

**COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THE IMPACT OF  
PARENTAL INCARCERATION: An Introduction**

**By**

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognizes parental incarceration as “an adverse childhood experience” that can result in devastating consequences.

Research shows that children are impacted socially, emotionally, and academically.

While there are some resources for children with incarcerated parents, there also exists a huge gap in the support the United States is providing for these youth. The majority of resources for children with an incarcerated parent are for young people between the ages of 0 and 17. However, the needs of children change dramatically as they age and there is very little research or resources available for young adult college students.

According to the Pew Charitable Trust, more than 2.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent.<sup>1</sup> That means that 1 in every 28 children are currently living with one or both parents in a correctional setting. In addition, the Sentencing Project reports that approximately 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point by the time they are 18.<sup>2</sup>

After completing high school, young people may choose to enter the workplace while others continue their education. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost 70% of high school graduates in 2016 are enrolled in college or university this

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*. Washington, DC: Western, B., Pettit, B.

<sup>2</sup> The Sentencing Project. (2009). *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children - Trends 1991 – 2007*. Washington, DC: Mauer, M., Nellis, A., Schirmer, S.

year.<sup>3</sup> Adult, college-aged children of incarcerated parents face unique challenges at this integral moment of their lives and currently there are few to no resources for support. In a time of change, identity and social development, and newfound independence, adult children of incarcerated parents deserve more. Especially because incarceration has a profound impact on everyone involved, when it comes to college, “the graduation rate of 40% drops to 1–2% among children of mothers who are imprisoned and about 15% for imprisoned fathers. Even if a child’s own parents are not imprisoned, when children go to schools where 10–20% of other parents are imprisoned, college graduation drops by half.”<sup>4</sup>

With the pressure and need to complete higher education within a standard of four years, there is an increasing need to support college-aged children of incarcerated parents, as these systems outside of their control already have such a large influence on them. There are unique challenges these students face and they fall into three major categories: financial implications, independence, and social & identity development.

### **Financial Implications**

The cost of college tuition has been increasing for the past fifty years. In addition to the rising tuition, there now exists thousands of dollars required each year for room and board, fees, and books. According to the CollegeBoard, the average cost for an in-state public university is \$9,410 while a private university can run \$32,410 per year.<sup>5</sup>

While these figures can seem astronomical to a family with two working parents, it seems almost unattainable for a family with one or both parents within the prison system.

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<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). *College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2016 High School Graduates*. Washington, DC.

<sup>4</sup> American Bar Foundation. (2013). *Parental Incarceration in the United States: Bringing Together Research and Policy to Reduce Collateral Costs to Children*. Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> (n.d.). Retrieved June 01, 2017, from <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/pay-for-college/college-costs/college-costs-faqs>

Without a livable income, an incarcerated parent will most likely be unable to afford sending their child to college. This may be compounded with the extreme cost of legal fees, restitution, or withheld wages depending on the specifics of each case. In relying on a single parent income, children may feel responsible for the financial burden, which in turn could lead to predatory loans or entrance to college but then the inability to continue paying for each semester within the four years.

In addition, students may face added pressure when completing the FAFSA or Free Application for Federal Student Aid, as parent information is required. With the immense stigma that comes with an incarcerated parent, a student may feel extremely uncomfortable in disclosing that information, further hindering their ability to receive adequate financial assistance to afford college. While the FAFSA provides some resources on how to include this information for students with an incarcerated parent, shame and embarrassment can often lead to simply leaving it out or forgoing the application entirely.

### **Independence**

College is often the first time that young people are able to make decisions for themselves. The responsibility and independence can be freeing and yet overwhelming at the same time. Especially when attending college away from the family, students often face their first real independent challenges while in university. This newfound independence can sometimes cause rifts between family dynamics, and families with an incarcerated parent are no exception. The relationship between an incarcerated parent and the remaining parent can be tenuous and difficult for a child. Often, the remaining parent dictates the relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent. If the remaining

parent does not want the incarcerated parent to have contact with their child, then often no relationship exists. However, this dynamic has the potential to change once a child turns 18 and enters college.

There is potential that a college-aged student will want to use their newfound independence to begin or repair a relationship with an incarcerated parent. Family dynamics are always complicated and can cause tension for a student. Approaching a remaining parent to discuss rebuilding a relationship can certainly cause emotional harm and, without proper support from a family therapist or school counselor, these conversations can be detrimental. In addition, reconnecting with a parent who has not seen their child very often can also take an immense amount of emotional energy from both parties and must be facilitated in a healthy way. Finally, the logistics of visiting an incarcerated parent can be confusing and complicated for a college student, often without readily available access to the necessary transportation.

### **Social & Identity Development**

Two of the most unique challenges that children face are determining who they are and who they want to become. With the independence that comes from college, these students are beginning to develop both their identity and social network; building the framework for their future lives within our increasingly interconnected society. The first few months of college are packed with opportunities to meet other incoming students. Often, these conversations include stories of childhood and upbringing; parental stories are also part of the conversation. For students with an incarcerated parent, the stigma of prison may always be present and, therefore, their unwillingness to share may come across as cold or distant. Choosing when to disclose such personal information is stressful

and can hinder that necessary bonding, particularly between roommates or new friend groups.

In today's age of social media and immediate information, the public nature of the prison system may also negatively impact social and identity development. College is often when children begin to take responsibility for their own and their family's behavior. If a parent is incarcerated for a crime that was heavily publicized or connected to the family, then their peers may already recognize or be familiar with their name. Losing the ability to choose when this information is disclosed can have an extremely harmful impact on social development, which in turn may impact concepts of self-worth and trust. Students do not want to feel tokenized by their parent's incarceration so providing resources and support for disclosing this information can be troublesome, complicated, and delicate.

Ultimately though, one of the most lasting impacts of parent incarceration on college-aged children is the loss of parent involvement in the college process. While "helicopter parents" receive most of the media attention, parents and families play an increasingly important and vital role in supporting their children through college. Whether it is a biological family member or chosen family member, students rely heavily on their intimate network. At a time when students begin to individuate from their families, social adjustment to the college environment is particularly important. The quality of parent-student relations, as reflected in healthy attachment to parents, parental support, or parents' expressed interest in the students' college experience, serves to facilitate social adjustment to college.<sup>6</sup> College provides not only new experiences for

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<sup>6</sup> Mattanah, J., Brand, B., & Hancock, G. (2004). Parental attachment, separation-individuation, and college student adjustment: A structural equation analysis of mediational effects. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51(2), 213-225.

students to explore, but it also provides exposure to new ways of being, thinking, and understanding the world. Classroom and co-curricular experiences that expose students to diverse perspectives and issues have been shown to influence students' social and cultural awareness. Parents play an integral role in this process as it may vary depending on how these concepts were introduced prior to college. If parents are accepting of this new diversity, then students will be as well.

Without the proper support, college-aged students with incarcerated parents are going to continue struggling with the finances of college, conflicts of independence and family responsibility, and social & identity development in school. Though there are several resources for younger children, these organizations do not cater to the unique needs of college students. Without intervention, these developing adults will be left questioning how to exist in a world that is not sensitive to the circumstances in which they find themselves through no fault of their own.

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