


Mass Incarceration and Its Devastating Effects: Assessing the Ongoing Struggles of Prisoners, Families, and the Prison Environment

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ABSTRACT: This research paper utilizes various sources from Canadian studies and firsthand accounts to identify the issues within penitentiaries and the Canadian criminal justice system. There are numerous pressing issues related to the handling, punishment, and sentencing of crime, many of which stem from racial injustice and underlying societal problems. Inmates endure harsh prison conditions and face barriers when trying to maintain connections with their families and friends. The mental well-being of prisoners is often overlooked, creating an unjust and unfavourable environment for Canadian citizens. The legal system requires reform and improvement to support individuals and promote rehabilitation effectively. Addressing these problems requires focusing on systemic injustices disproportionately affecting minorities and impoverished individuals. Studies have demonstrated that visitation and human contact contribute to law-abiding behaviour in criminals. Therefore, to enhance our criminal justice system, we must address the root causes of crime.

KEYWORDS: poverty, crime, incarceration, criminal justice system, reform



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Incarceration can take a devastating toll on an inmate's mental and physical health, as the conditions and environment within prisons are poor and can be challenging to adjust to. While awaiting trial in remand, presumably innocent people are forced to face harsh prison conditions where their spaces are disorganized, dirty, and completely closed off from the outside world. However, the prisoner is not the only person affected by the incarceration, as these individuals often have spouses, children, and communities who rely on and care about them. Visiting family members in prison is a tedious and timely process which is often delayed or prevented due to extensive paperwork and strict rules and protocols. The issue with mass incarceration as a deterrent to crime is that our criminal justice system is punishing individuals instead of addressing the root problems that lead to incarceration, such as poverty, racism, and homelessness; there is no actual correlation between preventing crime and incarcerating individuals to small, enclosed spaces with a lack of interaction with their families.

The current processes involved when visiting incarcerated individuals is extremely difficult and has a severe impact on both the prisoner and their families. Canada's current criminal justice system needs to address the environment prisoners live in, as well as the issue of mass incarceration, as a solution to crime reduction in our society. The environment of incarceration and the stigma surrounding it has considerable effects on both inmates and their family members who are dealing with significant changes to their lives. Mass incarceration continues to harbour individuals away from their loved ones, particularly those from impoverished neighbourhoods. This retributive approach is doing more harm than good as a solution to criminal behaviour. Mass incarceration is not a solution to preventing crime; instead, it is segregating families from their loved ones at a vast rate which can be detrimental to their rehabilitation. This paper will examine the adverse effects of mass incarceration on prisoners and their families. It will explore the poor prison conditions and the challenges of visitation, discussing how they affect the well-being of families, relationships, and mental health. It will also look at how the punitive aspects of mass incarceration disproportionately affect communities of colour and fails to address the root causes of crime,

ultimately leading to a cycle of incarceration rather than encouraging rehabilitation and crime prevention.

Incarceration Conditions

Spending any amount of time incarcerated certainly is an adjustment that takes a physiological toll on an individual. The conditions in prison are horrific, and people are forced to live in enclosed, bright spaces for the majority of their days. They can be dirty because urgent matters of violence within the prison will take priority compared to someone having a messy cell or missing essential items such as toiletries. The correctional staff has extreme responsibility of keeping prisoners safe from each other with legion hazards, which can range from an inmate throwing feces at a guard or staff being sexually assaulted or killed.¹ Hence, essential survival items can be overlooked due to the constant chaos involved in penal systems. Prisons leave individuals vulnerable to a multitude of issues both during their stay and after they are released due to the lack of supervision and support. The stigma surrounding a criminal record can lead to low self-esteem and self-worth for those wishing to reintegrate into society as law-abiding citizens. Labelling theory suggests that stigmatizing an individual can influence future offending and change their behaviour due to changes in their identity.² Being perceived as deviant can induce more criminal acts because if a person believes they are a criminal, they will act upon it. Even though everyone can change, our society is not as forgiving, as most jobs require record checks and avoid hiring those holding a criminal record.

