



Left Behind by Justice:

Children of Incarcerated Parents in Nebraska

All children need stability to thrive—adversity and trauma during developmental years can have significant, and oftentimes, lifelong effects. Parental incarceration can have a devastating impact on children, and mounting research shows that the cost of incarceration is much greater than what state budget reports might show.

The State of Nebraska spent over \$226 million to keep over 5,300 Nebraskans incarcerated last year.¹ The rise of mass incarceration in the United States in recent decades has proven to be extremely costly for taxpayers, and have caused reverberations lasting for generations in families and communities. The latest estimates show that today, 5.1 million children in the United States have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their childhood. This issue brief considers the existing body of research on parental incarceration and includes findings from a number of “community conversations” held in Nebraska with formerly incarcerated parents and their loved ones to better understand the ripple effect of our justice system.

1. CHILDREN IN THE AGE OF MASS INCARCERATION

It is estimated that 41,000 Nebraska children, or nine percent of our total child population, have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their childhood.² After decades of punitive policies, the unsustainably high cost of mass incarceration has come to a head in recent years across the country and states have begun to undertake criminal justice reforms. Concerns identified in Nebraska’s Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) have largely focused on staffing, overcrowding, mental and behavioral health treatment, programming, and restrictive housing.³ The research is clear that the impact of mass incarceration is much more widespread than the confines of jails and prisons—there are tremendous burdens, oftentimes unseen, that children and families experience when a family member is incarcerated.

1. Nebraska Legislative Fiscal Office, “A Legislator’s Guide to Nebraska State Agencies,” December 2016, <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/reports/fiscal/2017legguide.pdf>, 274-275.

2. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families, and Communities,” April 2016.

3. Department of Correctional Services Special Investigative Committee LR 34, “Report to the Legislature 2016,” http://nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/reports/committee/select_special/lr34_2015/lr34_report.pdf.

1.1. PARENTS BEHIND BARS

In Nebraska, as is in many other states, individuals convicted and sentenced for one year or more for felonies generally serve time in state institutions, while shorter sentences are generally served in local jails.⁴ The latest reports from NDCS show that the average daily population of Nebraskans in our 10 state facilities was 5,133, which amounted to 156.7% over capacity. Due to overcrowding, NDCS began contracts in 2014 with counties to house state inmates in county jails, of which there were an additional 143 individuals last year.⁵ Although this report will focus on the children of parents who are incarcerated in state prisons, parental confinement in county jails can be just as distressing for children. County jails in the state are estimated to have an average daily population of over 3,600 Nebraskans.⁶

Incarceration has also disproportionately impacted people of color: American Indian, Black, and Hispanic Nebraskans are overrepresented in prisons and jails, while White, non-Hispanic Nebraskans are underrepresented (Table 1). The human and economic costs of parental incarceration are compounded for many children of color in our state, who we know are already facing multiple barriers to opportunity.⁷

Children of color are disproportionately impacted by incarceration. When compared to White Nebraskans: Hispanic Nebraskans are nearly three times more likely to be incarcerated, American Indian Nebraskans are nearly nine times more likely to be incarcerated, and Black Nebraskans are nearly 10 times more likely to be incarcerated.

Table 1. Equality before the Law? The Color of Mass Incarceration in Nebraska⁸

Race/ethnicity	Rate of incarceration (per 100,000)
Asian or Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	136.1
White, non-Hispanic	235.5
Hispanic	601.4
American Indian or Alaska Native	2,051.6
Black	2,301.0

4. Neb. Rev. Stat. §28-105.

5. Nebraska Department of Correctional Services, "Quarterly Data Sheet," July-September 2016, <http://www.corrections.nebraska.gov/pdf/datasheets/2016/Datasheet%202016%203rd%20Qtr.pdf>. Nebraska Legislative Fiscal Office, "A Legislator's Guide to Nebraska State Agencies," 275.

