

# The Consequences of Parental Incarceration for African American Mothers, Children, and Grandparent Caregivers

by

Dorothy Smith Ruiz, Ph.D.  
Department of Africana Studies  
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
Charlotte, North Carolina 28223  
(704) 687-2367  
dsruiz@uncc.edu

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Albert Kopak, Ph.D.  
Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice  
Western Carolina University  
Cullowhee, NC 28723  
(828) 227-2328  
amkopak@wcu.edu

## Abstract

Mass imprisonment in the United States disproportionately affects the country's African American population, and many of those who are incarcerated are mothers. The existing policies, which have led to an explosion in the number of mothers who are serving time behind bars, have also created a number of health-related and social consequences for their children. If this were not enough, caregivers of these children, who are usually their grandparents, also feel the effects of these policies when they assume guardianship over their grandchildren. This paper explores the extensive domino-effect of incarceration on African American families leading up to and following the point at which mothers become incarcerated. Children who experience maternal separation due to incarceration experienced heightened risk for many negative outcomes, including mental health issues, delinquency, and victimization. Caregivers also encounter significant hardship as they try their best to care for children in the presence of significant economic strain and health problems. Examples of these situations are provided in the form of accounts of African American caregivers and these issues are discussed in terms of policy implications and future research directions.

## Introduction

Some 160 years since slavery was abolished in America, and some 50 years after the progress made during the Civil Rights movement, the language used to describe the status of African Americans remains remarkably unchanged (Feagin, 2010). African Americans continue to be oppressed by a system of racialized formal social control: the American criminal justice system. Perhaps one of the most pervasive problems associated with the discriminatory treatment of African Americans by the criminal justice system is the undeniably catastrophic effect mass incarceration has on individuals and families, particularly women and children, caregivers, (especially grandparents); and Black communities at large. This phenomenon is highlighted by Marc Mauer, in *Race to Incarcerate* (2006), as incarceration is identified as the predominant reason behind “The fraying of family bonds the rising number of children growing up with a parent in prison, and the disrupted social networks in many communities now threaten the viability of those neighborhoods and the life prospects for the next generation of children” (Mauer, 2006, p. xiii).

Research studies have shown that African Americans, and especially men, are incarcerated at levels disproportionately higher than they were 25 years ago. In less than 30 years, the incarcerated population in the United States has risen dramatically from 300,000 to more than 2.3 million; most of which is due to non-violent drug offenses (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011). This phenomenon is partly the product of drug enforcement efforts that disproportionately concentrate on inner-city illicit drug markets, drawing young African American men into the criminal justice system (Butler, 2010; Miller, 1996). To make matters worse, empirical evidence shows African American men charged with drug related offenses fare worst on a number of sentencing-related factors and are more likely to spend a greater amount of time imprisoned compared to their White counterparts (Bontrager, Bales, & Chiricos, 2005; Caravelis, Chiricos, & Bales, 2011; Huebner & Bynum, 2008; Spohn & Sample, 2008). Ensnarement into the system sets into motion a cyclical arrest-incarceration process which few African Americans manage to escape.

Major factors leading to the entrapment of African Americans in the criminal justice system include “get tough laws” of the 1970s, disparities in sentencing, and mandatory minimum sentences. All of these policies and practices contribute to high rates of mass incarceration that extend well beyond the ramifications of the actual crimes committed (Garland, 2001a; Garland, 2001b). Severe restrictions in post-release housing options, indefinite disenfranchisement, and significant disruption in familial relationships are just a few of these.

Existing research in this area has mainly focused on the experiences of incarcerated parents rather than those of the families, children, and caregivers they leave behind (e.g., Braman, 2002; Foster & Hagan, 2009; Visher, 2013).

The primary objective of this paper is to add to this body of knowledge with a discussion of how the incarceration and removal of African American mothers from the family affects both their children and, more often than not, grandmothers who care for the children while the mother is incarcerated. There are ripple effects that are felt among these families and all family members experience them, from the younger to the elder generations. Only a direct recognition of the nature and scope of this problem can help guide ameliorative research and policy proposals.

