



# Impacts of Parental Incarceration

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## **The Far-Reaching Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Children and Families**

Millions of children across the United States experience instability due to parental incarceration, which creates a cascading effect that impairs their growth and development. Once a parent is taken away, the household is not the only thing that shifts, but also the child's world as well. As soon as their only form of parental figure is taken away, they might deal with switching schools they feel foreign to, live with unfamiliar relatives, and take on a severe emotional burden way beyond their years. Parental absence disturbs family relationships, causes financial difficulties, and subjects children to social stigmas that can harm their mental and emotional health. These effects are especially severe in marginalized communities, where systemic inequalities in the criminal justice system disproportionately impact Black and Hispanic families, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disadvantage (Gaston, 2016; Turney and Goodsell, 2018). Without sufficient support, children frequently suffer academically, emotionally, and socially.

This paper examines how parental incarceration leads children into cycles of emotional, financial, and social hardship. These challenges begin once a parent is removed from a home, interfering with a child's sense of safety and stability. Although the lives of children are not individually the same, the dynamic, irregular routines that these children are forced to adapt to are all too familiar and they face a series of difficulties because of parental incarceration. It also explores how institutional injustices intensify these effects, especially in disadvantaged areas, and draws attention to the lack of effective resources for dealing with these problems. By reviewing existing research and real-world examples, the goal is to advocate for educated policies and interventions that minimize harm and increase resilience in impacted families. The purpose is to help readers understand that parental incarceration is a pressing issue that disrupts child development through problems such as financial instability, social stigmas, and broken family dynamics.

### **Disproportionate Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Marginalized Communities**

Parental incarceration is a severe problem that disproportionately affects underrepresented groups. 1 in 14 children in the United States have

experienced parental incarceration, with rates as high as 12% in rural areas and 8% in metropolitan areas (Muentner et al., 2023). These regional differences demonstrate how socioeconomic circumstances, local laws, and unequal access to legal representation all contribute to systemic injustices in the legal system. Children affected by parental incarceration often face a wide range of hardships such as unstable housing, sibling separation, food insecurity, difficulty in school, and struggle with emotional stress and social isolation. Such problems are particularly serious in communities of color, where incarceration rates are significantly higher; for instance, children who are black are 7.5 times more likely than white children to experience parental incarceration, reflecting long standing systemic racism (Gaston, 2016).

Beyond racial inequities, parental incarceration has significant effects on children, especially those from vulnerable and underrepresented areas. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to struggle academically, suffer from anxiety, depression, which feeds the cycle of disadvantage (Gaston, 2016). Such challenges escalate in areas where structural disadvantages including high unemployment, inadequate schooling, restricted access to affordable mental healthcare, and aggressive policing procedures are already prevalent. Structural injustices make these families' struggles worse, especially in underground rural and urban areas where children are forced to navigate through their daily life without stable housing, reliable transportation and safe learning environments. The psychological trauma of losing a parent to incarceration, these systemic barriers make it very difficult for families to heal and for kids to thrive. Designing community-based solutions that can break these harmful cycles and create overall fairness requires an understanding of how all of these issues intersect.

The difficulties that families of incarcerated parents experience are made worse by the existing criminal justice system, which also perpetuates national suffering and structural injustices. Due in large part to policies such as mandatory minimum sentencing and the "war on drugs," which disproportionately concentrate on vulnerable populations, Black children, for instance, are 7.5 times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated father (Gaston, 2016). Despite disrupting families, these policies also produce cycles of instability and poverty. The financial instability brought on by a parent's wage loss worsens the stigma, emotional trauma, and behavioral issues that children are more likely to experience. These discrepancies demonstrate how urgent reform is.

## **Prioritizing Families and Alternatives to Incarceration**

Reducing incarceration rates, according to some, could jeopardize public safety, especially by preventing nonviolent offenders from going to prison. However, research shows that alternatives to incarcerations, like treatment-based interventions, community monitoring, and restorative justice programs, do not raise crime rates and, in many situations, produce better long-term results (Turney & Goodsell, 2018). By addressing the fundamental causes of criminal conduct, such as trauma, addiction, and poverty, such programs that prioritize family reunification and provide support services have been demonstrated to lower recidivism. Reducing incarceration rates can aid in ending cycles of disadvantage and promoting more stable family structures, particularly for individuals who are disproportionately impacted by racial and economic inequality.

