

Why adult incarceration 'sucks' for kids

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The effects of incarceration on kids? Grant writers talk of things like "intergenerational patterns of criminal behavior."

But in short — according to one 15-year-old county teen — it "sucks."

It means taking off your shoes to go through metal detectors to see your dad, and sitting in a room with other inmates, said the teen, who spoke to the Sentinel on the condition he remain anonymous.

It means "kickin' with your dad, you know father-and-son," and getting reacquainted only to see him return to prison.

It means seeing him the last time a couple years ago, at an aunt's house, and having him lavish stuff on you to make up for everything.

It means, when he is out, that when he sees his son "all creased up" to go out at night he just turns his head away when the son admits he is going to party with his "homies."

"He don't tell me anything," the youth said. "He can't. He still does that."

The teen admits to smoking pot and drinking beer and says he doesn't really intend to stop, despite what Pajaro Valley Prevention Counselors, his mom and others say to him. He says he is against drugs like methamphetamine, and that pot and beer don't hurt him.

He says he has been in and out of Juvenile Hall, hangs out with gang members and would not want to have a son of his own heading down the same path.

As for his future, he says he tries not to think too far ahead.

"I got a lot on my mind," he said. "I just go day to day and deal with it."

"...I still love him, but this is why, when he gets out, it's like, 'hey dad, what's up?' I try not to think about it. It's just 'whatever' to me."

He chuckles a little in an attempt to put an adult twist to a dad who has disappointed him so often.

"He never learned his lesson," he says.

Officials say the effects on children of incarcerated parents ranges from shame to an increased risk of abuse and neglect to a substantially increased tendency to lead lives of crime themselves.

Obvious, perhaps, but for those who get to know those teens, criminally painful.

Scott MacDonald, of the county Probation Department, recalls one "heavily tattooed" teen in a drug program who was "trying to make it" yet having a hard time not becoming like his imprisoned father.

The boy was torn because he "honored and loved his dad so much," MacDonald said, that he felt it would be some kind of betrayal if he didn't follow in his footsteps.

"He needed his dad to say it was OK to have a good life," he said. "Because having a good life would be going on a whole different path.

"And he got it. He got that OK. It came down to having a social worker there who could coordinate a meeting with his dad, who could help make that connection."