Our provincial prison systems also lack resources because people are frequently cycling in and out, either while awaiting their trial in remand or serving a short sentence. Access to mental and physical health programs is hard to obtain unless sentenced to a federal facility, for instance, after being found guilty and receiving a sentence of two years or more. These prisons have more resources and programming due to the nature of the crimes. Therefore, people suffer from little access to their past life, where their family, community, and workplace are disrupted, and it may not be possible

to return after their release. The term incapacitation describes the inability to commit crimes while detained, which impacts well after release.³ Serving a sentence will disrupt the lifestyle that person was living beforehand, affecting their family and friends who may depend on them. Prison is a very humbling experience because people become alienated from their loved ones and may not feel good enough to return.

The cycle will continue because punishment is frequently falsely regarded as the best method to deter crime. However, the conditions and dangers in prison can create a mindset of delinquency, as labelling theory suggests, which may lead to continued criminal behaviours. There is not enough supervision or support from the criminal justice system for a successful release to meaningfully assist people in reforming and reintegrating. Being drained while in prison, mentally and physically, makes reintegration feel impossible when the feelings continue because of society's standards and stigmatization of crime. Certainly, incarceration takes a heavy toll on the view of oneself and can affect a person years after being released into society.

Visiting Processes for Families

This paper focuses on determining the direct effects incarceration can have on families with an incarcerated loved one. Maintaining communication between friends and family while incarcerated is extremely important as these relationships can be the one thing individuals can look forward to while imprisoned. For summary offences, these inmates can expect a shorter sentence of six months to two years in jail, and indictable offences can last years to life. Any sentence will result in a loss of income, career growth, and relational developments with spouses and children, causing a severe strain on the livelihood of not only the inmate, but also their family. Furthermore, the processes involved with the visitation of prisoners threaten to ruin some of the only good moments these individuals have while incarcerated. Visitation between prisoners and loved ones is shown to help rebuild relationships in preparation for outside life, making visits a critical part of the reintegration process.⁴

Nevertheless, the process of visiting someone for just a few hours can sometimes take an entire day. To visit someone who is incarcerated, visitors often have to travel to the center, wait to be admitted and are sometimes even turned away for minor issues such as the clothing someone is wearing. The underwire in a bra, the wrong colour of clothing, or items in pockets are some additional examples of reasons that halt visitors' entrance into the facilities.⁵

In *Visiting Days*, based on real-life prison visitation encounters, Beth recalls how excruciating these visitations can be on the outside person looking to see their loved one.⁶ The waiting process is the most gruesome, as traffic or a late morning resulting in arriving half an hour later could mean waiting for an additional two hours, which takes away from the short time she would get with her husband. "The lengthy and inefficient queues required for visiting a prisoner do not just belittle the worth of his family and friends' time—they also deprecate the importance of the visit itself."⁷ It can feel distressing for these people who go through extensive wait times and endure protocols that dehumanize them, such as metal scanners and pat-downs. These large-scale prisons have hundreds of families daily waiting to be granted only a few hours with their loved ones. Beth describes an encounter in the processing center where a young girl asked her mother, "Why does it take so long, Mommy?" regarding seeing her father.⁸ Children are too young to understand what is happening, making the situation intimidating at such an impressionable young age.

Impact on Families

Children are not old enough to understand the intricacies of incarceration and why their father, mother, or family member is so hard to contact. In the United States, the 1991 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities found that 56% of state prison inmates had children under the age of eighteen.⁹ Although Canadian penitentiaries are smaller in numbers compared to the United States, it is not hard to imagine how similar this number is, and three decades later, it is plausible to assume that the number of children affected by their parents entering the prison system is disgracefully high. It has

been discussed how extensive the process is to visit someone in prison, but we also must consider how much harder it can be when a child is involved. Often, toddlers and young children are unaware of what a prison is, nor do they understand the rules that come with visiting a person in one. Mothers with babies and younger children are faced with extreme strain, whether that be financial or mental, as travelling with them is emotionally draining and can be extremely expensive. Institutions can be located hours or even provinces away. Also, adjusting to an income without the other parent can lead to substantial financial strain, as travelling to prisons and even phone calls can cost absurd amounts of money. If the mother is incarcerated, there is an increasing chance the children's father is as well, which can further jeopardize the children's stress and mental health problems.¹⁰

