives. This finding supports Wisner (2025), who explained that productive engagement and distraction are adaptive coping mechanisms used to regulate stress during adversity.

The study also revealed that children developed economic resilience and a strong sense of familial responsibility. Many participants willingly worked to help support their family and provide for younger siblings. These experiences fostered maturity, responsibility, and perseverance at a young age. The findings are consistent with Jarjoura et al. (2015), who found that children of incarcerated parents often assume caregiving and financial roles within the family. In the Philippine context, Ceballo and Absin (2022) similarly emphasized that Filipino children affected by parental incarceration develop resilience through sacrifice, family solidarity, and responsibility.

Moreover, the findings highlighted the importance of relational, spiritual, and internal sources of strength. Support from grandparents, family members, and faith in God helped participants cope with emotional struggles and maintain hope. Some participants also demonstrated self-reliance and resilience against stigma by ignoring negative judgments from others. These findings align with Glodove et al. (2024), who

emphasized that resilience among children with incarcerated parents is strengthened through supportive relationships, spirituality, and positive coping strategies.

How Children Envision Their Future in Light of Their Lived Experiences of Parental Incarceration

The findings in Table 3 revealed that children remained hopeful and future-oriented despite their lived experiences of parental incarceration. Education emerged as a major source of hope, with participants viewing schooling as a pathway toward stability, success, and a better future. Many children expressed determination to finish their studies despite emotional and financial difficulties. These findings support Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2020), who emphasized that education provides hope, direction, and emotional stability for children affected by parental incarceration.

The participants also demonstrated strong aspirations for a better life and a desire to support their families in the future. Success was commonly defined in terms of responsibility, family support, and achieving stability rather than material wealth. These findings are consistent with Clancy and Maguire (2017), who explained that children affected by parental incarceration often redefine success based on emotional well-being, stability, and family responsibility. The participants' experiences of hardship shaped their goals and strengthened their determination to improve their lives.

Furthermore, the findings revealed moral reflection and hope for healing among the participants. Many children expressed a strong desire to avoid repeating their parents' mistakes and hoped for family reunification and emotional healing in the future. This finding supports Herman's Trauma Theory (1992), which highlights recovery, resilience, and meaning-making following prolonged emotional distress. Overall, the findings suggest that although parental incarceration creates significant challenges, children continue to demonstrate hope, resilience, and the capacity to envision positive futures for themselves and their families.

Conclusions

Children described their emotional journey associated with the arrest, trial, and incarceration of a parent as painful, traumatic, and emotionally overwhelming. They experienced sadness, fear, loneliness, insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and longing due to the sudden separation from their parents. Parental incarceration also exposed them to financial hardship, disrupted family relationships, and premature responsibilities that affected their emotional well-being and daily lives.

Children demonstrated different forms of resilience and strength while navigating life with an incarcerated parent. They coped with their situation through work, self-reliance, family support, spirituality, and perseverance. Participants showed maturity and responsibility by helping provide for their families and caring for their siblings despite their young age. Support from relatives, faith in God, and positive coping strategies helped them endure emotional struggles and resist social stigma.

Children envisioned their future with hope, determination, and optimism despite their lived experiences of parental incarceration. Education was viewed as an important pathway toward achieving stability and improving their lives. Participants aspired to become successful, support their families, and avoid repeating the mistakes of their incarcerated parents. They also hoped for emotional healing, family reunification, and a peaceful and stable future.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are presented:

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and other concerned agencies may develop child-centered and trauma-informed intervention programs for children with incarcerated parents. Counseling services, psychosocial support, family assistance programs, and community-based activities may help address the emotional, social, and financial difficulties experienced by these children.

Schools, teachers, and guidance counselors may strengthen emotional and academic support for children affected by parental incarceration. Schools may establish safe and inclusive environments through counseling programs, mentoring activities, and stigma-awareness initiatives to help children maintain their well-being, self-esteem, and motivation in education.

Families and caregivers may continue providing emotional support, guidance, and encouragement to children with incarcerated parents. Strengthening family relationships and maintaining open communication may help children cope more effectively with emotional stress and feelings of abandonment.

Community organizations and faith-based groups may organize support programs, seminars, and outreach activities that promote emotional healing, resilience, and social acceptance among children affected by parental incarceration. Community support may reduce stigma and help children feel valued and understood.

Future researchers may conduct similar studies using a larger number of participants and wider research settings to gain a broader understanding of the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. Future studies may also utilize quantitative or mixed-method approaches to further examine the emotional, social, educational, and psychological effects of parental incarceration. Additionally, researchers may explore the perspectives of caregivers, teachers, social workers, and incarcerated parents to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The researchers strictly observed ethical principles throughout the conduct of this study to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants. Prior to data

gathering, informed consent was secured from the participants, and the purpose, procedures, and nature of the study were clearly explained to them. Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all collected data in accordance with data privacy and ethical research standards.

The researchers ensured that the study did not expose the participants to any form of psychological, emotional, or social harm. Sensitivity, respect, and empathy were practiced throughout the interviews, particularly because the study involved children navigating life with incarcerated parents. The researchers also affirmed that no conflict of interest existed during the conduct of the study. All sources and references used in the research were properly acknowledged, and plagiarism was strictly avoided. The interpretation and presentation of the findings were carried out honestly, objectively, and without bias.

Furthermore, the findings of the study were utilized solely for academic and research purposes. The researchers also disclose that Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools were used to assist in the writing and editing process, particularly ChatGPT for grammar refinement and sentence restructuring, and Grammarly for grammar and plagiarism checking. However, all concepts, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented in the study remain the sole responsibility of the researchers.

Acknowledgement

The researcher is very grateful to GOD ALMIGHTY for the blessing of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. With HIM, nothing is impossible.

Immeasurable appreciation and deepest gratitude are extended to all individuals who, in one way or another, have contributed to the completion of this study.

To the research adviser, Sir Romeo Jose V. Japsay, LPT, for the unwavering support, valuable advice, guidance, comments, suggestions, supervision, and encouragement that greatly contributed to the success of this research. The researcher is sincerely thankful for having such a dedicated and supportive adviser who continuously offered help throughout the development of this manuscript.

To the research instructor, Sir Rondick O. Piodos, LPT, for the knowledge, guidance, and encouragement shared throughout the conduct of this study. The researcher deeply appreciates the valuable insights and learning experiences that contributed to the completion of this research.

To Sir Rene Gade V. Gumban, LPT, for the continuous support, assistance, and willingness to answer queries throughout the development of this paper. The researcher sincerely appreciates the guidance, helpful suggestions, and encouragement generously shared, which greatly contributed to the improvement and completion of this study.

To the panel of examiners, Ma'am Jayhaira C. Etod, RSW, Ma'am Althea C. Calunsag, LPT, and Sir Jomer D. Navarez, RSW, MPA, for their insightful suggestions and constructive feedback, which helped refine and finalize this study.

To the participants for generously sharing their time, insights, and experiences during the interview, and for their valuable contributions to the data-gathering process of this research.

To the researchers' family, friends, classmates, and loved ones, for their moral support, patience, understanding, and constant encouragement throughout the entire journey.

Above all, to everyone who became a part of this endeavor, your contributions, no matter how big or small, are deeply appreciated.

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APA Citation:

Reginio, C. J. E., Castro, J. R. C., Gumban, R. G. V., Japsay, R. J. V., & Piodos, R. O. (2026). SHADOWS OF SEPARATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN NAVIGATING LIFE WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS. *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(5), 2664–2680. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20466544>

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