



## Parents' Imprisonment and its Effects on their Children

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### ABSTRACT

*This research concerns parents' long-term imprisonment and its effect on their children. As per the 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka, suspects are supposed to have committed an offense. In that sense, they are accepted as innocent people until proven guilty. Thus, the main purpose of this investigation is to identify the situations regarding the children of suspects who are being imprisoned for a long time in Sri Lankan prisons and forward suggestions for minimizing the effects upon them. The research question of the study is, what are the problems faced by the suspects' children during the imprisonment of their parents? Using the Quota sampling method, 178 residents of Welikada Prison who were imprisoned for more than one year were selected from the Colombo District as the sample. Fifty-four (imprisonment) prison inmates' families of 30 male detainees and 24 female detainees were selected for this study. Mix data analysis including qualitative and quantitative has been used for the data analysis. The research indicates that the detainees' children are faced with several issues such as a lack of educational needs, and absence of safety, and further they undergo various mental disorders during the entire period. As suggestions, external factors can be encouraged at the institutional level to maintain a strong relationship between the suspect and their family members, especially with the children. Strengthening communication between them would ensure a good relationship. Also, the government authorities should implement special aid programs for such families to cater to their financial, educational, and social needs and provide vocational training for their children.*

## **1. Introduction**

Parents' imprisonment and the associated problems have been discussed by various researchers (Cunningham, 2001; Gabel and Johnston, 1995; Reed and Reed, 1997; Tudball, 2000). Hounslow et al. (1982) described the problematic situation that arises when parents are imprisoned: child punishment is often the other side of the coin to parental imprisonment. This is one of those shadowy corners of the criminal justice system seldom spotlighted. In our society, prisoners are marginalized; their spouses and adult friends are isolated and hidden; while their children – to all intents and purposes – are invisible (Cunningham, 2001; Hounslow, et al., 1982). Dennison et al. (2013), have identified the impact of long-term imprisonment of Indigenous Australian fathers. They pointed out that “It was evident that for some men, imprisonment placed a significant barrier between them and their children while for other men, their relationships with their children were sporadic prior to imprisonment and therefore their absence in the lives of their children may have been less pronounced (p,52). Wakefield and Wildeman (2011), comment on the imprisonment of parents and the related negative effects. Other studies suggest that parents' imprisonment causes their children to face long-term problems (Foster and Hagan, 2007). It is identified how to face or referrals on the various aberrations associated with these issues (Murray and Farrington, 2005; 2008). What is further recognizable here is the fact that in some ways the imprisonment of parents, especially fathers, has a positive effect on children (Giordano, 2010; Wildeman, 2010).

Daniel and Barret (1981) further reported that individuals and their families were primarily facing economic crises due to individuals' long imprisonment. It is clear from the study of the theories presented that, even the sources of income for the basic needs of the family are blocked when the head of the family or income provider is

absent. This study focuses on children's basic needs (Hairston, 2001). It is not uncommon for children to suffer financial hardships in the families of the persons imprisoned. There will be economic problems when the parents' role in nurturing their children is absent. This is a major problem, especially in economically disadvantaged families (Murray, 2005). Research has also focused on how children in those families continue to suffer as a result of such economic hardships (LaVigne et al., 2005). Economic hardships lead to the loss of daily necessities and other economic problems such as homelessness, the unbearable debt burden, etc., (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1997; Healey et al., 2000, Commission for Children and Young People and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, 2001). In addition, it has been identified that the financial vulnerability of visiting incarcerated prisoners has a severe impact (Phillips et al., 2006; Rosenberg, 2009; Light and Campbell, 2007). Economic hardship is sometimes a reason to break social ties, and also imprisoning individuals is a reason to intensify such activities. It is also pointed out that conflicts between siblings could also be caused by such economic difficulties (Phillips & Bloom, 1998). In many cases, imprisonment is a common occurrence among low-income families. In such situations, it is pointed out that imprisonment by the sole breadwinner is a major obstacle to meeting the basic needs of the family. This varies according to the basic needs of different social strata. As stated by Healey et al. (2005), impairment of housing and vehicle maintenance is a result of the imprisonment of those who own economic means in their homes. Schneller (1976) of the University of California, Alabama has paid particular attention in his study to the economic grip these families face due to poverty as well as social problems. A person can be identified as having symptoms of stress being away from the daily life he is accustomed to and, experiencing that his children and wife are in traumatic situations.

