

THE BARS BETWEEN US

REALITIES OF GROWING UP WITH INCARCERATION



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INTRODUCTION

The traumas of incarceration extend far beyond the reach of our prisons and jails. Families and children feel the impact of incarceration on their lives in a multitude of significant ways.

For the loved ones of Justice-Involved individuals, *especially their children*, the experience of incarceration is a unique and variable trial that manifests itself in a multitude of ways. Connections are lost and oftentimes it feels as if the entire structure of their lives has changed. These impacts manifest financially, physically and emotionally for those loved ones who remain at home. (1, 2, 5, 9, 11, 16)

Incarceration irrevocably changes family dynamics and familial interactions within their communities. It also creates unstable environments for children which leave lasting impacts on their physical and emotional health, social behavior, and development. Even after the incarceration period ends, these impacts continue once loved ones return home due to the adjustment obstacles and how difficult it is to get back to assuming the roles they once held. (1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 16)

This publication aims to not only examine the existing literature, research, and evidence behind the impacts of incarceration on the families and children, but also to examine interviews with individuals who have been directly impacted by growing up with incarceration to lend a voice to the oftentimes overshadowed consequences of mass incarceration beyond the prison walls. We will also take time to acknowledge work that is already being done to put the needs of families and children of incarcerated parents first, and what policies and practices still need reform.



Through this publication, you will learn:

- How the impacts of incarceration branch beyond the bars of prison and jail and into the lives of families and children
- How the incarceration of a parent/caregiver can cause lasting impacts on their children
- The disparate impacts systems of incarceration have on children and families of color
- The work that is currently being done to address impacts of incarceration on children and families
- The work that still remains to properly support children and families both during and after incarceration

IT'S ALWAYS MORE THAN 1 LIFE



What happens to children when their parent(s) go to prison? Where does an individual's incarceration leave the rest of the family? Often the answer to that is scrambling and picking up pieces of life that now feel shattered.

Impacts on Children

When a child's family member or caregiver is incarcerated, it impacts them in a multitude of ways, including: emotional, physical, and psychological strain, social isolation, financial hardship, educational hardship, and risk of carceral involvement. While the number of individuals impacted by the systems of mass incarceration continues to grow, it is also leaving more children and families uprooted from their lives and thrown into often unfamiliar circumstances. (2, 5, 9, 11)

As soon as a child's parent or family member is incarcerated, they are forced to understand and live with not only the absence of that individual from their lives, but also the hidden consequences that can come with justice involvement. Often, children are able to be transferred to the care of another parent or step-parent, but there are usually no supports readily available for the individuals assuming care, leaving both the child and family scrambling to develop a new normal for themselves. If a caregiver from the family is not available, then the child is often placed within foster or institutional care and the likelihood of ever being reconnected with their family or community becomes significantly less. (2, 5, 11, 16)

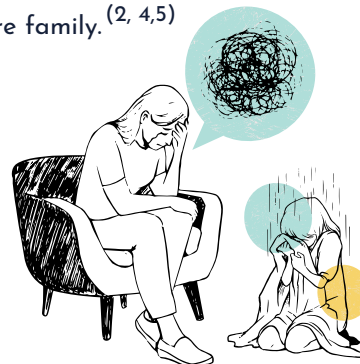
The hidden consequences of this are often seen in the data, as children of incarcerated parents are more likely to become involved with justice system and to be impacted by toxic stress and trauma. It also impacts a child's health and development, as children of incarcerated parents have higher likelihoods of struggling with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and more. They also have higher likelihoods of continued health problems in young adulthood. This illustrates how the impacts of incarceration too often echo into the rest of that child's life, even as they grow up. (1, 5, 9, 11)

Impacts on Families & Caregivers

The incarceration of a parent or family member is not just a one-time event of loss, it is a constant and daily reality that must be faced even once the sentence has ended. This reality becomes harder to face as destabilization from incarceration occurs at emotional, physical, and financial levels for an individual's family. There are also often not strong links between the criminal justice system and schools, health centers, and other community-based supportive programs which makes it harder for the families to find their ways through these difficult circumstances. (2, 5, 11)

Every member of a family is impacted when their loved one is incarcerated, whether that be by housing instability, struggling to meet basic needs, caregiving responsibility, or other financial burdens. Stigma, shame, emotional stress, and isolation often burdens caregivers, children, and other family members of incarcerated individuals. "Disenfranchised grief" is a term that is often used to describe familial incarceration, as the consequences faced emotionally are often unvalidated and misunderstood by others who have not experienced it. (2, 5)

Maintaining communication and connection with their incarcerated family members is often challenging, and even more challenges continue to arise once their family member is reunited with them upon release. The challenges brought about by incarceration do not cease just because a sentence is over, and lasting effects impact the entire family. (2, 4, 5)



DATA

The Impacts by the Numbers

57%

of people in federal prisons are parents of minor children (6)

47%

of people in state prisons are parents of minor children (6)



- 58% of women in state prisons reported being a parent to a minor child (16)
- 46% of men in state prisons reported being a parent to a minor child (16)
- More mothers (52%) reported living with their children at the time of their arrest than fathers (40%)

2.7 MILLION

Children in the US have an incarcerated parent (2)

... That's **1** in every **28** children

But some children are more impacted than others....



