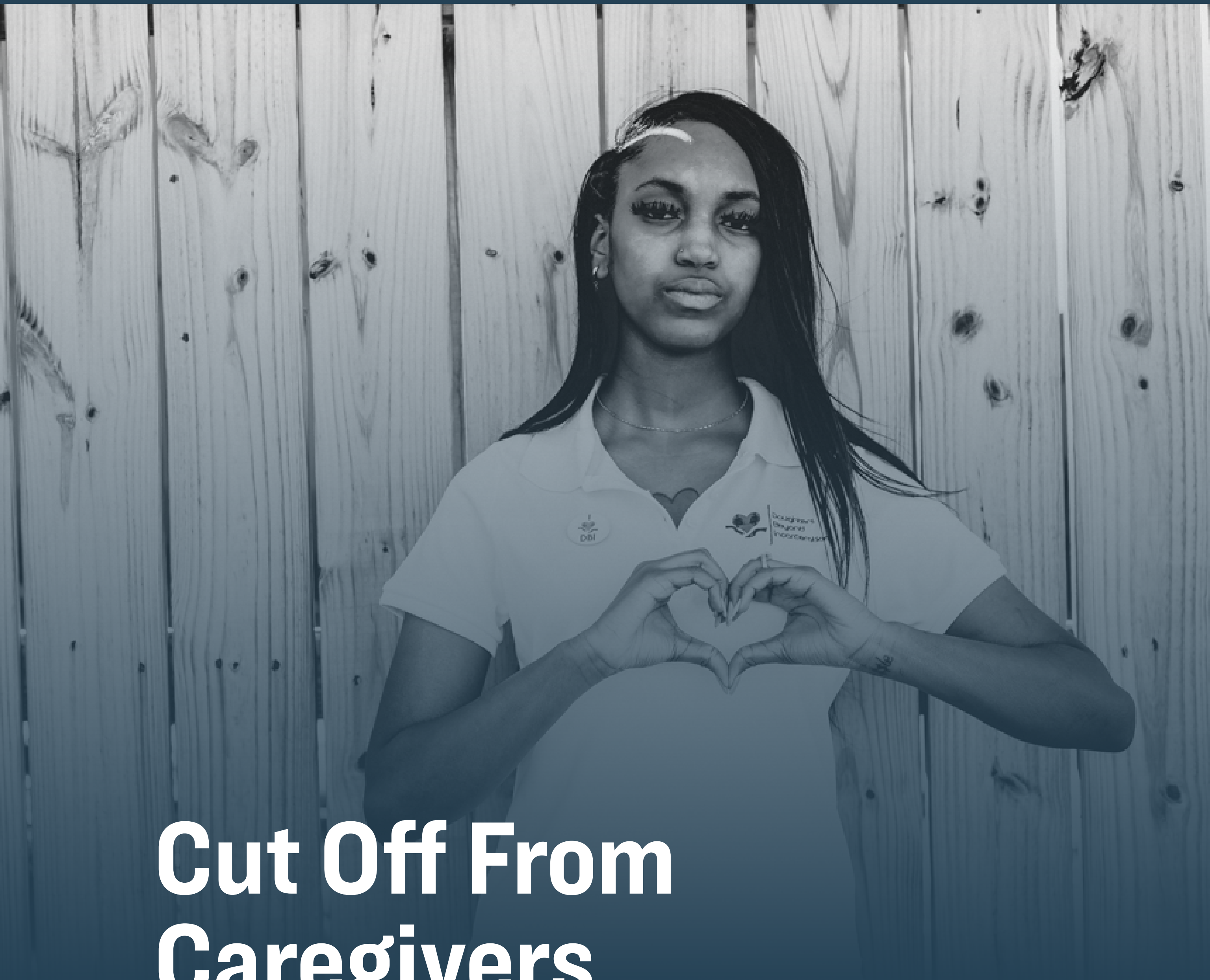

Cut Off From Caregivers

The Children of Incarcerated Parents in Louisiana

SPLC Southern Poverty Law Center

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Executive Summary

The impact of mass incarceration on children and families in Louisiana is significant. As the mass incarceration capital of the world, Louisiana has an estimated 94,000[1] children with a parent who is behind bars. The devastating effects of incarceration on children and families are evidence that incarceration is a sentence that the entire family will serve.