It is clear that the people mentioned above bear a resemblance to the theories put forward by Daniel, Barret, and Ariston. On the other hand, due to economic difficulties, the children of these families as well as their wives were found to be involved in various deviant practices (National Prisoners' Families Helpline website for England and Wales, 2018).

It can be identified as a point currently under-emphasis in the world of research, the inmate's long-term imprisonment has led to his/her emotional problems with his family members. This condition has a profound effect on a person's personality. Various studies have been conducted by different scholars to confirm the problematic situations caused by lack of mental clarity of the detained persons and their children from an early age. Kampfer presented information on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in children whose mothers have been imprisoned for a long time. This study further explains that young children are more likely to experience these forms of stress when they are not properly cared for by their mothers (Kampfer, 1995). Research further confirms that long-term detention of prisoners is a cause of psychological distress. In the meantime, the study of 347 families of inmates in the 34 prisons by Young Voice in 2001 with individuals between the ages of 7 and 74 is significant. Research has shown that people of different ages including young children, adults, and elders have regrets due to the long-term imprisonment of their close relatives. This study by Young is primarily about the current situation of prisoners. There was a systematic revelation about the children of the detainees that these children are ashamed of the situation they face and as a result, are exposed to abusive behaviors such as drug use. Other guilty feelings of those children in normal life, the study on the social relations associated with the economic crises of the elderly family members in connection were captured (Katz, 2002).

Another study found that imprisoned mothers largely become stressed due to uncertainty of their children's current status and future prospects (Houck & Loper, 2002). A study by McEvoy in 2001 about hundred prisoners and their families in Northern Ireland confirmed the above. That study is considered to be one of the most successful empirical studies. It also analyzed the impact of long-term detention on inmates, their children, and other family members (McEvoy and et al., 2001).

Clarke et al. conducted a study in 2005 using forty-three imprisoned fathers and their children in three prisons in England. In this research, data contributors were examined separately. It has been found that it reveals behavioral and attitudinal variables. The study also found that prisoners as parents have to deal with their children who are subject to psychological restrictions (Clarke et al., 2005).

In many cases, the long-term emotional impact of parental imprisonment on children can lead to behavioral changes as well as, in some cases, mental illness such as depression. Cognitive impairment at school can be a sign of weakness as well as a tendency toward abusive behavior, such as drug use (Johnston, 1995; Arditti et al., 2003; Murray and Farrington, 2005). Numerous research studies have shown three types of such health problems in children. Accordingly, physical, emotional, and mental health are important (Murray et al., 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008). This health hazard has been identified in a variety of ways, and emotional impairments have been identified as follows; "These health problems may change over time, with emotional upset, attachment, and physical problems when the child is young; anger, violence, and bed-wetting during middle childhood; and a range of at-risk behaviors involving drugs, sexualized behavior and acting out once the child reaches adolescence" (Johnston, 1995; Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Cunningham, 2001; Light and Campbell,

2010; Murray et al., 2009). The mental disorders such children face are manifested in several ways such as loss, abandonment, grief, rejection, guilt, shame, anxiety, disappointment, betrayal, suicide, anger, and attachment/bonding problems (Richards, 1992; Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1997; Healey et al., 2000; Stanley, & Byrne 2000). Social stigma and segregation are other major problems faced by children in such families. It will be a major factor in creating an emotional impact (Young & Smith, 2000).

Imprisonment of parents causes emotional distress in children and also contributes to their behavioral changes. Studies have shown that such specific behavioral changes affect the wellbeing of children. Among such behavioral differences are: self-harm, dysfunctional eating, disruptiveness in the classroom, attention-seeking, learning problems, and delinquency (Howard, 1996). Parallel to these problems, use of drugs or alcohol, truancy, running away from home, disciplinary problems, bedwetting, poor school performance, excessive crying, nightmares, problems in making relationships with others, depression, apathy, suicide and attention problems also can be seen (Stanley & Byrne, 2000). In 2001, Senanayaka, Wanigasinghe and Wickramasinghe have done a study about the children of imprisoned mothers. According to their study, most of the children have suffered from less contact with their mother, and have suffered from several kinds of health issues such as scabies (23%), pediculosis (10%), and impetigo and malnutrition (7%).

