

The costs of incarceration for families of prisoners

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Abstract

Family members of incarcerated people are often faced with financial, social and emotional costs related to the imprisonment of their loved ones. These costs can be conceptualized as investments both in the sustenance of personal relationships and in a greater social good in the form of assisting with the reintegration of former prisoners. In this article, we draw upon data from a mixed-methods study to elucidate the costs of detention on families of prisoners. We demonstrate that financial, social and emotional costs associated with imprisonment of a family member are interrelated and often compound each other, indicating the importance of addressing them in a holistic framework.

Keywords: families, prisoners, incarceration, relationships, costs.

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Introduction

Incarceration rates have risen throughout the globe over the last several decades.¹ These increases have been analyzed as stemming from a complex interplay of neoliberal governance, welfare retrenchment, racism, xenophobia and, in the US context, the “War on Drugs”.² As the number of people held in jails and prisons has grown, the importance of family ties in the lives of incarcerated people and the challenges that imprisonment presents to maintaining these connections, the scope and breadth of family member connectedness to prisoners, the importance of family ties in the lives of incarcerated people, and the challenges that imprisonment presents to maintaining these connections have become focal

1 See the Institute for Criminal Policy Research's World Prison Brief website, available at: www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/ (all internet references were accessed in June 2017).

2 James Forman Jr, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2017; Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995; Loïc Wacquant, “Suitable Enemies: Foreigners and Immigrants in the Prisons of Europe”, *Punishment & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999; Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon J. Hawkins, *The Scale of Imprisonment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1991.

points of research.³ Most incarcerated individuals express the desire to maintain connections with their children and their intimate partners while separated.⁴ Family contact during incarceration has been found to have positive effects, including reduced recidivism after release from prison.⁵ Indeed, if incarcerated people are able to maintain strong family ties, these relationships can be sources of emotional, financial and practical support as they serve their sentences.⁶ Likewise, family members are often a key source of “housing, emotional support, financial resources, and overall stability” during the re-entry period.⁷

When people serve time in prison, the family members they leave behind must adjust not only to the physical absence of their loved one, but also to a void in the place of the monetary and practical contributions which that person made to the household and the encumbrance of a set of challenges and costs specifically associated with maintaining a relationship with a prisoner. The financial, social and emotional costs incurred by families in their efforts to maintain contact during and after incarceration can be conceptualized as investments both in the sustenance of personal relationships and in a greater social good in the form of assisting with the reintegration of former prisoners. The burden born by non-incarcerated members of society in terms of taxpayer money and public safety should be of central importance in decisions about incarceration policies. The fact that the emotional and financial costs paid by family members of prisoners are not accounted for in these calculations is an important oversight, as they can also have profound and long-term implications for societal well-being.

- 3 Hedwig Lee *et al.*, “Racial Inequalities in Connectedness to Imprisoned Individuals in the United States”, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2015; Manuela Ivone P. da Cunha, “Closed Circuits: Kinship, Neighborhood and Incarceration in Urban Portugal”, *Ethnography*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2008; Sara Wakefield, Hedwig Lee and Christopher Wildeman, “Tough on Crime, Tough on Families? Criminal Justice and Family Life in America”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 665, No. 1, 2016; Megan Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2008; Donald Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2004; Gwénola Ricordeau, *Les détenus et leurs proches: Solidarités et sentiments à l’ombre des murs*, Éd. Autrement, Paris, 2008.
- 4 Creasie Finney Hairston, “Family Ties during Imprisonment: Important to Whom and for What?”, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1991; Mary Pattillo, David Weiman and Bruce Western (eds), *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2004.
- 5 Nancy G. La Vigne *et al.*, “Examining the Effect of Incarceration and In-Prison Family Contact on Prisoners’ Family Relationships”, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2005; William D. Bales and Daniel P. Mears, “Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?”, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2008; Jonathon J. Beckmeyer and Joyce A. Arditti, “Implications of In-Person Visits for Incarcerated Parents’ Family Relationships and Parenting Experience”, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2014.
- 6 D. Braman, above note 3; M. Comfort, above note 3; Christine Lindquist *et al.*, *The Experiences of Families during a Father’s Incarceration: Descriptive Findings from Baseline Data Collection for the Evaluation of Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners*, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, 2015.
- 7 Bruce Western *et al.*, “Stress and Hardship after Prison”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 120, No. 5, 2015; Christy A. Visser *et al.*, *Baltimore Prisoners’ Experiences Returning Home*, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2004.

