

Nearly half of Americans have had a family member jailed, imprisoned

March 4 2019

In a groundbreaking Cornell-led study illuminating the extensive scope of mass incarceration in the U.S., nearly 1 in 2 Americans have had a brother or sister, parent, spouse or child spend time in jail or prison—a far higher figure than previously estimated.

The study is the first to accurately measure the share of Americans—45 percent—who have ever had an immediate [family](#) member jailed or imprisoned for one night or more. The researchers had assumed they would find half that rate.

"The core takeaway is family member incarceration is even more common than any of us—all of whom are experts in the field—had anticipated," said Christopher Wildeman, professor of policy analysis and management and a co-author of the study, which appeared March 4 in *Socius*.

"This really is an issue that affects all of society," added lead author Peter Enns, associate professor of government. Their Cornell co-authors are doctoral candidates Youngmin Yi, M.A. '16, and Alyssa Goldman '07, M.A. '16.

The figures are even higher for African-Americans and people with low education levels; for those groups, nearly 3 in 5 have had an immediate family member incarcerated, the team found. And siblings were the most common immediate family member to be incarcerated, the researchers said—another surprise finding—and a trend about which not

much is known.

"Having an immediate family member in prison instead of in the home can have a major effect on a person and can be extremely disruptive," said Enns.

"This survey really shows who the victims of mass incarceration are: the folks who have to manage households and grow up absent a loved one," said Wildeman, director of the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research.

More-advantaged groups are not immune to the trend, the study found. While college-educated whites experience family incarceration at a much lower rate than the less-educated and people of color, 1 in 6—15 percent—have had that experience. "That breaks pretty sharply from the standard narrative that we've heard in the [research community](#) and in popular discourse, about how white, college-educated folks are completely insulated from those risks," said Wildeman. "And, indeed, this provides further evidence that mass incarceration is a profoundly American phenomenon and something that we as a society must confront together."

Even though all groups are affected, education does somewhat insulate whites from having a family member imprisoned. As their level of education goes up, their level of incarcerated family members goes down.

But that is much less true for African-Americans; the chances an African-American will have a family member jailed or imprisoned stays about the same even if she is well-educated. About 70 percent of people who didn't finish [high school](#) have had a family member incarcerated; it's 71 percent for those with a high school equivalent; and 55 percent for those who have a college education.

The research, which grew out of a theme project sponsored by Cornell's Institute for the Social Sciences, is the first to capture both jail time and prison time for family members. And it represents people who are often overlooked in national surveys—such as young adults, households with a low socio-economic status, those without internet access and Spanish speakers—thanks to study's design: participants were able to take the survey online or by phone, in English or in Spanish.

The researchers asked a nationally representative sample of more than 4,000 people whether members of their immediate family (a parent, sibling, spouse or domestic partner, stepsiblings or foster family) or extended family (including grandparents, grandchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews or in-laws) have ever been held in jail or prison for a night or more, and for how long.

The participants were also asked follow-up questions about their experiences with and opinions of the police and the criminal justice system, health and well-being, civic and political engagement, and drug and alcohol use.

The researchers will dig into that data in later studies—and they invite other researchers to do so as well. They've made their data publicly available via Cornell's Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, of which Enns is executive director, to allow others to both see what else the data show and confirm the findings for themselves.

The researchers hope the study will destigmatize the incarceration of [family members](#).

"I hope that it will help folks see that this is more a structural issue than a behavioral one," Wildeman said. "And I hope that it would drive home just how much more we can learn when we do the work to get surveys that explicitly focus on crime and criminal justice contact."

More information: Peter K. Enns et al, What Percentage of Americans Have Ever Had a Family Member Incarcerated?: Evidence from the Family History of Incarceration Survey (FamHIS), *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/2378023119829332](https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119829332)

Provided by Cornell University

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