

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark, curly hair. She has several piercings: two on her left eyebrow, a septum ring, a nostril ring, a lower lip ring, and a chin ring. She is wearing a thin necklace with a pendant that appears to be a nameplate. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Because She's Powerful

*The Political Isolation and Resistance of  
Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones*

A NATIONAL REPORT BY

GINA CLAYTON, ENDRIA RICHARDSON, LILY MANDLIN, AND BRITTANY FARR, PHD

ESSIE JUSTICE GROUP



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## RESEARCH PARTNERS

### **Prison Policy Initiative**

The non-profit, non-partisan Prison Policy Initiative produces cutting edge research to expose the broader harm of mass criminalization, and then sparks advocacy campaigns to create a more just society. The Prison Policy Initiative's insightful data analyses and powerful graphics are designed to reshape tomorrow's debates around mass incarceration and over-criminalization.

### **Research Action Design**

Research Action Design (RAD) uses community-led research, collaborative design of technology and media, and secure digital strategies to build the power of grassroots social movements. RAD is a worker-owned collective. RAD's projects are grounded in the needs and leadership of communities in the struggle for justice and liberation.

## STATE PARTNERS

### **Detroit Justice Center** MICHIGAN

Detroit Justice Center (DJC) is a nonprofit law firm working alongside communities to create economic opportunities, transform the justice system, and promote equitable and just cities.

### **Family Unity Network** CALIFORNIA

Family Unity Network is an organization that advocates for loved ones of the incarcerated. Family Unity Network strives to build leadership of family members in the communities most affected by incarceration. Their goal is to reduce the use of incarceration and solitary confinement by way of grassroots organizing, policy changes, public education, advocacy efforts, and sentencing reform.

### **Florida Council of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls** FLORIDA

The mission of the Florida Council is to end all forms of incarceration that claim the lives of women and girls. It is the mission of the Florida Council to study and abolish the many pathways that guarantee or contribute to the extinction of Black and Brown Women. The Florida Council is an affiliate of the National Council of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls.

### **Mothers in Charge** PENNSYLVANIA

Mothers in Charge is a violence prevention, education, and intervention-based organization, which advocates and supports youth, young adults, families, and community organizations affected by violence. Mothers In Charge, Inc. advocates for families affected by violence and provides

counseling and grief support services for families when a loved one has been murdered. The organization is comprised of impassioned mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and others who are committed to working towards saving lives and preventing another mother from having to experience this terrible tragedy.

**People's Advocacy  
Institute**  
MISSISSIPPI

People's Advocacy Institute partners with community members to provide education, training, coaching, investigation, research, advocacy, and legal services to assist in defining the structural inequities that cause harm, and together develop new policies and practices that reduce oppression, and foster self-determination and a more unbiased system.

**Project Blackbird**  
OKLAHOMA

Project Blackbird is a digital organization advocating for the liberation of communities most impacted by Oklahoma's cash bail system. Project Blackbird raises bail funds for black folks who are forced to remain in jail, prior to any conviction, due to their inability to pay. By allowing folks an opportunity to remain in the workforce, nurture their children, and seek services that discourage recidivism, recipients can resume their lives without detrimental interruptions.

**Southerners on  
New Ground**  
GEORGIA

Southerners on New Ground (SONG) is a regional Queer Liberation organization made up of people of color, immigrants, undocumented people, people with disabilities, working class, and rural and small town LGBTQ people in the South. SONG builds a beloved community of LGBTQ people in the South who are ready and willing to challenge oppression in order to bring about liberation for all people. SONG develops leadership, builds a membership base, and identifies and carries out community organizing projects and campaigns. All of SONG's work strives to bring together marginalized communities to work towards justice and liberation for all people.

**The Special Project**  
KENTUCKY

The Special Project is an independent network of artists & creatives who engage children and caregivers. Located in Louisville, The Special Project works with children with incarcerated parents and families through weekly art making in the visitors' lobby of the Louisville Jail.



