

**Facilitating Children's Relationships with Their Incarcerated Parents:
Good for the Children, Good for Society**

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1 Introduction to the Problem

Michael Tubbs was Stockton, California's first Black Mayor, and at 26 years old, was the youngest Mayor of any major city in American history.¹ Michael's father received a thirty year prison sentence for committing a third strike felony while desperately trying to obtain the \$2,000 he needed to bury his newborn daughter after her tragic death. Michael grew up in poverty, separated from his incarcerated father for almost his entire childhood. With his father absent for critical life moments and decisions, Michael taught himself the lessons a father normally would. The only connection he could foster was through the thick metal bars that separated him from his father, with the guards overhearing every conversation, stripping away the feelings of comfort and privacy. Growing up with an incarcerated father had a lasting effect on Michael that ultimately shaped his mayoral vision of how to serve the marginalized and vulnerable people in Stockton.²

There are 2.7 million children in the United States who suffer from the experience of having an incarcerated parent.³ But the problem does not persist only because of parental failures ; the problem is also socially systemic . The prison system is a “dual punishment” environment. Even though the children are innocent, they still suffer as much as the parents in jail.⁴ As a result, parental incarceration will impact 1 out of every 28 children, and many will suffer significant adverse effects, such as financial hardships, housing instability, food insecurity, educational

¹. “Mayor’s Fund for Los Angeles, Board of Directors, Michael Tubbs,” Mayor’s Fund for Los Angeles, accessed June 26, 2023, <https://www.mayorsfundla.org/people/michael-tubbs/#:~:text=Michael%20Tubbs%20is%20the%20Founder,at%2026%2Dyears%2Dold>.

². Cortney Wills, “What ‘Stockton on My Mind’ Revealed to Mayor Tubbs About His Imprisoned Father,” The Grio, July 30, 2020, <https://thegrio.com/2020/07/30/stockton-on-my-mind-mayor-tubbs-father/>.

³. The Pew Charitable Trusts, “Collateral Costs: Incarceration’s Effect on Economic Mobility,” The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010, https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pew_assets/2010/collateralcosts1pdf.pdf, 4.

⁴. “Children of the Incarcerated,” InsideOut TV, March 31, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6I6vL_OyNmA.

disruption, and emotional and behavioral problems.⁵ Children of incarcerated parents are innocent victims whose broken parental bonds cause adverse intergenerational outcomes that hurt society in both the short and long run. One story illustrating this point comes from my interview with Alice, a vulnerable 18-year-old girl living in the Southeast, struggling to overcome the ghosts of parental incarceration that still haunt her. Alice, who was seven when she lost the only father figure in her life to imprisonment for a violent crime, recalls the terrifying experience of visiting him in prison for the first time.

The morning of the visit, a nervous, tingling sensation pulsed through Alice's body as she anticipated seeing her father in a way she had never seen him before. Fear grew in the pit of Alice's stomach when the prison's enormous, monotone grey walls with intimidating barbed wire came into view. As she walked through the prison entrance, Alice clutched her mother's hand tightly, terrified of being separated. Everywhere Alice looked, guards with guns and sullen facial expressions towered over her. The sound of slamming jail cell doors echoed in her head. Alice was swept into chaos as she went through metal detectors, scanners, security checks, and physical body searches. With each step in the process, her fear turned to outright terror as she thought, "How am I ever going to be able to see my father again?"

Alice's question still rings in my ears. It reminds me of how we lose children's voices when considering the penal system and its impact on them. Children are often invisible and overlooked during the incarceration process. Many, like Alice, recall feelings of shame, fear, dehumanization, and invasiveness while visiting an incarcerated parent. The officials who designed prisons did not have children's visitation in mind. Due to this hostile environment and

⁵. The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs," 4

numerous other visitation barriers, it is difficult for children to maintain a meaningful relationship with their incarcerated parents.

Yet, the research shows that an ongoing relationship between children and incarcerated parents during imprisonment can benefit both the children and society. Children benefit from improved mental, emotional, and social well-being and health, and society benefits from a lower risk of recidivism for the parent. So, we must look for ways to reduce the significant barriers that prevent children from having regular contact with their incarcerated parents.

In this research paper, I explore the literature documenting the existence and vast extent of the adverse effects of children of incarcerated parents (Baresford, Loucks & Raikes, 2020; Duke University, 2019; Hage & Flagg, 2018; Landon & Jones, 2021; Morsy & Rothstein, 2016; Murphy & Cooper, 2015; The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). I also share numerous real-life stories about children and their incarcerated parents, both through watching their videos on YouTube and interviewing them, that illustrate the impacts of parental incarceration on the children and document their struggle to maintain a relationship with them. In addition, I explore solutions, including funding initiatives and legislative and policy-driven prison reform, that facilitate children’s ability to have in-person and video visits, thus strengthening their parental bond.

2 Scope of the Problem

As of 2021, there were 5.4 million people under the supervision of the U.S. adult correctional system, including parole and probation, in the United States.⁶ Of these, 1.8 million

⁶ E. Ann Carson, PhD and Rick Kluckow, DSW, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2021 – Statistical Tables,” U.S. Department of Corrections, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, February 2023, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/cpus21st.pdf>, 4.

people were incarcerated in the prison system, including jails and federal and state prisons.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic caused a decline in the incarcerated population due to a drop in new prisoner admissions resulting from a slow down in the courts and an increase in the number of prisoner deaths from pandemic-related illnesses. The decrease is expected to be temporary as the courts return to normal and vaccines reduce pandemic-related deaths. Thus, it is more relevant to look at the pre-pandemic prison population to understand the scope of the incarceration problem. As of 2019, there were 2.1 million incarcerated people, representing a more than four-fold increase compared to the 500,000 incarcerated people in 1980.⁸

In order to understand the meaning of this four-fold increase, it's crucial to juxtapose the U.S.'s rates of incarceration with other first world nations, worldwide. A quick cross comparative analysis shows how aggressively and shockingly we push mass incarceration compared to our counterparts. The United States had both the highest overall incarceration population and the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world as of 2019. The U.S. prison population of 2.1 million far exceeded the next three countries, with China, Brazil, and India having 1.7 million, 835,000, and 554,000, respectively.⁹ The U.S. incarceration rate of 630 people per 100,000 residents is 13% higher than the next highest country, El Salvador, which has the highest murder rate in the world.¹⁰ The incarceration rates of countries in Western Europe are

⁷. Carson and Kluckow, "Correctional Populations," 1.

⁸. Vera Institute of Justice, "Incarceration Statistics," Vera Institute of Justice, accessed June 25, 2023, <https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration/causes-of-mass-incarceration/incarceration-statistics>.

⁹. John Gramlich, "America's Incarceration Rate Falls to Lowest Level Since 1995," Pew Research Center, August 16, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/16/americas-incarceration-rate-lowest-since-1995/>.

¹⁰. Gramlich, "America's Incarceration Rate."

significantly lower than the U.S. For example, England, Germany, and France had incarceration rates that were 80%, 85%, and 90% lower than the U.S., respectively.¹¹

Even more concerning than the prison population's size is that most prisoners are parents. There are approximately 1.2 million incarcerated parents in the U.S. and 2.7 million children with an incarcerated parent.¹² As a result, 1 out of every 28 children had a parent behind bars, representing 3.6% of the 73 million children under 18 in the U.S.¹³ By comparison, that rate was only 1 in 125 children twenty-five years ago.

These children are more than just statistics; they are real people with real emotions and stories. In talking to Charlie, I learned about a nine-year-old boy happily living in a small, rural town in southwest Missouri in 2010. He loved spending time with his elderly grandparents, close cousins, and all the animals on their small farm. Then, suddenly, Charlie's father was arrested for armed robbery. All the freedom, fresh air, fun, and love Charlie experienced stopped abruptly. He felt intensely confused and angry.

Charlie couldn't understand why the police took his father away from him. His whole world fell apart when his father received a life sentence in prison. Charlie's mother tried her best to explain it to him, but he was unable to comprehend the logic of our criminal justice system at such a young age. All Charlie knew was that the daddy he loved and saw every day had instantly vanished and would never return.

Children like Charlie, with currently incarcerated parents, are not the only ones impacted. As of 2019, an estimated 5.3 million U.S. children under 18 have lived with a parent who was

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs," 4.

¹³. The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs," 4; Child Stats, "Child Population: Number of Children (in Millions) Ages 0–17 in the United States by Age, 1950–2021 and Projected 2022–2050," childstats.gov, accessed July 28, 2023, <https://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables/pop1.asp>.

incarcerated at some point after the child was born.¹⁴ Thus, 1 in 14 children, representing 7.3% of all children in the United States, have been impacted by parental incarceration.¹⁵

Not only is the scale of parental incarceration staggeringly large, but the trend does not bode well for the future. From 1991 to 2016, the number of incarcerated fathers increased by 48%, and the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 96%.¹⁶ Since 1980, the number of children with incarcerated parents has risen from 500,000 to 2.7 million, an alarming increase of 440%.¹⁷ This increase compares to the rise in the U.S. population of only 46% during the same period.¹⁸

3 Significance and Impact of the Problem

3.1 The suffering of innocent children

Due to the “dual punishment” nature of incarceration, not only do parents suffer the consequences of their actions, but their children also suffer them. Through no fault of their own, these children are innocent victims silently sentenced to endure the consequences of their parent’s mistakes. They committed no crime, yet the road ahead is fraught with many adverse outcomes affecting all aspects of their life. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes the trauma resulting from parental incarceration as an Adverse Childhood

¹⁴. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Children Who Had a Parent Who Was Ever Incarcerated by Race and Ethnicity in United States,” The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Data Center, May 2023, <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/9734-children-who-had-a-parent-who-was-ever-incarcerated-by-race-and-ethnicity?loc=1&loct=1#detailed/1/any/false/2043,1769,1696,1648,1603/10,11,9,12,1,13/18995,18996>.

