



# Over-Incarceration of Nonviolent Offenders Hurts Children and Families and the Effects of Incarceration Radiate into Communities

FINDINGS FROM ABF PRIZE-WINNING RESEARCHER JOHN HAGAN'S WHITE HOUSE WORKSHOP ON PARENTAL INCARCERATION<sup>1</sup>



**Parental imprisonment affects more than just the children of those incarcerated: in schools where parental imprisonment is greater, college graduation rates are driven down dramatically.<sup>2</sup>**

## Key Findings

- Since 1970, the proportion of nonviolent offenders in prison has increased dramatically.<sup>3</sup> This increase is mostly due to a shift in sentencing law and policy, not an increase in criminal activity.<sup>4</sup>
- The US incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world.<sup>5</sup>
- Approximately half of all imprisoned persons in the US are parents.<sup>5</sup>
- Parental incarceration disproportionately affects communities of color. One in four black children have had a parent incarcerated.<sup>3</sup>

## Consequences for Families and Communities

- At the outset of an incarceration term, the non-incarcerated parent or caregiver may be distressed and unprepared for changing parenting roles and the additional responsibilities they must now undertake, creating more pressure for the family unit.<sup>5</sup>
- Parental incarceration creates traumatic separation for children and spouses and causes economic and health decline for families.<sup>6</sup>
- Children of incarcerated parents demonstrate difficulty transitioning to successful adult lives, including greater rates of delinquency in adolescence, higher unemployment, lower educational achievement, and greater risk of involvement in the criminal justice system themselves.<sup>7</sup>

**Students with incarcerated fathers have a 25% chance of graduating college, if the school they attend has a paternal incarceration rate near 0%.**

**In advantaged U.S. schools, 40% or more of the students graduate from college.**

**In schools where the paternal incarceration rate is near 20%, students with an incarcerated father have just a 13% chance of graduating from college, and students whose fathers are not incarcerated also suffer a reduced likelihood of college graduation (25%).**

**Students with incarcerated mothers have a 2% chance of graduating college, if the school they attend has a maternal incarceration rate near 0%.**

**In schools where the maternal incarceration rate is near 10%, students with an incarcerated mother have just a 1% chance of graduating from college, and students whose mothers are not incarcerated also suffer a reduced likelihood of college graduation (25%).**

## REAL WORLD IMPACT

Charles E. Wood, of Southborough, MA, a Life Fellow of the ABF, recently put ABF research to use in the courtroom. His client, a father, had admitted guilt to a nonviolent offense and knew that prison was a certainty. When Mr. Wood made his presentation on sentencing on behalf of his client, he referred the judge to Professor John Hagan's ABF Research on the limited educational prospects for children of incarcerated parents. "The judge knew about the ABF," said Mr. Wood, "and it was this argument that the judge paid attention to. The DA wanted a sentence of a year-and-a-half, but the judge gave my client eight months." He added, "It would have been irresponsible to my client not to use this research."

### Citations

1. The findings outlined here are output from the ABF's White House Workshop on Parental Incarceration organized by ABF Research Professor John Hagan. Professor Hagan's own research is based on the data collected by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health ("Add Health").
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3. Wakefield, Sara, and Christopher James Wildeman. *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*.
4. "Fact Sheet: Trends in U.S. Corrections." *The Sentencing Project*. April 2015.
5. Arditti, Joyce A. *Parental Incarceration and the Family Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.
6. Lee, R. D., X. Fang, and F. Luo. "The Impact of Parental Incarceration on the Physical and Mental Health of Young Adults." *Pediatrics*, 2013.
7. Roettger, Michael E., and Raymond R. Swisher. "Associations of Fathers' History of Incarceration with Sons' Delinquency and Arrest Among Black, White, and Hispanic Males in the United States." *Criminology*, 2011, 1109-147.

### Sources

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