**Texas Advocates for Justice**  
TEXAS

Texas Advocates for Justice (TAJ) is on a mission to end the criminalization of its communities, to break down barriers to reentry from jail and prison in Texas, and to demolish the legacy of racism in the criminal justice system. TAJ unites formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, people of all faiths, and allies to build safe and resilient communities through organizing, leadership training, and connections to community resources.

**Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project**  
CALIFORNIA

Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP) is a group of transgender, gender variant, and intersex people—inside and outside of prisons, jails and detention centers—creating a united family in the struggle for survival and freedom. TGIJP works in collaboration with others to forge a culture of resistance and resilience to strengthen the community for the fight against human rights abuses, imprisonment, police violence, racism, poverty, and societal pressures. TGIJP seeks to create a world rooted in self-determination, freedom of expression, and gender justice.

**Voices of the Experienced**  
LOUISIANA

Voices of the Experienced (VOTE) is a grassroots organization founded and run by formerly incarcerated people, families, and allies. VOTE is dedicated to restoring the full human and civil rights of those most impacted by the criminal (in)justice system. The organization relies on its members' experiences, expertise, and power to improve public safety in New Orleans and beyond without relying on mass incarceration.

**Workers Center for Racial Justice**  
ILLINOIS

Workers Center For Racial Justice is a grassroots organization fighting for Black Liberation and a fair and inclusive society that benefits everyone and leaves no one out. They organize marginalized Black workers and the families that depend on them, in order to address the root causes of high rates of unemployment, low-wage work, and over-criminalization plaguing the Black community. The organization focuses on direct action organizing, policy advocacy, leadership development, and voter engagement at the city and state level to achieve its mission of building a caring economy and society that allows Black people to reach their full human potential.





# Executive Summary

*I*s mass incarceration the largest barrier to gender justice today? In the current age of mass incarceration, at least 1 in 4 women has an incarcerated loved one.<sup>1</sup> Women are being incarcerated more frequently today than ever before.\* Women's lives are defined and confined by criminal justice control. Given that incarceration's harm radiates from inside prison walls to well beyond them, a large number of women are directly suffering the consequences. This report asks and answers the question, what is mass incarceration doing to millions of women who have loved ones behind bars?\*\*\* Our research concludes that mass incarceration is (1) a direct cause of significant to extreme psychological distress and trauma, and (2) a serious obstacle to the financial health and economic agency of women with incarcerated loved ones. This report concludes by positing a new analysis: that the sum total effect of the social condition of women with incarcerated loved ones is most accurately described by what we call "political isolation."

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## The insufficiency of data and analysis on women and incarceration has left a significant gap in our understanding of obstacles to gender equity facing women today.

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Despite these startling impacts, few critical analyses of either the incarceration system or gendered oppression in the United States are informed by the experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones. The insufficiency of data and analysis on women and incarceration has left a significant gap in our understanding of obstacles to gender equity facing women today. Moreover, without a complete view of the direct harm incarceration causes to large groups of historically marginalized people—be they women or communities Black and Brown—our analysis of mass incarceration's root causes and ability to identify solutions remains incomplete.

*\* The policing, racial profiling, and incarceration of women in jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers is an understudied and devastating crisis in the US. This report focuses on the experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones, a large number of whom are also formerly incarcerated women. For more discussion of the context of this work within the currently and formerly incarcerated women's movement see Page 12.*

*\*\* When we say "women" we include cisgender women, transgender women, and genderqueer and gender non-conforming people. We use the word "women" acknowledging that its value as a term is limited by the gender binary it often operates to reinforce.*

In order to better understand the impact of incarceration on gender equity, the authors of this report, a research team of 25 members of Essie Justice Group, and Essie Justice Group staff endeavored to explore the effects of the system of mass incarceration on women with incarcerated loved ones. Fourteen organizations joined our effort. Together we surveyed 2,281 women\* who answered 41 questions that focused on the experience of having an incarcerated loved one. Women in 46 states and Puerto Rico completed online or paper surveys, or attended a focus group session led by one of 12 national partners.

