



The hidden victims: children of incarcerated parents under drug laws in Croatia and Serbia

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Abstract: In Croatia and Serbia, drug-related incarceration silently punishes thousands of children alongside their imprisoned parents. It is worth highlighting how parental imprisonment shapes children's mental health, economic stability, and social inclusion, comparing policy responses across both countries.

When a parent goes to prison because of drugs, the court sentences one person, but in reality, a whole family is punished. In Croatia and Serbia, children learn to explain sudden absences with half-truths and carefully chosen silences. Between overcrowded Croatian prisons where [cocaine still circulates](#) and Serbian confinement institutions where drug addiction is widespread but children remain unaccounted for, thousands of boys and girls grow up carrying a double burden: a parent behind bars, and a story they are never quite sure is safe to tell.

In Croatia, [criminal law](#) focuses on trafficking and serious forms of drug abuse, while possession for personal use is mostly treated as a misdemeanour rather than a crime, as [legal analyses of Croatian drug legislation](#) confirm. People caught with unauthorised drugs for personal use can [receive prison sentences](#) ranging from 3 months to 5 years;

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those who produce or sell drugs face 5 to 15 years. [Reports](#) show that in 2022 Croatian prisons held 6.9 percent more prisoners than the previous year while guard numbers fell, and drug markets continued operating behind bars. Behind these figures there are many parents: estimates suggest around [one third](#) of all prisoners are parents to minor children, meaning roughly [12,000–13,000 children](#) each year have a parent behind bars. Every drug-related sentence can instantly turn a child into 'the child of a criminal', with emotional and social consequences that Croatian research has only recently begun to document.

In Serbia, drug-related offences make up a significant share of both recorded crime and the prison population. It is [estimated](#) that two-thirds of prisoners regularly abuse narcotics, and around 95 percent of convicts with a history of drug abuse return to using them after release. People who use drugs are still commonly labelled '*narkoman/ka*' in everyday language, a term that reduces a person to their addiction and carry strong moral judgement. Children then carry a double burden: the pain of separation and the stigma of being associated with '*narkomanija*'. In 2015, Serbia adopted the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the [Nelson Mandela Rules](#)), which do require prisons to record information about prisoners' children and ensure that any decision about a child staying with a parent is based on the child's best interests. In practice, however, the implementation of these rules [remains incomplete](#).

How imprisonment shapes children's mental health

Data for Croatia show how fragile contact can be. In one year, children made almost [9,000 visits](#) to imprisoned parents, yet only just over half of those parents received even a single visit. [Studies](#) and [NGO reports](#) describe how affected children often hide the truth at school and in their neighbourhoods, afraid of gossip and judgement. Some withdraw socially, others become irritable or aggressive, and many struggle to concentrate or keep up with schoolwork. When the sentence is connected to drugs, the burden is compounded: before imprisonment many of these children already lived with addiction, arguments, and financial instability at home. Prison is not the beginning of the problem, but a breaking point in a story that has long been stressful.

In Serbia, there are no official statistics on how many children currently have a parent in prison, and children of prisoners are not recognised as a separate, vulnerable group in social-welfare law. Research summarising [international findings](#) shows that many children experience parental imprisonment as traumatic, with emotions ranging from fear and anger to loneliness and guilt. Boys are more likely to externalise through aggression or rule-breaking; girls more often develop anxiety or depressive symptoms that can go unnoticed for years. [Longitudinal studies](#) show that parental imprisonment increases the risk of later mental-health difficulties and conflict with the law, especially when it comes on top of poverty, stigma, and weak social support.

Poverty, school, and being pushed to the margins

When a parent goes to prison in Croatia, families often lose an important source of income. Some move to cheaper housing or return to grandparents; others depend on

[social assistance and informal help](#). For a child this event can mean changing schools, losing friends, and learning to keep quiet about why everything has changed so quickly. Even though children of prisoners are not explicitly categorised as '[children at risk](#)', their exposure to poverty, social exclusion, stigma, and emotional difficulties makes the designation reasonable. Teachers often [do not know](#) that a child has a parent in prison, making it difficult to offer targeted support or understand why grades are dropping. Many children choose silence as a strategy: skipping birthday parties they cannot afford a gift for, avoiding group work to sidestep questions, keeping the parent's situation secret even from close friends.

In Serbia, social risks are equally serious but largely unaccounted for. Because children of imprisoned parents are [not formally defined](#) as a special category, they rarely receive early, proactive support. [Social-work centres](#) typically become involved only when problems have already escalated into neglect, violence, or extreme poverty. Families often cannot afford the cost of travel, phone calls, or parcels, so physical distance quickly becomes emotional distance. Long sentences destabilise families for years: lost income and stigma make post-release employment harder, relationships between partners break down, and children may rotate between relatives, foster families, or institutions, each move increasing the risk of school failure, early drop-out, and social isolation.

Croatia vs Serbia: similar risks, different visibility

In both countries, children of imprisoned parents face high levels of emotional stress, stigma, and insecurity, combined with increased risks of poverty, disrupted schooling, and social marginalisation. Croatia has taken important steps in making these children more visible. Research projects, NGO campaigns, and the work of the [Ombudsperson for Children](#) have pushed for child-friendly visiting spaces, parenting programmes in prisons, and greater attention to family ties in official documents. When institutions recognise that a prisoner is also a parent, every sentence becomes visible as something that touches a child's life as well.

Serbia, meanwhile, has detailed analyses of [prison conditions](#) and legal frameworks but still lacks a clear definition of 'children of prisoners' in its social-protection system. [Experts propose](#) concrete changes, such as obliging prisons to notify child-protection services whenever an imprisoned person has minor children, as well as treating these children as a group that needs assessment and, in many cases, ongoing support. For now, such proposals remain only partially implemented, and most children whose parents are in prison because of drugs remain invisible to the system.

The core problem is the same in both national contexts: policy and practice still focus primarily on the offender and the crime, while the children who live with the consequences stay in the background, serving their own invisible time. The path forward is not a mystery, Serbia and other countries in the region can look to the steps Croatia is already taking and adapt them to their own systems. Until then, drug policy and prison reform will keep talking about offenders and sentences while thousands of children wait for someone to notice them.