6. "Census of Jails: Population Changes, 1999-2013," Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, December 2015, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cjpc9913.pdf>.

7. Voices for Children in Nebraska, "Equality before the Law: An Index of Race and Opportunity for Nebraska Children," Kids Count in Nebraska Report 2015, <http://voicesforchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2015-Kids-Count-in-Nebraska-Report.pdf>, 11-20.

8. Voices for Children analysis of NDCS 2016 3rd Quarter Report and U.S. Census Bureau data for adult population.

2. WHO PAYS?

2.1. THE RESEARCH ON PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Extensive research on child development suggests that children unequivocally pay the price for decades of punitive policies in our criminal justice system. The loss of a parent to incarceration sets off a domino effect of instability and trauma, which can manifest in antisocial behavior, poor educational performance, and decreased physical and mental health.⁹ The cumulative effect of such stress and burden on children oftentimes leads to maladaptive behaviors and coping mechanisms that can bring children to their own interactions with the justice system.¹⁰

Incarceration of a family member is one of a number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are stressful events or circumstances that trigger a “strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body’s stress response system in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive, adult relationship.”¹¹ This biological response can produce toxic and lifelong outcomes if left unchecked by supportive relationships and environments, known as protective factors.¹² Unfortunately, neighborhoods that have suffered large losses of residents to incarceration are often also heavily under-resourced to offer such protective factors. Studies also show that communities with disproportionately high rates of incarceration, many of which are predominately black communities,¹³ are also often burdened by concentrated poverty, unemployment, and poor health.¹⁴

Children need a stable and supportive environment to thrive. The environments that children succeed in are interconnected: strong societies governed by good policies also strengthen communities and families.¹⁵ By enhancing each of these important ingredients of child well-being, our systems can effectively ease some of the burden borne by the children of incarcerated parents in Nebraska.

2.2. THE NEBRASKA EXPERIENCE

After nearly forty years of mass incarceration in the United States, the research and evidence on the effect of the practice on communities and families is well-documented. Many of our youngest generation have unjustifiably inherited the harsh sentences delivered by our justice system. Still, little is known about the impact that has been felt in our state. Through focus groups and surveys, this report seeks to provide some insight into the experience of Nebraska families and their children who have been caught up in the justice system.¹⁶ In the following sections, we detail the broad themes and recommendations arising from these focus groups and surveys.

9. Joseph Murray, David P. Farrington, and Ivana Sekol, “Children’s Antisocial Behavior, Mental Health, Drug Use, and Educational Performance after Parental Incarceration: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 2 (2012):175-210; John Hagan and Holly Foster, “Intergenerational Educational Effects of Mass Imprisonment in America,” *Sociology of Education* 85, no. 3 (2012):259-286. Rosalyn D. Lee, Xiangming Fang, and Feijin Luo, “The Impact of Parental Incarceration on the Physical and Mental Health of Young Adults,” *Pediatrics* 131, no. 4 (2013).

10. Joseph Murray, Rolf Loeber, and Dustin Pardini “Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System and the Development of Youth Theft, Marijuana Use, Depression, and Poor Academic Performance,” *Criminology* 50, no.1 (2012):255-302. Michael E. Roetger, et al, “Paternal incarceration and trajectories of marijuana and other illegal drug use from adolescence into young adulthood: evidence from longitudinal panels of males and females in the United States,” *Addiction* 106, no. 1 (2011):121-132.

11. Jack P. Shonkoff, et al, “The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress,” *Pediatrics* 129, no. 1 (2012):236.

12. *Ibid.*, 235.

13. Keith O. Lawrence, ed., *Race, Crime, and Punishment: Breaking the Connection in America* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 2012).

14. National Research Council, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, Committee on Causes and Consequences of High Rates of Incarceration, Committee on Law and Justice, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 2014, Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 282.

15. Julie Poehlmann, “Children’s Contact with Their Incarcerated Parents: Research Findings and Recommendations,” *American Psychology* 65, no. 6 (2010):575-598.

