

Parental Incarceration Takes Devastating Toll on Children

The nature of the parent-child relationship is a crucial factor for a child's overall well-being, both during childhood and extending into adulthood. When a parent is incarcerated, that relationship is threatened and children are often left in an unstable environment, causing them to suffer the consequences of their parent's incarceration in myriad ways.

During criminal justice proceedings, the crime and its punishment are all too often the only two factors considered—overlooking the consequences that sentencing



How Does Michigan Measure Up?

Incarceration Rates:

- ▶ Michigan has the 18th highest rate of imprisonment in the 50 states.¹

Children of Incarcerated Parents:

- ▶ One in 10 Michigan children—228,000 total—has had an incarcerated parent at some point in their childhood. Only two states have higher percentages of children who have had an incarcerated parent.²

Racial Disparity in Incarceration:

- ▶ Michigan's prison population is 55% people of color,³ while people of color make up only 38.4% of the general population.⁴

Pay-to-Stay:

- ▶ A Michigan law from 1984 allows county jails to charge inmates up to \$60 a day to reimburse the jail for room and board.⁵ Many county jails take advantage of this policy, which can leave those exiting with crippling debt before they are even released.

and geographic prison placement will have on the children or family of the accused. This is an unfortunate oversight as the effects of having an incarcerated parent can be equally as traumatic for a child as experiencing divorce, abuse or domestic violence.⁶

Considering the rapid growth of both the federal and state prison populations across the country in more recent history, it is essential to understand the effects that a parent's incarceration has on a child. Simply put, higher prison populations mean that more parents are incarcerated and that more children are negatively affected.

While the effects of a parent's incarceration vary based on a child's specific situation and the supports available to them, negative consequences have been echoed in conversations with family after family.

IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES

Financial Burden: A family's income drops by an average of 22% when a father is incarcerated, and on average remains 15% lower even when the father is released from prison.⁷

Sense of Shame: Shame is often induced by judgment from a child's peers or other members of their community.⁸

Strained Relationship With Incarcerated Parent: Around 60% of parents in state prisons are held over 100 miles from their previous residence.⁹ This makes it difficult for a child to maintain regular contact with their parent, which could otherwise help minimize the trauma associated with a parent's incarceration.

Behavioral Problems: Behavioral concerns may arise during this tumultuous period of a child's life.¹⁰ However, it is important to note that perpetuating the stigma that the child themselves is now destined for a "life of crime" can be damaging, and communities should instead work to properly support struggling children.

CONSEQUENCES FOLLOWING INCARCERATION

Difficulties in Transition: Parents returning from their incarceration might have difficulty adjusting to life at home and could find themselves to be emotionally distant from family members, including their children.

Criminal Justice Debt: With the average conviction-related costs (including fees, fines and other payments) for one person being \$13,607, up to 85% of people return from prison with criminal justice debt¹²—money that they owe for being convicted of a crime which also accrues at a time when they have little to no income. This results in

fewer resources for the family and children, placing an additional strain on the household.

Lifelong Consequences: The detrimental effects of parental incarceration continue into adulthood as well. It is one of several adverse childhood experiences that can be associated with higher rates of poor health, low life satisfaction, depression and anxiety among other concerns.¹³

Nationally, an estimated 5.1 million children have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their childhoods.¹¹

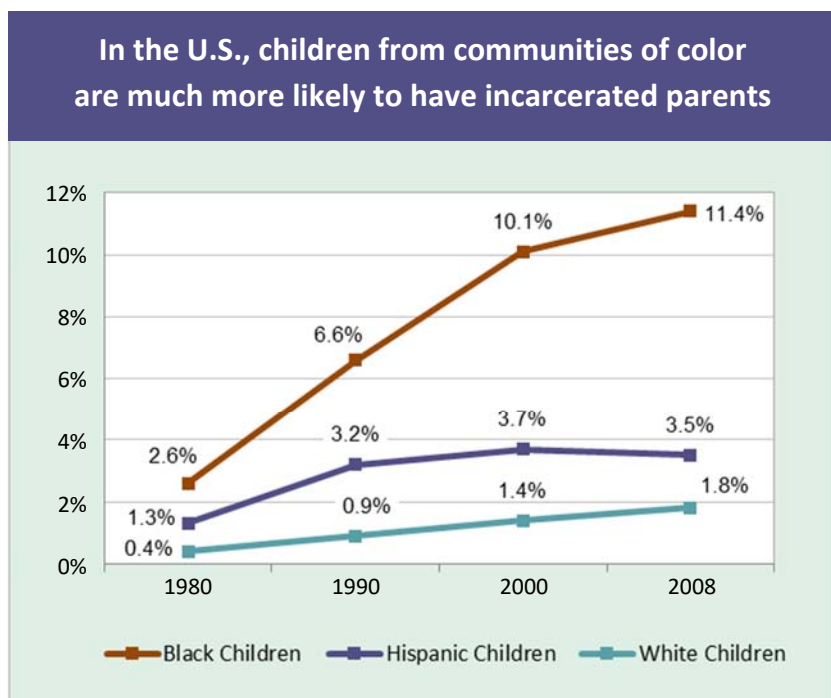
VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

The children most likely to have an incarcerated parent are often already the most vulnerable—children from families with low incomes and from communities of color. This disparity is due to a number of factors, one being the systemic racism encompassed by the more recent "War on Drugs." In fact, African-Americans are around three and four times more likely to be arrested for possessing and selling drugs, respectively, despite being no more likely to sell or use drugs than Whites are.¹⁴

HOW CAN WE HELP?

It must be our priority to meet the needs of children who are faced with the many challenges caused by having an incarcerated parent. There is much that community members and policymakers can do to offer proper support to these children:

- Communities and individuals must ensure that families are able to care for children both during and after a parent's incarceration while also crafting an environment where children feel free from judgment and instead feel safe sharing their experiences and emotions.



Source: The Pew Charitable Trusts

- Schools, faith-based organizations and other local groups must work closely with families and the criminal justice system to create multidimensional support for children and their families.
- The criminal justice system must work to preserve the family unit—considering the child’s well-being during the arrest and sentencing, allowing children reasonable access to their parent during incarceration, and utilizing prison time to empower the parent to be able to provide for their family after their incarceration.

In their policy report, *A Shared Sentence: The devastating toll of parental incarceration on kids, families and communities*, the Annie E. Casey Foundation offers these policy

recommendations to alleviate the consequences faced by children of incarcerated parents:

1. Ensure children are supported while parents are incarcerated and after they return.
2. Connect parents who have returned to the community with pathways to employment.
3. Strengthen communities, particularly those disproportionately affected by incarceration and reentry, to promote family stability and opportunity.

Download [A Shared Sentence](http://www.mlpp.org/kids-count/michigan/a-shared-sentence): www.mlpp.org/kids-count/michigan/a-shared-sentence.

ENDNOTES

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