## **Review of Literature**

There is a glaring lack of literature devoted to a thorough discussion of the effects of incarceration on multiple generations within African American families, and most of this work is focused on the effect imprisonment has had on the relationships between African American fathers and their children (e.g. Modecki & Wilson, 2009; Swisher & Waller, 2008; Swisher & Roettger, 2012). The little work that has concentrated on how incarceration has affected African American families has been largely descriptive in nature and has demonstrated the likelihood that African American children experience parental incarceration more than doubled from 1978 to 1990 (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Despite this enormous increase in the number of African American children who have a parent in prison and the negative consequences that this has on the family unit, researchers have not yet begun to fully comprehend precisely how this comes to bear on incarcerated mothers, their children, and the caregivers who assume responsibility over the children while mothers serve their prison sentences.

## **Recent Trends in the Incarceration of African American Women**

The national crime rates have steadily declined since the 1990s, although the incarcerated population has continued to increase drastically (Bosworth & Flavin, 2007; Smith & Hattery 2010). In spite of the slight reductions in prison population, 0.2% for males and 0.7% for women, African American women represent approximately 30% of all women incarcerated under federal and state jurisdiction, and 16% for Hispanic women. Blacks and Hispanics have extraordinarily high incarceration rates; far exceeding the White population (See Table 1). In less than 30 years, the incarcerated population in the United States has rocketed from 300,000 to more than 2.3 million; most of which were due to non-violent drug offenses (Alexander, 2010; Mauer, 2006). These rates have continued to lead to disparate imprisonment among racial groups with Black non-Hispanic females experiencing an incarceration rate of 133 per 100,000 at the end of 2010, which was nearly 3 times higher than White non-Hispanic females (47 per 100,000 of White female residents).

Table 1: Estimated rate of sentenced prisoners under state and federal jurisdiction per 100,000 U.S. residents, by sex, race, and Hispanic origin, December 31, 2000 - 2010

Year	Male				Female			
	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
2000	904	449	3,557	1,220	59	34	205	60
2001	896	462	3,533	1,177	58	36	199	61
2002	912	450	3,437	1,176	61	35	191	80
2003	915	465	3,405	1,231	62	38	185	84
2004	926	463	3,218	1,220	64	42	170	75
2005	929	471	3,145	1,224	65	45	156	76
2006	943	487	3,042	1,261	68	48	148	81
2007	955	481	3,138	1,259	69	50	150	79
2008	952	487	3,161	1,200	68	50	149	75
2009	949	487	3,119	1,193	67	50	142	74
2010	943	459	3,074	1,258	67	47	133	77

Table adapted from Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, - *Prisoners in 2010*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011.

The number of women in prison spiked 646% between 1980 and 2010: from 15,118 to 112,797 (Phillips, 2012). Although this dramatic rise in the number of female inmates clearly indicates the female prison population has exploded in size over the past 30 years, there have been recent variations in the number of incarcerated women. The rate of incarceration decreased 35% from 2001 to 2010 for Black women, but it has increased 28% for Hispanic women, and 38% for White women over the duration of this decade. This decrease is promising, but it is important to consider there are more than 205,000 presently incarcerated (including those in local jails), and more than 1 million under criminal justice supervision (Phillips, 2012). This is an enormous number of women, which are disproportionately African American, and all are currently experiencing the comprehensive and life-altering consequences accompanied by imprisonment. The disparity can easily be put into perspective with the current figures that clearly demonstrate Black women face the highest odds of lifetime imprisonment. Specifically, 1 in 19 Black women in the U.S. will spend time in prison while 1 in 45 Hispanic women and 1 in 118 White women will be incarcerated. To make matter worse, shockingly large numbers of the incarcerated Black population are parents.