¹⁵. David Murphy and P. Mae Cooper, “Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children?,” Child Trends, October 2015, <https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015-42ParentsBehindBars.pdf>, 3.

¹⁶. Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Ph.D., Emma Stammen, and Kevin Muhitch, “Parents in Prison,” The Sentencing Project, October 18, 2022, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/parents-in-prison/>, 1.

¹⁷. The Pew Charitable Trusts, “Collateral Costs,” 19.

¹⁸. U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Population Change Data (1910-2020),” Census.gov, August 6, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/popchange-data-text.html>.

Experience (ACE), a category of negative life experiences that includes abuse, neglect, parental divorce, and parental death.¹⁹

The children of incarcerated parents experience adverse effects, including financial hardship, housing instability, social and emotional challenges, adverse educational outcomes, changing caregivers, and increased health issues. Research shows that there is a higher risk of transmission of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) to subsequent generations.²⁰ Children of incarcerated parents end up in a category of vulnerability that can affect the rest of their lives, their children's lives, and their future generations.

3.2 Impact: Disruption in Caregiver/Living Situation

Disruption in the children's caregiver or living situation is a detrimental outcome of parental incarceration that can potentially occur. If the incarcerated parent was the primary caregiver, there are several possibilities for the children's new caregiver. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics' 2016 *Survey of Prison Inmates* data, 71% of such children lived with the other parent or step-parent, 17% with a grandparent, 7% entering the foster care system, and 5% with other friends/relatives.²¹

Even when placed with other relatives, this change in living situation can lead to disruptions in their friends, neighborhood, community, schooling, and home and parenting dynamics. These innocent children find their world turned upside down, uprooted from a life

¹⁹. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACEs.pdf>, P.7.

²⁰. Angela J. Narayan, Alicia F. Lieberman, and Ann S. Masten, "Intergenerational Transmission and Prevention of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)," *Clinical Psychology Review*, April 2021, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272735821000404>.

²¹. Prison Policy Initiative, "Both Sides of the Bars: How Mass Incarceration Punishes Families," Prison Policy Initiative, August 11, 2022, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental_incarceration/.

they once knew, and forced to adjust to new circumstances that can have lasting consequences for their health and development.

An even worse outcome awaits those children who enter the foster care system. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, parental incarceration accounted for 6% of the 207,000 children entering the foster care system in 2021.²² In these cases, 1 in 8 incarcerated parents loses all parental rights, regardless of the seriousness of their offense.²³ The problem is much worse for incarcerated mothers because their children are five times more likely to end up in the foster care system than those with incarcerated fathers.²⁴

During a conversation with Thomas, I realized that children sometimes experience the adverse effects of parental incarceration most acutely months or even years later. When Thomas was seven, his father received a life sentence in prison for a violent crime. His mother's anxiety and stress over her new role as a single parent, the unexpected loss of his income to support the family, and an eventual divorce all weakened her heart. Five years later, Thomas suffered the ultimate consequence of parental incarceration when his mother unexpectedly passed away from a heart condition, and he ended up in the foster care system. Thomas was separated from his siblings hours after his mother's passing and placed in a home with four other foster children. Thomas had asthma, and his foster mother smoked and incessantly screamed and cursed at him. To this day, as a 21 year-old-man, Thomas has never been so terrified in his life and hopes he never will be again.

²² "The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #29 (FY 2021)," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, November 1, 2022, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-29.pdf>, 2.

²³ Eli Hager and Anna Flagg, "How Incarcerated Parents Are Losing Their Children Forever," The Marshall Project, December 2, 2018, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/12/03/how-incarcerated-parents-are-losing-their-children-forever>.

²⁴ Hager and Flagg, "How Incarcerated Parents."

The loss of Thomas' mother highlights another unintended consequence of parental incarceration. Parental incarceration directly impacts the child, but there is often a less visible impact on the caregiver and other adults in the child's support system. The caregiver can suffer adverse mental and physical health effects, as in the case of Thomas' mother. When a non-parent, such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other relative, becomes the primary caregiver, they often find themselves in an unexpected, intense, fast-paced parenting role above and beyond what they were prepared to handle. Thus, the absence of the incarcerated parent also negatively affects the other adults in guardian relationships that support the lived experiences of the children.

3.3 Impact: Financial Hardships, Housing Instability, and Food Insecurity

A potential negative impact of parental incarceration is that the children can experience financial hardships created by the incarcerated parent's lost income. When a parent becomes incarcerated, the financial burden of providing for their children falls to the new caregiver. More than 50% of all inmates were the primary source of income prior to incarceration, resulting in a significant drop in or the complete loss of the family's income.²⁵ As a result, one out of seven children with an incarcerated parent lives below the poverty line.²⁶ These children living in poverty can also have a significant impact on intergenerational poverty, perpetuating a cycle of economic and health disadvantages that not only affects this generation but subsequent ones.

The lost income can result in a disruption in the children's housing situation. The non-incarcerated parent or caregiver often has to move to less expensive housing as they cannot

²⁵. Leila Morsy, "Mass Incarceration and the Achievement Gap," *The American Prospect*, May 8, 2017, <https://prospect.org/education/mass-incarceration-achievement-gap/>.

²⁶. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, "Children of Incarcerated Parents," The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, accessed July 8, 2023, <https://www.cor.pa.gov/family-and-friends/Pages/Children-of-Incarcerated-Parents.aspx>.

afford the existing housing arrangement due to the incarcerated parent's loss of income. The change in housing location can also cause the children to switch schools and lose friends if they move out of their neighborhood or community.

Children may also experience food insecurity as a result of the lost income. The incarceration of a parent increases the probability of food insecurity for the household with children by up to 15 percentage points.²⁷ Young children who lived with their fathers before incarceration are also three times more likely to experience food insecurity.²⁸

The financial hardships caused by parental incarceration can put families on the brink of disaster and reminds me of my interview with Brian. Brian was one of four siblings. When he was thirteen, his father was convicted of a violent crime and sentenced to a lengthy prison term. Before his incarceration, his father worked full-time and was the primary wage earner for the family. His now single mother was disabled and unable to work. After his father's imprisonment, the family received government assistance, but the amount of money the family of five had to live on was a small fraction compared to when his father worked.

Brian and his family immediately had to move to a much smaller apartment across town and switch schools. His mother carefully monitored every dollar and doled out just enough to meet the basic necessities of housing, food, and used clothing. Wondering if there would be enough food for dinner and going to bed with hunger pangs became Brian's new normal. As Brian worried about his next meal, his friends at school worried about having the latest phone or keeping up with the latest social media trends. Brian often thought about the horrible inequities he suffered because of entanglements with the carceral state and penal systems. The impacts of

²⁷. Jenny Landon and Alexi Jones, "Food Insecurity Is Rising, and Incarceration Puts Families at Risk," Prison Policy Initiative, February 10, 2021, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/02/10/food-insecurity/>.

²⁸. Landon and Jones, "Food Insecurity."

financial hardships experienced by children of incarcerated parents are perhaps the most glaring examples of how incarceration punishes not just the prisoner but their innocent children and families.

3.4 Impact: Children’s Mental, Emotional, and Social Well-being and Health

The trauma of parental incarceration impacts children in ways that generate lasting adverse effects on their mental, emotional, and social well-being. These adverse effects can lead to mental health issues, social isolation, relationship difficulty, and emotional problems, which put the children at risk of developing behavioral and health issues. One study measuring the effects on a child’s brain from different traumatic events found that children separated from a parent due to parental incarceration was more detrimental to a child’s well-being than the divorce or death of a parent.²⁹

According to data from the Economic Policy Institute, children with an incarcerated father are more likely to have adverse health outcomes than children without incarcerated parents (Table 1). These outcomes include a higher likelihood of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, high cholesterol, asthma, and migraine headaches.³⁰

Table 1 – Likelihood of Adverse Health Outcomes for Children with an Incarcerated Father

²⁹. Sarah Beresford, Nancy Loucks, and Ben Raikes, “The Health Impact on Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment,” *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7047477/#>.

³⁰. Leila Morsy and Richard Rothstein, “Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes: Criminal Justice Policy Is Education Policy,” *Economic Policy Institute*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.epi.org/publication/mass-incarceration-and-childrens-outcomes/>.

Adverse Effect	Likelihood for Children with an Incarcerated Father
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	72% More Likely
Anxiety	51% More Likely
High cholesterol	31% More Likely
Asthma	30% More Likely
Migraine ceadaches	26% More Likely

Leila Morsy and Richard Rothstein, “Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes: Criminal Justice Policy Is Education Policy,” Economic Policy Institute, December 15, 2016.

According to the same data, children with either parent incarcerated are more likely to have adverse mental health and behavioral outcomes than children without incarcerated parents (Table 2). These outcomes include a higher likelihood of ADD/ADHD, behavioral problems, depression, marijuana use, developmental delays, learning disabilities, and delinquency.³¹

Table 2 – Likelihood of Adverse Mental Health and Behavioral Outcomes for Children with an Incarcerated Parent

Adverse Effect	Likelihood for Children with an Incarcerated Parent
ADD/ADHD	48% More Likely
Behavioral problems	43% More Likely
Depression	43% More Likely
Marijuana use	43% More Likely
Developmental delays	23% More Likely
Learning disabilities	22% More Likely
Delinquency	10% More Likely

Leila Morsy and Richard Rothstein, “Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes: Criminal Justice Policy Is Education Policy,” Economic Policy Institute, December 15, 2016.

³¹. Morsy and Rothstein, “Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes.”

An analysis of the National Survey of Children’s Health by Child Trends compared the rates of certain adverse childhood experiences for children with and without incarcerated parents (Table 3). According to the analysis, children of incarcerated parents experienced the following adverse outcomes at higher rates: parental divorce or separation, residing with a person with a substance abuse problem, frequent socioeconomic hardship, victim of or witness to domestic abuse, victim of or witness to neighborhood violence, residing with a mentally ill or suicidal person, parental death, and racial discrimination.³²

Table 3 – Children with an Incarcerated Parent Have a Higher Likelihood of Experiencing Adverse Outcomes Than Children Without an Incarcerated Parent.

Adverse Effect	Likelihood (Children w/ Incarcerated Parent)	Likelihood (Children w/o Incarcerated Parent)
Parental divorce or separation	57.0%	17.3%
Residing with a person with a substance abuse problem	54.7%	7.4%
Frequent socioeconomic hardship	46.8%	24.1%
Victim of or witness to domestic abuse	36.9%	5.1%
Victim of or witness to neighborhood violence	32.7%	6.8%
Residing with a mentally ill or suicidal person	27.8%	7.2%
Parental death	9.8%	2.6%
Racial discrimination	8.1%	3.8%

David Murphy and P. Mae Cooper, “Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children?,” Child Trends, October 2015

Beyond the changes in their family situation, children frequently experience changes in how other people treat them, including being stigmatized by their friends or society. This treatment can lead to social isolation and difficulty forming positive relationships. According to a study by Duke University, 25.5% of children of incarcerated parents reported feeling socially

³². Murphy and Cooper, “Parents Behind Bars,” 6.

isolated, almost three times the 9.4% of children without an incarcerated parent.³³ The stigma and judgment of the parent's incarceration are often passed down to their children, causing them to feel shame and embarrassment.

We return to Alice's story to see how parental incarceration impacts children's psychology. An emotionally drained Alice left the prison after her first visit. As the prison receded in the distance, Alice could slowly breathe again. But then, other fears crept into her mind. She was terrified of what would happen if anyone else discovered the secret of her incarcerated father. Would she be expelled from school if her teachers found out? Would her friends ever speak to her if they found out? Alice lived in dire fear that her embarrassment and shame would be publicly displayed if anyone found out. All these negative feelings and emotions became part of her daily existence as Alice struggled mightily to adjust to her new life. Fear, anxiety, and depression replaced her previous feelings of joy, confidence, and contentment, and school became a meaningless chore for her to endure.

3.5 Impact: Adverse Educational Outcomes

Children of incarcerated parents are at risk of experiencing adverse education outcomes, such as school suspension or expulsion, or failing to graduate high school. These children can also have a higher risk of disciplinary problems in school. According to Child Trend's analysis, 58.4% of children ages 6-17 with an incarcerated parent experienced school problems compared to 34% without an incarcerated parent.³⁴ These problems could involve having outbursts in the classroom, getting into fights with other students, or expressing anger or frustration in aggressive

³³ Duke University, "Children of Incarcerated Parents Have More Substance Abuse, Anxiety," The Center for Child and Family Policy at the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy, August 23, 2019, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/08/190823140734.htm>.

³⁴ Murphy and Cooper, "Parents Behind Bars," 18.

ways. Continued problems can ultimately lead to the children getting expelled. The likelihood of expulsion from school for children with an incarcerated father is 23% compared to 4% for other students.³⁵

Beyond the consequences of expulsion, children with incarcerated parents often experience diminished potential for educational success. The range of other adverse effects from parental incarceration may result in the children falling behind in school, missing homework, and struggling to learn the material. In some cases, children decide to drop out of school. According to the Duke survey, 25.5% of children with incarcerated parents dropped out of high school compared to 5.0% of students without an incarcerated parent.³⁶

Even if these children graduate high school and go to college, their educational problems can persist, lowering the probability of graduating college. According to a Pew Charitable Trust report, only 2% of children with an incarcerated mother graduate from college, and only 15% with an incarcerated father graduate, compared to a 40% graduation rate for those without imprisoned parents.³⁷

As told in The Hechinger Report, Victoria's story demonstrates how parental incarceration can affect a child's educational progress. When she was 13, Victoria lived with her grandmother in Oklahoma while her mother served a four-year prison sentence. Victoria was diagnosed with dyslexia and required additional, often intensive, help with her schoolwork, which her mother used to provide before incarceration. Her mother encouraged Victoria during prison visits and received updates from her grandmother on her educational progress. But then

³⁵ The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs," 5.

³⁶ Duke University, "Children of Incarcerated Parents."

³⁷ Christopher Zoukis, "Legacy of Mass Incarceration: Parental Incarceration Impacts One in Fourteen Children," Prison Legal News, February 7, 2017, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2017/feb/7/legacy-mass-incarceration-parental-incarceration-impacts-one-fourteen-children/>.

the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and Victoria's school closed. Her grandmother, at the age of 64, was unwittingly thrust into the role of not only the primary caregiver but also her primary educator. Victoria's grandmother admitted that, at her stage of life, she didn't have the patience to homeschool her. Meanwhile, her mom acknowledged that it was virtually impossible to help with Victoria's education from prison, especially during the pandemic.³⁸ This dynamic put Victoria at greater risk of falling even further behind as she did her best to overcome her learning disability without a safety net.

3.6 Intergenerational Effects of Broken Familial Bonds

The intergenerational effects of the broken familial bonds between children and their incarcerated parents negatively impact society in both the short and long term. The adverse effects on children can last well beyond the period of the parent's incarceration. In many cases, the effects can have a long-lasting, permanent impact on their adult life. The change in expected life outcomes for the children also then affects the prospects and opportunities for their children and future generations.

Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience significant difficulties throughout childhood and as they transition to adulthood. When children experience the trauma of parental incarceration early in life, they are at higher risk of developing their own problems. For example, children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to develop a substance abuse disorder than children without an incarcerated parent.³⁹ Unfortunately, the challenges do not stop with substance abuse. Children of incarcerated parents are also more likely to have the following additional outcomes compared to other children: being charged with a felony (35% vs.

³⁸. Caroline Preston, "It's Really Hard to Parent From Behind Bars," The Hechinger Report, June 27, 2020, <https://hechingerreport.org/its-really-hard-to-parent-from-behind-bars/>.

³⁹. Duke University, "Children of Incarcerated Parents."

11.5%), dropping out of high school (25.5% vs. 5.0%), and becoming a teenage parent (14.3% vs. 2.8%).⁴⁰

Intergenerational incarceration, where children of incarcerated parents become incarcerated themselves, is a significant concern. The cumulative adverse effects on these children, although not their fault, can contribute to a risk of them getting caught up in criminal activity. Involvement in criminal or illegal activities is often a byproduct of the trauma and adverse effects experienced by these children. Research supports that children of incarcerated parents are at a greater risk of themselves becoming incarcerated, with the risk for children of incarcerated mothers even higher than for incarcerated fathers.⁴¹ These outcomes impact the children and extend to the community and society. As such, everyone should have a vested interest in interrupting the intergenerational cycle of adverse effects by providing a support structure for these children. Improved educational outcomes and reduced crime benefit all members of society.

4 Strategic Approach to the Problem

4.1 Maintaining Children-Incarcerated Parents Relationships Improves Children's Outcomes

Facilitating children's ability to maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parents is an effective strategy to address these adverse effects and improve the outcomes for these children and society. Providing opportunities for children to communicate regularly with their incarcerated parents has proven benefits for both the child and parent, as well as the broader community. When children are young, it can be complicated for them to attempt to maintain a

⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁴¹. Morsy and Rothstein, "Mass Incarceration and Children's Outcomes."

relationship with their incarcerated parent, so the role of the caregiver or guardian is especially important. The caretakers can help facilitate a relationship and aid in managing the separation between them. Children can maintain the relationship through in-person visitation, video visitation, written letters, and phone calls. Although staying in touch can be challenging, the research demonstrates how beneficial it is for children to maintain communication with their incarcerated parents.

Many experts believe that visitation conducted in safe, supportive, and child-friendly environments is the best option to mitigate the adverse effects of parental incarceration on children.⁴² These experts are backed by 50 years of research and empirical studies showing that visitation, mail, phone, video, and other forms of contact between incarcerated parents and their children and families lead to better outcomes for the children and the incarcerated (Bales & Mears, 2008; Bales & Mears, 2013; Cochran, 2012; Hairston, 1991; Haverkate & Wright, 2020; Holt & Miller, 1972; Lee, 2020; Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011). Better outcomes for the children include improved mental, emotional, and social well-being and health. This improved well-being can reduce the risk of behavioral problems, substance abuse, and becoming incarcerated themselves.

Many factors influence and determine a child's ability to cope with parental incarceration, including family relationship dynamics, available support systems, resources, the degree of trauma for the child and caregivers, the crime's specifics, and the incarceration sentence's length and terms.⁴³ In addition to research studies, the collective observations of

⁴². Linsley Cramer et al., "Parent-Child Visiting Practices in Prisons and Jails," Urban Institute, April 2017, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89601/parent-child-visiting-practices-in-prisons-and-jails.pdf>, 3.

⁴³. "Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Incarcerated Parents," National Child Abuse and Neglect Technical Assistance and Strategic Dissemination Center (CANTASD), accessed July 17, 2023, <https://cblcc.acf.hhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/FII-Tip-Sheet-Supporting-Relationships-08.23.19-FINAL.pdf>, 2.

clinicians and community service providers indicate that most children can manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit the parent.⁴⁴ By communicating with their parent, children can express their emotions, ask questions, better understand the situation, and have realistic expectations about the future (Table 4).⁴⁵

Table 4 – Children Can Benefit From Communicating With Their Incarcerated Parents

Benefits of Children Communicating with Their Incarcerated Parents
Allows children to express their emotional reaction to the separation from the parent
Can reduce or repair attachment disruptions
Allows the children to know that their parent is safe
Talking about feelings can help them cope with the grief at the loss of the parent to incarceration
Helps the child develop a more realistic understanding of their parent's circumstances
Can set more realistic expectations for the parent's future and possibility of reunification
Seeing the prison and parent can correct inaccurate frightening images the child may envision

University of New Mexico, “Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin: Connecting Children with Incarcerated Parents,” University of New Mexico, accessed July 17, 2023

A 2020 study by researchers at Arizona State University used data from the Arizona Prison Visitation Project to understand the impact visitation and contact have on parent-child relationships. The results showed that all types of contact, including visitation, phone calls, and letters, improved the parent-child relationship.⁴⁶ Through these contacts, children could have a relationship with their incarcerated parents, even in a less-than-ideal situation. Frequently visiting incarcerated parents can improve mental health and reduce children’s behavioral issues.

⁴⁴. CANTASD, “Supporting Relationships Between Children,” 2.

⁴⁵. Ibid; University of New Mexico, “Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin: Connecting Children with Incarcerated Parents,” University of New Mexico, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://childlaw.unm.edu/assets/docs/best-practices/Connecting-children-with-incarcerated-parents-2011.pdf>, 3.

⁴⁶. Danielle L. Haverkate and Kevin A. Wright, “The Differential Effects of Prison Contact on Parent-Child Relationship Quality and Child Behavioral Changes,” *Corrections: Policy, Practice, & Research*, Spring 2020, https://static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/Haverkate_Wright_2020.pdf.

A research study by Western Michigan University found that children said to have behavioral problems upon their father's incarceration displayed increasingly improved behavior after visiting their incarcerated fathers.⁴⁷

A research roundup by the Prison Policy Initiative summarized a 2018 article by The R Street Institute's findings that supportive family relationships could promote psychological and physiological health for incarcerated parents and children when their health would otherwise deteriorate.⁴⁸ They further found that under the right circumstances, visitation can reduce anxiety in children and mitigate the impact of a strained parental relationship.⁴⁹

Kennedy, who told her story in a YouTube video, brings to life the benefits children can realize by having contact with their incarcerated parents. When she was just two years old, little Kennedy enjoyed the familiar comforts of nap time and dolls until one day when her father was arrested and taken to prison. As Kennedy understood her father's situation more, their relationship went through many ups and downs. When she was six, she maintained a good relationship with her father by writing letters and talking on the phone. This phase of their relationship lasted until she was ten, when Kennedy more fully comprehended the implications of her father's 22-year sentence. His absence and the shame of his situation weighed on her more. Kennedy desperately desired that happy father-daughter bond from earlier years. But, with only 30-minute phone calls, their relationship became increasingly strained.⁵⁰

⁴⁷. Creasia Finney Hairston, "Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What?," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare - Western Michigan University*, March 1991, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1970&context=jssw>.

⁴⁸. Leah Wang, "Research Roundup: The Positive Impacts of Family Contact for Incarcerated People and Their Families," Prison Policy Initiative, December 21, 2021, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/.

⁴⁹. Wang, "Research Roundup."

⁵⁰. Kennedy Steel Williams, "Growing Up With an Incarcerated Parent," YouTube Video, December 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqZG28ENrkQ>.

Kennedy did not believe she could restore the relationship until she was old enough to visit her father in prison. During her visits, Kennedy and her father had one-on-one time where they could talk privately and catch up on everything happening in her life. She says it now feels as if nothing had changed, and she was finally getting that relationship she desired with her father. At 17 years old, with her father in prison for 14 years, keeping this contact with her father and letting all her emotions go when talking with him was able to help Kennedy better deal with his absence at home.⁵¹

4.2 Maintaining Children-Incarcerated Parent Relationships Reduces Prisoner Recidivism and Improves Prisoner Behavior

The strategic approach of facilitating children's relationships with their incarcerated parents during incarceration not only improves outcomes for the children but also provides broader societal benefit. By maintaining a relationship with their children, incarcerated parents show improved prison behavior and reduced recidivism after release. Thus, policies and system changes that facilitate contact between prisoners and their family members to foster the child-parent relationship is both humane and contributes to public safety.

4.2.1 Impact: Improved Prisoner Behavior & Reduced Prison Terms

Visitation, contact, and communication with children and family help foster a stronger relationship and connections with the incarcerated parent. This stronger relationship incentivizes the prisoner to behave, including compliance with prison rules and reduced citations for violations, because visitation is a revocable privilege if they do not comply with the rules. This incentive leads to improved behavior because prisoners value these visits, and they do not want

⁵¹. Williams, "Growing Up With."

to risk the potential loss of seeing loved ones. Thus, visitation and contact correlate with improved prisoner behavior before and after the visit.

One study analyzing visitation and misconduct patterns for Florida prisoners showed that the more consistently an incarcerated person receives visitors, the less likely they are to engage in misconduct or rule violations. The reduced probability is because regular contact enables prisoners to feel more connected as family or community members and because the expectation of being visited incentivizes them to behave.⁵² Another study of prison visits and officially recorded disciplinary infractions for 7,000 inmates showed that misconduct decreased significantly in the three weeks leading up to a visit.⁵³ According to a research study of Iowa state prisoners, one additional monthly visit by loved ones reduced prisoner misconduct, as measured by official citations, by 14%.⁵⁴ Because improved behavior leads to reduced time served, the same researcher found that an increase in visitation would reduce time served by 11%. Reduced prison sentences mean these prisoners have the opportunity to become product members of society by holding jobs and contributing financially to their households. Reduced prisoner misconduct and prison sentences lessen the total cost of incarceration, which benefits society.⁵⁵

⁵². Joshua C Cochran, “The Ties That Bind or the Ties That Break: Examining the Relationship Between Visitation and Prisoner Misconduct,” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2012, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2012.06.001>.

⁵³. Sonja E. Siennick, Daniel P. Mears, and William D. Bales, “Here and Gone: Anticipation and Separation Effects of Prison Visits on Inmate Infractions,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, August 2013, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022427812449470>.

⁵⁴. Logan M. Lee, “Far From Home and All Alone: The Impact of Prison Visitation on Recidivism,” *American Law and Economics Review*, January 15, 2020, https://www.loganmlee.sites.grinnell.edu/ALER_Submission_Lee.pdf.

⁵⁵. Lee, “Far From Home.”

4.2.2 Impact: Reduced Recidivism

Parents, upon their release from prison and reunification with their family, often have a better support system that can help them avoid re-incarceration if they maintained a relationship with their children while in prison. Numerous research studies have demonstrated the link between prison visitation and reduced prisoner recidivism over the past fifty years. For example, prisoners in California who received no visitors during their sentence were six times more likely to be reincarcerated within the first year than prisoners with three or more visits.⁵⁶ In Florida, state prisoners with at least one visit had a 30.7% lower probability of recidivism than those without visits, and for each additional visit, the likelihood of recidivism decreased by 3.8%.⁵⁷ The Minnesota Department of Corrections found that visits by clergy and family reduced the risk of re-incarceration by 13% for felony reconvictions and 25% for technical violation revocations.⁵⁸

Increased recidivism results in the following economic burdens on individuals, communities, and society: (1) expenses related to navigation of the justice system, law enforcement, and prison and parole systems; (2) social detriments, including social instability and community disorganization, (3) individual inhibitions for the incarcerated, including lost opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration into society, and (4) damages incurred by crime

⁵⁶. Norman Holt and Donald Miller, "Prisoner and Family Relationship Recidivism Study," Prison Legal News, January 1972, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/publications/holt-miller-prisoner-and-family-relationship-recidivism-study-1972/>.

⁵⁷. William B. Bales and Daniel Mears, "Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?," Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, June 2008, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237298166_Inmate_Social_Ties_and_the_Transition_to_Society_Does_Visitation_Reduce_Recidivism.

⁵⁸. Minnesota Department of Corrections, "The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism," Minnesota Department of Corrections, November 2011, https://mn.gov/doc/assets/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy_tcm1089-272781.pdf.

victims, including medical bills, lost earnings, and psychological distress.⁵⁹ In 2021, 41 states spent over \$8 billion to incarcerate more than 193,000 people for supervision violations and revocations.⁶⁰ Because increased visitation leads to stronger bonds with incarcerated parents and reduces recidivism, ways to facilitate the children’s relationship during the parent’s incarceration can have positive individual, community, societal, and economic benefits.