1 in 9
African American children have an incarcerated parent (2)



1 in 28
Hispanic children have an incarcerated parent (2)



1 in 57
White children have an incarcerated parent (2)

18,888

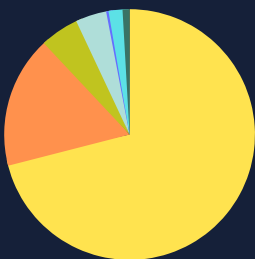
Children in North Carolina have an incarcerated parent (10)

Once a parent is incarcerated...

Who Their Children End Up Living With: (16)

Other Relatives 5%
Foster Care 1.8%

Grandparent 17%



Other Parent/Step-Parent 71%

Children of Incarcerated Parents & Foster Care

- **1 in 8** incarcerated parents with children in foster care lose their parental rights. (7)
- 6% of children entering foster care are placed due to parental incarceration (30,000) (8)
- Once placed in the foster care system, family reunification becomes much less likely. (7)

Adverse Effects on Children & Family:

- Family income can drop by an average of **22%** once a family member is incarcerated; leaving the children and caregivers without proper support. (5)
- A recent survey found that **65%** of families with a member in jail or prison could not meet their basic needs (5)
- Significant statistical associations have been found between parental incarceration and depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, antisocial behavior and anxiety for children. (9)
- Health issues resulting from the stressors of having a parent incarcerated has been proven to follow a child into adulthood. With higher likelihoods of experiencing asthma, migraines, high cholesterol, and HIV/AIDS. (9)
- Children who have incarcerated parents experience **2.7x more ACEs*** than children who did not. (13)
 - Having a parent be incarcerated has been added as an ACE in its own right as well.

*ACEs= Adverse Childhood Experiences Assessment Tool

STORIES FROM IMPACTED INDIVIDUALS



Frankie Roberts, LINC Executive Director, shared his experiences of growing up with an incarcerated brother and having a son incarcerated and how this impacted himself and his family..

- Frankie was only 8 years old when he noticed his brother's substance use habits, and only 12 when his oldest brother was incarcerated and removed from his family unit. His brother was gone for 6 years, and upon return from incarceration things got much worse before they got better.
- "I remember my mother saying "Well you know, they got your brother for armed robbery, so you know he's going to be in prison for a while." Frank said of his conversation with his mother. As a child, Frank interpreted his brother's justice involvement as defining him as a bad person, and began building a wall between himself and the older brother who was now missing from his life.
- Frankie remembers being bullied by other kids for having an incarcerated brother, causing feelings of extreme isolation and kids taunting him asking "where's your brother" and "jailbird".

- When speaking on his brother's substance use both before and after prison, Frank described "It was hellish, I mean it impacted everything", and how it built up resentment in his family as he continued to watch his mother struggle to care for someone who had clearly not gotten the help he actually needed.
- Maintaining connection with both his brother and his son, both at different periods, were difficult for almost the same reason, that being costliness of collect calls and long drives for visitation. When speaking on the costliness of maintaining communication with his son, Frank stated "it was about \$24,000 in order for him to call us over the whole time". This is often not affordable for many families.
- "Honestly I am them and they are me", was Frank's statement when asked if he still recognizes a parallel cycle to the impacts of growing up with an incarcerated older brother to his own son's experience with the same thing. Even decades apart, the stories of these disparate impacts remains the same, implying that real changes to address these impacts are desperately needed.

IN FURTHER INTERVIEWS...

- Interviewees who wish to remain anonymous, also expressed their experience with incarceration. Two sisters, aged 18 and 19, grew up with their Father being incarcerated through various points in their life and is currently incarcerated.
- Both young women felt isolated from their peers. They expressed feeling envious of other kids who got to see both of their parents and didn't understand for a very long time why they could not see their Dad and why he was incarcerated. They both expressed the inability to understand the nuances of incarceration and what factors like trauma and poverty led their Father to continuously making choices that led to incarceration.
- In their joint interview, both young women also expressed feelings of abandonment. At one point, one interviewee expressed: "I didn't understand why I wasn't important enough or why my Dad did not love me enough to be a part of my life".
- The other young lady expressed: "I remember seeing my older sister with her dad and seeing the kids in school with their dads and I felt so incredibly jealous. I became angry at the whole world. I was angry at the police, my sister, my mom, my dad and most importantly myself".