Parental incarceration is a growing epidemic. Nationally, one in 28 children experiences parental incarceration today, compared to one in 125 children in 1985.[2] Black children are particularly affected by caregiver incarceration, as 11.4% of Black children experience parental incarceration, compared to 1.8% of their white peers.[3] This is of little surprise, as Black people are disproportionately represented in the prison system, due to historic social and economic inequality.

The incarceration of a caregiver can hamstring a child's development and leave already struggling families financially strapped. As the parent-child bond is critical to a child's development, the severance of that bond by the incarceration of a parent can have effects that stretch into adulthood.[4] A child who has a parent who is incarcerated is likely to experience social and emotional consequences.[5] The trauma caused by having a parent who is incarcerated undoubtedly impairs a child's mental and physical health.[6]

Witnessing the arrest of a parent and the following struggle to maintain contact with loved ones can expose a child to further trauma.[7] The visiting process can be difficult and exhausting for children who are unable to make physical contact with their caregiver and are only able to see that person in prison uniforms and chains.[8] While some children maintain contact with their loved ones through visitation and phone calls, others have this ability stripped away from them.[9] Children who are funneled into the foster care system have their bond with their parents more permanently severed, while their incarcerated caregivers have had custody stripped away from them.[10]

The incarceration of a parent could also lead to a child displaying trauma in school, often resulting in punitive disciplinary responses that have the potential to cut short students' education and increase the likelihood that they themselves will be incarcerated. The struggle that a child of an incarcerated parent experiences in school may go unnoticed by educators, leading these children to suffer in silence.

Families with incarcerated loved ones also suffer the financial consequences of incarceration. Already struggling families will be left to fend for themselves, as their incarcerated loved ones are often the primary breadwinners of the family.[11] The loss of this financial stability increases the risk that children of incarcerated caregivers will sink into poverty or be at risk of homelessness.[12] Additional strain is placed upon these families via the costs of prison phone calls, visitation, and court costs and fees.[13]

It is clear that Louisiana must do more to reduce and, ultimately, eliminate mass incarceration. In 2020, in an effort to address the effects of parental incarceration on children, Louisiana passed legislation to create the Council on the Children of Incarcerated Parents and Caregivers (the Council) within the Office of the Governor. The Council is made up of stakeholders in the justice system and caregivers and children impacted by incarceration. It is charged with studying the effects of incarceration on children and recommending policy changes as a result of its findings. The Council's first meeting was March 4, 2021.

This brief serves as a roadmap for the Council as it carries out its work: defining the problem in Louisiana and outlining how the Council should develop its recommendations to address the problem.

The 94,000 Children of the Incarcerated

Nine-year-old Eri'Shine Lewis cannot recall how old she was when her father went away. "That was a long time ago," she said. "I was probably in my [mama's] stomach."

Eri'Shine's father, Erick Garrison, has been away for eight and a half years. He has been serving a prison sentence at a federal facility in California, over 2,000 miles away from Eri'Shine's home in Louisiana.

Eri'Shine remembers visiting him once with her grandmother and other family members. "He was, like, behind a window—and I was on the other side."

Nearly 2.3 million people in the United States live in confinement.[14] Accounted for in this number are state and federal prison populations, youth in detention, local jail populations, immigrants held in detention facilities, patients in psychiatric facilities, and other conditions of confinement.[15] The U.S. incarcerates so many people that CNN reported in 2019 that more Americans live in criminal confinement than the populations of some of the United States' most populated places.[16] The prison population in 2016 was so large that if it were a city, it would be the fifth most populous city in the country—behind New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston.[17]

Though the United States' mass incarceration problem is being increasingly recognized as the crisis of public health, human rights, civil rights, and racism that it is,[18] many families like Eri'Shine's remain separated from their loved ones—only able to interact with them through windows and over the phone—in addition to other hardships.[19] The plight of families such as Eri'Shine serves as evidence that when a person is criminally confined, they are not the only ones serving the sentence.

Louisiana's incarceration problem

Though mass incarceration is a national problem, Louisiana has the misfortune of being the "incarceration capital of the world"[20]—a title it has held for nearly 20 years. Louisiana's incarceration rate is well above the national rate, with nearly 50,000 people behind bars, including youth and immigrants in detention, and Louisianans in federal custody.[21] During the 2019-20 fiscal year, the state budgeted over half a billion dollars—$583,974,237—on "corrections services."[22] Not included in this number are the additional costs of local jails.

Louisiana's prison system grew—like the rest of the nation's—in response to a now-free Black population following the American Civil War.[23] Black people made up a majority of the population following the Civil War and were a powerful voting bloc who sought to improve their conditions and address poverty in general.[24] In response to this new political reality, conservative Louisianans enacted and disparately enforced vague criminal laws to maintain a free, Black workforce through convict leasing, as well as to disenfranchise Black people and their allies.[25]

Today, Black people remain overrepresented in Louisiana's prisons and jails: Black people make up

$583,974,237 was budgeted during the 2019-20 fiscal year on Louisiana's "correction services," which does not include costs of local jails.

ISTOCK PHOTO

32% of the state's total population but account for over two-thirds of the prison population.[26] Black people are more than twice as likely to be jailed following an arrest than their white peers, and receive longer sentences.[27] Similarly, Black people in Louisiana are twice as likely to be in poverty than white Louisianans,[28] Black women are twice as likely to experience adverse birth outcomes,[29] and Black children are more than twice as likely to be suspended or expelled than to be in advanced placement courses in school.[30] It is no coincidence that eight in 10 parolees ineligible to vote are Black.[31]

In 2017, Louisiana attempted to decrease its dependence on incarceration by passing an extensive criminal justice reform legislative package.[32] The reforms sought to "steer people convicted of less serious crimes away from prison, strengthen incarceration alternatives, reduce prison terms for those who can be safely supervised in the community, and remove barriers to re-entry."[33] The reforms are projected to reduce the prison population by about 10%, and the state has committed to reinvesting the savings of $262 million in local programs that steer Louisianans away from incarceration. However, even with these reforms, Louisiana still incarcerates more of its citizens than any other place in the world[34] and has struggled to address the root causes and multigenerational effects of mass incarceration—including the critical issue of how incarceration impacts our youth.

Black people make up 32% of the state's total population but account for over two-thirds of the prison population.

Hidden victims

Like Eri'Shine, Reign LaCour is one of the many children in the state with an incarcerated parent. Reign wants to grow up to be a social worker to help children who also have an imprisoned caregiver.

"I don't want kids in the same predicament as me to feel alone," she said, recalling how she felt growing up with her father away.

"My daddy wasn't there when I got all my awards for being on the honor roll and stuff like that. My daddy wasn't there for my prom, he wasn't there for my homecomings, and he wasn't there for the biggest moment—to me—walking [across] the stage," she said of her graduation.

At least 5 million children across the United States have had a parent incarcerated in their lifetime.[35] In 2010, 2.7 million children, or one for every 28 children, had a parent incarcerated in the United States.[36] For Black children, the odds are even bleaker, as one in nine Black children had an incarcerated parent.[37] A majority of these children's parents were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses.[38] Estimates project that 94,000 children in Louisiana have a parent who is incarcerated[39]—or nearly one of every seven children—meaning 94,000 children have experienced the social, emotional, and economic consequences of the abrupt severance of the parent-child bond by having a parent locked away.

To address the effects on children of having incarcerated parents, Louisiana passed legislation in 2020 to create the Council on the Children of Incarcerated Parents and Caregivers within the office of the governor. Louisiana follows Oregon, New York, Illinois, and Washington as one of the few states to address parental incarceration through policy.[40] The Council is made up of stakeholders from the justice system, as well as children and caregivers who have been impacted by caregiver incarceration, and is charged with studying and recommending policy on the impact of parental incarceration in Louisiana. This report is intended to provide an overview of the issue that can assist the Council in its work.

94,000 children in Louisiana are estimated to have at least one parent who is incarcerated.

1 out of 7 children have experienced the social, emotional, and economic consequences of the abrupt severance of the parent-child bond.

The Impact of Parental Incarceration

Having a parent behind bars can have a destabilizing effect on children, which means that children may experience developmental and behavioral challenges in later years; however, the effects of having an incarcerated parent can be experienced at least as early as the age of 3.[41] Further, a child whose parent is incarcerated may face instability in housing, food security, and overall economic well—being. There are severe emotional impacts on children as well. The effects of forced parent—child separation may lead children to struggle to adapt to having an incarcerated parent, have their self-esteem impaired or exhibit their trauma through acting out.[42]

Children experiencing parental incarceration in Louisiana are especially at risk of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress.[43] Parental incarceration places children at risk for cumulative adversity.[44] A study found that children exposed to parental incarceration were more likely to have other ACEs than their counterparts who were not exposed to parental incarceration.[45] The more adverse childhood experiences a person has encountered, the more likely the person is to experience poor physical health outcomes such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), hepatitis, lung cancer, and heart disease.[46] Parental incarceration places children at an elevated risk for a host of emotional and behavioral challenges such as depression, anxiety, suicidality, withdrawal, delinquency, and substance use.[47] Negative emotions about a parent's incarceration place children at an increased likelihood to isolate and suffer in silence.

> **"I gotta see him behind glass and I can't hug him and touch him."**
>
> —Tamia Crawford, a 13-year-old, describing what it was like to visit her father in jail

Children with incarcerated parents experience an exacerbated risk of insecure attachment, within the context of the caregiver-child relationship.[48] The caregiver-child relationship establishes the internal working model for how children will interact with the world around them for the rest of their lives.[49] If left untreated, insecure attachment relationships can matriculate into mental health disorders, emotional regulation difficulties, and interpersonal relationship challenges that extend into adulthood.[50]

Children of color are already particularly vulnerable to harm to mental and physical health because of social inequalities resulting from structural racism. These include poverty, segregated neighborhoods resulting from this country's history of racist housing practices, discrimination, unequal access to key educational resources, parental unemployment, violent neighborhoods, inadequate housing, and lack of transportation. Social inequalities coupled with the adverse childhood experience of parental incarceration harm community well-being and position children of color as hyper-vulnerable to negative outcomes associated with toxic stress.

From the moment of arrest

For children of all ages, witnessing the arrest of a parent can be a life-altering, socially and emotionally traumatic experience. According to data analyzed by the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a 2010 national study[51] found that children who witnessed the arrest of a household member were 57% more likely to encounter post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms than children who had not witnessed such an event.[52] For children who witnessed the arrest of a household member, and recently witnessed the arrest of a parent, the child had a 73% greater likelihood of developing symptoms of PTSD.[53] But the trauma does not stop there.

"I gotta see him behind glass and I can't hug him and touch him," said 13-year-old Tamia Crawford as she described what it was like to visit her father in jail.

"They should be able to let me hug him and talk to him."

Many children like Tamia may travel hundreds of miles to see their parents in state and federal prisons.[54] These visits can be long and stressful for children.[55] The lack of physical contact and a long day can culminate in an additional traumatic experience for the child.[56] Fifty percent of state prisoners and 40% of prisoners are located at facilities that are 100 to 400 miles away from their children and in rural communities,[57] sometimes without accommodations nearby. Sadly, the children able to visit their caregivers behind bars are the lucky ones. Other children are funneled into foster care with no way to see their loved ones behind bars; these children's relationship with their parents is more permanently broken upon the termination of parental rights.[58] This practice more often affects mothers. Further, incarcerated parents are more likely to have their parental rights terminated due to their incarceration alone than parents who physically or sexually abuse their children.[59] Between 2006 and 2016, one in eight incarcerated caregivers lost their parental rights regardless of offense, and incarcerated mothers were five times more likely to lose their rights than incarcerated fathers.[60]

Even upon a caregiver's release, the struggle to maintain the parent-child bond continues. Challenges such as housing instability following the release of a caregiver from incarceration can complicate the reunification process.[61] Further complicating the reunification process are broken relationships between parents and other family members as a result of a caregiver's incarceration that may result in a lack of contact with the child post-release.[62] Subsequent returns to prison or jail and extended periods of incarceration can cause further difficulties in reforming the parent-child bond, as parents like Reign's father miss milestones in their children's lives.[63] Incarceration leads to the lives of families and children being forever changed.

Parental incarceration touches every aspect of a child's life

Challenges in school

Parental incarceration touches every aspect of a child's life and increases the risk of cognitive delays and academic difficulties from problems in the classroom.[64] Collectively, these behavioral and cognitive challenges place children of incarcerated parents at a much higher risk of falling victim to the justice system than children whose parents have not been incarcerated.

Children with incarcerated parents are more susceptible to the school-to-prison pipeline, which involves exclusionary policies, such as unnecessary suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests. Children who have experienced the incarceration of their father were nearly six times more likely to be expelled or suspended than their peers – with 23% of these children being expelled or suspended compared to only 4% of children whose father has not been incarcerated being expelled or suspended.[65] These disciplinary policies have devastating effects—often, they cut short students' education and increase the likelihood of incarceration. The trauma caused by having a parent who is incarcerated undoubtedly impairs a child's mental and physical health. Without effective community-based mental health services and supports to address the trauma, children with incarcerated parents are at greater risk of institutionalization.

In most cases, children are carrying these social and emotional burdens completely unbeknownst to schools. Even if schools are aware, the child's ability to succeed in school is thwarted by having a parent incarcerated.

The costs of caregiver incarceration

The incarceration of a caregiver can further plunge children and their families into economic instability. Nearly half of the people incarcerated were the breadwinners for their family, meaning children with incarcerated caregivers are more likely to be poor upon their caregivers' incarceration.[66] Two-thirds of men were employed before their incarceration and nearly half of incarcerated parents in state prisons lived with their children before imprisonment.[67] The result of this loss of income leaves children of incarcerated caregivers more likely to end up homeless than their peers.[68] Black children with incarcerated fathers are particularly at risk of homelessness as the remaining parent is often unable to afford housing.[69]

Maintaining communication with an incarcerated caregiver and contributing to an incarcerated caregiver's finances in prison can inflict further economic harm to families. Trips to visit an incarcerated loved one to prisons in rural communities can often be costly to families.[70] Families are also required to foot the bill for phone calls to their loved ones. Louisiana families pay millions of dollars for prison phone calls. In 2013, families across the nation paid an estimated $386 million a year for prison phone calls.[71]

The financial struggle continues for families upon the release of a loved one, as the stigma of incarceration leads to formerly incarcerated parents being unable to find gainful employment and housing to support their families.[72] Court costs and fees, including bail and the cost of pre-and post-trial supervision, can further hamstring families' finances.

$386 million was spent on prison phone calls in the United States in 2013. Families are required to foot the bill for phone calls to their incarcerated loved ones. Louisianans contribute millions to this number.

A roadmap for Louisiana's Council on the Children of Incarcerated Parents and Caregivers

First and foremost, Louisiana must work to end its mass incarceration problem. At the same time, it must take steps to address and mitigate the impact of this problem at every stage on the many children across the state whose parents and caregivers are incarcerated. The Council created by the Louisiana Legislature in 2020 is charged with serving as a resource to the state on issues affecting children of incarcerated parents and caregivers. This includes duties to:

- Investigate the impact that parental or caregiver incarceration has on the mental, emotional, physical, and financial well-being of children.
- Serve as a liaison between government and private interest groups on this issue.
- Identify and discuss best practices as they affect the children of incarcerated parents and caregivers and determine how to implement these practices.
- Advise executive and legislative bodies of the potential effect of proposed legislation on the children of incarcerated parents and caregivers.
- Investigate the merits of a potential state agency dedicated to this issue.
- Provide resources and education to the caregivers of children with incarcerated parents or caregivers.

The Council is also charged with issuing a report on its efforts at least every two years, including its findings and recommendations to improve the obstacles and challenges facing children of incarcerated parents and caregivers. In preparation for its initial report, due in January 2022, we encourage the Council to engage meaningfully with impacted families and communities and other experts and to identify systemic solutions to ensure that Louisiana can reduce the number of children with incarcerated parents and caregivers and ensure that those children have the resources they need to thrive.

The Council must analyze the systemic barriers faced by children of incarcerated parents and caregivers. This brief provides an overview of the scope of this issue in Louisiana, where nearly 100,000 children are impacted by incarceration each year. The Council should study the full scope of the problem, and the ways incarceration harms children and families from the point of arrest, throughout incarceration, and following incarceration. It should also ensure that impacted communities are engaged in identifying agenda topics and questions to be answered during its meetings and deliberations.

The Council should ensure that impacted children and their families are meaningfully engaged at each of its meetings. It is required to meet in at least three of the four quarters annually and in compliance with the state Open Meetings Law. In addition to the members of the Council who have had an incarcerated parent or caregiver, the Council should invite children and families who are impacted by incarceration to speak at each meeting and ensure they represent different geographical communities across the state, as well as children of color, children with disabilities, immigrant and undocumented children, low-income children, and LGBTQ children. The Council should also engage experts on the issue from education, disability, health, mental health, and other backgrounds.

The Council should propose recommendations that provide immediate policy improvements for children of incarcerated caregivers, as well as long-term solutions that will address the systemic issue of incarceration and its impact. There are policy solutions that can provide meaningful improvements to impacted children in the short term, including eliminating barriers to communications by eliminating all fees for communicating with incarcerated caregivers and removing barriers to visitation. The Council should work to implement these short-term solutions, and at the same time, it should propose recommendations that will reduce the number of impacted children and provide systemic reforms for those children.

Personal Narratives

The American concept of justice promotes punishment of the guilty and vindication of the innocent but fails to recognize its roots in racism and socioeconomic inequality, and the effects of incarceration on families. In its blindness, American justice has devastating effects on arguably the most innocent among us—our children. These are the stories of children and caregivers who suffered the consequences.

DOMINQUE JONES is the founder and director of Daughters Beyond Incarceration (DBI). Her father, Charles Brown Jr., was sentenced to life in prison in April 1982. Dominque was born seven months later, and her father has been in prison for her entire life. DBI advocates for over 50 girls in Louisiana to build strong parent-to-child relationships with their incarcerated fathers through public education, mentorship, leadership development, and policy advocacy.

NARRATIVES OF GIRLS GROWING UP WITH AN INCARCERATED FATHER

I'M 37 YEARS OLD and my father has been incarcerated for 37 years for a crime that he did not commit. My mom was pregnant with me in 1982 when he was sentenced to life in prison. There was no DNA evidence at that time, there was no eyewitness; and to be clear the person who did the crime is behind bars as well. So, it's basically like the state of Louisiana ripped my father away from me for no reason at all. Maybe the state thought, "Oh well," because my father was a drug addict.