4.2.3 A Success Story

In a Prison Fellowship YouTube video, Jason demonstrates how continued contact with his family and children provided an incentive for his continued sobriety and rehabilitation. Jason is serving a 9 to 18-year sentence in Nebraska for the non-violent crime of drug possession with the intent to deliver. During this time, he is not physically present as his young children grow up, but that has not stopped him from being involved in their lives. Colorful pictures of his children adorn his otherwise sterile cell walls as he tells his story. Jason’s wife, Abby, participates in the Prison Fellowship Angel Tree program. Volunteers purchase Christmas gifts through this program and deliver them to Jason’s children on Christmas morning. Jason’s children’s eyes light up when they receive his colorfully wrapped presents, even though he is in prison. Jason is still able to have a connection with them on their special Christmas celebration.⁶¹

Jason’s eyes tear up the following week as he reads a letter from his children thanking him for the Christmas gifts. He tells his fellow prisoners at lunch as they high-five him that his focus on recovery and stability in prison is intentional. He is determined to get home and be a

⁵⁹. Christopher Zoukis, “The Cost of Recidivism: Victims, the Economy, and American Prisons,” Zoukis Consulting Group, February 14, 2014, <https://federalcriminaldefenseattorney.com/cost-recidivism-victims-economy-american-prisons/>.

⁶⁰. Justice Center, “The Cost of Recidivism,” Justice Center, April 2023, https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-Cost-of-Recidivism-Infographic_508v2.pdf.

⁶¹. Prison Fellowship, “How Parents in Prison Connect with Their Families,” YouTube Video, November 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEvyEqJ7hwE>.

good father and husband for his family. Jason says that he feels loved even though he is in prison and that doing things like the Angel Tree project with his family makes him feel whole.⁶²

Abbey, Jason's wife, initially worried about Jason reoffending when he gets released because of how powerful drug addiction can be to overcome. However, Jason has used his connection with his family as motivation to pursue sobriety and stability inside the prison. His family and children remind him that he is cared for and has moved on from his old life of addiction. Abbey now believes the future holds great opportunities, and he is ready to successfully re-integrate with the family when he is released.⁶³

5 Discussion of solutions

Policies and structural factors create significant barriers to children maintaining regular contact with their parents while incarcerated. Communication methods include in-person visits, telephone calls, video visits, and letters. Each method has barriers that make it difficult for children to maintain relationships with their incarcerated parents. As a result, over 50% of incarcerated parents in federal and state prisons have had no contact with their children.⁶⁴

5.1 Barriers to In-person Prison Visitation

One of the primary ways to maintain contact with an incarcerated parent is through in-person prison visits. However, these visits are often difficult, if not impossible, due to structural challenges like geographic distance and transportation costs. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 63% of state prisoners are incarcerated more than 100 miles from

⁶². Prison Fellowship, "How Parents in Prison."

⁶³. Ibid.

⁶⁴. Susan D. Phillips, Ph.D, "Video Visits for Children Whose Parents Are Incarcerated: In Whose Best Interest?," The Sentencing Project, October 2012, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/sp/cc_Video_Visitation_White_Paper.pdf, 2.

their homes, while federal prisoners are, on average, more than 500 miles away.⁶⁵ In addition, many prisons are in remote locations inaccessible by public transportation or very expensive for private transport.⁶⁶ Visiting an incarcerated parent at the prison costs the family money, which creates an affordability barrier. In addition to transportation costs, there are often meaningful food and lodging costs if an overnight stay is involved.

Through my research on geographic and transportation cost barriers, I discovered the story of Ameerah on KQED media, which illustrates the difficulty of in-person visits with incarcerated parents when they are in prisons far away from their children. Ameerah, who is 9 years old and lives in California, cherishes the time her father, Deandre, when she visits him in prison. Deandre is serving a 30-year prison term after a third-strike felony conviction, so Ameerah's relationship with him has come through these visits. They read together, color, play Uno, and she tells him about everything happening at school. Ameerah and her mother, Bernice, live in Sacramento and must drive 200 miles and seven hours to see Deandre for a short visit in Salinas Valley State Prison. For Bernice, a single mother working in a homeless shelter, the cost of gas and buying food for three hungry children during the trip takes "a big bite out of her salary."⁶⁷ As a result, they can only make one visit per month, even though Ameera would love to see him more often. After their monthly visit, Ameerah cries on the car ride home, realizing how long it will be until she can see her father again.

⁶⁵. Jaime Joyce, "Let's Make It Easier for Kids to Visit Incarcerated Parents," The Marshall Project, May 10, 2019, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/05/10/let-s-make-it-easier-for-kids-to-visit-incarcerated-parents>; Nancy G. La Vigne, "The Cost of Keeping Prisoners Hundreds of Miles from Home," Urban Institute, February 3, 2014, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/cost-keeping-prisoners-hundreds-miles-home>.

⁶⁶. Joyce, "Let's Make It Easier."

⁶⁷. Tyche Hendricks, "'Good for the Kids': A California Bill Would Place Incarcerated Parents in Prisons Close to Home," KQED, March 31, 2023, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11945315/good-for-the-kids-a-california-bill-would-place-incarcerated-parents-in-prisons-close-to-home>.

In addition to structural barriers, there are policy-driven barriers, such as complicated prison visit logistics, restrictive visitation policies, and invasive security processes. Scheduling a prison visit, especially with children, can be challenging for caregivers. States vary widely in their policies and procedures, making them difficult for caregivers to understand and navigate, especially when policies are not communicated or well publicized. For example, prisons vary in the allowed length of visit, the number of visits in a period, how to schedule a visit, and advance scheduling requirements.⁶⁸

Restrictive prison visitation policies can further limit children's ability to visit incarcerated parents. For example, North Carolina only allows one visit per week of up to two hours.⁶⁹ Many prisons only allow visitation during the day, which makes it more difficult for children in school and caregivers who work.⁷⁰ Some policies do not allow contact with the incarcerated person, and a few do not allow children under 16 to enter the prison.⁷¹ Security procedures can also make visiting stressful. Procedures require visitor searches that are often invasive and humiliating, extending to visitors' vehicles and even body cavities. Imagine the horror of a four-year child when a prison guard they have never seen before touches them all over their body during a search. Such searches contribute to the trauma the children experience and serve as a deterrent to visitation.⁷²

Prison environments and visiting policies in the United States are, for the most part, extremely child unfriendly, often designed in ways that subject children to many of the same

⁶⁸. Chesa Boudin, Trevor Stutz, and Aaron Littman, "Prison Visitation Policies: A Fifty State Survey," *Yale Law & Policy Review*: Vol. 32: Its 1, Article 5, November 6, 2012, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2171412, 160-163.

⁶⁹. Boudin et al., "Prison Visitation Policies," 161.

⁷⁰. Phillips, "Video Visits for Children," 2.

⁷¹. University of New Mexico, "Child Protection Best Practices."

⁷². Boudin et al., "Prison Visitation Policies," 167.

restrictions and intrusions that prisoners experience. Children are often subjected to a physical full body search and sometimes intrusively questioned prior to visitations. They often have to wait hours in sterile waiting rooms while being monitored by correctional employees. When the visits occur, glass barriers separate children from their parents in some prisons, and in others, children have to meet with their parents in crowded, noisy visiting rooms. The visits are strictly regulated by nearby corrections officers, causing parents and caregivers to worry that the children's normal behaviors might inadvertently violate visitation rules.⁷³ In addition, the prison may not permit physical contact, and the image of the incarcerated parent in handcuffs can present an uncomfortable image for the children. In addition, many prisons allow the termination of visits based on the children's behavior, and some state prison policies, such as New Hampshire, prohibit toys in the visiting room.⁷⁴ Given all that children must endure, it is not surprising that an in-person prison visitation can be a traumatic experience.

5.2 Solutions to Reduce Barriers to In-person Visits

Solutions that can reduce barriers to in-person visits include a range of options that include passing legislation, affecting policy reforms, and providing increased funding for transportation costs, and improvements to child visitation rooms. On the legislative front, solutions include passing state caregiver mitigation and diversion laws and proximity laws. Caregiver mitigation laws require judges to consider a caregiver's status as a mitigating factor in sentencing decisions. Diversion laws provide alternative-to-incarceration programs that keep convicted people out of prison. Home-based alternatives to prison sentences, such as drug

⁷³. Phillips, "Video Visits for Children," 2.

⁷⁴. Boudin et al., "Prison Visitation Policies," 168.

treatment programs, home supervision, electronic monitoring, and other community-based alternatives, allow parents to maintain consistent relationships with their children.⁷⁵

As of February 2023, eight states (California, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington) had passed caregiver mitigation and diversion laws.⁷⁶ For example, Washington state has a *Community Parenting Alternative* program that allows parents convicted of non-violent, low-risk crimes to serve the last 12 months of their sentence under home supervision.⁷⁷ A second program, *Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative*, allows judges to order community service and programming for parents of minor children instead of prison time.⁷⁸ The passage of caregiver legislation and the successful implementation of these laws in states with different political environments is encouraging. It indicates that criminal justice reform that focuses on the welfare of children can draw support from across the political divide.⁷⁹

One way to reduce the geographic distance and transportation cost barriers to in-person visits is through proximity laws. Proximity laws require that incarcerated caregivers serve their sentence in a facility within a specified distance from the children, making it easier for children to visit their incarcerated parents. As of February 2023, four states (Florida, Hawaii, New Jersey,

⁷⁵. Leah Wang and Katie Rose Quandt, “Building Exits Off the Highway to Mass Incarceration: Diversion Programs Explained,” Prison Policy Initiative, July 20, 2021, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/diversion.html>.