16. Due to the sample size of this study, the results cannot be generalized as a complete picture of parental incarceration in Nebraska, but nevertheless offers a better understanding of how state and local policies have affected children and families in our state. See Appendix A for information methodology,

2.2.1. CHALLENGES TO MEETING BASIC NEEDS

Overwhelmingly, families identified financial strain as a principal challenge of familial incarceration. The incarceration of a parent often led to tough decisions: new caretaking arrangements, moving to more affordable housing or to a city that was closer to the placement facility, or taking on a second or third job. Many noted that incarceration exacerbated already precarious financial circumstances.

***“When they lock a parent up, somebody’s got to pick up the slack.”
– Formerly incarcerated father who had a father in prison during childhood***

Oftentimes, parental incarceration disrupts home life, and other family members step up to provide caregiving or support. In some cases, parental incarceration may have led to the involvement of child protective services (CPS), but not necessarily to a foster care placement. In fact, only 311 Nebraska children were removed in 2015 because their parent or caretaker was incarcerated.¹⁷ Most often, children are able to remain in the home of another parent or with a family member. Although potentially unprepared to care for additional children, family members, most often grandparents, invariably made sacrifices: “[My father] going to prison put a bunch of people in poverty—it put a strain on my grandparents because they had to raise us. It put a strain on us because we no longer had a dad. Foster care wasn’t an option. Grandma and grandpa was coming to get you.”

***“She had to work so much that I never really saw her. She was always working all the time. That was financially straining and emotionally, too, on our relationship.”
– Young man on how his father’s incarceration affected his mother***

The loss of a source of income was often exacerbated by costs that were more directly associated with incarceration. It is not uncommon for families to send money to their loved ones in prison for phone calls, emails, food, and hygiene products. One Omaha man recounted: “When you go to prison, jail—the phone, the commissary—it’s like they take advantage of our people because they know our people are going to want to talk to us on the phone. It’s a business. They’re using our people that are on the outside as victims...they know [our family] is going to try to do their best to keep us happy.” Family members and formerly incarcerated parents expressed that even though jobs were available in some facilities, they offered meager wages. One mother reported that her husband earned \$2.00 an hour as a certified nurse aide, and a formerly incarcerated father noted that his wages were often garnished for child support payments, leaving him only \$12.50 a month—not even enough for a single, 15-minute phone call.

“I wasn’t understanding where [my father] went, but now I’m thinking: ‘I got to be a big brother and a dad to my little brother.’” – Formerly incarcerated father, on learning as a teen that his own father would be imprisoned

17. Data obtained from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Many family members shared that parental incarceration led to older children in the family shouldering adult responsibilities, oftentimes at their own peril. After his father was incarcerated at age 14, one man said that parental incarceration was a turning point that quickly led to his own incarceration: “I eventually quit school and was working to provide food. It really changed my whole life.” Especially in families where the breadwinner was incarcerated, individuals described feeling a sense of desperation, especially as an older child, to help their family. “They just want to help out and try to make ends meet. As kids get older, they try to help provide for their family, even if it means going out on the streets,” one formerly incarcerated father said. “They start doing things that lead them into the footsteps of their father. If you’re raised in an area with high crime, it’s easy to get sucked into that.”

2.2.2. BARRIERS TO STRONG FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Healthy attachment relationships and contact with parents are the foundation of childhood development, and have been shown to have lifelong consequences for proper functioning. The physical loss of such a key figure in life poses a tremendous challenge to children, and can permanently damage parent-child relationships. Moreover, because many facilities require a long drive from the family home, families noted that sufficient time and money was a privilege that many families simply did not have, however much they wanted to bring their children to visit. For those who could not arrange for transportation to the facility at visitation hours, 15-minute phone calls were the only lifeline for children to talk to their parents.

