



Mitigating the Impact of Incarceration on Children and Families

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INTRODUCTION

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country, but the group most impacted by incarceration is not always the one behind bars. The statistics are startling: More than 10 million children live with a parent who has been involved in the criminal justice system at some point, and approximately 1 in 28 children have a parent who is currently incarcerated. The incarceration of a family member deeply affects families, disproportionately impacting Black parents and children. One study indicates that almost twice as many Black children (11.5%) have experienced a parent going to jail compared to white children (6%). [1](#)

The instability of the family unit caused by incarceration significantly affects children in several ways, ranging from socioeconomic challenges to substance abuse issues. Notably, one of the most profound impacts is on the education of these children. While the likelihood of a child being expelled from school is 4%, this figure increases to 23% for children with an incarcerated parent. The disparities in college graduation rates are even more striking: The rate is 40% without the presence of parental incarceration but drops to 15% for children with an incarcerated father and just 2% for those with an incarcerated mother.

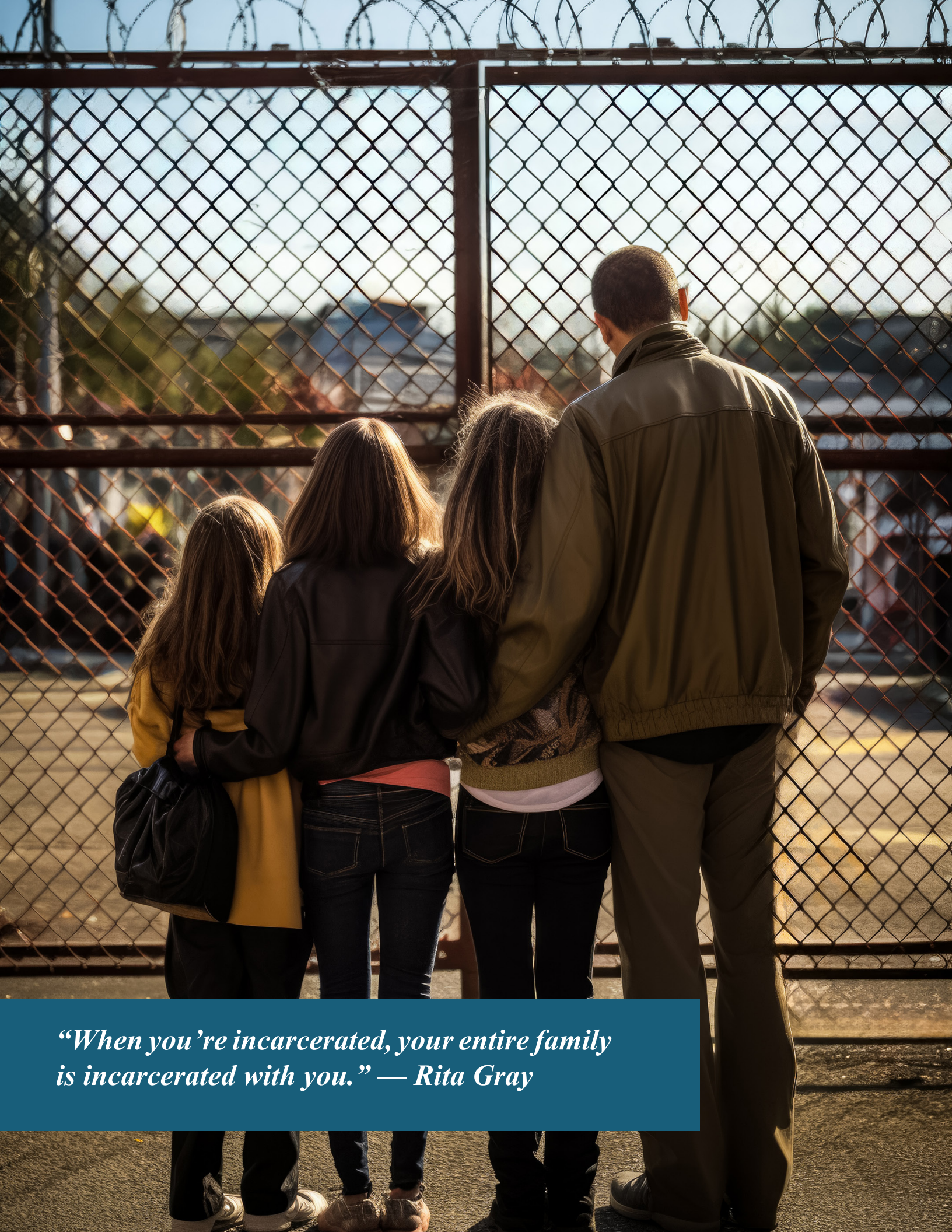
In response to these alarming statistics, the National Center for Victims of Crime convened a working group of experts to share their lived experiences with both their own and parental incarceration and to examine the impacts on their families and children. We've distilled this rich conversation into five key takeaways for institutions to implement in effort to mitigate the trauma experienced by families during incarceration.



