

Children of the Incarcerated

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Mass Incarceration has long been an issue that plagued American society. Rooted in racism and oppression, mass incarceration has disproportionately affected Black and Brown communities throughout the United States (US). Not only does it reinforce the social and economic inequalities of these communities, but it also separates families and has life-altering effects on their children. This year, in New York alone, over 60% of the people incarcerated in the state are parents (Trujillo, 2023). That is at least 18,600 children whose lives are impacted by mass incarceration.

In some cases, children have another parent to raise them. Others, either come from single-family homes or have both parents incarcerated at the same time. Some children are fortunate to have other family members to raise them, but the others end up in foster care. In 2021, 40% of children and youth living in foster care in the US had experienced parental incarceration (Laub & Haskins, 2018). Some children are placed in stable homes, while others are placed in unstable, abusive homes. By the time they turn 18, and have aged out of the foster care system, many of these children end up living in poverty or become homeless.

A Failed Generation

Children of incarcerated parents are affected by their Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) i.e. the traumatic events that happen in their childhood. The Centers for Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) recognizes parental incarceration as an ACE that has long-term effects on a child's life. These effects are negative consequences on children's health and well-being, education, and job potential, as well as an increased risk of running into problems with the law (CDC, 2023).

From malnutrition and chronic heart problems from stress to substance use problems that help cope with that stress, children of incarcerated parents experience a variety of health and well-being issues. Those who witnessed their parent's arrest, often develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and an array of mental health issues that can lead to suicidal thoughts. These children are more likely to see a drop in their grades and display rebellious behavior that causes them to be expelled from school. As a result, many end up without a high school diploma or college degree, affecting their chances of earning well-paying jobs. This results in them being homeless and unable to support themselves financially, putting them at risk of being influenced by neighborhood gangs where they are forced to do illegal activities to make money. Thus, most get into trouble with the law and end up in juvenile detention - or if they're 18 and older - prison.

Conclusion

With no stability or familial support, little education, and no jobs, many children of incarcerated parents fall into the same cycle of mistakes that their parents did. They are six times more likely to be incarcerated than their peers who have not experienced parental incarceration. (Trujillo, 2023). So how do we attempt to address this vicious cycle of intergenerational incarceration? First, we must recognize that the justice system is flawed. Correctional facilities meant to rehabilitate, and correct behavior rarely engage in practices that guarantee this outcome. Incarcerated parents and their children need resources that can provide social, economic, and emotional stability and support that prevents recidivism and decreases the chances of intergenerational incarceration.

We have to work together to address the issue of mass incarceration as its consequences affect multiple generations of our society. If we allow these systems of injustice and inequality to continue, we will fail the future of our society.

Works Cited

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