“Fifteen dollars for a 15-minute phone call? It’s exploitation!” – Formerly incarcerated father

Families expressed frustration at exorbitantly high fees for phone calls and commissary purchases. As one Omaha mom put it, “[phone calls are] ridiculously expensive...if they’re doing it two times a day for fifteen minutes, it still adds up. And when you’re only on a one-person income, it makes it difficult to find those extra pennies to put aside for phone calls.” Nevertheless, families understood the importance of maintaining contact and often made tough sacrifices out of love and an obligation to the incarcerated parent and their children: “We do what we have to do.”

“Why would I take him to visit his father chained?” – Family member, on shackling in visitation rooms

Although physical contact is the most proximal way for children to begin to remedy this loss, visitations sometimes present their own barriers to maintaining relationships with a loved one. Aside from the tremendous time and money required of visitations, many families expressed frustrations with visitation policies in facilities. Current NDCS regulations only allow children age three and under to be held during visits. Families often agreed that this age limit was hurtful and confusing to children, especially younger children who cannot understand the rules or mistakenly believe that their parent simply did not want to touch them. A mother from Lincoln articulated that the age restriction created points of conflict during visitations—her eight-year-old daughter felt bitterness towards her younger sister who could sit on their father’s lap, and toward her father: “It makes her push away from him.”

Spotlight on Daddy Day Visits

In partnership with NDCS, Christian Heritage Nebraska has administered parenting programs in six of Nebraska's ten state correctional facilities. The parenting programs include a number of graduated components, including parenting classes and special visits. Many families shared that "Daddy Day Visits" offered their children the best opportunity to build a relationship with their incarcerated parent. Instead of sitting at a table, children have access to toys and books, and are able to embrace their fathers without restriction. Particularly in contrast to regular visits, these special visits were often brought up as a rare glimmer of hope for children and parents through incarceration: "Children need that, they need to be held by their parent." The program also coordinates special holiday events for families, and a number of mothers agreed that this offered a supportive and safe space for them to share their challenges with others who could relate.

"He's able to form a bond with his dad, and he's not going to be terrified when [dad] comes home. He's not coming home to a complete stranger." – Family member on Daddy Day Visits, in contrast to regular visitation

Although visitation procedures vary by facility, many families described a desire for visitation rooms to be more child-friendly. Many participants agreed that the limited interactions that children could have with a parent during visitation—sitting still at a table—is unnatural and problematic for children. Caregivers mentioned that after a long drive and wait, by the time the visit started, children were often restless, hungry, and limited to sugary vending machine items because visitors are unable to bring food in. One Omaha mother mentioned that she felt it was difficult for children to follow the rules, and often observed visits terminated due to these difficulties: "A little kid won't understand why they can't turn around in their chair."

Nurturing Maternal-Infant Bonds Behind Bars

The Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (NCCW) in York is the only correctional facility for adult women in Nebraska. In 1994, Nebraska became the second state in the country to establish a nursery program that allowed babies born to mothers during incarceration to remain together. The maternal-infant bond has been long-recognized by developmental scientists to be tremendously important to optimal development, as the very first social attachment in life that is used as a model for subsequent relationships.ⁱ By minimizing the disruption of the maternal-infant bond through incarceration, the nursery program at NCCW supports a strong foundation for new mothers in prison to build upon. Evaluations of the program have shown positive outcomes for behaviors and recidivism in participants.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Miriam R. Spinner, "Maternal-Infant Bonding," *Can Fam Physician* 24 (1978):1151-1153.

ⁱⁱ Joseph R. Carlson, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Live-In Nursery within a Women's Prison," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 27, no. ½ (1998):73-85. Joseph R. Carlson, "Prison Nursery 2000: A Five-Year Review of the Prison Nursery at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 33, no. 3 (2001):75-97.

