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## Parenting Prison: How Mass Incarceration of Parents Affects Child Development

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*Intersecting Disciplines***Parenting Prison: How Mass Incarceration of Parents Affects Child Development***Bridget Boland\****I. INTRODUCTION**

Mass incarceration refers to the reality that the United States (“U.S.”) incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world, spending over \$80 billion on incarceration each year. Mass incarceration is a system of policing, prosecution, and incarceration that is rooted in, builds upon, and produces oppression as well as economic and racial inequality. The actors upholding this system include private corporate actors, police officers, prosecutors, judges, legislators, national policymakers, and politicians.

Parents are among those Americans who are at higher risk of being incarcerated in jail or prison. Parental incarceration breaks up families and creates an unstable environment for children that can have long-lasting effects on their development. The arrest and removal of a parent can create emotional, social, and economic consequences for a child that may trigger behavior problems, poor outcomes in school, and a disruption or severance of the relationship with the incarcerated parent. This article will discuss mass incarceration relating to parents, explore developmental effects such incarceration has on children, and propose policies to combat the issues.

**II. MASS INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES****A. *History of Mass Incarceration***

The “start” of mass incarceration is often traced back to the 1970s, when the prison population began to grow exponentially due to harsh political policies. Programs such as President Nixon’s “War on Drugs” which pushed a “tough on crime” approach, resulted in the criminalization and incarceration of far more people than ever before. The prison population truly exploded during President Reagan’s administration, as he continued President Nixon’s tough policies. President Reagan established harsh mandatory minimum sentencing regulations, which resulted in prison populations nearly doubling by the time he left office. This boom burdened the public sector and paved the

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way for private, for-profit prisons in many states and in the federal system. President Clinton's administration perpetuated these policies by passing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The Act, also known as the 1994 Crime Bill, provided incentive grants to build and expand correctional facilities to states that enforced mandatory sentencing. Incarceration under the Act grew both at the federal and state level. States specifically saw a large prison population growth since states house a majority of the nation's prisoners. Local, state, and federal governments spend within the range of \$20,000 to \$50,000 annually to keep people behind bars. There are twice as many people incarcerated in local jails than in the entire federal prison system.

The consequences of these harsh policies hit communities of color hardest, with their members being disproportionately incarcerated. Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly five times the rate of white Americans, with one in 81 Black adults serving time in state prison within the U.S. Historians often describe the "War on Drugs" as a racially motivated plan to criminalize Blacks. The policies often involved over-policing of minority-populated areas, harsher sentences for drugs like crack cocaine, which was prolific primarily in Black communities, and harsh mandatory minimum sentences for crimes often found in communities of color. More specifically, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act established mandatory minimum sentencing regulations, including the 100-to-1 sentencing ratio between crack, a form typically found in Black communities, and powder cocaine, a form typically found in White communities. Expansion of these laws flooded the criminal justice system with people convicted of low-level and nonviolent drug offenses, the majority being Black due to over-policing. The majority of people incarcerated are Black and Hispanic, even though these groups make up less than one third of the national population. Blacks are incarcerated for drug offenses at a rate 10 times greater than that of whites, despite the fact that both races use drugs at roughly the same rates. Mandatory minimum sentences allowed courts to dole out severe sentences that snatched parents from children and loved ones, destabilizing families and communities of color.

Since 1970, the incarcerated population in the U.S. has increased by 500% with two million people in jails and prisons today, outpacing both population growth and crime. In 2018, more than 10 million people entered U.S. jails and prisons. On any given day, almost 2 million people are living behind bars in this country with 4.5 million people on parole or probation. In the last decade, prison populations have declined about 10 percent, with racial disparities falling as well. These declines can be partially attributed to the consensus that mass incarceration is a mistake as it is an expensive, ineffective means to reduce crime. As states have begun to undo some of their harsh policies, they have seen their crime rates decline along with their prison populations.

Mass incarceration extends beyond prison and jail walls. Once a person has been involved in the carceral system, the collateral consequences are constant. Each year, 650,000 people nationwide return from prison to their communities only to face almost 50,000 federal, state, and local legal restrictions that make it difficult to reintegrate back

into society. Reintegration is often made difficult due to employment and housing discrimination, economic and educational deprivation, disenfranchisement, trauma from the system itself, the breaking of community bonds, and the separation of family.

These obstacles often push formerly incarcerated people back into contact with crime, leading them to recidivate and end up back in prison, away from their families.