Based on the literature review, it appears that many research studies have been conducted on parental incarceration and its impact. But in Sri Lanka, there is one research that has been done only to identify the conditions of nutrition and growth of such children of imprisoned parents. Consequently, this study leads to new insights in this area. Thus, the research question is, what are the obstacles faced by the children of long-term

imprisonment prisoners during their imprisonment? Accordingly, the main objective of this study was to identify the obstacles of the children of prisoners and make suggestions to minimize such circumstances.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study is mainly aimed at children of imprisoned persons as suspects. In 2018, there were 486 male suspects and 1874 female suspects in Welikada Prison. Its total is 2,360, making it a relatively larger number of female and male suspects than any other imprisonment or closed prison. Therefore, the Welikada Prison in the Colombo District was used as the study area for this study. Accordingly, a multistage sampling, Quota sampling was utilized during the selection of this sample. One hundred and seventy-eight (178) Welikada Prison residents who were imprisoned for more than one year were selected from the Colombo District. The sample has been chosen from 30 % of the total population. Accordingly, Fifty-four imprisonment inmates' families (30 male detainees and 24 female detainees) were selected as the sample. Data were obtained through interviews and questionnaires and Mix methods including qualitative, and quantitative were used for the data analysis.

Sample calculation -

$$n = N \times 30 / 100$$

$$n = 178 \times 30 / 100 = 54 \text{ (Families)}$$

$$54 \text{ families} = 30 \text{ male} + 24 \text{ Female}$$

$$\text{Total Children} = 134 \text{ from 54 families}$$

*\*Description- n = Sample, N = Population*

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Basic Information

According to this study, the age levels of the children of all detainees are spread over a wide range. These children are from a total of 54 families, and almost every family has more than one child. Of these children, 102 are girls

and the remaining 32 are boys. Most of them are between the ages of 5-9. The following details were identified about the guardians and custody of the children. The responders (main guardians or caregivers of the

children) have come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Most of them were mothers or fathers. Table 1 presents more details about the guardianship of the children.

**Table 1.** Guardianship of Children

<b>Guardian of the child/children</b>	<b>Male Detainees' children</b>	<b>Female Detainees' children</b>	<b>Total Number of Children</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Care of mother	45	-	45	33.5%
Care of father	-	41	41	30.5%
Care of grandmother/father	12	04	16	11.95
Care of other relatives	7	5	12	8.9%
Live separately	8	4	12	8.9%
Another place	3	5	8	5.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources -Field research- 2018 - 2019

According to the Table-01, the children of the imprisoned suspects are currently in the custody of someone. Accordingly, 45 children have been in the mother’s custody, during father’s imprisonment. There are 41 children in the father’s custody when the mother is incarcerated. This category especially includes underage children of young age. There are also 16 children in the care of their grandparents. The fathers of the two families had died. There were also five children in the custody of the grandmother or grandfather while the mother was abroad and the father was in prison. Other 09 children include those who prefer to live with their grandparents even if their mother or father is at home, and those who do not live with their parents due to various economic hardships.

There are 12 children living with another relative. Also, there are separated children among the 12, and 10 of them are married. The other two were boys and their living locations were not specified. In the category of life in another place, what should be noted here is the fact that *living elsewhere*. This means 3 girls live in an orphanage. Also, three

boys are in a rehabilitation center under the Department of Probation and Child Care. The salient factor is that two of them have been incarcerated. Apart from that, there are children who live in relatives' houses. As for the reasons for their living in orphanages, it was revealed that no one was willing to be the guardians of these girls.

It was noted that no was willing to accept children, especially because the father has been incarcerated and the mother has gone astray. Further, it was noted that children who were rehabilitated on probation were especially convicted of theft and other minor offenses. It was disclosed that the prisoners have been incarcerated on drug charges. A closer look at this situation exposed how the subcultural living environment has caused their living conditions to decline. On the other hand, the early departure of these children from school should be considered a special case. Children, in particular, should be in the care of their mother or father, or of a trusted relative. However, when we scrutinized the children of these families, a scattered pattern was seen. The main reason for this is the

broken family background that has arisen from the imprisonment of the mother or/and father of these children.