This organization is extremely important to me because I didn't have a "me" when I was growing up. I didn't have anyone to help me dealing with the trauma that I realize I was dealing with now, as a child. So, the way that I dealt with it was I physically fought: everywhere I went I was always known as being the most belligerent person on the team or in my area or wherever, I was always known to be violent. And I'm not that person anymore and I understand why I was that person because after seeing my father shackled and chained and being escorted by two corrections officers at his father's funeral, I thought I had to become what everyone told me my father was. And that's not who I am.

People don't understand how traumatic it is for a child to have an incarcerated parent. You have kids who wait all year to see their parent, only to arrive on a visitation day and find out that their father has been placed in solitary confinement and can't have visitors anymore, or that their father was in a fight and is now in the infirmary. You have kids who are ashamed of their last name, because their parent is locked up. I know these experiences firsthand, for myself.

One time I visited my dad, and he had to tell me to tell a friend of mine that her father, who was also at Angola, was killed in a prison fight. My friend didn't even know that her father had died. I had to be the one to tell her.

So today I work hard to educate the girls who are impacted by parental incarceration to face their fears, which is basically telling your truth. Don't hold it inside. Be open about it. Don't be embarrassed about it—because it's what makes you who you are. My overall vision for DBI is that every girl dealing with parental incarceration lives a healthy and stable life and becomes a successful community member.

I STARTED DBI BECAUSE I was once that girl growing up fatherless. My dad went away to prison while my mother was expecting me. He was given two life sentences in Angola State Penitentiary and he served 23-and-a-half years before being exonerated for a crime that he didn't commit. The importance of DBI is for girls to know that their fathers can raise them behind bars because my dad did; and it also helps with the communication because bridging the communication gap between a father and daughter is essential. When my father was incarcerated my mother made sure that I communicated with him and I visited with him when she was able to afford it. My dad was 19 and my mom was 17 when I was born, so it was really hard for my mom to go and visit him in prison. She brought me when she could and other times I went with my dad's mother (my grandmother). I went with my grandmother and we would catch the Angola Bus that would take you to see your father in prison.

For any girl that is growing up fatherless, whether your father is incarcerated, deceased, or not in your life, DBI is a great program because we have girls in our program who used to be afraid to tell their stories, but now they are helping to advocate for other girls to show them how to use their voice and that is important to get their story out. You shouldn't feel neglected or ashamed or embarrassed about your story. I grew up in the projects and it was hard. My mom was 17 when she had me, and I started working at 14 because one income in the household was hard for my mother. She did all that she could do, and when she had two other kids, I had to step up and help her.

I always knew my whole life that my father was incarcerated for something that he did not do because of the stories my mom told and just the evidence from going to court, and realizing that my father was incarcerated for crimes he did not commit. So, I supported him throughout his process, and I won't say that it was easy because I held a lot in. I never opened up about my story until I started advocating for other girls because when I started DBI I didn't know that sharing my story would impact so many girls. Not only the girls in my program but I have girls in other states who wish that they had a DBI in their state. So, it's really essential for young girls who are growing up fatherless.

Knowing that my dad served 23-and-a-half years for crimes he did not commit traumatized me. I'm 26 now, and I still have time with my dad—we stay together and we talk a lot and have great communication because we had communication when he was in prison. I'm really excited that my dad is home, but just hearing the stories of how the girls feel when they see people with their dad, it makes me sad because I used to be them. And I can't believe sometimes, I still have to touch myself to know if it's real because my dad has only been home for three years. He was gone for 23 years and for so long he kept saying that he was coming home, and I got so used to him saying that he was coming home. I never gave up on him: I just started questioning why he kept promising me that he was coming home. I graduated from high school and finished college and I kept wanting to accomplish things in life so that eventually he could make it to some big event in my life.

So now that I've started DBI, I'm excited because my dad is home, and he is able to work alongside of me. He gets to actually see and hear other girls' stories and some of the things that I experienced when I was young.

ROBRESHA “BREE” ANDERSON is the co-founder and co-director of DBI. She is the daughter of Robert Jones, who was sentenced to life without parole in 1992, freed in November 2015, and later exonerated in January 2017 with attorneys from the Innocence Project New Orleans as his counsel. Bree was born on Christmas Day in 1992, while her father was awaiting trial.