In this article, we draw upon data from a mixed-methods study conducted in the United States to elucidate the costs of detention on families of prisoners. In the United States, the increase in the use of confinement since the 1970s has been especially acute, and the phenomenon of one in every 100 US residents being held behind bars is widely referred to as “mass incarceration”.⁸ Although the nation is an outlier in terms of the number of people behind bars and thus the number of people navigating family ties with incarcerated loved ones, research from Australia, Denmark, England, France, Portugal and Russia has documented more similarities than differences in the experiences of these families.⁹ We do not claim that the findings reported in this article are generalizable within the United States, let alone globally. However, the existing literature supports the premise of many commonalities among families of prisoners, and further investigation of the challenges identified in this study is warranted in international contexts.

In the following, we begin by describing the methods for the *Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting, and Partnering*. We then report findings from this study regarding the costs of imprisonment for relationships with partners and with children, and discuss findings about families’ needs for support during incarceration and re-entry. We conclude by reflecting on the intersection of the financial, social and emotional costs of incarceration and the potential implications for policies to mitigate the burdens borne by families.

Methods

The *Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering* (MFS-IP) was funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), with the aim of documenting the implementation and impact of relationship and family strengthening programmes for incarcerated and re-entering men and their partners.¹⁰ Although the analyses described here use quantitative data collected for the MFS-IP impact evaluation (conducted from 2008 to 2014), the findings are not about the impact of programming, but rather the experiences of the families that participated in the study.

8 David Garland (ed.), *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences*, Sage, London, 2001.

9 Lars Anderson, “Duration and Frequency of Paternal Incarceration and Youth Outcomes”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2016; Rachel Condry, *Families Shamed: The Consequences of Crime for Relatives of Serious Offenders*, Willan, Cullompton, 2007; Rafaela Granja, “Beyond Prison Walls: The Experiences of Prisoners’ Relatives and Meanings Associated with Imprisonment”, *Probation Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2016; Mark Halsey and Simone Deegan, “Father and Son: Two Generations through Prison”, *Punishment & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2012; Marie Hutton, “Visiting Time: A Tale of Two Prisons”, *Probation Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2016; Dominique Moran, “Between Outside and Inside? Prison Visiting Rooms as Liminal Carceral Spaces”, *GeoJournal*, Vol. 78, No. 2, 2013; R. Gwénola, above note 3; Caroline Touraut, *La famille à l’épreuve de la prison*, PUF, Paris, 2012.

10 See: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners>; see also the forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* dedicated to articles describing the study and its findings.

Data collection approach

Beginning in December 2008, the MFS-IP enrolled couples participating in relationship and family strengthening programming¹¹ in five programme sites in the United States (the states of Indiana, Ohio, New York, New Jersey and Minnesota), and a set of similar non-participating couples. Couples (including 1,991 eligible men and 1,482 of their primary intimate or co-parenting partners, referred to as “survey partners” throughout this article) were interviewed at baseline and at nine- and 18-month follow-ups, and 34-month follow-up interviews were conducted with over 1,000 couples in two sites. The longitudinal interviews collected quantitative information about parenting, couple relationship experiences, family stability and re-entry. Study participants were asked about all of their minor children and were given more detailed questions about a single focal child, selected using a formula that favoured children co-parented with the study partner and children closest to the age of 8. The decision to use 8 years of age to select the focal child was made in order to (1) be able to compare focal children to each other across the sample, and (2) follow focal children longitudinally during a developmental period when a similar set of socio-emotional adjustment and behavioural outcomes could be measured (as opposed to, for example, having infants turn into toddlers). Quantitative data collection took place from December 2008 through April 2014.¹²

In addition to the longitudinal surveys, a qualitative sub-study was conducted to better understand family relationships during incarceration and re-entry. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of MFS-IP couples: those in which the male participant was nearing release from prison (who were interviewed twice – once before and once after release) or had been released within approximately the prior year (who were interviewed once, after release). Both members of the study couple were invited to participate. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were guided by a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews, conducted from 2014 to 2015, focused on family experiences and needs during incarceration and re-entry, as well as what forms of interpersonal, programmatic and policy support were and were not helpful during the re-entry process.¹³

Sample characteristics

The analyses presented in this article use both qualitative and quantitative data from the MFS-IP qualitative study sample. Data were combined across sites and for

11 Relationship strengthening programming provided through this initiative is described in detail in “The Implementation of Family Strengthening Programs for Families Affected by Incarceration”, available at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/implementation-family-strengthening-programs-families-affected-incarceration>.