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## HERE ARE OUR CONCLUSIONS

### **INCARCERATION OF A LOVED ONE IS A BURGEONING WOMEN'S HEALTH CRISIS**

Incarceration of a loved one negatively impacts the emotional wellbeing and physical health of women in various ways. Women reported that the incarceration of their loved one caused them to experience stress, anxiety, anger, depression, loneliness, migraines, insomnia, and fatigue. Eighty-six percent of women characterized the impact of a loved one's incarceration on their own emotional and mental health as 'significant' or 'extreme'. A majority (63%) of all women reported that their physical health has been significantly or extremely affected by a loved one's incarceration. These findings suggest that the impact of incarceration on women is psychologically and physiologically damaging. Incarceration may be an undetected or ignored driver of emotional, mental, and physical health crises among women.

### **AS LINCHPINS OF COMMUNITIES, WOMEN TAKE ON AN EXTRAORDINARY FINANCIAL BURDEN**

The incarceration of a loved one is financially destabilizing. Women absorb the immediate financial costs of incarceration, such as attorney's fees, court fees, and bail, all at the same time that they may be losing the financial support of their incarcerated loved one. A third of women (32%) who responded to our survey lost their household's primary source of income when a loved one was incarcerated. Nearly 70% of women with incarcerated loved ones shared that they are their family's only wage earner.

*\* While the majority of women who responded to our survey identified as "women" (rather than "trans women," "gender non-conforming," "genderfluid," or "genderqueer"), this is not because transgender women and women who identify along the gender spectrum do not have incarcerated loved ones. Many women identify as women, regardless of sex assigned at birth. Furthermore, the accessibility of our survey may have impacted our demographics. See a more full discussion of this in our Research Philosophy & Methodology section.*

During the period of a loved one's incarceration, many women are forced to deviate from personal plans that might have led to longer term stability in order to address the immediate needs of their loved one's incarceration and the needs of other family members. Women bear the costs of phone calls, prison visits, and commissary bills. Most commonly, women with incarcerated loved ones work more hours, change jobs, miss out on job opportunities, and cannot pursue their own education.

These impacts and their consequences can be longstanding: financial penalties in the form of restitution, fines, fees, and debt live on far beyond a loved one's incarceration. We found that the cumulative effect of financial challenges can lead to housing insecurity. A little over a third of women (35%) experienced homelessness or other housing insecurity because of a loved one's incarceration. This number increased to more than half (56%) for women whose loved one was the primary income earner.

## **WOMEN ARE ISOLATED**

Extreme isolation is one of the central findings of our research. Using a scale constructed from answers to six questions that measured social and emotional loneliness, we found that the most typical score among women taking our survey was the highest score possible—meaning that women with incarcerated loved ones are extremely isolated.\* The physical presence of loved ones is instrumental to people's sense of connection, identity, and overall emotional wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> The severity of the threat of isolation led former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to declare that the United States is facing “an epidemic of loneliness” correlated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that associated with smoking.<sup>3</sup>

The level of isolation experienced by women with incarcerated loved ones has social and political implications. Social isolation, when resulting from a system of laws and policies that render people less able to build political power based on their race, gender, or class, leads to political isolation, a new concept we are introducing in this report. Women with incarcerated loved ones are politically isolated, implicating the health of our social movements and the wellbeing of society at large.

*\* We chose to use a standardized shortened version of Jenny DeJong Gierveld's 11-point loneliness scale. While academic studies differentiate between measures of social isolation and social loneliness, measuring subjective experiences of loneliness can be a proxy for measuring social isolation. “Loneliness is an indicator of social wellbeing and pertains to the feeling of missing intimate relations (emotional loneliness) or missing a wider social network (social loneliness).” From De Jong Gierveld, Jenny. “A 6-Item Scale for Overall, Emotional and Social Loneliness: Confirmatory Tests on Survey Data.” *Research on Aging*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2006). We chose to use the term “isolation” because it is a more accurate descriptor of what women experience than “loneliness,” which can be used to describe a wide range of serious to relatively simple forms of emotional distress. “Isolation” is also the word many women we talked to used to describe their experiences themselves.*

## **WOMEN KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE**

Perhaps most importantly, the women whose expertise and strategies for survival inform this report affirm that women with incarcerated loved ones are distinctly powerful social and political leaders. Women have organized and led movements to break isolation and nurture healing and resilience, replenish the resources of their families and communities, and challenge the laws and policies that control them and their loved ones.<sup>4</sup> Our report ends with a vision written by the member-leaders of Essie Justice Group.