⁷⁶. Emma Peyton Williams, “How 12 States Are Addressing Family Separation by Incarceration — and Why They Can and Should Do More,” Prison Policy Initiative, February 27, 2023, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/02/27/caregivers/>.

⁷⁷. Casey Family Programs, “How Can Child Protection Agencies Support Children Spending Time with Their Parents Who Are Incarcerated?,” Casey Family Programs, February 27, 2023, <https://www.casey.org/parental-incarceration-strategy-visits/>.

⁷⁸. Casey Family Programs, “How Can Child Protection.”

⁷⁹. Williams, “How 12 States Are.”

and New York) have a maximum distance allowed between children and incarcerated parents, making in-person visits more accessible.⁸⁰

California Assemblymember Matt Haney (D-San Francisco) introduced a proximity bill, AB 1226 (Keep Families Close Act) in March 2023, mandating that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation incarcerate parents with minor children as close to them as possible.⁸¹ The bill, modeled on New York’s 2020 law, was signed into law in July 2023, making California the fifth state with a proximity law.⁸² The new law provides hope for children and caregivers like Ameerah and her mother that they will be able to increase the frequency of their visits.

These proximity laws can be hard to implement in practice because the concentration of prisons may be geographically far from the concentration of the population. For example, 41% of incarcerated people in New York are from New York City, but they are almost all in prisons located hundreds of miles away in upstate New York.⁸³ Future proximity laws should include funding to cover the costs of organizing and transporting children and families to the prison location when a state cannot meet the requirements of its proximity laws.⁸⁴ Where available, these laws should provide funding to existing nonprofits with the established infrastructure and logistics to offer free transportation services for children to visit their incarcerated parents.

One exemplary nonprofit is the Center for Restorative Justice Works (CRJW). They operate the Get on The Bus (GOTB) program, which aims to reunite children with their

⁸⁰. Ibid.

⁸¹. Hendricks, “Good for the Kids.”

⁸². Will Conybeare, “‘Keep Families Close’ Bill Signed into Law to Help Children with Incarcerated Parents,” KTLA, July 24, 2023, <https://ktla.com/news/california/keep-families-close-bill-signed-into-law-to-help-children-with-incarcerated-parents/>.

⁸³. Williams, “How 12 States Are.”

⁸⁴. Ibid.

incarcerated parents. The program accomplishes this goal by providing transportation and arranging trips for children and caregivers to visit the incarcerated parents in prison. The transportation is free, and they give the children travel bags, photos from the visit with their incarcerated parent, and a shared meal free of cost.⁸⁵ Ameerah and her mother participate in the GOTB program to visit Deandre every year. Through fundraising efforts and the engagement of volunteers and staff all over California, GOTB has reunited over 15,000 children with their incarcerated parents.⁸⁶

In addition to potential legislative solutions, there are opportunities for state Departments of Corrections to adopt separate child-friendly visitation policies and procedures to address visitation policy-driven barriers. The changes should focus on reducing the traumatic elements of the visit for the children without compromising security. For example, for first-time children visitors, prisons should provide a staff member or volunteer to walk the children and caregiver through the steps of the process and allow them to ask questions to reduce feelings of anxiety.⁸⁷ Prisons could offer children a sticker as a reward for successfully going through security to help the child see staff and volunteers as friendly and approachable and set a positive tone for the visit.⁸⁸

Policy changes should focus on streamlining/automating the logistics of scheduling visits. Prisons should clearly communicate, including posting on their website, the visitation rules/requirements, scheduling logistics, and necessary pre-approvals. Caseworkers should know

⁸⁵. “The Center for Restorative Justice Works (CRJW) ,” CRJW.org, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://crjw.org/>.

⁸⁶. Center for Restorative Justice Works , “CRJW Annual Report 2022 ,” CRJW.org, April 19, 2023, <https://crjw.org/2023/03/31/9751/>, 6.

⁸⁷. Youth.gov, “Tip Sheet for Prison/Jail Staff and Volunteers: Supporting Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent,” Youth.gov, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents/federal-tools-resources/tip-sheet-prison-staff-volunteers>, 1.

⁸⁸. Youth.gov, “Tip Sheet for Prison/Jail,” 1.

this information and help coordinate and prepare the children for the visits. In a best-case scenario, child-serving agencies, nonprofit organizations, prisons, jails, and the Department of Corrections should work together to create an optimal visitation experience from a child's point of view.⁸⁹ Another opportunity to reduce the traumatic effects of the children's visits is for the prisons and jails to make visitor waiting areas and visiting rooms child-friendly. In June 2021, The Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance announced a program to award prisons five grants of \$350,000 each. The prisons are to use the money to create child-friendly family-visiting spaces and revise policies and procedures for a more child-friendly visitation experience.⁹⁰

Prisons should try to minimize the wait time before the visit and provide books, toys, and activities to reduce the children's stress before the actual visit. Prisons should consider modifying existing non-contact visitation policies that allow children some form of safe contact. Children can easily be intimidated when all visitors and prisoners are in a large common area for the visit. In addition, the language and behavior of other visitors may not be appropriate for children. To the extent possible, prisons should consider ways to give families maximum privacy without compromising safety and security.⁹¹

5.3 Barriers to Phone and Video Communication

Phone calls eliminate the vast majority of the in-person barriers; however, the fundamental problem with the prison calling system is the steep price of the calls and relative

⁸⁹. Casey Family Programs, "How Can Child Protection."

⁹⁰. Bureau of Justice Assistance, "Child-Friendly Family Visiting Spaces in Jails and Prisons Program," Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, June 10, 2021, <https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/media/document/child-friendly-family-visiting-spaces-webinar-presentation-6-2021.pdf>.

⁹¹. Youth.gov, "Tip Sheet for Prison/Jail," 2.

unaffordability to the incarcerated and their family. As discussed above, the incarcerated parent is often the primary wage earner, and families struggle financially during their incarceration. According to the Prison Phone Justice organization, prison calls typically cost significantly more than non-prison calls because the prison has contracted out to phone service providers who pay the prisons a commission from the money charged to the incarcerated person and their family. According to their website, “Prisoners—quite literally—a captive market—are forced to rely upon monopolistic, predatory operators chosen for them by state agencies.”⁹² For example, a 15-minute call from a Louisiana State Prison costs \$3.15, and a woman communicating with her father in prison incurred \$400 of costs that would have been free for anyone else in Louisiana but prisoners.⁹³

Virtual or video prison visitation uses video conferencing platforms to allow an incarcerated person to visit with someone outside the prison via the Internet. The outside person has options for connecting to the incarcerated person, including at home, kiosks outside the prison, community organizations, and video kiosks within the prison. Despite its potential to address the issues with in-person visits and calls, the pre-pandemic implementation of video visitation resulted in numerous problems. Technology issues resulted in families’ unhappiness with the solution. Issues identified by users included poor video quality, audio lags, pixelated screen images, and frozen videos, all of which increased the anxiety of the family members.⁹⁴

⁹². “Prison Phone Justice: About,” prisonphonejustice.org, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.prisonphonejustice.org/about/>.

⁹³. David M. Reutter, “Cost of Communicating with Prisoners Breaking Family Budgets During Pandemic,” Prison Legal News, December 1, 2020, <https://www.prisonphonejustice.org/news/2020/dec/1/cost-communicating-prisoners-breaking-family-budgets-during-pandemic/>.

⁹⁴. Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner, “Screening Out Family Time: The For-Profit Video Visitation Industry in Prisons and Jails,” Prison Policy Initiative, January 2015, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/report.html>.

Families noted that they would often lose 5 minutes of a 20-minute virtual visit due to technical problems.⁹⁵

In addition to the technical problems, video visitation developed an economic model that replicated the financial cost burden of the prison phone calling model. While FaceTime and Google Hangout were free even before the pandemic, prison video visitation, similar to prison phone calls, was costly due to excessive usage fees. According to a 2019 Marshall Project analysis, families spent an average of \$63 per month on video visitation, with some spending up to \$500 per month and some paying as high as \$1 per minute.⁹⁶ Pre-pandemic unregulated pricing allowed prisons to turn video visitation into a profit center, resulting in the “continued economic exploitation of family and friends of incarcerated persons.”⁹⁷ In addition, many families could not obtain a refund for poor-quality video, resulting in a class action lawsuit against JPay, the largest national provider of video prison visits.⁹⁸ Many providers also require a credit card to pay for the service, another barrier for low-income families.

For the caregivers of children, another barrier is having access to the Internet in a private space. Given the financial hardships incurred by the families of incarcerated parents, internet access costs, in addition to the fees charged by the prison, exacerbate the cost barrier for video visitation. Free public Internet access is usually in places, such as libraries, where it would not be feasible for families to have a private video visit with the incarcerated parent. Private Internet

⁹⁵. Rabuy and Wagner, “Screening Out Family.”

⁹⁶. Beatrix Lockwood and Nicole Lewis, “Can You Hear Me Now?,” The Marshall Project, December 19, 2019, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/12/19/can-you-hear-me-now>.