12 For more details on the MFS-IP study design and sample, see Christine Lindquist, Danielle Steffey, Tasseli McKay, Megan Comfort and Anupa Bir, “The Multi-Site Family Study on Incarceration, Partnering and Parenting: Design and Sample”, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, forthcoming.

13 See: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners>.

treatment and comparison groups, so some sample members received grant-funded relationship and family strengthening programming and others did not. All study participants were subject to the selection criteria for the evaluation.¹⁴ Characteristics of the qualitative study sample at the time of participants' study enrolment (on average, two and a half years after the male partner's admission to prison) are shown in [Table 1](#).

Like participants in the full MFS-IP survey sample, most couples in the qualitative study reported being in non-married intimate relationships that were exclusive and long-term at the time of study enrolment. Most participants had minor children, most couples co-parented at least one child together, and most also co-parented with other people (with men reporting on average three co-parents and women reporting an average of two co-parents). Men tended to have fairly long histories of criminal justice system involvement (beginning on average at age 17), and data suggest that many couples had been through previous cycles of incarceration and re-entry together.

Analytic approach

All qualitative interviews were digitally recorded, audio files were transcribed verbatim, and transcriptions were uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package. A codebook was created using deductive codes, including codes pertaining to relationships (e.g., partnership, parenting) and time period (e.g., incarceration, re-entry). Inductive codes were developed iteratively based on interviewer and analyst memos and coder meetings. All transcriptions were coded by a team of research assistants. Coded data were then queried and results were reviewed and discussed in meetings, with analytic memos written to capture themes.

Findings

Costs for relationships with partners

Although their narratives had much in common with those of contemporary families throughout the United States, participants identified many ways in which men's incarceration had distinctly shaped their intimate ties. For example, couples experienced major obstacles to maintaining contact via phone and in-person visits when the male partner was in prison. For those who could continue some form of contact, the financial costs of phone calls and visits were substantial and often drained resources that family members would have otherwise used to pay household bills or buy food. For those whose communication was greatly reduced or eliminated entirely while the male partner served his sentence, often there was both an emotional cost of the loss of contact

14 C. Lindquist *et al.*, above note 6.

Table 1. *Qualitative sample characteristics at baseline*

	Men (n = 83)	Women (n = 87)
Age		
Age at study enrolment (mean)	33.7 years	32.8 years
Relationship with survey partner		
Relationship status		
Married	25%	18%
In an intimate relationship	71%	70%
In a co-parenting relationship only	4%	12%
In an exclusive relationship	88%	85%
Duration of relationship, if married/intimate (mean)	9.1 years	7.9 years
Parenting/co-parenting characteristics		
Number of children (mean)	2.3	2.3
Number of co-parents (mean)	3.1	2.2
Age of focal child (mean)	5.8 years	6.2 years
Co-parent any children with survey partner	72%	74%
Incarceration history		
Age at first arrest (mean)	17.4 years	(not asked)
Number of previous adult incarcerations (mean)	5.3	1.8
Duration of current incarceration (mean)	3.9 years	(n/a)

Source: all data are from the MFS-IP.

and a social cost of a hiatus in the relationship. Indeed, although some respondents continued to consider themselves in an exclusive partnership during the incarceration, others incorporated these periods of separation into the characterization of their relationship, often using the phrase “off and on” when asked about their relationship status. As one man explained:

We just off and on... Yeah. It’s like we’re kind of seeing each other still... I told her at first like, “You can just go on [with your life] and go, like, I catch up with you whenever I get out [of prison].”¹⁵

Evident amid participants’ descriptions of these cycles were the distinct relationship pressures that arose during times of incarceration, pre-release and re-entry. For

15 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

people who could maintain some form of contact during imprisonment, both male and female participants frequently understood this to be a period when men were reliant on women for emotional and practical support. However, relatively few men identified the difficulties and expense this could pose for their partners:

