

For 50 years, mass incarceration has hurt American families. Here's how to change it

October 14 2021, by Sara Savat



Family member incarceration has become exceedingly common among American families. Nearly half of all adults aged 18-49 have an immediate family member who has been imprisoned. Credit: Wikipedia

For nearly 50 years, the incarceration rate in the U.S. has grown at an exponential rate. Today, the U.S. has the largest prison population in the world. Incarceration is especially common in poor communities of color where nearly 70% of Black men who did not finish high school and are approaching midlife will be in prison at some point in their lives.

A review including new data analysis, published Oct. 14 in *Science* by experts at Washington University in St. Louis and Duke University, exposes the harm mass incarceration has on families and advocates for [family](#)-friendly criminal justice interventions.

"While mass incarceration has made family member incarceration common, low-income families of color are disproportionately impacted, especially the women who are often the ones bearing the responsibility of taking care of family members on both the inside and the outside," said Hedwig Lee, study co-author and professor of sociology in Arts & Sciences at Washington University. Lee also is director of the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity, & Equity at WashU.

"We cannot afford another 50 years of mass incarceration tearing apart families and communities. It is time to do something revolutionary and invest in data that allows us to fully understand the effects of mass incarceration on families and implement both criminal justice and broader [social policies](#) and practices that prevent future damage."

Collateral damage of criminal justice system

Extensive research exists detailing the effects of incarceration on convicted individuals, yet less is known about the toll mass incarceration has on families and communities. For this review, Lee and co-author Christopher Wildeman, professor of sociology at Duke University, shifted the focus to the families of incarcerated men, who make up the majority of imprisoned people in the U.S.

Family member incarceration has become exceedingly common among American families. Nearly half of all young adults, age 18-49, have an immediate family member—defined as a parent, child, sibling, current romantic partner or anyone who the respondent ever had a child with—who has been imprisoned. Family member incarceration is even

more pervasive for African American families, impacting far more than 60% of adults under the age of 50.

The indirect consequences of mass incarceration, experienced by family members, are likely more sizeable than those for the men who experience incarceration, according to Wildeman.

"Family members of the incarcerated have rarely—if ever—been involved in the crimes that their incarcerated family members have committed, and as a result are the collateral damage of the criminal justice system in a very real and tangible way," he said.

Because mass incarceration disproportionately impacts African American families, it also exacerbates existing inequalities. In their review, Lee and Wildeman found that family member incarceration has [negative effects](#) on family well-being above and beyond existing disadvantages prior to incarceration. These effects include:

1. Incarceration affects family structure. Incarcerated men marry at extremely low rates and divorce—and union dissolution more broadly—is more common among current and formerly incarcerated men.
2. Incarceration affects the overall quality of life for families. Incarcerated fathers are less involved in their family before, during and after incarceration. Mothers are also more likely to engage in harsh parenting and experience depression when fathers are incarcerated.
3. The loss of income caused by incarceration exacerbates economic hardship for families. Because men often struggle to find employment post-incarceration, these economic hardships can be long-lasting.

For children, the negative effects of parental incarceration are better

understood. These children are more likely to struggle with behavioral and [mental health problems](#). They're also less prepared to enter school than their peers, have disengaged parents and carry a stigma of parental incarceration.

"Children whose parents will eventually experience incarceration already disproportionately faced challenges even prior to experiencing that event. But for many children, the incarceration of a parent sets off a downward spiral in which negative responses from teachers, correctional officials and even peers due to the stigma of parental incarceration interacts with negative behavioral responses to the trauma of that event to lead children down a difficult path that has dire consequences for their transition to adulthood," Wildeman said.

Incarceration also impacts the women who are left behind to manage the fallout. According to Lee and Wildeman's review, a son's incarceration could increase the parenting burdens place on grandparents. "Mothers who had a child, almost always a son, incarcerated struggle mightily when it comes to a range of indicators of health, including but not limited to self-rated health, depression and health limitations," they write.

"Taken together, family incarceration may send generational ripples that impact the health of the entire family," Lee said.

How to break the cycle

Incarceration is a breaking point for families. But Lee and Wildeman's review highlights how poorly, on average, families were fairing even before experiencing parental incarceration.

Research from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study show drug abuse and domestic violence often precedes incarceration, as does

smoking or using drugs and alcohol during pregnancy. Families in which one or both parents are unmarried, and/or the biological father does not live with his children, are also more likely to experience future incarceration. Prior incarcerations also are a strong indicator of future incarceration.

"These families are often in dire need long before incarceration. These needs may include severe forms of material deprivation—getting evicted, being unable to pay for utilities and not having enough money for food consistently—which are amplified by the fact that rates of addiction disorders and other mental health conditions are highly prevalent in these populations," Lee said.

"Addressing these needs through better social services is a clear way to break the cycle and simultaneously improve the health and well-being of the entire family."

What would family-friendly criminal justice interventions look like?

According to Lee and Wildeman, at minimum, family-friendly criminal justice interventions would have three features:

1. **Focus more on diversion in combination with high-quality services.** For example, rather than arresting a person for drug possession, he or she would receive lower-level sanction—like a ticket or community service—combined with drug rehabilitation and/or mental health services to address underlying issues. "Such policies have the benefit of not putting families in a situation where the choices are essentially either incarceration or chaos," the authors write.
2. **Broaden the scope of services for families when prison or**

jail incarceration is necessary. Current family policies are narrow and focus on how to facilitate visitation and provide mentors for children. However, the review shows that incarceration causes significant harm to families. Social services—such as free universal childcare and extensive economic support—are one way to mitigate those negative effects. Families are especially fragile during the time immediately before and after release, yet little work is currently done to intervene on behalf of families during this time.

3. **Consider alternatives to incarceration and eliminate mandatory sentencing laws.** In addition to partnering with researchers to determine which types of changes—diversion, in-facility programs, post-incarceration programs—best offset the cost on incarceration for individuals, families and communities, alternative sentencing practices are needed for nonviolent and violent offenses. "There is, to be as blunt as possible, no way to drastically shrink the imprisonment rate without cutting sentences for individuals convicted of violent crimes and convicted multiple times," the authors write.

"Although we believe that the consequences of [mass incarceration](#) for families are now becoming clear," added Wildeman, "the reality is that the data we have available to understand how, when and why family member [incarceration](#) matters is woefully inadequate to the task, making future data collections that prioritize this incredibly prevalent stressor absolutely vital."

More information: Hedwig Lee et al, Assessing Mass Incarceration's Effects on Families on the Eve of Its 50th Birthday, *Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1126/science.abj7777](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abj7777)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: For 50 years, mass incarceration has hurt American families. Here's how to change it (2021, October 14) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-years-mass-incarceration-american-families.html>

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