In this study, the children of female detainees were particularly affected by the fact that girls became insecure when their mothers were not at home. Research has revealed that it is somewhat necessary to take care of elderly female, even though the father is at home. Girls, though often spend the day alone at home, at night they used to go to relatives' houses in the neighborhood to sleep.

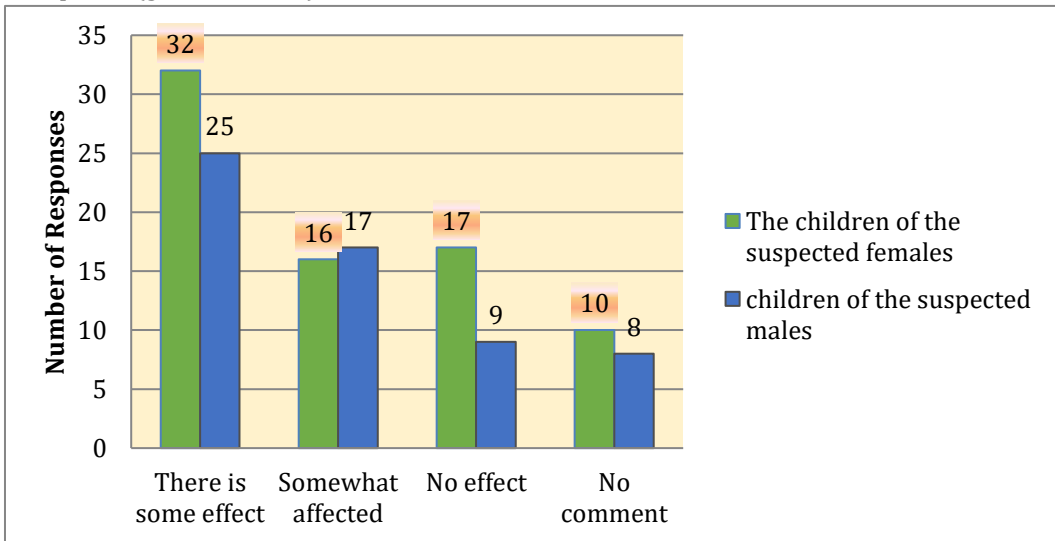
*"We do not leave her at home alone, Miss. The people in the vicinity are not that good. So, she comes to our place to sleep." A sister of the suspected woman is caring for the suspect woman's daughter (Hanwella, 28.10.2018)*

During the investigation, other families were also found in the custody of the mothers of the suspects (grandmothers). There were

also instances where fathers took care of their children while their mothers were in prison. However, it was understood that they accepted looking after children as a burden or a heavy task.

*"My eldest son went to school until he was 10 years old. My daughter still goes to school but it's very difficult to send her to school but I do it somehow. I cannot fill the loss of her mother to my daughter. She's grown up now." ( A husband of a suspected wife, Borella, T20 Watta, 23.8.2018).*

As shown in Table 1 above, discrepancies are identified when girls are in the care of other households and other persons besides their parents. The information obtained from the girls revealed the points connected to their safety. The graph below shows how boys and girls generally become insecure as a result of parental imprisonment.



**Figure 1.** Safety of the children

This chart shows fifty-seven children who are affected by insecurity. This includes young as well as adolescent or in childhood girls. It is a known fact that these children are neither in the care of a trusted relative nor in the care of

their mother or father. There were also 33 children who claimed to have some external influence. There were 26 children who were not affected at all, and 18 of them did not respond clearly in this regard.

**Table 2.** Education Level of Detainees' Children

Level of Education	Male Suspect's Children	Female Suspect's Children	Total	Percentage
Schooling age: But not schooling or never schooled	17	12	29	21.6%
Pre School	09	06	15	11.2%
Grade 1 - 5	15	15	30	22.3%
Grade 6 - 10	8	12	20	14.9%
Up to O/L	11	7	18	13.4%
Up to A/L	6	3	9	6.7%
Higher Education	4	1	5	3.7%
Vocational Training	5	3	8	5.95
Total	75	59	134	100%

Sources Based on field research- 2018

### 3.2. Education as Basic Rights of The Children

The educational needs are main rights of the children. Following table indicates the education level of the detainees' children.