When youth get older, the absence of a parent can be confusing and difficult to grasp; the ties their parent has to criminal behaviour can lead to similar problems and crimes for young adults. It is also crucial to consider the children who lose both parents to incarceration in certain circumstances, meaning they are forced to grow up in foster homes where visiting their family is not prioritized if a violent crime was committed. In a 2012 Pittsburgh Youth study, it was concluded that multiple problem behaviours existed in youth with parents in the criminal justice system, compared to those with no incarcerated parents.¹¹ Their conduct ranged from substance use, poor academic performance, and depression.

However, it is essential to consider the differentiating effects of parental incarceration youth feel depending on circumstances: which parent is incarcerated, the parent-living circumstances, and the extent of violent or antisocial behaviours used by parents in the home.¹² Similar outcomes result in the majority of these situations, as being away from any maternal or paternal influence causes a risk for delinquency. The family effects established by Arditti are noted as primary effects directly associated with the parent's incarceration and secondary effects resulting from the changes, such as economic disadvantages and stability.¹³ The child's well-being will be threatened if there is immense trauma resulting from losing their

parent; the view of “second-hand prisonization” shows that the absence of a parent can have devastating effects on children.

Mass Incarceration: The Main Issues and Possible Solutions

Prisons have become highly overcrowded, creating unsafe and unsanitary environments for people to live in. Our government has pushed a ‘tough on crime’ strategy that targets those who are already less fortunate, leading to thousands of people facing jail time. Homeless populations are severely affected by laws made by politicians to stop them from using unconventional forms of making money and surviving on the street. Instead of pushing a strategy to help those struggling, we enforce rules to keep these people in prison. This rise in incarceration significantly affects young, poorly educated, minority males. Expanding prison systems does not strongly relate to crime rates but instead is rooted in policy shifts, closely connected to the government’s war on crime and discriminatory drug initiatives.¹⁴ These approaches to crime prevention are not truly meant to stop criminal behaviour but rather to lock up and shield the rest of society from seeing how poorly disadvantaged and impoverished people are treated. Repeat offenders and drug offenders face harsher and longer sentences, resulting in a fast rise in incarceration in many countries.¹⁵ Attitudes from the government and the upper class hold opinions that using penal systems as a threat will prevent these crimes from happening when the lack of leniency actually creates disadvantaged sentencing and an increase in prison populations. Those who already distrust the police due to extreme violence against African American people are further pushed from believing our system is lawful and fair.

Another issue with mass incarceration is the racial discrepancies within the criminal justice system. Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (BIPOC) are more susceptible to interacting with police due to racism and the supervision that comes with it; although minorities make up smaller parts of our population, they overpopulate our prison systems. This disparity is a sad reality for many Canadians who have to be extremely cautious in their interactions with police due to the racial profiling they encounter on

a day-to-day basis. According to research, the effects of incarceration may be harsher for racial minorities due to the stigma associated with incarceration and racism in society, having amplifying effects.¹⁶ Policing has held racist ideologies written in the law, whether the officer is aware or not, by allowing frequent traffic stops, monitoring of Black individuals, and profiling that assumes someone with dark skin is involved with criminal behaviour. It is also noted that incarceration rates for African Americans are about seven times higher than those for Whites, estimating that 28.5% of Black men will spend time in prison sometime during their lives, compared to a risk of 4.4% for White men.¹⁷

The criminal justice system is failing to stop systematic racism that affects millions of people and their communities, allowing discrimination to occur within incarceration. Crime control systems also reproduce social hierarchies of power and inequality from social statuses such as race, gender, age, and class.¹⁸ People who are already disadvantaged due to their socioeconomic status have an even harder time reintegrating into society. BIPOC are the most vulnerable individuals, and their overpopulation in penal systems has been ignored. Millions of people endure the adverse impacts of incarceration, including the affected family members that are suffering against a system that is not attempting to fix nor address the more significant issue at hand.