## The Demographic Background of Incarcerated African American Parents

According to the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF) (US Department of Justice (DOJ), Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 2004), the most recent source of information on the incarcerated population in the United States, forty three percent (924,765) of all inmates incarcerated were African American (Table 2). The majority, (82%; 435,642) were male, but a large number (18%; 53,481) were women. A total of 55% (249,078) of African American inmates (male and female combined) reported they had at least one child under the age of 18. This amounts to more than half (54%; 233,431) of incarcerated African American male inmates and a similar proportion (59%; 15,647) of female inmates who reported they had at least one child under the age of 18 years, with most having two children ( $m = 2.21$ ,  $se = .03$ ). The mean age of incarcerated parents' minor children (<18 years of age) was estimated at 8.87 years ( $se = .09$ ).

Table 2. Demographic information for incarcerated African American mothers and fathers

	Female	Male	Total
Mean number of children	2.39 ( $se = .05$ )	2.20 ( $se = .03$ )	2.21 ( $se = .03$ )
Unemployed	41%	30%	31%
Marital status			
Never married	67%	64%	64%
Divorced/separated	16%	17%	17%
Widowed	2%	1%	1%
Married	15%	18%	18%
Homeless	15%	6%	8%
Education level			
Less than high school	60%	60%	60%
High school graduate or equivalent	25%	28%	28%
Beyond high school	15%	12%	12%
Estimated number of incarcerated African American parents	15,647	233,431	249,078

Note. Includes estimates for incarcerated African American mothers and fathers of children under 18 years of age. Source: *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities*, US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004.

These data also clearly demonstrate incarcerated African American mothers are distinctly members of a disenfranchised, low income social class. With such high levels of unemployment (41% reported not currently working) and single relationship status (67% were never married), most were solely responsible for their own finances and occupied an extremely impoverished social position. Moreover, prospects for upward mobility for mothers are depressing, given nearly two-thirds (60%) had not completed high school (or an equivalent level of formal education). As a whole, incarcerated African American mothers are among the poorest, least educated, and socially stigmatized (given their criminal conviction) people in America (Roberts, 2012). Most importantly, mothers do not choose to be incarcerated. Most have reached their current position through the racially charged enforcement of certain types of laws.

## **How African American Mothers Become Incarcerated**

There are two primary reasons for the explosion in the incarceration of African American mothers in the United States. The predominant reason African American mothers are incarcerated is directly related to the perpetual War on Drugs (Alexander, 2010). This is evidenced by the fact that the largest proportion of African American mothers was incarcerated for drug offenses (Bush-Baskette, 2010).

Drug offenses usually carry along with them mandatory minimum and lengthy sentences. This is the primary reason why incarcerated African American mothers were sentenced, on average, to spend 7.6 ( $se = .39$ ) years in prison (US DOJ, BJS, 2004). This is especially important to consider in the context of parenthood given the mean age of mothers' children was 10.2 years. This means mothers were going to be absent for 7.6 years during the most formidable years of their children's lives. Some policy advocates may construe this as a reasonable factor associated with the appropriate punishment of a drug offender, but the reality of this situation is ever-lasting when a mother is absent from a child's life for such a long amount of time during this developmental period. It is also imperative to consider most incarcerated mothers are single, making them the financial breadwinner for their children, which leaves young children in a perilous situation. The majority of these consequences stem from the misdirected enforcement of drug laws (Bush-Baskette, 2010).

One personal example of how drug enforcement has targeted African American mothers is found as Sheldon (2010) recounts the story of Regina, which took place in Hearne, Texas. Regina was a mother at the age of 13. In 2000, she was a 24-year old single mother living in a housing project with her 4 young daughters in rural east Texas. She worked as a waitress and needed government assistance to feed and house her family. During a drug sweep, more than 28 residents of the housing project (primarily Black) were arrested and charged with selling cocaine. Regina handcuffed, arrested, and jailed on a felony charge carrying a potential sentence of 20 years.