Table number 2 shows the level of education that children of different ages have received and are currently receiving. Twenty-nine people have dropped out of school so far. Of these, 17 were girls and the remaining 12 were boys. Children aged between 6 - 9 and 10 - 14 years are in groups. The reason for boys not attending schools is that they are employed in different sectors. Some of the school-drop out girls told that they had to do so to take care of their younger siblings and the daily chores at home when their mother was not at home. Among the pre-school children, 9 children of the suspects and 6 children of the suspect women were identified. It was a clear indication that these children were facing various difficulties due to the lack of essential items in their pre-school education. There were several children who had received education from grade 1 to 5. This includes 15 children of the suspects and 15 children of the suspect women. Even though they were old enough to receive an education, even at that age, the

children seemed to drop out of school. It is clear that their family environment also has contributed to this situation in some way. The children who dropped out of school lived in low-income urban areas. They were less interested in educational goals because they lived in a social system that valued money but not education. Out of 20 children, 12 of them in grades 6 to 10 category were girls.

There were several students who had studied up to GCE Ordinary Level and are currently fulfilling those educational qualifications. Most of them are children of the suspects and five children of them are of suspect women. Those who have done education up to GCE Advanced Level were among there. It was noted that there were 02 children of suspected women engaged in vocational training. Accordingly, it is possible to get an idea of the educational status of the children of prisoners: men and women suspects. Another finding was that about 21% of the children of these detainees had dropped out of school. They also say that schooling is not being done properly at that moment. The following are the reasons behind the suspension of these children from schooling: past and present economic difficulties and the tendency of these children to earn money, unclear educational goals, decreased interest

or motivation of both parents, and lack of a family environment for education. One of the major difficulties was economic constraints. In the absence of the head of the family, these children have given up school when their needs could not be properly met. Then it was clear that they had left education and pursued various jobs. Meanwhile, it was reported that ten girls aged 16, 17, and 18 were working in a garment factory. It was also seen that due to the change in attitudes of the parents and engaging in the present various occupations and employment, these children were not motivated to pursue education. In addition, the obstacles to the education of the twenty-nine who stopped their education could be mentioned as the separation of mother and father. The twelve children of the suspected women were asked why they did not go to school. Their reply was that they had motivation when the mother was at home, but at present, that motivation was not there.

Furthermore, the data identified the impact on education of the children of the families in the sample while the heads of those households were incarcerated. Accordingly, 10.4% of the 14 children dropped out of school due to detention of their parents. It was also identified that the financial difficulties that arose with parents' imprisonment had a major impact on the education of their children. Among these children were those who did not stop going to school but stopped going to extra classes. Its percentage was 12.6%. It is also possible to identify instances where daily schooling did not take place. Here we can see the failure of these children to learn. Also, this feature is a specially observed factor regarding children of suspected women. It is also a fact that there is a lack of enthusiasm for education among these children. Thus, the imprisonment of the parents can be seen to have a negative impact on the education of the children. There are also children who were not disturbed. This is especially seen in the children of suspected women. It is also a fact that there is a lack of enthusiasm for education among these children. It was also seen that the children of

the imprisoned parents were deprived of education. However, there are also children whose education is not hampered by their parents' imprisonment. Thus, 11.6% of the children were able to complete their education without any hindrance. And 11.2 percent of children were among those who had no disruption to their education. The following are the findings of the inquiry into the reasons for the above.

First, the person who acted as the head of the family was a person who did not help the children's education. Also, a prisoner becomes addicted to alcohol or drugs and spends money on them.

*"Even though father stays at home, he drinks. If goes to work, he drinks. However, he does not bring anything home when comes back. But he takes anything from home. We are not paid to buy even a book. It does not matter if our father is in the prison or at home."  
(Muslim Suspect's child aged 19 years. Wellampitiya area).*

It was also possible to identify how children who were in the care of their mother or father were left out of education. The negative attitudes of those parents towards education have greatly contributed to this.