2.2.3. CAUGHT IN THE CYCLE OF INCARCERATION

Circumstances surrounding contact and relationships between children and their incarcerated parent varied among participants. Participants suggested that outcomes were different depending on the child's age, gender, support system, and individual personality. Nevertheless, many were in agreement that on the whole, the consequences were negative and long-lasting. Parents pointed to changes in behavior, mental health, and academic performance. Perhaps most troubling, many participants felt that the physical loss of a parent, compounded by other adversities, oftentimes led children down their own path in the justice system.

“They’re just sad. They just miss him. We can take them to therapy but there’s nothing that will help as much as dad getting out.” – Family member

Parents, especially those with younger children, often voiced that their children often had trouble making sense of a prison or jail sentence. Some could only understand that “dad’s home is jail,” as one young mother put it, or that “dad can’t come home.” Older children, who begin to understand the stigma attached to incarceration, are often left unsure of how to talk about their parent to their peers or teachers for fear of humiliation. This sense of loss and abandonment was reported to manifest itself in many ways, ranging from internalized feelings to externalized behaviors. One mother shared that her daughter felt such anguish over her relationship with her father that “at one point, she actually said that she wished she was dead.” A formerly incarcerated father, in reflecting on his family said the effect was obvious: “Out of my four children—the daughter seeks out abusive relationships, the son just caught his first criminal case...and he bragged to me. It was the last thing I wanted to hear. My 15-year-old son is in a residential treatment facility. My nine-year-old son is also in a residential treatment facility, and just now I got a phone call and some messages [about his behaviors].”

“In my hometown, that’s why you got to leave...once the cops know your family, then they just assume you’re up to no good.” – Family member

Participants from rural and urban areas alike consistently stated that the stigma of past involvement in the justice system was far-reaching and inescapable, even for young children. One grandmother from southeast Lincoln said that she felt her family was unfairly targeted without cause. “Every cop from county to federal knows [our] name. I have a son that’s in a wheelchair. One time, they pulled him over and as soon as he says his last name, they say, ‘You better not run.’ He didn’t even look in the car to see that my son doesn’t have legs.” Many family members conveyed feeling the weight of being treated like a criminal by association during visits, or when others found out about their loved one’s incarceration: “They just look at you different and stop talking to you.”

“After seeing my stepdad go to prison during childhood and then my mom...I’ve just seen the rollercoaster of violence coming from my dad, passing it on to me and my little brothers. It’s real easy to see the ripple effect on all [six] of us. We all ended up in prison.” – Formerly incarcerated father, on his experience with parental incarceration in childhood

Participant responses reflected the research that suggests parental incarceration increases the likelihood that children will undergo other adverse childhood experiences. Many participants reported child protective services involvement, being the victim of a crime, and living in high-crime or low-income neighborhoods. Some families shared stories of incredible resilience and success, such as in the case of one young mother who grew up with an incarcerated mother, and in adulthood, sought out activities and support from the church for her children when their father was incarcerated: “The justice system unconsciously repeats itself unless we have strong parents...we can overcome. But it’s going to impact their education. It’s going to impact their job. It’s going to impact their earning potential. Most of all it’s going to impact their self-esteem.” Many others raised serious concerns that the intergenerational effect of incarceration would be inescapable without adequate supports for their children. As one young man, who was living with an aunt who worked multiple jobs when both of his parents were incarcerated, put it: “Growing up, not knowing what to do, you had to figure it out on your own and you figure out the wrong stuff.”

2.2.4. MINIMIZING HARM TO CHILDREN THROUGH BROADER REFORM

Child well-being depends on parental well-being, and participants felt strongly that broader reforms were needed to reduce the impact of incarceration on children. These conversations included thoughts on a prejudicial system, the juvenile justice system, overly harsh punishments, and adequate preparation and programming for re-entry.