The society we currently share would be vastly distinct if these possibilities were given consideration. We could utilize those funds to invest in housing, education, job training, and mental health care rather than the prison industrial complex itself. Families would be allowed to rebuild their lives instead of being split, and children would have absolute access to the help they require to grow up. It is not only just to put families at the core of justice reform, but it is also essential to create communities that are safer and more resolute. It is both equitable and essential to implement justice changes that put families first.

## **Exploring Support Systems for Parental Incarceration**

Understanding how to reduce these damages is crucial since parental incarceration has negative effects on children. Assessing the most effective support networks, such as school-based interventions, trauma-informed counseling or mentorship, can provide solutions to end adversities. Knowing which support systems are most effective can help policymakers develop focused policies that can strengthen family resilience and lower long-term costs to society. Furthermore, the hope to draw attention to the need for family-focused policies is important to remember in order to end the damaging intergenerational cycles of incarceration.

To break this down, it is explored through the Power-Control Theory, developed by Hagan, Gillis and Simpson argues that changes to authority and

family structure have a major impact on a child's conduct and general wellbeing. The theory, first introduced in 1985, examines how power relationships in families influence children and their predisposition to participate in dangerous or criminal activities. The balance of power in the home frequently changes when one parent, usually the father, is imprisoned. The mother is now left to handle both financial and caring duties, with little to no outside assistance. Soon this change leads to less stability, emotional availability, and supervision, which are essential parts of child development according to Power-Control Theory. Without regular parental supervision and structure, children could be more susceptible to emotional distress, behavioral issues, or academic disinterest.

### **Advocating for Family-Focused Policies and Community-Based Solutions**

A shift to family-focused policies and community-based programs must be implemented to address the effects of parental incarceration. One important approach is removing mandatory incarceration for nonviolent acts, which can reduce the number of parents behind bars as well as the pain that separation causes. Reforms like increasing access to parenting classes, counseling services, and kid-friendly visitation areas are crucial for families who are already impacted.

Researchers have also emphasized that: Reducing or eliminating federally mandated incarcerations for lower-level nonviolent crimes could help to reduce the number of incarcerated parents. Policies that place incarcerated parents in facilities closer to their homes and create more child-friendly visitation spaces would decrease some of the geographical and safety barriers to visitation (Mihalec-Adkins & Schlafer, 2022, p.2).

Community-based projects are also essential. Programs that offer financial assistance or opportunities for mentorship reduce the financial and psychological strain on impacted families. Such examples like Project Rebound at San Francisco State University raise how educational opportunities for formerly imprisoned individuals can help restore familial security. Project Rebound provides intellectual, emotional, and financial support to students, of which are parents, who are reconstructing their lives after incarceration. The methodology not only reduces recidivism but also enhances the long-term results for their children by enabling these people to seek further education and find secure employment. Through these factors, it meets one of the main

objectives of family-centered reform, which is to prevent incarceration cycles by providing opportunities and support. Such initiatives give children access to resources, emotional support, and trustworthy relationships, all of which lower their risk of adverse outcomes like school dropout or engagement with the juvenile prison system. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to become incarcerated themselves, but this cycle is broken over time by such care. These actions contribute to the development of a more stable society by tackling underlying issues such as poverty, trauma, and opportunity imbalances. In this sense, a stable society is one in which families stay together, children can excel in educational and social environments, and state investments put welfare ahead of punishment. By funding these measures, policymakers can enhance the welfare of families and children while addressing the fundamental causes of structural inequality.

There are several advantages for society, legislators, and communities when measures are put in place to address parental incarceration. By lowering the expenses associated with sustaining sizable jail populations, incarceration rates for nonviolent crimes can be reduced, saving public funds. The predicted \$28 billion in savings over the next ten years can be used to fund community efforts that support families and enhance the lives of children (Mihalec-Adkins & Shlafer, 2022, p.2). By emphasizing justice and rehabilitation rather than punishment, these reforms promote confidence in public systems.

### **Prioritizing Support Networks to Break Cycles of Disadvantages**

For children and families in our society, parental incarceration poses serious and lasting problems. These issues, which range from systemic inequality to financial instability and emotional trauma, require immediate change. Based on research showing the beneficial effects of interventions like counseling programs and lower punishment for nonviolent offenses, this study indicates that resolving these challenges necessitates a change towards family-centered policies and community-based strategies. These results make it clearly apparent that giving impacted families' support networks top priority can end cycles of disadvantage, improve perseverance, and reduce impact between generations.

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