I didn't understand her working all the time ... because I always wanted time. I wanted her to make time for me. To answer the phone or to sit down and write a letter – a long letter to me to explain to me what is going on, how she is doing and how our daughter is doing. But with her work schedule and school and our daughter, it was just like, it was a lot on her and I didn't understand that. So I would get frustrated and upset. For me on my part, it was probably a struggle for me because I always thought like, well, if you don't have time for me now then are you ever going to have time for me when I come home?¹⁶

In addition to straining partnerships by overburdening women, prisoners' high needs for money, toiletries, extra food and emotional connection were seen as disruptive to primary relationships because the constraints on an individual woman to meet these needs encouraged men to reach out to multiple women for support. One woman who had limited time and money to dedicate to her currently incarcerated partner recalled a former partner's analysis of this phenomenon:

A lot of men that go to jail, they seem to juggle women when they're in jail, incarcerated. Because ... this one might put money on the phone all the time, this one might be able to visit all the time, and then this one might be my commissary person. So they play a lot of mind games when they're incarcerated. ... [My former partner told me,] "Every man does it, you know. Every man that can get away with it, however many [women] he can pull and get away with, that's what he's gonna do. Cause we don't have nothing but time in there, you know. So of course we want somebody to come and see us every single day that visits are allowed. We want to be able to go out to that phone and call out to whoever is gonna answer, you know."¹⁷

Distance and lack of communication also created relationship tensions by fuelling men's suspicions about their partners' activities, and particularly the possibility that women could be involved in another relationship. One woman who lived in Ohio spoke about the toll that her partner's incarceration in New York took on their relationship:

I do believe if he would have been here in Toledo, it would have been a lot different. I would have been able to visit. I would have been able to get some calls. ... There would have been communication, a line of communication [and] actual visits. It wouldn't have been a whole long period of absences ... which caused nothing but, "What were you doing? Where were you at? You

16 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

17 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

left me. You abandoned me. You didn't care. You had somebody else." And all the accusations that come along next. Which has done nothing but caused us problems since.¹⁸

The financial and emotional costs of incarceration on relationships continued even as men's prison sentences came to an end. The pre-release period was often described with trepidation, as men and women felt anxious about their individual and joint preparedness for post-prison life and worried that they did not have access to the necessary support structures. This was also a volatile moment in relationships because the level of support provided by women during men's imprisonment did not always correspond to plans made during the pre-release and re-entry periods. Certainly, for some couples, maintaining contact during incarceration translated into anticipation and enactment of reuniting post-release. However, some female participants described having provided robust practical and emotional support during a man's imprisonment only to have him end the relationship just before or after his release from custody, often in order to join another partner. Others found themselves a sudden object of affection when men tried to secure housing and stability for their return to society:

Female participant: Of course the first time [he was released,] he needed me. So everything was... I mean, [he did] anything that you could think of to try to woo me. Because like I say, he really needed me. He didn't have a place to go to besides his mother's house. ...

Interviewer: Any advice that you would give to a woman who is in a relationship with someone who is incarcerated?

Female participant: Beware.

Interviewer: Beware?

Female participant: Beware.

Interviewer: Now, what do you mean?

Female participant: Of all things. Don't feel like nothing isn't possible, 'cause it is. Beware of everything. Beware of being manipulated.¹⁹

Men and women often characterized the re-entry period as challenging due to the emotional and logistical awkwardness of reintegrating their partners into their lives, particularly when communication had been restricted during incarceration. The phrase "we have to get to know each other again" was used frequently by participants who were struggling to reconnect. One woman poignantly

18 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

19 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

illuminated how the long separation of the incarceration period had exacted costs on her partnership that were difficult to repair:

We're still separated just because I feel like me and him, we have to get to know each other again, because four and a half years is a long time to be separated from someone. And then I've gotten so used to doing things on my own, I kind of, I don't know, it seems like I get offended by the things that he does. I'm not saying that he does it on purpose, but it just almost makes me feel like he's like questioning my parenting. Which I know he probably isn't, but I'm just so guarded because I've been doing it for so long by myself that I kind of don't know how to accept his help. So we're kind of just, we're moving slow. We live separately, but he's helping me out with the kids a lot.²⁰

Costs for relationships with children

Participants described a wide array of relationships with children. Some couples only had children they conceived together, but many navigated family constellations that included children from other partnerships. Among female sample members who co-parented with other men, in communities heavily impacted by incarceration it was not uncommon for those men to be justice-involved as well, such that women might be coping with the incarceration and re-entry of multiple co-parents at once.

As in their accounts of their partnerships, men and women emphasized how distance and lack of communication made it difficult for fathers to maintain relationships with children during incarceration. When asked what was hardest about being a father in prison, many men focused simply on the physical separation from their children:

Being away, not being able to be a dad. Not being able to be there and protect my daughter from anything. Like, just being a dad. That was the hardest thing for me... [My child's greatest challenge was] getting to know me. And an attachment. Like I think she was young, so she didn't have me there, and her biggest struggle probably would have been, like, where is her dad at. So I think she just had a problem with me not being there.²¹

Women often perceived men's absence as limiting the latter's ability not only to bond with their children, but also to learn how to parent. This was sometimes portrayed as coming at the cost of the entire father-child relationship. The partner of the man quoted above commented:

[His incarceration] made him and [our daughter] fall apart. I mean, there's a whole barrier there. Like he doesn't know how to be a father. Like he doesn't understand that kids talk back, that they try to push your buttons. ... He went to jail the day after I [gave birth to her, and then] he was home for

20 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

21 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

maybe about a year and then he went back [to prison]. And that's when he got that seven years. So he has never really done anything more than like a year. So, I mean, he has missed everything, and because of that, they don't have that bond.²²

Nonetheless, some mothers felt that their incarcerated partners managed to be helpful co-parents. One woman described how she felt more supported by her incarcerated study partner than she did by the biological father of her child, specifically acknowledging that the man in prison managed to provide emotional and financial support that she could not obtain from her child's father:

[My incarcerated partner] was co-parenting while he was locked up. I mean, he was doing a whole lot more than what [my child's] dad was doing out here, which was, he [the biological father] was only ten minutes away. I mean, if somebody can call me that is locked up and I can get money out of this man that is locked up before I can get some money out of that man out here, that says a lot.²³

Women also articulated making difficult decisions about whether to bring children into the prison environment to visit their fathers. Some women spoke about their efforts to protect their children from the negative effects of visiting a correctional facility, while others chose not to have their children undergo this experience at all, even though that meant not seeing their fathers:

I never took them to see their own father. ... I didn't want them to be introduced to that [prison] in no kind of way. Because it's pretty hard when you go in there. You know they gotta strip search you and take off your shoes. And, you know, I kind of felt like they damn near treat you like an inmate, you know. And that was just something I didn't want my kids to experience.²⁴

Interestingly, men's and women's qualitative interview responses helped to contextualize differences in their survey reports of parenting. Initial quantitative analysis indicated that men tended to view their relationships with their children somewhat more positively than did their partners.²⁵ Comparing men's and women's responses in qualitative interviews suggested that men often wished to downplay the impact of their incarceration on their children and remain optimistic about life together after prison, while women – who had watched their children struggle during the prison period – were keenly aware of their children's sense of loss. Couples often gave factually matching accounts of the father's post-release relationships with his children, while offering these very different

22 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

23 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

24 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

25 Christine Lindquist, Megan Comfort, Justin Landwehr, Rose Feinberg, Julia Cohen, Tasseli McKay and Anupa Bir, *Change in Father-Child Relationships Before, During, and After Incarceration*, Research Brief prepared for the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, March 2016.

emotional frames. For example, one father painted a rosy picture of his relationship with his children, even while indicating his inability to provide financial support:

Father: They love me more than their mother. ... I'm a big kid when I'm with my kids.

Interviewer: What has made it easier to be a good parent?

Father: I'm always there. It's the, that's the easiest part, just being there. And it ain't about, be about no money. It never about no money. Because my kids don't care about no money. ... But just being there, man, like, my car, I'll take the bus to go see my kids. You feel me? It's about my kids, man.

Interviewer: What has made it harder to be a good parent?

Father: Sometimes their mothers. Because they want me to do more, like we into a [romantic] relationship. And I won't allow it. ... I don't need [study partner] or [other child's] mom, I don't need neither. I got my kids. I got all the love I need. I don't need you all, period... I sit down with my kids on a daily basis, you feel me? On a daily basis. "What's going on? Talk to me. What's going on? What's up?"²⁶

In her interview, the mother of these children expressed a very different view, echoing the perspectives of other mothers who felt that the fathers' incarcerations exacted a toll on their relationships with their children:

The kids are a little reserved around him now... his relationship with the kids is what's kind of my biggest concern. Because when he can be, he's a really good father, when he's there... He has to learn, and they're just now learning each other, although they're about to be five [years old]. It's like they just now met their dad and, you know, they're just not used to having a dad or calling somebody dad. So, it's all new for them.

