



People with Family Members in Prison are Less Likely to be Engaged American Citizens

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"They just have too many people in prison that shouldn't be here," says Crystal, the 21-year-old wife of a prisoner. She goes on to comment on the system as a whole:

There's a lot that's in prison because they didn't have an adequate lawyer, or they couldn't afford it, so they got a public defender that didn't care, you know, or that went along with the DA or somethin' an' that's how they got here!... I don't even feel like we have a justice system anymore. Cuz I mean, it's crazy. I feel like everybody should be treated equal in the justice system, even if you have a lot of money, and even if you don't have no money... what kind of justice system do we have if I can get off of a case because I have more money?

As Crystal's reaction suggests, faith in the public institutions can sour just as thoroughly for family members and romantic partners of those behind bars as for currently confined or newly released prisoners. The correctional system not only punishes those convicted of crimes; it also conveys political messages to offenders and their families and friends, influencing their beliefs about government and willingness to take part in civic life. Research evidence confirms that mass incarceration has erected extra barriers to citizen engagement among marginalized people whose bitter experiences lead them to distrust the criminal justice system and feel alienated from U.S. politics. American democracy suffers as a result, because citizen participation is central to the democratic process, and trust in the legitimacy and fairness of the government contributes to people's sense of full citizenship.

How Mass Incarceration Affects Families

Family ties mean that a major segment of the United States population is impacted by the extraordinary numbers of people sent to U.S. prisons in recent times. The most robust data available reveal that in 2007 about 1.7 million children in the United States have had a parent incarcerated, comprising 2.3 percent of the United States population under the age of 18. In addition, approximately 17 percent of state and federal prisoners report being married; a nearly equal proportion are divorced, and many more have ties to romantic partners. Beyond spouses, former spouses and romantic partners, prisoners are of course also tied to many other family members including parents, grandparents, and brothers and sisters.

Having a close family member serving prison time affects multiple domains of life, including economic hardship, family dynamics, and emotional wellbeing. Of course, poverty and other kinds of economic disadvantage plague these families even before a member is sent to prison, but careful research studies suggest that additional economic woes follow afterwards. Relationships suffer, leading to frayed emotions and economic lifelines. Difficulties compound across generations for poor people, mostly racial minorities, who already had a hard time in life. Adult children of incarcerated parents are more likely than others from similar backgrounds to end up going to prison themselves.

Consequences for Family Members' Civic Engagement

The adverse effects of mass imprisonment also undercut citizenship. Adult children of incarcerated parents are less civically engaged than other children of similar backgrounds. Their parents, whether imprisoned or not, were often not civically engaged themselves. And the prisoner's offspring, in turn, end up being less likely to be registered to vote, less likely to have voted in the last presidential election, and less likely to engage in community service. They express lower trust in the government and are more likely to perceive discrimination.

Interviews with women who recently experienced the release of male romantic partners underscore their heightened distrust of the criminal justice system and the authorities who run it. Fatalistic attitudes emerge from what these women experience as discrimination and injustice. Already grappling with unusually severe social and economic hardships, female partners of imprisoned men often feel set up to fail – like Celina, who was parenting her two young children alone after her boyfriend was sent back to prison, in her eyes unjustly, losing his job at Home Depot. “I don’t think people understand when you’re like stripped of everything, and you work so hard for it,” she explains, as she spells out how betrayed she feels.

Well why should I work hard?... Why should I obey the laws if, you know, this is what it’s gonna get me?” [S]ometimes you just think to yourself, “Well maybe he could have gone to a program or something like that and you know, got help that way.” [Instead of] “making him go to a place where he’d lose his job and have to start from scratch all over again, and you know how hard it is for an ex-felon to get a job, so, it just makes you mad. ... [T]his man was riding a bicycle back and forth to work, to Home Depot... doing everything correct, or legit, for the first time.”

Larger Implications for American Civic Life

Family members tied to incarcerated people experience reduced economic and social wellbeing, and at the same time become increasingly alienated from the institutions that ostensibly support economic and social progress for all Americans. For these families, the prison system becomes the source of bitter lessons, the main lessons they learn about the workings of society and politics. Women, children, and other family members and friends connected to prisoners become even less able and willing to vote and otherwise participate in the democratic process – ensuring that correctional and social practices that don’t work very well for anyone will continue to go unnoticed by political reformers and elected officials.

All of us should be concerned when cycles of disadvantage are perpetuated across generations – not just for economic and social reasons but also because citizen faith and participation breaks down in affected communities. How long can U.S. democracy flourish with a growing sector of marginalized and disengaged people who do not feel they are equal citizens?

Read more in Hedwig Lee, Lauren Porter, and Megan Comfort, “The Collateral Consequences of Family Member Incarceration: Impacts on Civic Participation and Perceptions of Legitimacy and Fairness.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651, no. 1 (2014): 44-73.