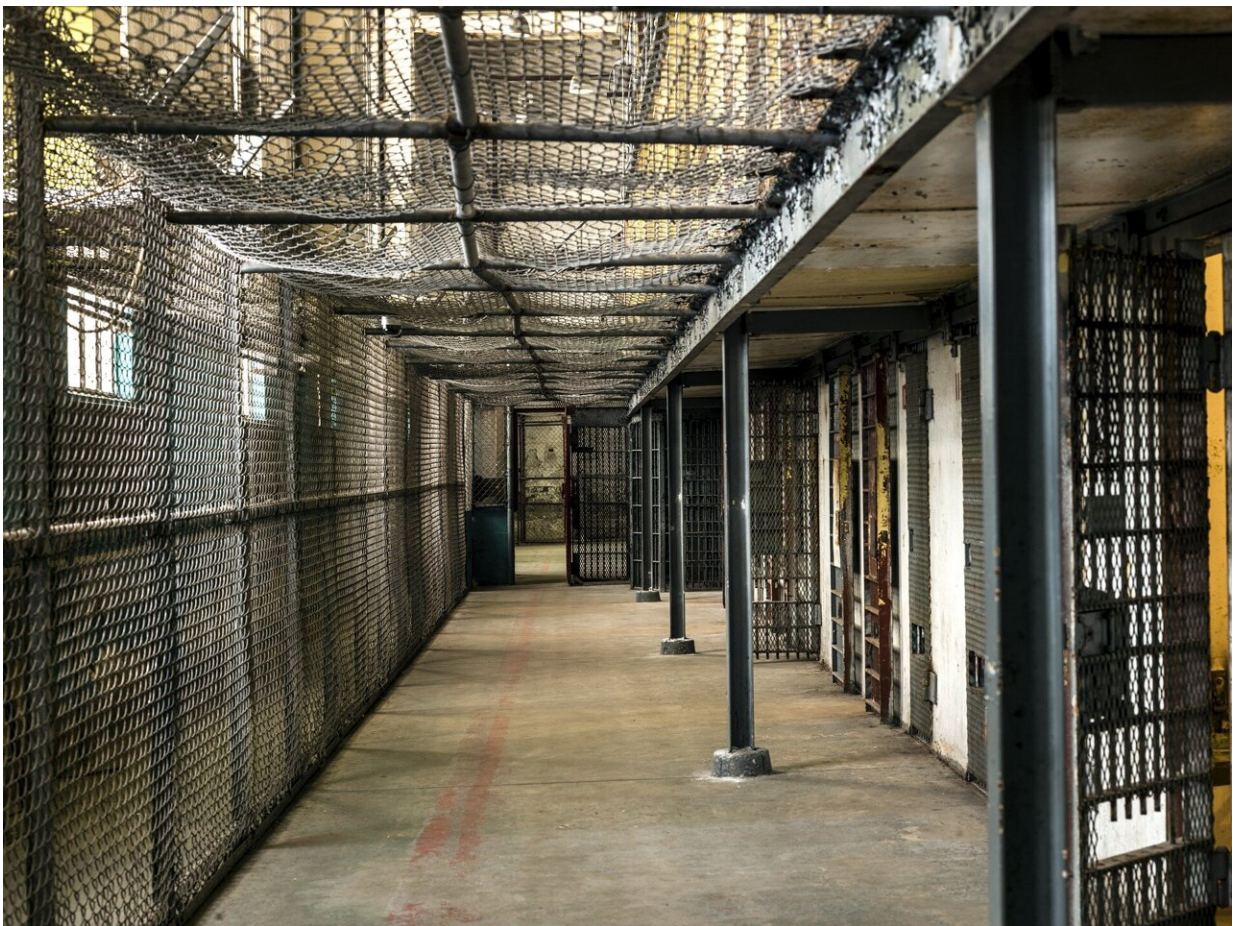


Study: Black adults in the US are more likely to have had multigenerational family members incarcerated

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While previous studies of incarceration and family life have focused on immediate family—parents, partners and children—a new analysis of a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults that asked about siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, cousins, and other extended family members has found that Black adults in the United States are not only more likely to have experienced family incarceration, but are also more likely to have had more family members incarcerated and to have had family members from more generations ever incarcerated.

As described in her new paper published in the journal *Demography*, Youngmin Yi, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, found that on average a non-institutionalized American adult has had 2.5 family members ever incarcerated and 1.1 generations in which a family member has been incarcerated. Meanwhile, Black adults on average have had 5.3 family members incarcerated and 1.7 generations with family members who have been incarcerated.

Overall, 40% of adults have ever had immediate family incarcerated, 34% have ever had extended family incarcerated, and more than half of adults (52%) have ever had any family incarcerated. On average, U.S. adults have had two or three family members incarcerated for at least one night. Horizontal, or same generation, family incarceration is the most common (44%) of the three types of generational extension of family incarceration experienced, while 30% experienced upward (generations before) and 19% experienced downward (generations after) extension of family incarceration.

However, individuals who identify as Black are substantially more likely than adults of all other racial/[ethnic groups](#) to have experienced the incarceration of a family member, whether focusing on immediate family, extended family or both immediate and extended family. Yi found that 60% of Black adults have experienced an immediate family

member's incarceration, 53% have experienced extended family incarceration, and 74% have experienced either of those events.

Additionally, on average, white respondents report having 0.75 immediate and 1.17 extended family members ever incarcerated, while those numbers are more than twice as high among those who are Black, who report 2.11 immediate and 3.20 extended family members having been incarcerated.

"The prevalence, consequences and unequal distribution of parental and own incarceration in the United States are well documented," writes Yi. "However, much of our knowledge of the reach of the carceral state into [family life](#) is focused on incarceration of a parent, [romantic partner](#) or child, to the exclusion of other important relationships. The focus to date on immediate family and prevalence in the study of mass incarceration may therefore yield an incomplete understanding of the impacts of this policy regime, potentially underestimating racial inequalities in the reach and consequences of family incarceration."

Yi notes that siblings, for example, influence one another's well-being in childhood and can later serve as sources of support in adulthood. Grandparents and other relations—especially grandmothers and aunts—often serve as primary or secondary caregivers and as critical sources of in-kind support in families.

"Previous family demographic research by other scholars suggests that the impacts of incarceration of family members other than parents, partners or children may be more severe for Black persons and families, who are simultaneously at higher risk of carceral contact and more likely to be close to, receiving support from, or living with extended family," Yi says.

"Family disruption and strain linked to incarceration could therefore be

related to inequality in at least two ways: through unequal distribution and unequal impact. In fact, recent estimates show that the incarceration of family members other than partners, parents and children is common—sibling incarceration (27%) is 1.5 times to twice as common as parental (18%), partner (14%) or child incarceration (12%)."

To illustrate the impact of these limitations, Yi suggests consideration of two hypothetical individuals, one whose father was incarcerated and a second whose father and aunt were incarcerated.

"The most common contemporary approaches to studying family incarceration would capture the fact that both individuals have had family incarcerated, but not differences in the number of [family members](#) ever incarcerated or differences in the relationships affected," she writes.

"Indeed, predominant approaches that focus on immediate family would entirely fail to capture the aunt's incarceration in this example. Without a more comprehensive understanding of the configurations of incarceration within families and how these vary across racial/ethnic groups (or not), description and analysis of family incarceration are susceptible to oversimplification of the experience and potential misidentification of the outcomes and effects of carceral contact. Put in technical terms, without a better handle on the heterogeneity of family incarceration, the experience of having one relation incarcerated is measured as similar or as having similar 'effects' as having a family with multiple generations of incarceration exposure."

Ultimately, Yi concludes that these new estimates of [family incarceration](#) provide "additional evidence of the overwhelming salience of race for criminal legal system contact and the inextricably racialized nature of sociodemographic and economic contexts in the United States."

The article, "Racial Inequality in the Prevalence, Degree, Extension, and Permeation of Incarceration in Family Life," is available online in *Demography*.

More information: Youngmin Yi, Racial Inequality in the Prevalence, Degree, Extension, and Permeation of Incarceration in Family Life, *Demography* (2023). [DOI: 10.1215/00703370-10419487](https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-10419487)

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