My oldest son, he remembers his dad being in jail and going to see him... And I think that [my son] is scared to get so attached again and then [have the father] go back to jail, is what makes him nervous.²⁷

When men were able to reflect on the impact their incarceration had on their children, their narratives were often devastating and painful. This was particularly salient when the children's mother was not able to care for them or provide the "buffer" against hardship that many women attempted to create to protect their children from overwhelming feelings of loss. One father described his efforts over the course of a long prison sentence to sustain his children emotionally, despite their difficult circumstances:

26 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

27 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

Like I said, I got twins. One of the twins, he in jail. He got [sentenced to] ten years. And I just never forget – I will always tell them, like, man, I will be home to see you graduate. This was even when they was young. Like man, by the time you graduate, I will be there. I will see you walk that stage. So finally that time came, it was 2008, which was the year that my twins would graduate. And I went to the parole board, I think in January. ... Long story short, they didn't let me out. They gave me four more years. So I had to get on the phone and I remember I called them and my son, the one that is in jail now, he was crying so bad. And he was like, he just kept, he said, "Dad, I don't care no more." I said, "What you mean?" He said, "I don't care, I don't care. Man, mommy out here on crack, you in there, you got to do four more. Man, I can't do this no more. I am done. I am done. It is over." ... And he just spiraled down after that.²⁸

Families' needs for support during incarceration and re-entry

Interview participants indicated that staying in touch was prohibitively difficult during men's incarceration. The chief barriers to communication were lack of transportation to correctional facilities, institutional policies that felt invasive or objectionable (e.g., searches, lack of child-friendly spaces), the high cost of visiting (transportation, food, child care, and long distances between the prison and the home community) and phone calls, and logistical difficulties coordinating times to connect. One man expressed the toll it took on him when he couldn't reach his family by phone:

I talked to them every day, a couple of times a day. But there would be times where I wouldn't get a hold of them and I would just be frustrated and upset. Like, you are not at work again, or why can't you answer your phone? And like, the timing of me trying to get a phone and get on the phone and the atmosphere I was in was upsetting enough as it was, and then not – hearing it ring and not getting no answer, it was like, it was like a let-down.²⁹

Another man responded to a question about what was hardest in his relationship during his incarceration by speaking to the emotional challenges he and his partner faced when she came to visit:

The visits. I used to hate it. Yeah. Like, because especially when she came, [with] my momma, like seeing them leave. And she'd leave, yeah it used to mess with me. ... It just used to hurt like, and then every time she came up here she like, "They treat me like a criminal", searching her and make her take off her shoes. ... I mean, lucky I wasn't too far from here. She didn't have to drive too far, but I just used to hate having her, making her go through that. Even though I used to want to see her, but it was always bittersweet, every time.³⁰

28 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

29 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

30 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

When asked what help they wanted during the incarceration period, men and women consistently identified assistance maintaining contact as a primary need. Repeatedly voiced suggestions included financial assistance with the costs of visiting and telephone calls, including gas cards, phone cards, and transportation and food subsidies; vans, shuttles, organized carpools or other forms of collective transportation to prison facilities; lowering the costs of phone calls and providing opportunities for video calls with minor children, who had difficulty concentrating on a telephone call; and implementing family-friendly policies at the prisons, including reduced security screenings for children, longer visits, and play areas in visiting rooms.