⁹⁷. Prof. Patrice A. Fulcher, “The Double-Edged Sword of Video Visitation: Claiming to Keep Families Together While Furthering the Aims of the Prison Industrial Complex,” Prison Legal News, November 8, 2014, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2014/nov/8/double-edged-sword-video-visitation-claiming-keep-families-together-while-furthering-aims-prison-industrial-complex/>.

⁹⁸. Lockwood and Lewis, “Can you hear me.”

access requires a technology device, such as a computer or phone, which is another significant cost barrier.

5.4 Solutions to Reduce Barriers to Phone and Video Communication

The COVID pandemic has created a new policy opportunity to reform video visitation to capture the benefits while eliminating the previous drawbacks and solving the problems mentioned earlier. With the advent of COVID-19 quarantines and lockdowns, the pandemic mostly eliminated in-person communication and accelerated the adoption of video communication, as video conferencing platforms such as Zoom became widely available and included a free option. In addition, three years past the start of the pandemic, investments in video conferencing solutions have now made the technology more stable and reduced technical barriers.

To address pre-pandemic high-cost barriers, prisons should adopt video conferencing technology that allows them to offer free video visits so that children can maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parents regardless of the caregiver and families' financial circumstances. Prisons should not partner with companies that profit from captive prisoners and should ensure that the free video visits are genuinely free without any hidden costs. While some prisons have opted to adopt free video visits, it will likely require lobbying pressure or legislative mandate on the Department of Corrections for more widespread adoption.

Prisons should minimize their video conferencing costs by renegotiating current contracts or conducting a request-for-proposal (RFP) process with new vendors. The prevalence of free video meetings, such as Zoom, has given prisons additional leverage in price negotiations with vendors. In addition, prisons should bundle video solutions with phone and e-mail, often available at no additional cost through one telecommunications provider. If funding is still

necessary, prisons can consider sources such as government funding or grants, foundations, prisoner general welfare funds, and community-based partnerships.⁹⁹

Prisons can improve the economics of offering free video visits by using the video conferencing technology to reduce other prison costs and streamline logistics. Examples of ways to utilize the technology to lower their costs or streamline logistics include:¹⁰⁰

1. Offer prisoners video-based mental health services that are not otherwise available.
2. Offer prisoners video-based medical visits, similar to the Telehealth industry, that eliminate trips to the infirmary.
3. Offer prisoners and attorneys video-based attorney-client visits to reduce visitor congestion in prisons.
4. Offer prisoners and attorneys video-based court hearings and probation interviews to eliminate secure transportation and logistics costs.

To address pre-pandemic video quality barriers, prisons should adopt a highly reliable video conferencing solution that minimizes technology problems. Zoom has led the market, offering high-quality audio and video designed to work on unstable or weak networks. In addition, prisons should use video conferencing technology to simplify scheduling video conferences and adopt family-friendly technology policies. For example, prisons should allow families to log on and enter the waiting room 20 minutes before a video visit so the caregiver can resolve any technology issues.

As a way of addressing internet access barriers with caregivers, states should form partnerships with community-based organizations to host computer stations for families to

⁹⁹ Allison Hollihan and Michelle Portlock, “Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations,” U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Corrections, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://nicic.gov/resources/nic-library/all-library-items/video-visiting-corrections-benefits-limitations-and>, 29.

¹⁰⁰ . Hollihan and Portlock, “Video Visiting in Correction,” 9-12.

ensure that children and caregivers without internet access have access to video visitation.¹⁰¹ For families that do not have home Internet access, several programs may be able to assist financially, thus increasing the accessibility of video visitation. Caseworks, child-serving agencies, and prisons should educate caregivers about the organizations that provide subsidized or discounted Internet for qualifying low-income consumers. Examples of these programs include [EveryoneOn](#), the FCC’s [Emergency Broadband Benefit](#), and the FCC’s [Lifeline Program](#).

In June 2020, Department of Justice’s Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) changed its regulations to provide federal prisoners with free video-teleconferencing and phone calls during the national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic under Section 540.106 under the CARES Act.¹⁰² The Federal BOP should make permanent the provisions under CFR 540.106.

The biggest challenge to video visiting adoption is the state’s Departments of Corrections abandoning the progress made on video visits during the pandemic as the world returns to normal and the focus switches back to in-person visits. For example, California offered free video visits during the pandemic, but is now phasing out video visits in favor of returning to in-person visits.¹⁰³ The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) is a compelling example of a state that successfully adopted the free video visit model during the pandemic and has kept it as a permanent solution. When the pandemic prevented in-person prison visits in March 2020, the Pennsylvania DOC immediately switched to video visitation via Zoom, with 130,000 visits

¹⁰¹. Phillips, “Video Visits for Children,” 4.

¹⁰². Bureau of Prisons, Department of Justice, “Video Visiting and Telephone Calls Under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act,” Federal Register, June 22, 2020, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/06/22/2020-13004/video-visiting-and-telephone-calls-under-the-coronavirus-aid-relief-and-economic-security-cares-act>.

¹⁰³. Travis Schlepp, “California Department of Corrections Adds Additional In-Person Visitation Day,” KTLA, May 4, 2023, <https://ktla.com/news/california/california-department-of-corrections-adds-additional-in-person-visitation-day/>.

conducted by August 2020.¹⁰⁴ The program was so successful that Corrections Secretary Jon Wetzel confirmed, “Video visits will remain a visiting option forever.”¹⁰⁵

The Pennsylvania DOC’s current video visitation policy includes the following elements: (1) video visits are free, (2) each video visit will be 45 minutes long, (3) up to 6 authorized visitors may participate in the video visit, (4) inmates in the prison general population are allowed up to six video visits per month, (5) video visits are incremental to the up to four allowed in-person visits, and (6) visitors can join Zoom up to five minutes before the scheduled visit start time.¹⁰⁶ At the time of the video visit launch in 2020, Susan McNaughton, then-Communications Director for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, stated, “The inmates have responded favorably to the video visitation program. In fact, several have told us that they now are able to visit people they haven’t seen in decades, because those people couldn’t make the trip to the prisons for in-person visits.”¹⁰⁷ In March 2023, Acting Department of Corrections Secretary Laurel Harry indicated that video visits had increased by more than 300% since the suspension of in-person visits.¹⁰⁸ “We absolutely value visits, and those video visits give folks an opportunity who may be out of state, elderly, or can’t travel,” she said.¹⁰⁹

6 Conclusion

¹⁰⁴. Elliot Davis, “California to Offer Virtual Visits for Prisoners After Thanksgiving,” U.S. News & World Report, November 25, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-11-25/california-to-offer-virtual-visits-for-prisoners-after-thanksgiving>.

¹⁰⁵. Paul Guggenheimer, “Pennsylvania Prisons to Upgrade Video Visitation for Inmates,” TribLIVE.com, August 15, 2020, <https://triblive.com/news/pennsylvania/pennsylvania-prisons-to-upgrade-video-visitation-for-prison-inmates/>.

¹⁰⁶. Pennsylvania DOC, “PA DOC Inmate Visitation,” Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://www.cor.pa.gov/family-and-friends/Documents/Visitor-Guide.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷. Davis, “California to Offer”

¹⁰⁸. Peter Hall, “Lawmakers Question Pa. Corrections Department Head on Inmate Health and Safety,” Pennsylvania Capital Star, March 30, 2023, <https://www.penncapital-star.com/civil-rights-social-justice/lawmakers-question-pa-corrections-department-head-on-inmate-health-and-safety/>.

¹⁰⁹. Hall, “Lawmakers Question Pa.”

With 1.8 million prisoners, the United States has the highest prison population and incarceration rate of any country in the world. Even worse, over half of the prisoners are parents to minor children, resulting in 2.7 million, or 1 in 28, children with a currently incarcerated parent. Including formerly incarcerated parents, over 5 million children in the U.S. have experienced the effects of parental incarceration. These children are innocent victims whose broken parental bonds cause adverse childhood effects in many aspects of their lives. Such adverse effects include caregiver disruption, financial hardships, food insecurity, housing instability, educational interruption, emotional and behavioral problems, and mental and physical health issues. These adverse outcomes result from a situation beyond the children's control.

Numerous research and empirical studies show that children who maintain regular contact with their incarcerated parents have better outcomes (Bales & Mears, 2008; Bales & Mears, 2013; Cochran, 2012; Hairston, 1991; Haverkate & Wright, 2020; Holt & Miller, 1972; Lee, 2020; Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011). These outcomes include improved mental, emotional, and social well-being and health and reduced behavioral problems, substance abuse, and incarceration risk. In addition, this regular contact provides incentives and support that improve prisoner behavior and reduce the risk of recidivism. These parental outcomes reduce the cost of incarceration and lower crime rates, which makes society better.

Despite these benefits, there are many significant policy-driven and structural barriers to children maintaining regular contact with their incarcerated parents. In-person prison visits can be difficult, if not impossible, for children due to geographic distance, transportation costs, complicated prison visit logistics, restrictive visitation policies, invasive security processes, and child-unfriendly waiting and visiting rooms.

However, legislative and policy reform solutions can help lower these barriers to in-person visits. First, states should pass caregiver mitigation and diversion laws that consider caregiver status in sentencing decisions, including alternative-to-prison programs that would allow children access to their parents. Second, states should pass proximity laws that limit the distance an incarcerated parent can be imprisoned from their children and ensure adequate resources for implementation. Third, states should fund programs that provide transportation for children to visit their parents in prison. Lastly, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the state's Department of Corrections should adopt child-friendly visitation policies and procedures to reduce the traumatic elements of prison visits without compromising safety and security.