NARRATIVES OF FATHERS WHO WERE FORMERLY INCARCERATED

NORRIS HENDERSON

spent over 27 years in prison serving a life sentence and was released in 2003 as a result of a wrongful conviction.

WHEN I WENT TO PRISON my daughter's mother was pregnant with her, and I had an 18-month-old son. I was blessed in the sense that I always got to see my kids: Their mother would send them to see me or she would bring them when she could, or my father would bring them. And even when my kids were of age to come on their own, my kids would come and see me until I got released from prison.

My kids were motivation for me to behave well and get an education while in prison. They gave me a sense of purpose. The most important time in the day in prison is mail call time because that's when you would find out whether there was someone out there, especially your kids, who still care about you. When they were in grade school, I would tell my kids that I'd give them $5 for every "A" that they made on their report card. They would always photocopy their report cards to me at the end of the year, and I'd work hard to make sure that I delivered on my promise. When I was in school while in prison, I made a healthy competition between me and my kids, where I would challenge them that I would make better grades than them. People often think that guys who are locked up with kids don't care about their kids. In my experience that hasn't been true. Most of the guys I was in prison with loved their children and wished that they could be a part of their lives.

I never combed my daughter's hair, never changed her diaper, and never fed her. I know she appreciates me in this form that I'm in years later, but I know that she would give up everything for me to have been there during those formative years.

My son used to stay in scuffles because folks would always talk about his daddy being in jail. Unfortunately, he was murdered before I was released. My daughter had to call me with the news of my son's murder while I was in prison. My son visited me eight days before he was killed. But I have my son's daughter so I love on her the way that I didn't get to love him. And I have my daughter and her two daughters to do right by.

ROBERT JONES

is Bree's father. Robert spent 23 years, seven months, and two days of Bree's life in prison.

THE ONLY AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION with your child are through visitation or a phone call or through writing letters. So, when the hardship of life takes away the ability of your loved ones to bring your children, you have to rely on the telephone, but then those become overpriced and bear a burden on your loved ones, so you are left with only writing letters. And all you can do is hope that you can do a good job of parenting from behind bars, through letter-writing. You want to provide guidance behind bars, because you don't want to see your child end up behind bars as well.

My daughter met me for the first time when I was in prison. When kids meet their parents for the first time behind bars, they see their parent in a dehumanized situation, and that alone is traumatic for the child. And children can't process this, so they subconsciously deal with it. It's also traumatizing for the parent behind bars. I've talked to many guys in prison who have always told me that they felt the same way that I felt: dehumanized. It was dehumanizing for their beautiful children to see them in handcuffs and in prison robes. The only time I could get sound sleep is after visitation, when I was able to see my child.

NARRATIVE OF A MOTHER WITH CHILDREN WHOSE FATHER IS INCARCERATED

RAISING MY DAUGHTERS without their father has been a struggle. Their father has been incarcerated for six-and-a-half going on seven years. There's many times that events have come up and my daughters wish that their father was there to support them. In his absence, he has friends that have been supportive of him, but there's nothing like having your father there. Recently my 13-year-old graduated from the eighth grade, and it was a struggle for her because all of her friends' fathers were present for their graduation, and her father wasn't there. She woke up that Friday morning asking so many questions, about why she had to be the child to grow up without her father in her life.

Being a single mother, it's hard to explain to my daughters the situation that their father is in. So, I do the best that I can to try to fill their father's shoes, but there are times that I can't play the role of a father in their life. My child has said that she doesn't want to celebrate Father's Day because her father is not here. She wants to be able to talk to him every day and she can't. She wants to be able to call and tell him about her accomplishments, but she can't.

JIMESE VAN BUREN
is the mother of two girls ages 11 and 13 who are DBI participants. Her daughters' father is in prison.

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