Study participants also noted a need for emotional and psychological support. Women in particular raised this issue, frequently saying that they would welcome opportunities to participate in a support group with other partners of prisoners or in individual or couples counselling. Their narratives about their emotional suffering suggested a need for support in addressing the specific trauma each partner experienced during and after the incarceration:

I know being incarcerated isn't something easy to do. It's a whole different mindset from being in society. But then I also think it's hard for him to understand everything I went through. You know what I mean? Like, it was just something traumatic for both of us.³¹

Accounts of children's traumatized reactions to visiting their incarcerated fathers also indicated an urgent need for counselling and support specifically focused on this experience:

After the visit, like, you're allowed to sit from across each other and you're allowed to touch, but when the visit's over, you know, they stand the inmates up and put their handcuffs on and walk them out. [My son] flipped out to see his dad like that. ... He's like, "Come on daddy, we going home." He wanted him to come with him. Like, why he not coming? And when he seen the police [the correctional officers] he just, "Oh my God, daddy?" He had a big old conniption fit. And I was embarrassed 'cause I had two little babies in the car seat and he was like kicking and screaming... So the visits started getting really hard for me. Even though I know they did him good to see the kids, it was really hard for me afterwards to explain that to the boys or try to calm them down. So after a while we just agreed that we would cease the visits altogether.³²

Participants suggested that incarcerated men needed more access to education, job skills training and legal resources, as well as instruction on parenting and other topics. In one woman's words, "I feel like maybe jails could offer more 'how to' classes. How to be a dad. How to be a husband. How to be a man."

31 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

32 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

Participants strongly indicated that the families of incarcerated men needed relief from incarceration-related financial costs such as phone calls and putting money on prisoners' accounts, and help compensating for lost income and support from the incarcerated partner. Men and women advocated that financial assistance for housing, child care, food and transportation as well as practical support such as after-school programmes, tutoring and summer camps be made available to families to prevent what were common stories of destabilization when a father was lost to incarceration:

We moved because we had just moved and we were trying to, like, do this rent-to-own and purchase this condo, townhouse, but then he went to jail and I couldn't afford the payments so I got evicted. ... [F]inancially that [was] a big blow. So instead of two incomes, one. And then mentally, everything was on me. Just everything that I depended on him for or no, I don't have to go and pick the kids up, he'll do it. Just I'm doing everything which I wasn't used to. Cause all my parental duties were split as long as he was around. ... And then to do it with four kids was something I never did before.³³

For men re-entering the community, employment and housing assistance were repeatedly identified as dominant needs. In addition, individuals with current or previous experiences of their own or their partner's mental health challenges, substance dependency and partner violence articulated the desire for support specific to these situations. As with so many resources, the costs of rent, therapy and other treatment services were prohibitive for the men and women who expressed a need for them. In the absence of subsidized or free assistance, families were often left without the basic building blocks they needed to reconstruct their lives after incarceration.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the findings presented here from the MFS-IP, it is clear that although the costs of imprisonment resonate in the financial, social and emotional domains for justice-involved families, the edges of these categories are not sharp. For example, the expense of phone calls with an incarcerated loved one may simultaneously decrease a family's ability to pay household bills, narrow their social network by diminishing the disposable income available for after-school and weekend activities, and increase interpersonal stress by contributing to arguments about money. In a similar vein, decreased contact with a loved one might lead to depression, which could result in a lowered paycheck due to missed days of work and social isolation due to reluctance to leave the house. For people who experience the dissolution of relationships due to distance, prohibitive expenses and institutional barriers, the cost of imprisonment may be vast, extending throughout every aspect of their lives.

33 Interview with study participant, on file with authors.

This interconnection encourages us to conceptualize the costs of imprisonment to families broadly, focusing holistically on well-being rather than attempting to calculate specific costs in distinct domains. This may also be a useful approach for considering the costs of imprisonment to society: the ripple effect of having governments that spend more of their budget on prisons than on educational systems extends far beyond what is listed in an expense ledger, shaping the health, safety, opportunities and access to public resources of large groups of people, the majority of whom will never be convicted of a crime or sentenced to time in a correctional institution. That the burdens of incarceration are borne in large part by people who are entangled with the criminal justice system mainly due to a desire to remain connected to and support a family member provides grounds for re-evaluating societal definitions of and responses to lawbreaking. Indeed, for people already struggling with a loved one's substance use or mental health issues, the imposition of costs related to incarcerating their family member could be considered counterproductive and harmful.

While it is important not to be reductive in thinking about the costs of imprisonment to families as being limited to financial outlays, the provision of monetary resources or their equivalent can be a way of investing in a broader spectrum of family well-being. Free or low-cost phone calls and transportation to facilitate relationship maintenance during incarceration, subsidized housing after release, affordable mental health and medical treatment services and a continuum of care across correctional and community clinics – all are means of improving family members' ability to maintain or improve stability during a prison sentence and reunify in a supportive and supported process during the re-entry period.