She had no record of drug arrests, and no drugs were found near her when she was taken into custody; but Texas law at the time deemed uncorroborated from a single informant sufficient to press charges. She refused to accept a plea bargain for a crime she did not commit, although her court appointed attorney suggested the felony plea with 10 years probation was a gift. (Sheldon, 2010; p. 139)

Regina's case was subsequently dropped. However, such cases are regularly repeated all over the country. A more recent case that has received national attention is that of Marissa Alexander (*Marissa Alexander v. State of Florida*, 2013). In Florida, Marissa Alexander was convicted of aggravated assault (classified as a violent felony) for firing a shot from her legally owned handgun into the ceiling. She was subsequently sentenced to 20 years in prison and has served more than three. Marissa is a mother and was separated from her 3 children, one of which was a newborn of only a few weeks at the time. She is highly educated with a Master's degree, no prior criminal history, and was working at the time of the incident. By all accounts, she has achieved a middle class status, and an upstanding citizen with a good record. She is currently awaiting a decision on her appeal to the State on the grounds the judge improperly informed the jury of the conditions of her self-defense. Most importantly, both of these cases involved mandatory minimum sentences (e.g. 18:1 sentencing ratio for crack v. powder cocaine; 10-20-life statutes) which were influenced by race, class, and the racial construction of crime (Bales & Piquero, 2012).

## **The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children**

The likelihood that children will have an incarcerated parent is disproportionately connected to the race of the parents. More than 65,000 women in federal and state custody are mothers of some 147,500 minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). These mothers were primary caregivers for their children with about 75% reporting they had provided most of the daily care for their children before incarceration (Snyder, 2009). Black children experience the greatest likelihood for the family instability associated with the imprisonment of a mother, which is evidenced in the startling reality that they are 9 times more likely than White children to have a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Although research has not yet deeply investigated these issues among Black children, the work that has been done has examined the deeper effects of parental incarceration on children which place children in this population at a greater risk for negative outcomes (Foster, 2012; Miller & Miller, 2014). Some of the factors closely associated with having a parent incarcerated include extreme poverty, high rates of violence, fragmented and segregated communities, little education, single-parent homes, racial inequality, and physical and mental health disparities (Dallaire, 2007; Sameroff et al., 1998).

Although these risk factors are present in urban African American communities before the incarceration of a parent, parental absence significantly erodes the potential for protection against the effects of these detrimental contextual factors. For example, Murray and Farrington (2005) found that young boys separated from their parents because of incarceration experienced more contextual risk factors, had an increased risk of delinquency in late life, and had almost 5 times the risk for adult incarceration in comparison to 3 times the risk for boys who were not separated from their parents for reasons other than incarceration.

Children who experience maternal separation due to incarceration are also likely to experience the adverse consequences associated with being placed in unfamiliar environments (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). This may intensify these contextual risk factors, largely due to the weakening of parent-child bonds, closer relationships with potentially delinquent peers, insecure attachment to adults, and diminished cognitive abilities (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). Although parental incarceration has different effects on children, studies generally show negative social and behavioral problems such as aggression, hostility, high levels of anxiety and depression, hostility, and withdrawal (Baunach, 1985; Kampfner, 1995).

These abrupt and glaring changes in children's' caregiving and family structures represents a significant source of disruption in the child's life. Parental separation is one of the more obvious effects on children and only a small proportion of incarcerated parents have contact with their children while serving their sentences. Evidence shows only 34% of all African American parents had any contact with their children while they were imprisoned (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004). Furthermore, only 32% of incarcerated African American mothers had contact with their children. And, many children never get to see their parents at all. The frequency of this contact should also be taken into account because few mothers have direct regular contact with their children. In fact, 43% of those who reported they had some contact with their children reported this contact took place in the form of mail exchange at least once a week. A smaller (36%) proportion of mothers who had contact with their kids did so through telephone calls in the same weekly time period, and far fewer (17%) of those who reported their children had visited them said they did so on a weekly basis.

