

High rates of parental incarceration among African-Americans means that criminal justice reform is now education reform

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African-American schoolchildren have a one in four chance of having a parent who is in jail, or who has been previously incarcerated. In new report [Leila Morsy](#) and [Richard Rothstein](#) argue that incarceration of African Americans – which has been on the rise due to increasingly punitive sentencing policies as well as the ramping up of the “War on Drugs” – has made a significant contribution to the racial achievement gap in education. They write that criminal justice reform is now education reform, and that it should be high on educators’ lists of concerns.

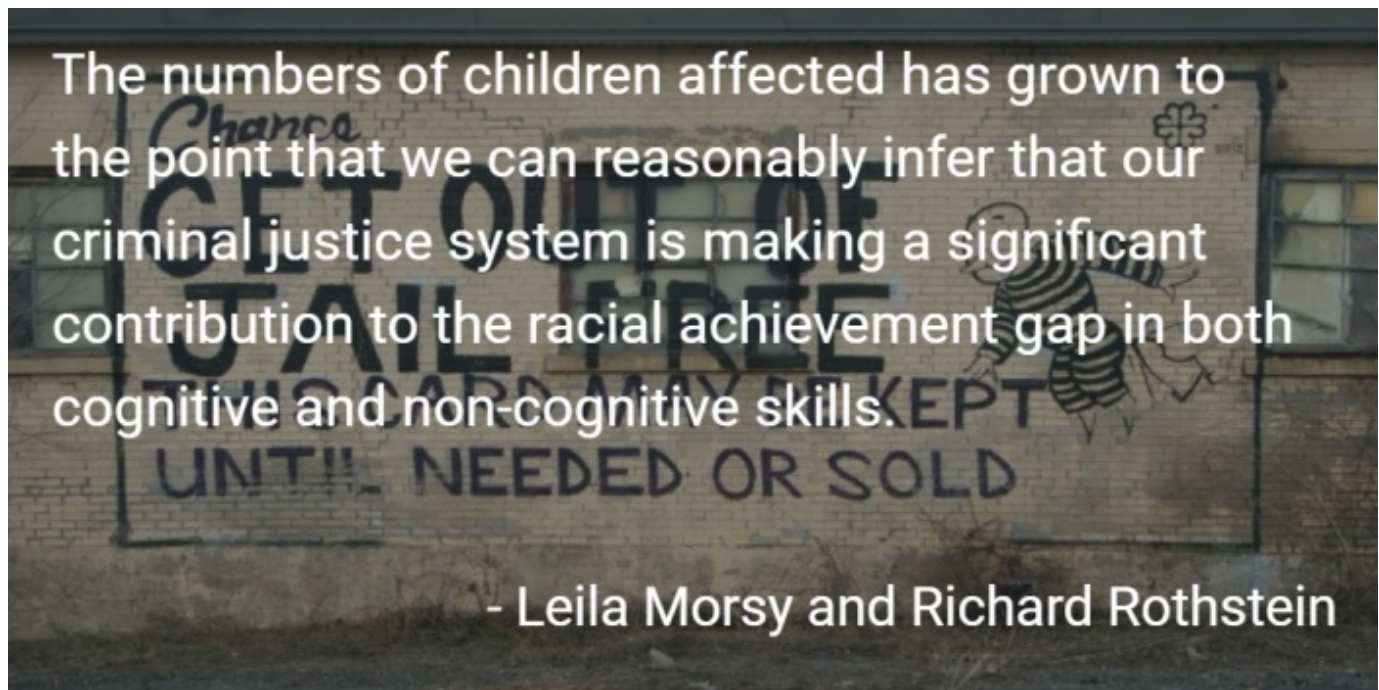


During the 2016 election campaign, the now President Donald Trump advocated a nationwide policy of “stop-and-frisk,” a police practice concentrated in low-income minority neighborhoods that invariably leads to the arrest and eventual imprisonment of men, African American men in particular, for non-violent victimless crimes. Yet “stop and frisk” as well as excessive sentencing for minor crimes, are not primarily federal policies, and the Trump administration has little influence over them. These are policies and practices of local and state governments, and reform is no less realistic or urgent now than it was before the presidential election.



Our new report, [Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes](#), however, urges education policymakers and educators in states and localities to pay greater attention to the mass incarceration of young African American men. The evidence is overwhelming that the unjustified incarceration of African American parents, fathers especially, is an important cause of the poorer performance of their children. On any given day, 10 percent of African American schoolchildren have an incarcerated parent; 25 percent have a parent who is or has been incarcerated. The numbers of children affected has grown to the point that we can reasonably infer that our criminal justice system is making a significant contribution to the racial achievement gap in both cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Two policies have been mostly responsible: a more punitive sentencing policy, including prison terms for violent crimes that have increased by nearly 50 percent since the early 1990s; and the declaration of a “war on drugs” that has included severe mandatory minimum sentences for relatively trivial victimless drug offenses. The incarceration explosion is primarily an expression of our race relations and of the confrontational stance of police toward African Americans in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage. (The incarceration rate of middle-class African Americans has declined and has made no contribution to the rapidly rising rate of incarcerations.) Young African American men are no more likely to use or sell drugs than young white men, but they are nearly three times as likely to be arrested for drug use or sale; once arrested, they are more likely to be sentenced; and, once sentenced, their jail or prison terms are 50 percent longer, on average.



Comparing the children of incarcerated parents with economically and demographically similar children, the former perform worse academically, are more likely to suffer from a variety of learning disabilities, drop out of school at higher rates, and have worse behavioral and health outcomes. Our report discusses the biological processes by which the stress of parental incarceration can predict these conditions.

We have reviewed sophisticated studies from diverse fields – epidemiology, economics, sociology, child development – that control for background factors and conclude that these differences are not reasonably the result of economic or demographic differences between the children of incarcerated parents and children of those without a criminal record. Rather, the differences plausibly result from the experience of parental incarceration itself.

However improbable reform of federal policy may seem in a Trump administration (and we hope we are wrong), many more children are harmed by the incarceration of their parents in state than in federal prisons. In 2014, over 700,000 prisoners nationwide were serving sentences of a year or longer for non-violent crimes. Over 600,000 of these were in state, not federal prisons. This reality presents an opportunity, and necessity, for educators to press for change in state and local policing and criminal justice policies that will substantially benefit their students.

We will be discussing our findings in a forum held at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. on March 15 at 10:30 a.m. US Eastern Standard Time. Valerie Strauss, the online education columnist (“The Answer Sheet”) of *The Washington Post*, will moderate the forum, and our presentation will be discussed by Glenn Loury of Brown University and Ames Grawert of the Brennan Center for Justice. [It will be livestreamed here](#) and available for viewing at the same site after the event.

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About the authors

Leila Morsy – *University of New South Wales*

Leila Morsy is a senior lecture in education at the School of Education, University of New South Wales, and a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute.



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Richard Rothstein – *Economic Policy Institute*

Richard Rothstein is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute and a senior fellow at the Thurgood Marshall Institute of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.



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