

# The Growth of **INCARCERATION** in the United States

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SEPTEMBER 2014

ISSUE BRIEF

## Consequences for Families

After decades of stability, U.S. federal and state prison populations escalated steadily between 1973 and 2009, growing from about 200,000 people to 1.5 million. The increase was driven more by changes in policy—measures that imprisoned people for a wider range of offenses and imposed longer sentences—than by changes in crime rates. Has this greater reliance on incarceration yielded significant benefits for the nation, or is a change in course needed?

To answer that question, a committee of the National Research Council examined the best available evidence on the effects of high rates of incarceration. The committee found no clear evidence that greater reliance on imprisonment achieved its intended goal of substantially reducing crime. Moreover, the rise in incarceration may have had a wide range of unwanted consequences for society, communities, families, and individuals. The committee's report, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, urges policymakers to reduce the nation's reliance on incarceration and seek crime-control strategies that are more effective, with better public safety benefits and fewer unwanted consequences.



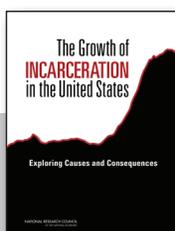
### **Growth of Incarceration Means That More Children and Families are Affected**

Wider use of imprisonment in the U.S. means that many more children and families have been affected by a parent's incarceration. From 1980 to 2000, the number of children with a father in prison or jail increased from about 350,000 to 2.1 million – affecting about 3 percent of all U.S. children. According to the most recent estimates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 53 percent of those in prison in 2007 had minor children. In that year, an estimated 1.7 million children had a parent in state or federal prison.

Some groups of children have been affected at higher rates; in 2007, Hispanic children were 2.7 times more likely and African American children were 7.5 times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison. Over 25 percent of African American children born in 1990 experienced a parent sent to prison by their fourteenth birthday.

### **Incarceration Associated with Poorer Outcomes for Children and Families**

Incarceration is strongly correlated with negative social and economic consequences for prisoners' families. Fathers' incarceration is associated with instability in male-female unions and with families' economic hardship; families with a father in prison are more likely to be homeless, have difficulty meeting basic needs, and make greater use of public assistance. Because men released from prison have trouble finding work, financial problems for families often persist after the father returns home.



**THE GROWTH OF INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES**  
Exploring Causes and Consequences

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Having a father in prison is associated with a range of poor social, psychological, and academic outcomes for children, including the potential for depression, anxiety, and behavior problems such as aggression and delinquency. These impacts are more likely and more pronounced among boys and among children who were living with and positively involved with their father before his incarceration. Studies of children with mothers in prison—a group that grew rapidly in recent decades—are relatively recent and generally based on small sample sizes, and so more research is needed to draw strong conclusions about consequences.

## **Reducing Incarceration and Better Preparing Prisoners for Release Would Limit Harm to Families**

Policymakers should take several steps to reduce the harmful consequences incarceration may have for families, as well as for society, communities, and individuals:

- Reducing rates of incarceration and seeking a wider set of tools with which to respond to crime would limit harmful family separations and the economic, social, and emotional consequences that may occur when a parent is imprisoned.
- Legislators and prison authorities should improve prison conditions with the goal of increasing prisoners' chances of reentering society with social relationships intact and better prepared to make a positive, productive transition.
- A broad review should be conducted of the penalties and restrictions faced by former prisoners in their access to social benefits, rights, and opportunities that might otherwise promote their successful reintegration into society and ability to contribute to their families and communities.

## **Principles to Guide Policy**

In a democratic society, policymakers need to consider not only empirical evidence but also principles and values as they determine policies for punishment. The following four principles have helped shape criminal justice in the United States and Europe for hundreds of years. Policymakers should consider these principles as they weigh sentencing and prison policies:

- **Proportionality:** Is the severity of sentences appropriate to the seriousness of the crime?
- **Parsimony:** Is the punishment the minimum necessary to achieve its intended purpose?
- **Citizenship:** Do the conditions and consequences of punishment allow the individual to retain his or her fundamental status as a member of society, rather than violating that status?
- **Social justice:** Do prison policies promote and not undermine the nation's aspirations to be fair in terms of the rights, resources, and opportunities people have?

These principles should complement the objectives of holding offenders accountable and combating crime. Together, they help define a balanced role for the use of incarceration in U.S. society.

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This issue brief is one in a series prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the report *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*. The study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice and the MacArthur Foundation. Any findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the study committee and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsors.