



Women & Incarceration Project
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INCARCERATING MEN HARMS WOMEN TOO: A MASSACHUSETTS BRIEFING¹

Executive Summary

This briefing for policy-makers and activists summarizes current research on the ways that incarcerating *men* harms *women's* economic and housing security, physical and mental health, personal safety, and parenting and family relationships.

Economic Consequences. When male family members go to prison, women often lose their household's primary source of income ([Clayton et al., 2018](#)), accumulate debt, work multiple jobs, struggle to pay bills ([Bruns, 2017](#); [Bruns, 2019](#)), and take on new expenses and debt to pay for bail, attorney's fees, commissary bills, phone calls, and prison visits ([Page et al., 2019](#); [Clayton et al., 2018](#)).

Housing. Mothers and their children often experience housing insecurity during and in the periods following their partners'/fathers' incarceration ([Geller & Franklin, 2014](#)). This is due both to financial stresses and to state policies regarding subsidized housing ([Aruleba et al., 2022](#); [Ocen, 2012](#); [Desmond, 2014](#)). These issues especially impact women of color.

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence. Rates of physical intimate partner violence committed by formerly incarcerated men are five to six times higher than rates reported in the general U.S. population ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016](#)).

Women's Health. Steep declines in life expectancy ([Wildeman, 2012](#)), significantly elevated rates of heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, obesity, overall poor emotional, mental, and physical health ([Lee et al., 2014](#); [Clayton et al., 2018](#)), and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) ([Khan et al., 2011](#)) are prevalent in women with incarcerated family members.

Parenting. When fathers are incarcerated, mothers take on the work associated with managing the resulting financial, emotional, legal and medical challenges ([Lee & Wildeman, 2021](#)), leading to increasing risk of major depression and drug use among these mothers ([Bruns & Lee, 2020](#)).

Community Health and Well-being. Individuals living in neighborhoods with high rates of incarceration are more likely to suffer major depressive disorders and generalized anxiety disorders ([Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015](#)), elevated rates of hypertension, high cholesterol levels, metabolic syndrome ([Topel et al., 2018](#)), COVID infection ([Reinhart & Chen, 2020](#)), and infant and child mortality ([Conway, 2021](#); [Dyer et al., 2019](#)).

Policy Implications for Massachusetts. 1) Lower men's incarceration rates through ending cash bail, eliminating mandatory minimum sentences, non-coercive treatment instead of prosecution for drug-related transgressions, and probation and parole reforms ([An Act Relative](#)

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to [Criminal Justice Reform, 2018](#)). 2) Help keep incarcerated men involved with their families with free phone calls from prisons and jails ([H.1900 / S.1559](#)). 3) House returning citizens by expanding access to subsidized housing for formerly incarcerated individuals and their families in Massachusetts ([Aruleba et al., 2022](#)). 4) Facilitate non-carceral responses to family and intimate partner violence with expanded use of transformative and restorative justice approaches ([Jane Doe Inc., 2020](#)).

Introduction

One in four women in the United States has a family member in prison. This includes 44% of Black women and 12% of white women ([Lee et al., 2015](#); [Clayton-Johnson, Karefa-Johnson & Rasaki, 2020](#)).² Many more—approximately 50% of US women—have family members who formerly were incarcerated ([Equal Justice Initiative, 2018](#); [Enns et al., 2019](#)). As mothers, sisters, partners, co-parents and neighbors of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men, women provide financial and emotional support to men held in jails and prisons, share shelter and resources with men after their release, and live in households and communities harmed by the scars that incarceration leaves on those who have spent time behind bars ([Miller, 2021](#)).

Our intention in this briefing is not to minimize the ways in which men are hurt by the criminal legal system.³ Rather, we see the harmful impact of men’s incarceration on women as one facet of a carceral system that tears millions of men and women away from their families and communities, abrogates human rights to safety, privacy and freedom of movement, and results in lifelong struggles with health and financial well-being.⁴

This briefing summarizes the most current and rigorous research showing specific ways in which incarcerating men harms women’s economic and housing security, physical and mental health, personal safety, and parenting and family relationships. Wherever possible, we highlight long-term studies that evaluate impacts over substantial periods of time. We hope the research presented here will prove useful for policy-makers and activists working to improve the lives of men, women, and children, to reduce incarceration, and to strengthen families and communities in Massachusetts and throughout the United States.

Economic Consequences

When sons, fathers, partners and co-parents go to prison, women suffer financially. In the first study of its kind, the Essie Justice Group surveyed 2,281 women with incarcerated loved ones across the United States. A third of respondents (32%) reported having lost their

² Numbers on other demographic groups are harder to assess. According to one recent study, an estimated 48% of Hispanic Americans and 63% of Native Americans have experienced the incarceration of a close family member ([Enns et al., 2019](#)).

³ As of February 2022, 6,033 men were held under the jurisdiction of the [Massachusetts Department of Correction](#), and another 6,087 men were incarcerated in [county jails](#) in the state.

⁴ Non-binary people are not included in this analysis due to the lack of research at this time. We note that gender-queer people are involved with the criminal legal system at especially high rates, and we hope to see more research that’s gender-inclusive in the future ([Jones, 2021](#)).

household's primary source of income when a loved one was incarcerated, and nearly 70% reported becoming their family's only wage earner ([Clayton et al., 2018](#)).

Women with incarcerated partners are more likely than other women to accumulate debt, and work multiple jobs, and struggle to pay bills ([Bruns, 2017](#); [Bruns, 2019](#)). In Massachusetts, nearly one quarter of individuals (primarily men) under Department of Correction (DOC) jurisdiction were part of the child support caseload; as a consequence, their partners (primarily women) lost child support payments due to their incarceration ([Griswold & Pearson, 2003](#); see [Hager, 2015](#) for more on child support debt accumulated during incarceration). Financial struggles continue after incarceration due to discrimination that makes people with criminal records less employable and less able to earn a living wage ([Agan & Starr, 2017](#)). This discrimination may help to explain why formerly incarcerated fathers are less likely to contribute to their families, and those who do contribute provide significantly less financial support for their children than never-incarcerated fathers ([Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011](#)).

At the same time as women grapple with lost household income, they take on new expenses and debt to pay for bail, attorney's fees, commissary bills, phone calls, and prison visits ([Page et al., 2019](#); [Clayton et al., 2018](#)). Massachusetts families pay approximately \$14 million each year on phone calls to connect with incarcerated loved ones ([Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts, 2021](#)).

Everywhere I turn people need me and look at me to take care of things: the children, my mother, my [formerly incarcerated] brother, my [formerly incarcerated] man. My brother moved in and my place is too crowded. And I'm in bad shape myself. I have nightmares most nights and my hair is falling out. Last month when I got my check I bought a comforter, sheets and pillows for my son's bed. It cost \$70. Then I was upset with myself for spending that money when I need it for soap, detergent, toilet paper for all these people staying here. (Tonya, Boston, MA)⁵

Housing

Over a third of women surveyed by the Essie Justice Group experienced homelessness or other housing insecurity because of a loved one's incarceration ([Clayton et al., 2018](#)). Similarly, a rigorous national study of 4,125 families (the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study), which included Boston families, found that mothers and their children often experience housing insecurity in the periods following their partners'/fathers' incarceration ([Geller & Franklin, 2014](#)).

People leaving jails and prisons struggle to locate and afford stable housing ([Couloute, 2018](#)). This is largely due to 1) discrimination against people with criminal records, 2) administrative barriers to securing subsidized housing, and 3) severe shortages of affordable housing in much of Massachusetts ([Aruleba et al., 2022](#)). Homelessness additionally places formerly incarcerated individuals at risk of reincarceration for violating the terms of parole that,

⁵ The quotes from Tonya and Gloria (pseudonyms) were made to Susan Sered in the course of her research documented in [Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, Drugs and the Limits of Personal Responsibility](#).

for example, prohibit contact with people who have criminal records or that require the individual to locate housing within a certain amount of time ([Miller, 2021](#)).

Thus, a man's first post-incarceration landing spot is often with family members, and specifically with female family members. Approximately 80% of the mostly male respondents in the Boston Reentry Study who reported staying with family were staying with female relatives through at least the first six months out of prison ([Western et al., 2015](#)). However, in Massachusetts and across the country there are policies prohibiting anyone with a felony conviction from visiting or living in subsidized housing ([Aruleba et al., 2022](#)). As a consequence, it is all too common for women to lose their housing due to the felony record of a partner or other family member ([Ocen, 2012](#)). This dynamic particularly impacts Black women who already face discrimination in housing due to both racism and historical redlining ([Desmond, 2014](#)).

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

Prisons are notorious breeding grounds for violence. Physical, sexual, and verbal violence are used both by other incarcerated people and by guards as a means of control and as currency for gaining respect ([Mariner, 2001](#); [Bourgeois, 2014](#)). Male prisoners in particular may experience, be threatened with, and witness violence on a daily basis. Research shows that violent and controlling behavior can carry over after incarceration ([McKay et al., 2018](#)). A national study of 666 couples who participated in “family strengthening programming” following the male partner's release from prison found that rates of physical intimate partner violence committed by formerly incarcerated men were **five to six times higher** than rates reported in the general U.S. population ([McKay et al., 2016](#)). Focus groups conducted with men incarcerated in Wisconsin, New York, and Tennessee provide more details. In response to a request to describe the circumstances in which they or similarly situated men are likely to commit an act of intimate partner violence upon their return to the community, the men spoke about economic stresses, lack of household authority, suspicions or proof of infidelity, and displaced anger regarding having been sentenced to prison ([Oliver & Hairston, 2008](#)).

A ten-year study of 342 men arraigned in the Quincy District Court in Quincy, MA for a crime of domestic violence between 1995 and 1996 found that criminal-legal interventions did little to prevent future incidents of abuse. Most tellingly, **jail sentences (in contrast to probation supervision and other responses) were most highly linked with future abuse arrests** ([Klein & Tobin, 2008](#)). These findings are consistent with studies and analyses showing that incarcerating men—even as a response to intimate partner violence—leads to increased violence against women ([Davis et al., 2021](#)).

Donald [got out of prison and] came here and wants to stay with me but I can't have overnights [visitors] here [in her subsidized room in a single room occupancy house]. ... Donald stays here at night and sneaks out in the morning before anyone sees him. ... He broke my phone. ... He kept me locked in my room for two days... He hit me in the face and poured

water on my head. ... I called the police. No, I didn't make a complaint because I don't want to get him more angry. (Gloria, Boston, MA)

Women's Health

The incarceration of men has dramatic effects on women's health. Among the 2,815 individuals in the national Family History of Incarceration Study, incarceration of any family member led to a projected 2.6-year reduction in life expectancy ([Sundaresh et al., 2021](#)). In fact, **increases in male incarceration rates over the past decades have led to steeper declines in women's life expectancy than in men's** ([Wildeman, 2012](#)).

Women with family members who are incarcerated have significantly elevated rates of heart attacks and strokes, diabetes, obesity and overall poor health ([Lee et al., 2014](#)). Women whose partners were incarcerated also have dramatically higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV infection ([Khan et al., 2011](#)). In the Clayton et al. ([2018](#)) study, 86% of women characterized the impact of a loved one's incarceration on their own emotional and mental health as "significant" or "extreme," and 63% of women reported that their physical health had been significantly or extremely affected by a loved one's incarceration.

Nearly half (46%) of mothers who had a son incarcerated experience medical distress, compared to a quarter (26%) of mothers who do not have a child incarcerated ([Lee & Wildeman, 2021](#)). Moreover, studies show that mothers' health impacts continue to increase in the years following the son's incarceration, having a cumulative effect over time—increasing significantly two and four years after the son's release ([Sirois, 2020](#)).

Parenting

When fathers go to prison, mothers and children pay the price. An estimated 47% of men incarcerated in Massachusetts are fathers of minor children.⁶ Having a father who is incarcerated is associated with children moving more frequently, greater socioeconomic neighborhood disadvantage, psychological strain, suspension or expulsion from school, economic hardship, criminal legal system involvement, and lower social cohesion ([Liebbrand et al., 2019](#); [Geller & Franklin, 2014](#); [Martin, 2017](#)). The damage caused to children as a consequence of their fathers' incarceration is well-documented and well-known ([Wakefield & Wildeman, 2018](#)). Less attention has been given to the costs of women taking on all the work associated with managing the resulting challenges to their children's health, behavioral, academic, social and legal situations ([Lee & Wildeman, 2021](#)).

⁶ According to the U.S. [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), 47% of men in state prison and 58% of men in federal prison have at least one child under the age of 18. MA DOC reported [6,033 men](#) on 2/1/2022 in its jurisdiction population (Massachusetts Department of Correction [MA DOC], 2022a), and MA Sheriffs reported [6,087 men](#) on 2/21/2022 in county facilities (MA DOC, 2022b). Applying 47% to those two counts, we estimate that approximately 5,696 incarcerated men in Massachusetts are likely to have at least one child under the age of 18 years.

Incarceration of one's child(ren)'s father increases women's risk of a major episode of depression. In the national Fragile Families study cited [above](#), incarceration of one's child(ren)'s father was significantly associated with a mother's drug use. This association is highest among Black women ([Bruns & Lee, 2020](#)). While the Fragile Families study did not trace racialized links between mothers' drug use and children's encounters with the criminal legal system, other studies explore the forces that push more Black children into child welfare institutions and foster care ([Roberts, 2002](#))—and into early engagement with the criminal legal system (for Massachusetts data, see [Lowenstein, 2018](#)).

Community Health and Well-being

Incarceration impacts not only the immediate families of the men who are or were in prison, it also impacts the wider communities into which these men return. Rates of incarceration vary widely from neighborhood to neighborhood, typically peaking in neighborhoods that are home to large numbers of people of color (see [Forman, van der Lugt, & Goldberg, 2016](#) for Massachusetts data). Individuals living in neighborhoods with high rates of neighbors in prison are more likely to suffer major depressive disorders and generalized anxiety disorders than individuals living in neighborhoods with low prison admission rates. Moreover, relationships between neighborhood-level incarceration rates and mental health challenges are comparable for individuals who have and who have not personally experienced incarceration. In other words, even people who have not been to prison or who do not have a directly-related loved one in prison suffer negative mental health impacts from high rates of community-wide incarceration — even when studies control for education, employment, income and race ([Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015](#)). High neighborhood incarceration rates also are associated with elevated rates of hypertension, high cholesterol levels, and metabolic syndrome - even when individual and neighborhood-level risk factors are adjusted for ([Topel et al., 2018](#)).

Incarceration also affects community health through the transmission of infectious diseases (see [Nowotny et al., 2020](#) on STIs). Of recent concern in Massachusetts, an estimated 6,682 COVID-19 cases were traced to outbreaks in prisons in the three-month period between May 1 and August 1, 2020 alone ([Hooks & Sawyer, 2020](#)). Transmission from prison and jail to communities is due not only to men coming home but also to prison and jail staff going back and forth from home to work on a daily basis. Similarly, people going back and forth between jail and the community accounted for 55 percent of the variance in COVID-19 case rates in 2019 across ZIP codes in Chicago and 37 percent of the variance in all of Illinois. In fact, [Reinhart and Chen \(2020\)](#) found that movement between jail and community far exceeded race, poverty, public transit use, and population density as a predictor of elevated COVID-19 infection rates.

The potentially fatal impact of incarceration is passed along to the next generation. At the community level, high prior year incarceration rates are associated with high rates of infant mortality, child mortality, preterm births, and low-weight births in subsequent years. This relationship tends to be stronger for Black than for white children, further exacerbating the pernicious impact of racism in American communities ([Conway, 2021](#); [Dyer et al., 2019](#)).

Policy Implications

Many common sense reforms would lower the likelihood of incarceration for men—and for women and non-binary people as well. These include ending cash bail, eliminating mandatory minimum sentences, non-coercive treatment instead of prosecution for drug-related transgressions, as well as probation and parole reforms. Massachusetts took some steps in this direction with the [2018 Criminal Justice Reform Act](#), but that law has not been fully implemented ([Schoenberg, 2022](#)).

As of March 2022, two bills in the Massachusetts [House](#) and [Senate](#) would make phone calls and other communications from prisons and jails free and maximized to the extent possible. We encourage the Massachusetts legislature to pass this legislation aimed at alleviating financial pressure on families, keeping fathers involved in their children’s lives, and laying the groundwork for smoother transitions after release from prison.

Housing policy is an area where reform would have an especially beneficial impact on the men returning from incarceration, the women who want to welcome them home, as well as the substantial numbers of women who have been incarcerated themselves. [Aruleba et al., \(2022\)](#) lays out strategies for expanding access to subsidized housing for formerly incarcerated individuals and their families in Massachusetts. These include allowing people on parole or probation access to subsidized housing, allowing individuals with convictions to move back in with their families upon release, and setting aside units for people reentering the community after incarceration.

Finally, the research literature suggests that policies and practices facilitating non-carceral responses to family and intimate partner violence would contribute to women’s health and safety. In [Jane Doe Inc. \(2020\)](#), the Massachusetts organization Jane Doe Inc. emphasizes that criminal-legal interventions disproportionately harm Black and Brown families. In place of the current adversarial and punishment-oriented policies and practices, the Jane Doe Inc. report calls for expanded use of transformative and restorative justice approaches. These approaches seek to avoid reinforcing or perpetuating violent norms, emphasize obligations to “put right” the harms that have been caused, and actively cultivate the prevention of violence through commitments to accountability, resilience, and safety for all involved.

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