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## **COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS**

There are a number of misconceptions about the community that we seek to uplift in this report. Let us dispel some of them: women with incarcerated loved ones include formerly incarcerated women. Women with incarcerated loved ones include currently incarcerated women. Women with incarcerated loved ones love and support people of all genders behind bars. Women with incarcerated loved ones are cisgender, transgender, and gender non-conforming. Given the prevalence and influence of racialized and gendered stereotypes in our society, it is easy to embrace the tropes depicting women's experiences as mere accidental collateral consequences of the mass incarceration of men or assume that this community is homogeneously comprised of women "on the outside" who love men "on the inside." These and similarly simplistic characterizations are harmful and generally reinforce narratives that place men at the center and women as ancillary or subordinate.

In the midst of historic movements that are pushing for a radical re-envisioning of the foundational roles women play in our society,<sup>5</sup> there is no more important goal for progressive critics of incarceration and gender equity advocates than apprehending the scope of incarceration's harm to women with incarcerated loved ones and listening to the strategies that women put forward to end this harm. This report aims to add to and enrich strategies for liberation, recognizing that when we focus on the liberation of women—especially Black and Brown women—we may all become more free.



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## THE VISIONARY LEADERSHIP OF CURRENTLY AND FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN

Our research exists amidst the reality that women have remained the fastest growing prison and jail population over the past four decades. Despite the fact that 90% of incarcerated people are men,<sup>6</sup> current levels of women's incarceration in the United States are at a historic high. In many states, rates of women's incarceration continue to grow even as male prison populations decrease in response to criminal justice reforms. One in 18 Black women will be incarcerated in her lifetime, and Black women continue to be incarcerated at twice the rate of white women.<sup>7</sup> A staggering 47% of all Black transgender women will be incarcerated.<sup>8</sup> Women experience gender-specific forms of violence and trauma during incarceration, including denial of necessary medical care, shackling while giving birth, and sexual violence.<sup>9</sup>

Currently and formerly incarcerated women leaders have long advocated that mass incarceration is, in fact, a gender justice issue.<sup>10</sup> Too often these expert voices have been ignored on this point. Notably, these advocates find themselves similarly situated to race justice champions who a decade ago were continuously silenced by progressive arguments that high rates of incarceration were a function of poverty and not of racial bias.

There are manifold forces that make the crisis of incarcerated women in this country invisible. This report seeks to avoid contributing to that erasure. Our hope is that through the uplifting of harm and power of women with incarcerated loved ones in the context of mass incarceration we may bring millions of women with incarcerated loved ones into full solidarity with the perspectives and demands of the movement led by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women.

# Key Findings

## **Incarceration of a loved one is psychologically and physically traumatic**

**86%** The incarceration of a loved one leads to depression, anxiety, anger, stress, and loneliness. Eighty-six percent of women responding to our survey reported that the strain on their emotional and mental health is significant or extreme. That number jumps to 94% for women whose partners are incarcerated.

**90%** Almost 90% of women we surveyed who are formerly incarcerated have experienced violence or danger to their physical safety.

## **Women are the linchpins in communities**

**70%** Women provide irreplaceable and essential support for the people in their lives, incarcerated and not. Nearly 70% act as a primary support for at least one of their incarcerated loved ones. More than 80% of women surveyed listed at least one person, incarcerated or not, who depends on them for a basic need.

Nearly 70% of women are their family's only wage earner.

**56%** More than half the women (56%) have children or childcare responsibilities. In focus groups, women described taking over caretaking responsibilities for their incarcerated loved one's children.

## **Bail, court fees, and missed economic opportunities financially destabilize women**

**35%** Thirty-five percent of women experience homelessness, eviction, or the inability to pay rent or mortgage on time as a result.