An important note: While many children and families benefit from more frequent contact with their incarcerated parent, there are some cases in which it could be detrimental to the child's mental well-being — for example, in cases of domestic or interpersonal violence. NCVC believes children should be given the autonomy to decide whether they want to visit an incarcerated parent to ensure that more traumatization does not occur.

This report would not have been possible without the expertise of our co-authors, **Tanisha Murden, Rita Gray, and Louis. L. Reed**. We thank them for sharing their knowledge, experiences, and ideas and helping us create a more healing space for all survivors.





“When you’re incarcerated, your entire family is incarcerated with you.” — Rita Gray

TAKEAWAYS

1. Create comfortable spaces for interaction and visitation

- Visitation can be difficult for both children and adults. Witnessing a parent in a position in which they are unable to engage with you normally, having every movement controlled and watched, and enduring extensive checks both before and after the actual visit often compound the trauma of a visit. Within this context, our working group identified the following tangible suggestions for institutions:
 - ▶ Create a child-friendly atmosphere: Redo spaces with calming colors, toys for younger children, comfortable seating, and less harsh lighting. Creating a calming environment can help children feel more relaxed and enable parents to engage more naturally with their children.
 - ▶ Allow physical touch: Allow children and parents to hug, sit close to each other, or hold hands. Physical touch is limited or banned in many institutions but is important for both children and their parents. Allowing children to express themselves with physical touch can benefit both parties.
 - ▶ Allow for outdoor visitation: Build outdoor spaces for additional connection. Some institutions, such as [HomeWAV](#), have started to build walking areas, playgrounds, or other outdoor spaces that allow families to connect with each other outside of the walls of jails or prisons. This change in setting aids connections that families are often missing in visits.

2. Consider implementing specialized liaison positions to support families both during and post-incarceration

- Family liaison/coordinator: Our group members discussed in depth the challenges people face when reentering family life after incarceration. Often, these individuals are thrust back into the role of a full-time parent while also navigating housing, employment, health care, and their own mental health needs. In many cases, grandparents have stepped in as substitute parents, requiring the person returning from incarceration to rebuild relationships with their children and their own parents. Family liaisons or coordinators can significantly support familial interactions during and after incarceration. For example, professionals in these positions can help schedule more frequent visits, support the individual returning from incarceration with any mental health needs related to trauma, and engage with family members — all things that can set the returning individual for success. The person in this position would also be connected with the family post-incarceration, checking in with the individual and their family members about continued mental health needs, reacclimating to full-time parenting, liaising with schools if needed, and providing general support to everyone involved.

“The system, as it stands, is meant to break you and break up families.” - Louis Reed



3. Train correctional staff on trauma-informed and family-centered interactions

- Correctional staff, more often than not, have not received trauma-informed training and do not employ trauma-informed practices in their interactions with people who are incarcerated. Our working group reported that this impacts family visitation: Frequent and invasive searches were commonplace and sometimes occurred in full view of their families. Trauma-informed training can help staff improve interactions during visitations, mitigating some of the trauma created during visitations. Prison staff members should be trained to understand that while there are specific safety requirements, they can follow them in ways that aren't as harmful — and it's imperative they understand that they must treat everyone with a basic level of respect. Staff could be required to speak calmly, explaining the violations in an age-appropriate way to children instead of yelling at individuals to stop engaging in physical touch. Staff should also understand that visits with children may be inherently less structured and be prepared to make accommodations for that. For example, telling a toddler that they can't sit on their father or mother's lap during a visit may result in meltdowns or tears, through no fault of the child or parent. We would also encourage staff to create a culture of mutual respect while keeping professional boundaries. This can create a more comfortable environment for everyone involved.