My fiancé is African American and I think that’s played a huge part [in his incarceration]. He first got charged when he was nine with third-degree assault for snapping someone with a rubber band in school. Then when he was 13 he got a probation violation for being out after curfew, and that’s when he first got sent away to the [Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center] in Kearney. – Family member

Participants highlighted the ways in which they felt individually targeted, even before their first charge, by law enforcement based on their race or their neighborhood. Heightened police presence in certain neighborhoods, many observed, oftentimes paved the path for unjust treatment and system involvement, even for young children. One young man recounted his first encounter with the police, as a middle schooler walking down the street in daylight: “They hopped out with guns and told us to get on the ground...cuffed us up. They just jumped on us for no reason and then let us go.” Another formerly incarcerated father described a culture of harassment in his neighborhood, oftentimes without cause: “They were always coming around, jumping the fence into our backyard and coming out, harassing you. You could be sitting outside, not doing nothing. I was profiled and got harassed so much just because of the area and the street that I lived in.”

“I started getting in trouble when I was 13 years old, and it all stemmed from school. Back when I was in school, people didn’t know about kids that had dyslexia or ADHD. I was getting in trouble in school because I was having trouble learning. My dad got mad at me [for school issues] one day and threw me out of the house. Three days later, the cops pick me up at school for being a runaway! My father filed charges against me for being ungovernable and unruly, and I’ve been in and out of institutions ever since.” – Formerly incarcerated father

A number of participants traced their involvement in the criminal justice system to early involvement as a child or teen. Research shows that rehabilitative responses to such behaviors in childhood are most effective, and yet many participants felt that they were only pushed further into misbehavior through the juvenile court system. Moreover, the latest brain development research suggests that brain development continues well past reaching the legal age of majority, into the mid-20s. Still, one young man, who lamented that juvenile records could not be expunged under current state law, shared that as a 19-year-old, a judge justified delivering a harsher sentence based on his juvenile record, telling him: “You’ve had a long time to be an adult.”

“He didn’t know anything about drugs or gangs when he first went in [to prison], but guess what? He sure did when he got out!” – Family member

Participants consistently remarked that they were often stunned by the duration or severity of punishment that they or their loved one received. One family member observed, speaking of her children’s father: “He came out significantly more screwed up than when he went in! They put them in a hole with a bunch of other angry men, and they just get even angrier!” Many others described how common it was for families to unravel due to seemingly minor infractions, such as driving on a suspended license or failure to pay child support. One formerly incarcerated father, told of an all-too-common occurrence that he observed: “Why would you take a man’s driver’s license away from him because he owes child support? Now he can’t get back and forth to work. How’s he supposed to pay child support when the guy is trying to go to work and take care of his family? And he gets thrown in jail for driving on suspension?” On non-violent crimes, one family member offered: “[Have them] do more things in the community, where they are participating...so the community is gaining from that.”

“Most of the people in the prison system are eventually going to get out. Treating them like they’re ‘less than’ is not going to help them be successful in the community. There’s so many people in [prison] who have so many things that they could do for our community, and they’re treating them like they’re not those kind of people. They’re going to come out, so whether you treat them bad or good in there is going to [determine] how they’re going to act when they get out.” – Family member

Formerly incarcerated participants and family members alike were in agreement that programming and preparation for re-entry to the community was insufficient. A young mother explained the difficulties that her family experienced: “He was in high school before prison. He’s never filled out a job application. He doesn’t know basic things and it’s almost like I’m having to be his parent. That causes problems for our relationship and his self-esteem.” In an extreme case, one young man said: “They basically just threw me out of prison. I didn’t get my gate fee,” which is \$100 in cash provided upon release for expenses like food or a bus ticket, “until two weeks later.” Many participants pointed out that the challenges that people faced upon re-entry often seemed so insurmountable that “[it] causes a lot of people to go right back out to doing what they were doing before,” as one formerly incarcerated father put it. Little or no access to vocational training, interview and job application skills, and education was often compounded by financial barriers to successful re-entry. A number of participants questioned the logic behind current state law banning individuals with certain drug felonies from receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, or food stamps. One young man, who shared that he had to begin providing for his family as a young teen when his parents were incarcerated, said: “I sold drugs to feed my family—and I can’t get food stamps now?”

