

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.