To improve our prison systems, the relationship between law enforcement and BIPOC must be formally addressed, and a proper solution must be implemented to prevent the increase in their arrests and sentences. There are many disadvantages vulnerable populations face when trying to improve their lifestyle, especially while impoverished. Those experiencing homelessness and poverty are most at risk of falling into a cycle of crime and incarceration. Implementing better resources to support any individual dealing with disadvantages in society is vital to improving crime in Canada and preventing mass incarceration, especially when these individuals have nowhere to turn to or reach out for support.

Conclusion

The criminal justice system forces incarcerated individuals to make challenging adjustments that affect not only their well-being but also their family's and community's livelihoods. The stress of long wait times and protocols for visitation create unneeded stress for those simply wishing to retain bonds with their loved ones while incarcerated. It is heartbreaking for any individual to go through the experience of missing a loved one who has no choice but to finish their sentence, yet the process of visiting them is discouraging, stressful, and timely. Moreover, due to 'tough on crime' antics used by politicians; mass incarceration is growing at an extremely high rate meaning millions are overpopulating prison systems. Often, these sentences are short and could be solved with other sentencing options such as probation or other programs to deter future criminal behaviour; increased prison populations account for a portion of crime prevention, but not all of it.¹⁹ If anything, the threat of more prison time for minor and drug crimes creates further distrust with law enforcement. There are root issues in penal systems, as the majority of the people incarcerated are minorities, facing impoverishment and encountering other problems such as homelessness and substance abuse. Mass incarceration damages family relationships and creates a large funnel of crime that cannot be reversed. The impact of mass incarceration in Canada does not only negatively affect the imprisoned individual, but also their families, their loved ones, and their communities.

Notes

- ¹ Gary Garrison, *Human on the Inside: Unlocking the Truth about Canada's Prisons* (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: University Of Regina Press, 2014), 129.
- ² 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 (February 2012): 255–302, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2011.00257.x>, 259.
- ³ Bruce Western and Sara McLanahan, "Fathers behind Bars: The Impact of Incarceration on Family Formation," *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, 2000, 309–24, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1530-3535\(00\)80017-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1530-3535(00)80017-5), 5.
- ⁴ Joel Medina and Beth Caldwell, "Visiting Days," *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 20, no. 2 (December 1, 2011): 47–63, <https://doi.org/10.18192/jpp.v20i2.5128>, 62.
- ⁵ Medina and Caldwell, "Visiting Days", 55.
- ⁶ Medina and Caldwell, "Visiting Days".
- ⁷ Megan L. Comfort, "In the Tube at San Quentin," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32, no. 1 (February 2003): 77–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241602238939>, 92.
- ⁸ Medina and Caldwell, "Visiting Days," 52.
- ⁹ Western and McLanahan, "Fathers behind Bars," 5.
- ¹⁰ Joyce A. Arditti, *Parental Incarceration and the Family: Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 59.
- ¹¹ Murray, Loeber, and Pardini, "Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System," 255-302.
- ¹² Murray, Loeber, and Pardini, 275.
- ¹³ Arditti, *Parental Incarceration*, 98.
- ¹⁴ Western and McLanahan, "Fathers behind Bars," 4.
- ¹⁵ Western and McLanahan, 4.
- ¹⁶ Murray, Loeber, and Pardini, "Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System," 285.
- ¹⁷ Western and McLanahan, "Fathers behind Bars," 2.
- ¹⁸ Arditti, *Parental Incarceration*, 25.
- ¹⁹ Arditti, 5.

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