A third (32%) of women lose their household's primary source of income when their loved one is taken away.

**54%** Bail depletes women's earnings—and many are unable to pay it at all. More than half (54%) of women are unable to afford the bail set for an incarcerated loved one. The remaining half (45%) have paid a loved one's bail. Fifty percent of women who have ever owed money to a bail bonds agency have faced housing insecurity.

**43%** Many women sacrifice their educational and career goals when a loved one is imprisoned. Our research found that 43% of women are forced to work more hours, get a different job, or turn down an educational opportunity as a result of their loved one's incarceration.

## **Many women with incarcerated loved ones have also been incarcerated**

**24%** Almost a quarter of the women who responded to our survey (24%) have been incarcerated in jail, prison, or a detention center. Over a third of Essie Justice Group's membership in California are formerly incarcerated women.

## **Women are isolated when a loved one is incarcerated**

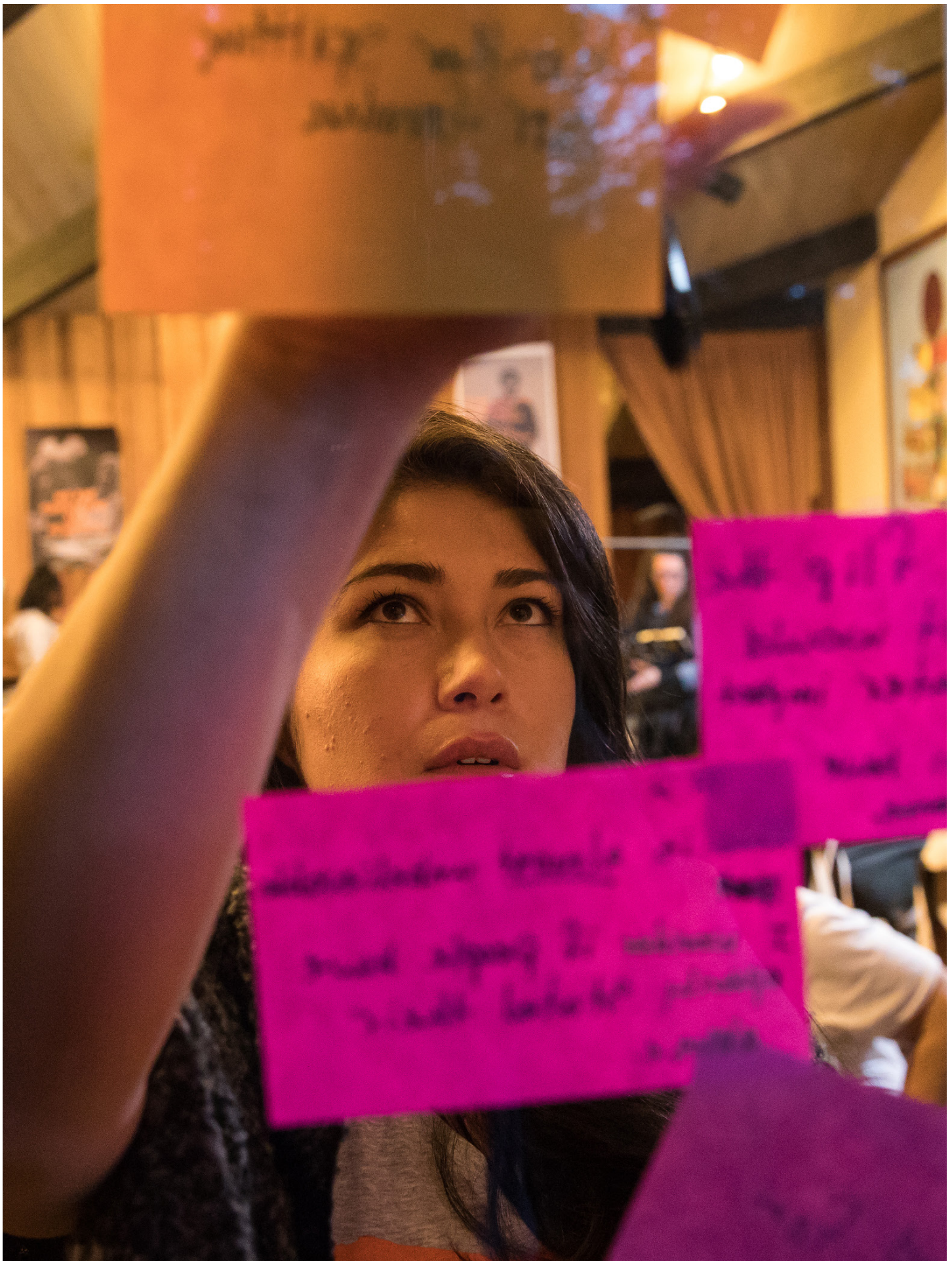
Using a standardized 6-point scale to measure social and emotional loneliness, more women received the highest score possible than any other score—meaning that women with incarcerated loved ones are extremely isolated.

**80%** Eighty percent of women have not physically touched their loved one within the past month; a quarter of women (26%) have not physically touched their loved one in over a year.

**55%** Most women (55%) see their loved ones only monthly or a few times a year, and over a quarter never see their incarcerated loved one. Sixty-five percent of women reported they would see their loved one daily if they were not incarcerated.

**57%** Over half (57%) of women have been separated from at least two loved ones through incarceration at the same time. About 7% of women reported that they have had more than ten of their loved ones incarcerated throughout their life.







# Research Philosophy & Methodology

**I**t is a gray evening in July in Oakland, California. Summer is a season that never sits still for long in the East Bay, outside of quick, teasing trips that bring the town to warm itself at the sides of Lake Merritt the last two weeks of March, and the first two of September. The evening sky feels heavy, pressing itself down almost to the pavement.

Anita sits at the center of a circle in a building upstairs from Oscar Grant Plaza. She is surrounded by other women, mostly Black and Brown women in their forties, fifties, and sixties. Anita, called Ms. Anita by anyone who has stood face to face with her, is answering the same question every other woman in the circle has answered: “When did you become a woman with an incarcerated loved one?”

This is the first focus group session for what will become a national research project on women with incarcerated loved ones. It is the first step of an eight-month process, during which Essie Justice Group and 14 partner organizations will conduct research on women with incarcerated loved ones. The goals that informed this process are (1) to address the lack of data on women with incarcerated loved ones by conducting a national survey of at least 1,000 women with incarcerated loved ones in at least half of the states; and (2) to use this research as an opportunity to build relationships with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, women with incarcerated loved ones, and base-building organizations working on criminal justice and race justice in key states across the country.

The session taking place this evening in July is facilitated by two members of Essie Justice Group who will lead the women through five questions that will be asked in every focus group session.



## RESEARCH DESIGN PROCESS

The five focus group questions, as well as the 41 questions included in our national survey, were designed by Essie Justice Group, a 25-person research team of women with incarcerated loved ones who have completed Essie Justice Group's nine-week Healing to Advocacy model, and Research Action Design. The questions were designed over the course of one research design weekend led by Research Action Design, and revised over several iterations by Essie Justice Group and the Research Team. The research design process was led by women with incarcerated loved ones, and the vast majority of the team who contributed to the research design are women with incarcerated loved ones. This impacted every step of our research process.

Our research targeted four broad areas of inquiry: (1) Who are women with incarcerated loved ones (i.e., what are the racial, gender, sexuality, age, and income demographics of this population)?; (2) Who are women's incarcerated loved ones?; (3) How does a loved one's incarceration impact women's emotional, physical, and financial wellbeing? (An important area of inquiry in this section was to evaluate how isolated women with incarcerated loved ones are, through the inclusion of a standardized six-point loneliness scale in our survey); and (4) Are women practicing resilience and civic engagement, and if so, how?

Additionally, before inclusion in the survey, each question was evaluated for its emotional impact on the respondent. The survey did not use stigmatizing language like "offender," "convict," "inmate," or "criminal." Our team of research designers gave feedback on which questions might be emotionally difficult to answer (i.e., brought up painful feelings or memories, did not capture an experience accurately, or were worded insensitively). The design team endeavored to make revisions according to feedback where possible, and to include a balanced mix of types of questions.