This information should not be interpreted to indicate children do not reach out to their incarcerated parents. In fact, it seems many children try to maintain relationships with their imprisoned parents. The majority (53%) of children of African American incarcerated mothers who actually had contact with their parents utilized both telephone calls and personal visits to stay connected with their parent. A minority (2%) only visited and a fairly negligible portion (7%) only used the telephone, but the vast majority took advantage of these most personal forms of contact to see and talk to their mothers (US DOJ, BJS, 2004).

Stigma and social isolation research reveals that children with parents in prison are often not accorded the social support and sympathy provided to children who experience other types of parental separation or loss, such as divorce or death (Arditti, 2005). Although existing research shows that parental incarceration contributes to negative outcomes among minor children, not much is known about the direct causal relationships between parental imprisonment and behavioral and/or mental health outcomes. The little research which has been done has shown that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency, become incarcerated themselves, or become victimized (Dallaire, 2007; Johnston, 2006; Whelan, 1993).

## **The Impact of Incarceration on Grandmothers**

Grandmothers are also impacted by the ripple effects created by maternal incarceration. For every mother who is incarcerated in the United States, there are at least ten other people who are directly affected; these include especially children and caregivers, particularly grandmothers (Golden, 2005; Ruiz, 2004b). This is supported by data which indicate the largest proportion (42%) of incarcerated African American mothers had children living with a grandparent while serving their sentence (US DOJ, BJS, 2004). Children living with grandparents were followed in sequence by those who lived with other relatives (24%), fathers (17%), friends (10%), or children living alone or with a person other than those in the other categories (7%) (US DOJ, BJS, 2004).

The primary reason indicated for assumption of care for grandchildren was drug and alcohol problems of grandchildren's parents (45%). Other reasons included parents' neglect of the grandchild's needs (38%), need of parents to work (23%), teenage pregnancy (18%), parent's emotional or mental problems (17%), parent deceased (10%), and parent incarcerated (12%). Sixteen percent indicated other potential reasons, including taking care of grandchildren because of divorce, parents needing a break, parent's illness (AIDS or physical disability), mental and sexual abuse of child by parent, and school. Many grandparents report taking care of their grandchildren due to their parents' economic problems and difficulty obtaining housing (Hanlon, Carswell & Rose, 2007; Ruiz, 2004a; Ruiz, 2004b; Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012).

Two important patterns underlying caregiver role assumption have been identified: immediate assumption and gradual assumption (Ruiz, 2004b). Immediate assumption reflected the experiences of grandmothers who were thrust suddenly into the custodial caregiving role without previous warning. Examples of immediate caregiving role assumption include the biological parent (typically the mother) leaving the child in the grandmother's care and failing to return, intervention by Social Services because the mother neglects the child's needs, discovery by the grandmother that the child was left unattended for an unreasonable period of time, and incarceration of the parent.

Gradual assumption refers to grandmothers who had previous, and sometimes regular, experience caring for grandchildren, but eventually realize a temporary situation has become more or less permanent (Ruiz, 2004b). Examples of this form of custodial assumption include caring for grandchildren when at least one biological parent sporadically lives in the grandparents' home, or caring for grandchildren while a parent receives drug or alcohol treatment.

A few case examples can clearly illustrate these experiences. For example, Julie, a 47 year-old grandmother, has been the primary caregiver for her three grandchildren since their birth because of the drug use of their 31 year-old mother. Although Julie is not pleased with the placement, she believes that her decision was in the best interest of her grandchildren. She was concerned that she will have permanent responsibility for their care and well-being:

I truly love my grandchildren, but I never wanted to become a mother all over again. I feel that I have taken on more than I can bear. It's as if I have lost my life. If I had to make the choice to do it all over again, I don't think I would. This is not the way I planned my life at this point. I am very resentful that I am in this situation. I do not want to take care of my grandchildren. It has caused me to become depressed as well as put me in poverty. It's difficult to take care of a child on \$72 a month. I feel torn between letting them go into foster care and keeping them. I don't want to take care of them, but I think it's my obligation. (Ruiz, 2008, p 40)