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Family relationships are complex and multifaceted, and this fact is made even more difficult when the familial bond is interrupted by period(s) of incarceration. Reunifying families is an important aspect of addressing the impacts of mass incarceration on children and families. Reunification encompasses health, safety, housing, treatment and mending any fragmentations in the familial relationship. Reunification can be difficult for both the justice-involved person and their loved ones. The trauma of incarceration extends to every person who has known and loved someone who has experienced incarceration.



Stable Housing

Affordable and accessible housing is critical to ensuring families with justice-involved members are able to reunify their families in a stable environment. The lack of housing for justice-involved individuals leads to instability and contributes to continued cycles of recidivism.

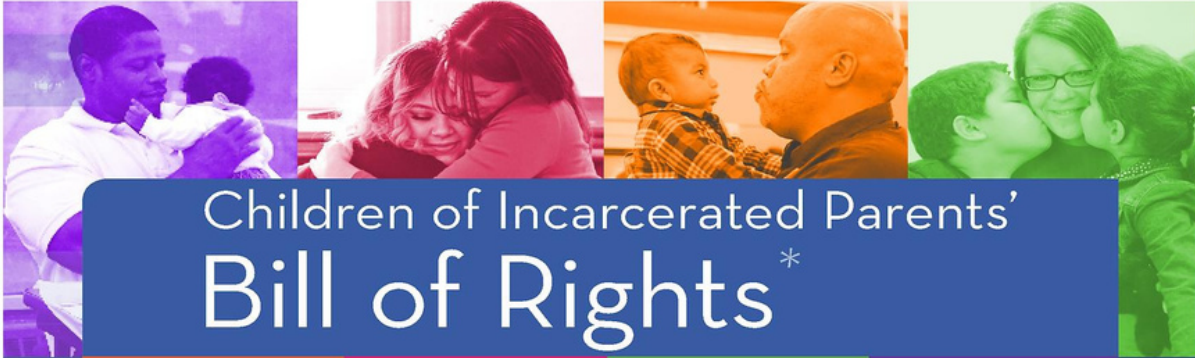
Navigating the Complexity and Supportiveness of families

Family is very complex and comes in many different forms. Incarceration can change family dynamics and interrupt family bonding and relationships. Having a supportive network of family, whether this is biological or chose, goes a long way in ensuring success and creating a healing and supportive environment for justice-involved individuals and their families.

Drug Use and Further Incarceration

Individuals with continued justice-involvement or drug use, are less likely to be actively or significantly involved in the lives of their loved ones. Periods of continued incarceration or drug use undermines the development of healthy relationships and may create unsafe environments that prevent reunification.

The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents created this Bill of Rights as a tool to empower and uplift children of incarcerated parents. This thought provoking Bill of Rights speaks to the impact that incarceration has on the entire family unit and how communities should support children of incarcerated parents. Implementing ideas like this could be beneficial in mitigating the impacts of incarceration.



Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights^{*}

- 1.** I have the right **to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.**
- 2.** I have the right **to be heard when decisions are made about me.**
- 3.** I have the right **to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.**
- 4.** I have the right **to be well cared for in my parent's absence.**
- 5.** I have the right **to speak with, see, and touch my parent.**
- 6.** I have the right **to support as I face my parent's incarceration.**
- 7.** I have the right **not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.**
- 8.** I have the right **to a lifelong relationship with my parent.**

* Developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership in 2005; www.sfcipp.org



New York Initiative for
Children of Incarcerated Parents



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[@OsborneNY](https://twitter.com/OsborneNY)
[/NYCIP](https://facebook.com/NYCIP)

CURRENT EFFORTS

Many organizations and programs are making strides in providing support to children and families of incarcerated family members. The following are just some examples of the work currently being done...



Our Children's Place of Coastal Horizons Center statewide program in NC that serves to:

- Educate communities and professionals about the impacts of parental incarceration
- Identify and promote policies and practices through advocacy that would help to improve the current disparate outcomes that exist for children of incarcerated parents.
- To support and provide space for children and families.

Learn more about Our Children's Place and their great work at: ourchildrensplace.com



See Us, Support Us (SUSU) started as a month-long event to bring recognition to and support children of incarcerated parents, and now serves as a network of national partners and a 24/7 effort to raise awareness about and increase support for these children and families and provide connection and community.