### **III. PARENTAL INCARCERATION**

#### **A. *Overview***

The majority of U.S. inmates are parents. More than 2.6 million children in the U.S. currently have a parent in prison or jail, and more than 5 million children across the country have had a parent incarcerated at some point in their lives. The challenges of parental incarceration are more likely to affect women since women in state prisons are more likely than men to be a parent of a minor child. Women are also more likely to have been living with their children prior to imprisonment, as well as more likely to lead a single-parent household. Black children are most likely to have a parent in prison, followed by Hispanic children, and then white children, a statistic likely tied to the disparate impact of the racially discriminatory policies employed during the era of mass incarceration.

#### **B. *Developmental Effect on Children***

Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood which can have negative developmental effects on children. ACEs can include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect or witnessing violence in the home or community. Substance use problems, mental health problems, or instability due to parental supervision or household members being in jail or prison are all ACEs that can undermine a children's sense of stability and safety. ACEs are linked to mental illness, chronic health problems, and substance abuse problems in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. ACEs can also negatively impact a child's education, future job opportunities, and earning potential.

Parental incarceration is likely to result in worse outcomes for children due to socioeconomic factors, psychological factors, family factors, and health factors. Children of incarcerated parents have worse cognitive and noncognitive outcomes than children of non-incarcerated parents with similar socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. The incarceration of a parent affects not only the child's mental health, but their physical health as well. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to suffer from migraines, asthma, and high cholesterol. Mentally, these children are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder relating to their parent's arrest and incarceration. Mental health issues may also lead to children to have unstable careers as adults and struggle with school, finances, jobs, and depression throughout life. These effects can even be passed on to their own children.

Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have speech or language problems, like stuttering, than children whose parents have not been incarcerated. Additionally, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to develop learning disabilities such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental delays, and behavioral problems. Thus, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to misbehave and even drop out of school. Those children who stay in school often see a decline in their grade point averages.

Children of incarcerated parents experience more instability and are thus more likely to become poor than children with parents at home (or something to describe other types of parent-child relationships). The removal of a parent from the home may also create financial hardship for the child, due to the loss of that parent's income or child support. This financial distress often continues after parents are released from prison due to the structural barriers to successful reentry. Parental income is a strong predictor of how children will fare in school and thus adulthood, so incarceration-related income loss stunts the mobility of affected families. This financial hardship may further lead the child to a life of crime. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to engage in behavior that exposes them to the criminal justice system. Studies show that arrest and incarceration of a parent has been linked to a child's own eventual involvement in the justice system. Children of imprisoned mothers are more likely to experience imprisonment compared to children of incarcerated fathers.

Children of incarcerated parents may also be more likely to have faced other difficult experiences in their upbringing, including witnessing violence or exposure to drug and alcohol use or misuse. The emotional and social trauma that may occur can be compounded by the social trauma that children may face as a result of having a parent in prison. When parents are incarcerated, most children go on to live with other family members such as the other parent, grandparents, or other relatives, though some move in with friends, an agency or institution, foster care, continue to live on their own, or experience homelessness. Children who are able to visit their parents are often faced with stress, as there is usually no place to play, waiting times can be long, and physical contact is often limited. The remaining parents will often also experience extreme stress and financial strain, which may result in less supervision and less parental availability for the child. With all of this instability, a child of an incarcerated parent may likely suffer detrimentally. The removal of a parent not only removes a source of comfort, but a source of stability in emotional, social, and financial areas of life. Thus, the removal of a parent may create anxiety for the child as they attempt to navigate life, develop fulfilling relationships, and ultimately, survive.

#### **IV. POLICY PROPOSAL**

As mentioned, the U.S. prison system costs taxpayers at least \$80 billion per year. This money would be better spent building up communities, rather than harming them. Investments, not incarceration, is how we improve safety. Specifically, at the state level,

state prisons could take steps to improve family contact through expanded family visitation as well as visitation assistance to continue to bolster the relationship between parents and their children while incarcerated. Prisons should further ensure that incarcerated parents are housed as close as possible to their home communities, allowing for better access to in-person visitation. An increase in accessibility of visitation fosters continued contact between children and their incarcerated parents, ultimately alleviating some of the developmental effects of the parent's incarceration on the child.

Mass incarceration was created through decades-long political policy. Therefore, ending it will require policies just as far-reaching at the national, state, and local level. The improvement of outcomes for children with incarcerated parents starts with dissecting the history of mass incarceration in order to combat the policies which fostered the phenomenon. Reformers should seek to repeal mandatory minimum sentences for minor drug offenses and other minor crimes and further seek to eliminate disparities in sentencing. Reformers should also champion an increase in funding for social, educational, and employment programs for released offenders. Parental incarceration creates an unstable environment for children, resulting in long-lasting developmental effects but the proposed solutions would provide stability for children, families, and ultimately society as a whole.

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