June, a 48 year-old grandmother, who has taken care of her granddaughter since birth, assumed immediate responsibility because of the consistent emotional problems and neglect by the child's mother. Although taking care of her grandchildren is an added responsibility for her, she takes pride in knowing that they are safe: "I feel good because I know they are being taken care of well. I know where they are and what they are doing. At first it was difficult, but I've gotten comfortable now. They still bet on my nerves, but I am fine generally" (Ruiz, 2008, p. 40).

June continues her discussion of the difficulties, obstacles, and conflicts of caregiving. She states:

I have no social life and no desire to take care of myself. I have no freedom, and when I have to leave them, I feel guilty. I have to work too hard to take care of them. The demands of taking care of my 10 year old granddaughter, who has cancer, conflicts with my work. I am concerned that I cannot be at home when they come from school. I'm having problems keeping up with my own health. I don't like having to spend most of my money on them instead of myself (Ruiz, 2008, p. 41).

Missie, a 54 year old grandmother, shares her small home with four grandchildren. She assumed care of her grandchildren because their mother is using drugs and neglected their needs. She, like the vast majority of grandmothers, did not want her grandchildren to go into foster care. The role of custodial caregiver has presented a number of problems and concerns for Missie. She states:

Two-hundred and seventy one dollars a month is not enough to take care of my grandchildren. I had different plans for my life. I am not able to do the things I want to do, after raising my own children. I have to put what I want to do on the back burner. I am concerned about the health of my two grandsons (ages 7 and 12) who have serious emotional problems. My seven- year old grandson weighs only 47 pounds. I have to dress him for school and he cries every morning. I have to tell him everything he has to do, and he bothers other kids constantly. He runs through the house constantly. He has had emotional problems since birth. Both boys have a bad temper. My health has gotten worse because of them. I feel helpless. I cannot get essentials for myself because of the expense for my grandchildren. I need a break. (Ruiz, 2008, p. 41)

Custodial caregiving among African American grandmothers may be a burden as well as a blessing. While a majority of the grandmothers seem to enjoy caring for their grandchildren, grandmothers are nonetheless concerned about inadequate financial support, poor health, the need for respite care, being saddled with permanent childcare responsibilities, and inadequate housing. Many grandmothers had mixed feelings about having responsibility for their grandchildren's care, and several do not at all enjoy being a caregiver. They felt trapped in the position and felt angry about grandchildren's care being thrust onto them by either the children's parents or by social services (Ruiz, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The mass imprisonment of mothers since the 1980s has had a devastating impact on the structure and functioning of African American families, with profound effects on children and their social and cognitive development. Incarceration affects children's well-being and compromises their life chances. Efforts to address the needs of children through counseling and program development must not neglect the needs of the caregiver. The important role of African American grandmothers has largely been ignored in the literature as well as in the community. Although many grandmothers take pride in caring for their grandchildren, many do not relish the role of custodial caregiver and lack the resources and skills needed to deal with children with different types of behavioral and health problems. This extensive ripple effect which starts with mass incarceration must not be understated. Imprisonment impacts far more people than just a mother who is serving time behind bars.

This better understanding of how maternal incarceration impacts family networks has significant implications for ameliorative policies and future research. First, any policy initiatives must emphasize the needs of the incarcerated mother, as well as the children and caregivers. Mass incarceration is a policy which must be viewed as a moral issue where all voices are heard, including those who are incarcerated, their children, caregivers, and African American religious and community leaders. Only after these voices are heard can we as scholars more effectively communicate these critical concerns and work them into our research and teaching objectives. This means we have the responsibility to continue debates and to raise policy concerns in related to this critical moral issue of why the U.S. is so punitive, and why, as a nation, we incarcerate so many of our citizens of color.

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