Learn more about, or connect with SUSU at: susu-osborne.org



Sesame Workshop is an initiative started by Sesame Street to provide children and families with resources where there may have been gaps previously. In their "tough topics" resource section they have resources such as workshops, practice conversations specifically designed for children being impacted by incarceration.

Find these resources at: sesameworkshop.org/topics/incarceration



LINC has a mission of educating and motivating youth to make positive life choices and to empower individuals returning from incarceration to be productive members of our communities. Working to bridge the gap between youth, community and reentry, LINC's LITE Manhood serves to provide services to youth who would be considered "at-risk", and if parental incarceration is a factor their parents/families are encouraged to get involved with LINC's reentry services.

Learn more about LINC and our comprehensive programs at: lincnc.org

NEXT STEPS

The work that remains...



Making contact and communication easier

States and prisons should take efforts towards making family contact easier through:

- Expanding family visitation
- Lower costs of, or provide free phone calls
- Make efforts to keep parents close to their families, instead of relocating them far away
- Introducing family-based sentencing and allow for diversion programs as alternatives to long sentences. ^(5,16)



Creating Cohesive Service Networks

- Develop partnerships between child welfare practitioners and law enforcement⁽⁵⁾
- Provide services networks, funding, and resources for both youth and their caregivers (including child support for caregivers) ^(5,16)
- Schools, child welfare agencies, and other community-based centers and organizations should be able to work with each other to provide comprehensive services ⁽⁵⁾



Providing Support to Children and Family Members at Every Step

From arrest to reentry, children and family members should have access to financial, emotional, physical, and social support resources.⁽⁵⁾

- Creating and offering specialized counseling and support groups for children and family members
- Correctional facilities and community organizations should provide parenting courses and counseling to support reunification

CONCLUSION

Having a parent or family member become incarcerated has profound and long lasting impacts on all individuals involved. The data presented and the stories shared within this publication provides a basic understanding of how wide-ranging and long-term those impacts can be on family members, especially children. The efforts to provide support to these families will also need to be wide-ranging and expansive, and while there is excellent work being done, there is still much more that could be done to lessen these disparate impacts.

Summary

Incarceration of any individual not only impacts that individual, but also their families, their children and their communities. Those impacts can range from financial, causing loss of stability or basic needs, to emotional, causing mental health conditions that can follow later in life or feelings of grief and loss, to physical, causing lasting issues with impacted individuals' health. While everyone involved in the family unit is impacted, it is often the children of incarcerated parents or caregivers who experience some of the greatest tolls.

Keeping our Eyes on the Disparities

Not all families and children are impacted to the same degree. Children and families of color are disproportionately impacted, and often face more obstacles and stigma when trying to receive support. We also must recognize the disparate rates at which these children will experience adverse effects on their physical and emotional health. Without acknowledging these disparities, the proper avenues of support and change cannot be made.

Implications of Research

Children of incarcerated parents, while recognized in some spheres of service and data, are still being severely impacted and are still lacking the expansive resources that are needed. Illustrated by the growing rates of children in NC who are impacted by having a parent incarcerated, as well as by the parallels in trauma experienced through generations as seen in Frankie and his son's experiences.

There are powerful frontiers in providing resources and conversations surrounding this, and this publication only begins to cover them. However, at many levels system reform is still desperately needed. This will take policy change and network developments that are as far reaching as the impacts of incarcerations reach into families lives.

Looking Towards the Future

- What can YOU do to provide supportive networks to families?
 - Download, share, and connect with the available resources to create more widespread networks.
 - Vote and advocate for policies that provide more rights and services to families of incarcerated individuals

AUTHOR'S NOTES

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Working on this publication, throughout the research and writing, opened my eyes to just how widespread the impacts of incarceration are. It also gave me a newfound appreciation of the incredibly strong people around me who not only work with individuals returning from incarceration, but also support the families of incarcerated individuals. Reentry work is about more than just one person. It's about rebuilding communities, uplifting impact individuals, recognizing cycles, continuing to address the disparities in our legal system. Through this publication, I hope that those who suffer from the impacts of incarceration or the incarceration of a loved one are given the recognition and support that they need and deserve.

Cooper Mertens

(They/Them/Theirs)

LINC Data & Impact Coordinator



As a researcher, criminologist, and sociologist, I see too often the conversations surrounding incarceration's impact on families and children being overlooked, and therefore so too are the ways we could be providing support to these individuals. It is an important mission to spread awareness surrounding this impacts, as many individuals do not even think about the extending reaches of incarceration until they are faced with it themselves. In the writing of this publication my hope is that we can initiate the important conversations that need to happen and provide insight into how things still need to change to lessen the disparate impacts that are continuously perpetuated by our systems of mass incarceration.

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