*"These kids do not learn though they would have been sent to school. And we don't have the money to do that. Even though educated people do not get jobs. So why should they go to school Miss? We did the same, we earned money when we could earn as much as we did. Our children do the same."*

*A wife of a suspect. Mount Lavinia, Badovita, 25th Aug 2018.*

It is clear from the above statement that these people have not given any support to the education of their children.



However, 11.6% of children are still doing the same thing in a positive way without any impact on education.

This situation is a special feature that can be identified not only in the families of the suspects but also in several families of the suspected women.

### 3.3. Psychological Effects Connected to Children

This study also concerns the mental or emotional well-being of the children of imprisoned parents. Accordingly, the present caretakers of the children were consulted in this regard. The results are as follows:

**Table 3.** Mental State of the Children

Changes in Children	Children of Male Suspects	Children of Female suspects	Total	Percentage
Anxiety	06	14	20	14.9%
Mischievous behaviour *	12	07	19	14.18%
Disgust	08	16	24	17.91%
Temper tantrums	23	11	34	25.37%
Changes in behavioural patterns	6	5	11	8.21%
No Changes	12	14	26	19.40%
Total	75	59	134	100%

\* **Mischievous behavior – Slightly bad behavior with less harm** (Source: Extracted from field research 2018– 2019)

As shown in Table No. 3, prison inmates’ children undergo various mental disorders during the entire period. The children of suspected women exhibit lonely feelings more than the children of male suspects. One of the reasons for this is the absence of the mother at home to show love and affection for the children in the family. Also, in this situation, the six children of the category did not have both mother and father at home. It was clear that two of their mothers had gone abroad. Fourteen more children of the suspected mothers showed this anxiety due to the absence of mothers. The children of twelve male suspects and seven women suspects appeared to have revealed such stubbornness. It was clear that they were acting the way they desired. Also, their environment seemed to have a strong influence on these behavioral patterns. Another point observed through interviews with them was that they exhibited impulsive traits. Failure to socialize properly with

parents is a major reason for this. There were also various changes in the patterns of behavior that prevailed in normal life of girls. During their behavioral change, they express shyness, reluctance to meet society, etc. It is totally different from the mischievous behavior which has a slightly bad behavior. There were also cases of significant mental confusion or unexplained changes in normal life noted among these children. Such cases were most common among the children of male suspects. Especially, the absence of a father in their lives was not able to make such an impact on them. Similarly, this behavior was observed among the children of female prisoners too. The reason for this was their mothers were away from these children or mothers’ ignorant attitudes towards children.

### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

A number of issues have been uncovered through the studies on the children of long-

term incarcerated suspects. It was found that the education of these children was in a very poor state. Many of the boys who dropped out of school at the beginning were engaged in menial jobs for a living. This situation was seen as something inherited from the society in which they lived. These conditions were more common in boys. Furthermore, symptoms such as lack of cleanliness were manifested in young children. It should be made clear that this is due to the family environment in which they have socialized since childhood.

Most of the girls showed a tendency to get married as soon as they reached adolescence. This situation also manifests itself as an unintended consequence of this socio-economic environment itself. This was especially the case in this social structure where parents and children were less educated and did not have the strong parental care of their children. These girls were also noticed with early pregnancy. The girls are at risk of facing various security issues especially due to the absence of the mother at home. This situation is aggravated by the departure of the mother to foreign jobs, while the father is in imprisonment custody or vice versa. Further, this is worse in the absence of elderly women who can take care of these girls' security while the mother is in imprisonment custody.

Based on the conclusions that can be drawn from this study, several suggestions can be forwarded. External factors can be encouraged at the prison at institutional level to maintain a strong relationship between the suspect and his family members. It is recommended to have a secluded space in the prison for the suspects and relatives to meet, and also to strengthen the physical facilities and services for communication between them. Rehabilitating the children of the families of the suspects who are incarcerated for a long period of time according to their educational and vocational training needs can also strengthen the future of those children. This can be a boon for their development as

well as for the country. After the imprisonment of the mother or father, such welfare programs should be implemented through the Department of Rehabilitation for the economic, social and educational development of the children. Suspects and Convicted prisoners should be detained separately. Also, suspects, as well as convicts, should be introduced to a vocational, educational, developmental and regenerative methodology.

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