3. A PATH FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FAMILY-FOCUSED JUSTICE REFORM

3.1. STRENGTHEN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS DURING INCARCERATION

Implement family-friendly visitation policies. The most direct remedy to the physical loss of a parent to incarceration is to provide opportunities for natural parent-child interactions to occur. Although special visits are available in some facilities, current visitation policies are too limited. Family-friendly visitation policies should include: an easing of physical contact restrictions for children and allowing for parents to engage in age-appropriate activities with their children.

Reduce barriers to visitation, phone calls, and other communication with children. In concert with the financial stress of parental incarceration, families often face significant barriers to protecting parent-child relationships. Families often travel long distances to reach facilities, and the cost of phone and video calls are exorbitant, which exacerbate the trauma that children experience.

Invest in programs that support parenting and parent-child bonds. Parenting programs and special events for families are already available in some facilities and have seen tremendous successes. Continuing this investment, and ensuring that the programs are more widely available to incarcerated parents reduces the impact of the justice system on our state’s most vulnerable children.

Coordinate with public and private agencies to publish supportive resources for families. The incarceration of a parent disrupts household finances, caregiving arrangements, and overall well-being. The experience is devastating for children, and oftentimes overburdens the other parent and family members. Providing information about supportive resources during incarceration, such as mental health services, food pantries, or public assistance programs, would ease the burden that befalls families, and preempt family crises.

3.2. SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY

Invest in education, life skills, and vocational training within facilities. Child well-being is indivisible from parental well-being. The trauma of parental incarceration is evident, but investments in programming that builds upon parental capacity and stability can mitigate the overall impact and set families on the path to success.

Remove barriers to employment, housing, and financial stability. The concrete challenges of maintaining family stability after incarceration are often intensified by other institutional roadblocks. These include barriers to employment, such as criminal record history requirements in job applications; denial of public housing; and denial of public assistance based on past felony convictions.

3.3. MINIMIZE THE RIPPLE EFFECT ON FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Create a system-wide effort to reduce racial disparities. Mass incarceration undeniably takes a disproportionate toll on children of color. Parental incarceration rips apart families and communities, and efforts to reduce its costs must be targeted in the communities that are affected the most in order to be effective.

Advance sentencing reform. Sentences must be balanced in order for justice to be fair—the true cost of mass incarceration and the countless children that bear its cost demonstrate that sentencing reform is imperative for rebuilding communities that have been devastated by decades of punitive criminal justice policy. As the momentum for justice reform in Nebraska builds, the children and families left behind should be given weight.

Invest in substance abuse and mental health treatment. A stronger focus on rehabilitation during incarceration through substance abuse and mental health treatment has been consistently identified as a priority of state corrections reform. Such an emphasis should be integrated in the broader availability and affordability of community-based treatment programs in all parts of the state.

Continue rehabilitation-focused reforms in the juvenile justice system. In recent years, Nebraska has advanced numerous juvenile justice reforms that are informed by research and best practices. Many individuals in the adult justice system were long ago pushed deeper into the system through the juvenile courts and even in their classrooms. Continued reform in juvenile justice, where interventions can have the greatest impact, and consequently affect our adult justice system.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

Data for this report were collected through a series of “community conversations” held with Nebraskans who have experienced parental incarceration in their family. In all, we spoke to 26 Nebraskans, who were either: formerly incarcerated while the parent of a minor child, children when their parent was incarcerated, or family members of parents who are currently or formerly incarcerated. We also collected written surveys from currently incarcerated parents.

Due to the small sample size of this study, the results cannot be generalized or said to provide a complete picture of the impact of parental incarceration in our state. Nevertheless, our findings can provide a deeper understanding of how current policies affect children, and offer direction for future research and policy.

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7521 Main St. Suite 103
Omaha, NE 68127
www.voicesforchildren.com
402.597.3100