4. Lower barriers for frequent and consistent visits

- One of the most difficult aspects of keeping the family relationship strong while a parent is incarcerated is the expense and time required to visit frequently. Our group reported many instances in which a parent was incarcerated at a facility hundreds of miles from home, which meant their family had to pay for travel, lodging, food, and other expenses. Institutions should consider working with local organizations to provide transportation to jails and prisons so families can visit more frequently. Such programs already exist in some areas, including Florida, where Children of Inmates located in Florida (see resources) serves as a prime example. Even if a family can overcome travel, time, and expense barriers to visit a loved one who is incarcerated, additional issues can arise that create difficulty. Members of our group recounted several instances when they arrived at a prison or jail to visit a loved one only to discover the facility was on lockdown, making visitation impossible. When visitation is permitted, the process of going through screening and checks can be traumatic for children. We discussed how, in many cases, the person bringing the child is treated poorly and/or suspiciously during screening. This can magnify the feeling of resentment by the child toward the system; not only is one of their parents currently being held away from them but the person who is bringing them to visit is also being treated terribly. Ensuring that families are informed of last-minute changes to the visitation schedule and increasing the number and length of family-friendly visits per month would go a long way in building trust and mitigating harm.

“Transportation can be a burden and takes a toll on the family, but time with the parent can really help their relationship with their child.” - Tanisha Murden

- Another concept that our group discussed was dedicated, lengthy family bonding sessions. The Family Reunion Program in New York is a great example of such an initiative. This extended visit enables the child and parent to spend more time together than they would normally be allotted, and having the visits in a private area allows for more open communication. [2](#) Another similar example is in place at Minnesota Correctional Facility - Shakopee. Women who are a part of the Anthony Parenting Program can have their young children come for either an overnight or extended day visit, which allows for more direct bonding time between mother and child. [3](#)

5. Make communication easier

- This system does nothing to preserve family bonds. Instead, it causes those bonds to weaken or even break. By enabling more frequent connections between children and incarcerated parents, we can hopefully preserve a stronger family unit [4](#) While in-person visits are strongly preferred, we understand that many times they aren't feasible. Jails and prisons should be encouraged to provide free phone calls to families trying to connect with their loved ones. Placing a cost and/or limit on the amount of times that someone can talk to their children only increases stress and trauma. For example, think of a time growing up when you just needed your parent or caretaker. Now imagine having only three minutes to tell them everything that you need to get out and knowing that you won't be able to talk to them for another three weeks. In addition to making phone calls free and unlimited, we also recommend that jails implement video chatting systems. [HomeWAV](#) partnered with Bradford County Jail to provide inmates with Florida with access to communication devices that can assist them with education and mental health services along with voice calling and video visitation does this already and it's a valued and effective program. It should be said that these visits should not and can not replace in-person visitation. While a video visit is better than a phone call, nothing can replace the connection that comes with an in-person meeting.

These suggestions and takeaways range from basic to more difficult to implement, and we recognize the financial cost associated with some of the ideas. However, in order to preserve and protect family bonds, we believe that they are necessary. Stronger family connections lead to lower recidivism rates [5](#), which leads to lower jail and prison populations. It may take time to implement these ideas, and we know that reform is a marathon, not a sprint. We encourage institutions to start with whatever they can put into place more quickly and use that as a starting point.



For more ideas about programs that institutions could implement, please see the list below, which contains a sample of current child- and family-centered programming across the United States.

[Girl Scouts Beyond Bars](#)

This program, located at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, helps girls ages 5-17 stay connected with their mothers by providing troop meetings at the prison, in addition to meetings for mothers focused on building relationships with their daughters. [6](#)

[Children of Inmates](#)

Located across Florida, Children of Inmates provides multiple programs for children and their incarcerated parents, including working directly with parents to provide education about child development, and coordinating free transportation for longer bonding visits with parents. [7](#)

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