

Mass incarceration resulting in strains for families and children

[Health & Medicine](#), [Mental Health](#)



Getting a Trauma in the Childhood

Children are in a time in their life where their brains are developing (Pettit and Sykes). Having to go through that at a small age scar you; this can develop into psychological issues because when a person is small they tend to remember events that they went through and that will shape the rest of their life (Pettit and Sykes). For example, if they experienced a horrible childhood like their parents were incarcerated, they are most likely going to develop mental health issues faster than other kids. " Research suggests that adults who experience the onset of depression in childhood or adolescence have more impaired social and occupational functioning and poorer quality of life" (Pettit and Sykes). Children are really sensitive and prone to getting affected by anything, similar to the idea of them catching a cold easier than adults because they are susceptible to getting sick. So many of these kids experienced early-onset depression because one of their parents got incarcerated or both of them and now they are under the care of family members or they are in foster care. During the 1980s through the late 1990s, the foster care population of African American kids increased by 25% (Barbell 4). What is even more surprising is that during the 1980s and 1990s the " children of color are not abused at higher rates than white children... because of the disproportionate number of children of color in the child welfare population" (Barbell). Meaning that children of color are being put in foster care for other reasons: incarcerated parents. This shows how mass incarceration, especially the War on Drugs did have an impact on the kid's life. Living in these circumstances sets the child at a disadvantage because they can suffer from " emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems"

(Barbell 6). Therefore proving how being placed in foster care can make the children not develop well leading to them living a much more strenuous life. Thus making them have a much harder looking future, although some may argue that white children also had a similar experience, African American children had it worse because they had fewer opportunities.

A Stressful Life of Parents

Children were not the only ones that suffered, but their parents or their relatives also faced hardships from mass incarceration. “ The incarceration of a parent is often a stressful event for families. This is a concern for the stress levels of the parent or parents that are incarcerated because it can affect their well being” (Davis and Schlafer). When they come back home, they are going to “ face a multitude of challenges such as reduced income, residential instability, increased demands related to advocating for the imprisoned parent, and shame or stigma associated with incarceration, all of which can increase stress for parents and negatively impact parent-child relationships” (Davis and Schlafer). Therefore, this stressful life can often lead to depression and other mental illnesses later on in life. Consequently, in the long term this can lead to increased aches and pains, decreased appetite and insomnia (WebMD). Because of that, this can make the parents have a stressful life after getting out of prison. Consequently, because of the symptoms, it can affect how they take care of their children or how they perform on their minimum wage job and in the long run this will in return also affect their children. They would not be able to optimize their time and give their children better opportunities for their future. So their mental

stability will not let them educate their children to a better future which can have major consequences for the children when they grow up.

Relapse and Returning to Normal Life

Others argue that many of the parents already suffered from mental and psychological illnesses, mainly from drug and alcohol abuse before they even went to prison (Travis and Waul 131). Therefore disproving how they were unjustly imprisoned just because of their skin color but rather showing how they were incarcerated for drug possession. So when they went to prison they did not receive much help when it came to battling the illness or help them get sober. Not only that but some of the ex-inmates experienced relapses once they went back home to live a “ normal” life (Travis and Waul 2). Some of the relapses are alcohol and drug abuse, that is not including the extra family tensions that they experience (Travis and Waul 2). In the long term this, of course, could affect them getting a steady job and having a healthy relationship with their children if they can get them out of foster care. A main cause of the relapse was because when they were in prison they were basically secluded from the outside world so going back and trying to go back to normal was hard (Travis and Waul 2). A similar idea although not to the same extreme as this is like being in the dark for a whole day and being exposed to the sun once you step outside, it hurts your eyes but now makes that idea a million times worse because that is the rest of their lives. In addition, going back was also hard because they also had the pressure of maintaining their child if they were still there or if not many of them had to have a steady income in order to get them back. And of course, relapses can

happen to anyone, but ex-inmates, especially African Americans since they had fewer opportunities to receive help generally than white people because racism was still going on in the 1980s through the 1990s.

The Problems of Caregivers

Incarceration can result in “ strains for families and children such as loss of family income, disrupted attachment with caregivers, poor parenting skills, social stigma, and inadequate supervision of children (Davis and Shlafer). “ The stress associated with having an incarcerated family member can cause declines in personal well-being and impaired parenting skills in caregivers (Davis and Shlafer)” Therefore the health of the caregivers was also not at their best, they are under constant stress and their well being deteriorates. It is a lot to ask for from a person because taking care of children does take a toll on your body and that can have repercussions in the future with their health. People that are part of the extended family are not supposed to have their lives changed because of incarceration, they have a whole future ahead of them and now they are given the responsibility of taking care of children. Their now planned future is now broken and they have to take care of others, not just their family.