In addition to in-person visits, there are barriers to children maintaining contact through phone calls and video visits. Prison calls are typically significantly more expensive than non-prison calls, with the telecommunications providers and prisons making money from the inflated prices. Despite the availability of free virtual video solutions, unregulated pricing allows prisons to turn video visits into profit centers by economically exploiting the children and families of the prisoners. Pre-pandemic video visits also suffered from technology problems and poor-quality video. In addition, a lack of Internet access can also be a barrier for families.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for prisons to adopt video conferencing technology that allows them to offer free video visits so that children can have regular contact with their incarcerated parents without many of the drawbacks of in-person visits. Prisons should minimize their costs by leveraging free solutions, such as Zoom, to renegotiate their current contracts or conduct a request-for-proposal (RFP) process with new vendors. As part of this process, prisons should conduct a technology evaluation to ensure they have or adopt a highly reliable solution that minimizes technology problems and maximizes video quality.

Prisons should also use video conferencing technology in other areas of prison operations to lower existing costs or streamline logistics. To address Internet access barriers, prisons should form partnerships with community-based organizations, such as churches and nonprofits, to host computer stations for children and families without Internet access.

There has been some progress in these areas. Twelve states have adopted caregiver mitigation or proximity laws, with three more currently considering them. Some state prisons have started offering free phone calls. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections adopted Zoom to offer free video visits to state prisoners permanently. The Department of Justice provides grant funding for improvements to visiting areas and revisions to policies and procedures to support child-friendly visitation experiences.

However, the progress made is nowhere near close enough to what it needs to be to make a real difference in helping vulnerable children, the innocent victims of parental incarceration. We must collectively lobby state lawmakers, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the state's Department of Corrections for genuine legislative and policy-driven change. In doing so, we can change children's outcomes and break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration-driven adversity they face, and their children and grandchildren will face if we do not act.

7 Advocacy Actions You Can Take

It is time for us to take action on behalf of all the vulnerable children of incarcerated parents in the U.S. to help them maintain their relationships while in prison. I encourage everyone to take an active role in advocating for these children.

The following is a list of ways you can help:

1. Write/call/e-mail the leadership team of the Federal Bureau of Prison

Write/e-mail Collette S. Peters, the current Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), and the 18 people on her leadership team (see Appendix A for the names and information for sending communications). The communication should advocate for the Federal BOP to (1) adopt more child-friendly visitation policies and (2) make permanent the provisions under CFR 540.106, which temporarily provides for free phone calls and video visits during the pandemic.

2. Write/e-mail/call the Director of the Department of Corrections for your state

Write/e-mail/call the current or acting head of the Department of Corrections for your state (see Appendix B for the names and addresses of the Department of Corrections for all 50 states and D.C.). The communication should advocate for adopting (1) more child-friendly visitation policies, such as expanded weekday and weekend visiting hours, and alternatives to invasive searches for children, and (2) video conferencing technology and corresponding policy changes that would allow state prisons to offer video visitations for free.

3. Write the legislative representatives for your state

Write/e-mail/call the legislative representatives (State Assembly or State Senator) for your district and state. You can find your representatives and their contact information via Internet searches. The communication should advocate for the state legislature to (1) pass caregiver mitigation and diversion laws (if they haven't already), (2) pass proximity laws (if they haven't already), (3) pass laws funding and mandating the adoption of video conferencing technology and offering free calls and video visits for state prisoners, and (4) provide funding transportation costs for children to visit their incarcerated parents.

4. Support nonprofit organizations that provide family connection services

Numerous nonprofits provide a range of services to help children of incarcerated parents. These include mentoring programs, counseling and mental health services, educational support, support

groups, resource provisions, legal aid, and life skills programs.¹¹⁰ In addition, many nonprofits provide family connection services, such as organizing prison visits, to help children maintain relationships with their incarcerated parents (see Appendix C for a list of selected nonprofit organizations and the services the family connection services offer). You can support these organizations by volunteering your time or through donations that help pay for the cost of providing the service.

¹¹⁰. ChapGPT, response to “Describe the types of services nonprofit organizations offer to help children of incarcerated parents,” July 26, 2023, <https://chat.openai.com/?model=gpt-4>.

Appendix A - Federal Bureau of Prisons Contact Information (7-27-23)

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E-mail Form

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William W. Lothrop is the Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons

Kathleen Toomey, Associate Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons

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Randall C. Burleson is the Acting Assistant Director of the Administration Division

Linda Geter is the Assistant Director of the Correctional Programs Division

Christopher Gomez is the Regional Director of the Mid-Atlantic Region

L. Cristina Griffith is the Assistant Director of the Human Resource Management Division

Andre Matevousian is the Regional Director of the North Central Region

Alix M. McLearen is the Acting Director of the National Institute of Corrections (NIC)

Louis Milusnic is the Assistant Director of the Program Review Division

Patrick T. O'Connor serves as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Federal Prison Industries

Shannon W. Phelps is the Regional Director for the Southeast Region

Kevin Pistro is the Acting Assistant Director of the Reentry Services Division (RSD)

Melissa Rios-Marques is the Regional Director for the Western Region

Heriberto Tellez is the Regional Director of the South Central Region

Sonya Thompson is the Assistant Director of the Information Technology and Data Division

James C. Wills is the Assistant Director of the Office of General Counsel (OGC) and the Bureau of Prisons' General Counsel

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Appendix C - Nonprofit Organizations Offering Family Connection Services (7-27-23)

Angel Tree Program

The Prison Fellowship Angel Tree works to spread hope to men and women in prison through the word of the Gospel. The Angel Tree program supports prisoners' families by delivering Christmas gifts each year on behalf of the incarcerated parents, strengthening their bonds and making them feel like the child is receiving a personal gift from their parent.

Website - <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/>

Assisting Families of Inmates (AFOI)

Assisting Families of Inmates strives to provide families with opportunities to bond with and deepen their relationships with their incarcerated loved ones. AFOI recognizes the importance of family visitations within the prison complex, prioritizing building the connection between the incarcerated parent and child.

Website - <https://afoi.org/>

Center for Restorative Justice Works (CJRW) Get on the Bus Program (GOTB)

The program Get on the Bus creates opportunities where, with the help of volunteers, children and family members of the incarcerated can travel to visit them. These events happen throughout the year, and the organization covers all travel and expenses, encouraging more families to participate.

Website - <https://crjw.org>

Children of Inmates

Children of Inmates focuses on prioritizing the growth and support of children of incarcerated parents. They accomplish this through hosting bonding visits for the children to visit their parents and having information sessions that the incarcerated parents can attend.

Website - <https://www.childrenofinmates.org/>

Foreverfamily

Foreverfamily is an Atlanta-based program that works to ensure that all children have the opportunity to be surrounded by the love of family. Foreverfamily provides services to children of incarcerated parents and their families to ensure that, no matter the circumstances, all children can be surrounded by the love of family.

Website - <https://www.foreverfam.org/>

Girl Scouts Beyond Bars

The goals of the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB) program are to lessen the impact of parental separation due to incarceration, to foster the personal and social development of girls and their mothers, and to provide girls with the opportunity to participate with their parents in the Girl Scout Leadership Experience. Parents and their daughters actively lead in planning and implementing Girl Scout program activities. They participate in facilitated discussions about family life, conflict resolution, and preventing violence and drug abuse. After release, parents and daughters can continue participating in troop meetings in their communities, making Girl Scouting a consistent presence.

Website - <https://www.girlscouts.org/en/site-search.html?q=Girl+Scouts+Beyond+Bars>

Hope House

Hope House has three main goals: (1) to strengthen families and, in particular, the relational bonds between children and their fathers imprisoned far from home; (2) to reduce the isolation, stigma, shame, and risk these families experience when fathers and husbands are imprisoned; and (3) to raise public awareness about this most at-risk population.

Website - <https://www.hopehousedc.org>

KidsMates Inc

KidsMates Inc. is a national nonprofit organization co-founded by children of incarcerated parents. KidsMates Inc.'s advocacy raises awareness about the silent American epidemic of parental incarceration and its lifelong negative impacts on affected children. The organization implements initiatives to improve outcomes, foster resilience, and empower children of incarcerated parents.

Website - <https://www.kidsmates.org>

The Messages Project

The Messages Project focuses on the children left behind when a parent is incarcerated in prisons in Virginia, Nebraska, and Missouri several times a year to create videotapes or DVDs from incarcerated parents to their children. The recordings are mailed home to children and families, often with a book read as part of the message.

Website - <https://thessagesproject.org>

Photo Patch

Photo Patch endeavors to demystify what children of incarcerated parents face and need, as there is often a disconnect between what people suspect and reality. The application allows children and families to submit photos and letters electronically, and Photo Patch prints and mails them to the incarcerated parent for free.

Website - <https://www.prisonmail.org/>

PrisonMail.org

PrisonMail simplifies communication and encourages constant correspondence between prisoners and their families and loved ones. It uses the convenience of the Internet to allow those with incarcerated loved ones to send messages regularly.

Website - <https://www.prisonmail.org/>

Prisoner Visitation and Support

PVS is the only nationwide interfaith visitation program given access by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Defense to visit all federal and military prisoners. We have 300 volunteers across the U.S. who regularly visit over 90 federal and military prisons.

Website - <https://www.prisonervisitation.org>

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