Focus group sessions were limited to five questions and were planned to last no more than three hours. Dinner or lunch, childcare, and





transportation support were provided at each session. As much as possible, a comfortable and accessible location was chosen. Women received stipends for their participation.

The complete survey can be found at

**BECAUSESHESPOWERFUL.ORG**

Asking questions about traumatic incidents can itself be traumatizing. Our research process endeavored to create an experience that was methodologically rigorous but that did not cause harm.

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**“My brother was gone,” Ms. Anita says, when she begins to answer the first question at our session in Oakland. “He was there one day,” she says. “And he was gone the next.”**

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There are murmurs around the group. “Mmmhm,” one woman says reassuringly, letting Ms. Anita know that her story, her silence, and the anguish she still carries for her brother, are alright here. Most of the women in the group already know Ms. Anita.\* They know that she has three sons now—and that one of them has been in and out of confinement since he was 11 years old. Many of the women have attended the strategy sessions she leads for his freedom. They know that incarceration has marked her life as a sister and a mother and a grandmother, and it will continue to do so until all of her loved ones are safely home.

Faintly, from outside the window, music is drifting up from the plaza. Someone has turned the volume up on a jukebox and is playing hip hop. *They better turn that down*, you can almost hear the mothers in the group think. A complex calculation of worry, wisdom, and letting go seems to spin through the room, vibrating from one woman to the

*\*Most of the women who participated in our focus groups knew each other beforehand. Given the nature of the questions asked, this was the best method to create an environment that felt as safe and welcoming as possible. We were sensitive to the risk of over-disclosure, and designed our focus groups to mitigate the risks of emotional harm to our participants. Jennie Munday, *The Practice of Feminist Focus Groups*, in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber ed., 2013) 233-263. For more on our research philosophy, design, and method see the Research Philosophy and Methodology section at the beginning of this Report.*

next. Being Black, or Brown, and playing music too loudly might get you arrested. And once you are arrested, everything changes.

For the rest of the night, women go around the circle, taking turns to talk. The women share freely—they all know each other through their membership in Essie Justice Group.

At the end of this first focus group, one woman says, “I feel,” and lifts up her hands, palms up, to hover around her shoulders. Then, whoosh, she drops her hands down, flings them outward. “Like a weight is gone. Like that.” The other women add their assent:

*“This, this is what we need!”*

They mean a space where there is room to breathe, to be themselves, to talk about the specific kind of pain incarceration has inflicted upon them. A room where their story is the known story. Where they have a voice.

## DATA COLLECTION

The research presented in this report is a result of a collaborative research process led by Essie Justice Group staff; the Research Team of Essie Justice Group member-leaders; participatory action research group Research Action Design; and Prison Policy Initiative. We were joined by 12 state partners who led survey outreach in states that have either the highest incarceration rates, or the largest incarcerated populations in the country: Detroit Justice Center (Michigan), Family Unity Network (California), Florida Council of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls (Florida), Mothers in Charge (Pennsylvania), People’s Advocacy Institute (Mississippi), Project Blackbird (Oklahoma), Southerners on New Ground (Georgia), The Special Project (Kentucky), Texas Advocates for Justice (Texas), Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project (California), Voices of the Experienced (New Orleans), and Workers Center for Racial Justice (Illinois).

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THE FINDINGS  
IN THIS REPORT  
ARE BASED ON

**2,281**

COMPLETED  
SURVEYS FROM  
WOMEN WITH  
INCARCERATED  
LOVED ONES

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**46**

STATES AND  
PUERTO RICO

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The entire team of researchers surveyed more than 2,500 women with incarcerated loved ones to understand and document women’s

experiences when they have incarcerated loved ones. Surveys were collected online and in person, and in English and Spanish.\* The findings in this report are based on 2,281 completed surveys from women with incarcerated loved ones from 46 states and Puerto Rico.\*\* Essie Justice Group and three state partners conducted six in-person focus group sessions in California, Louisiana, and Kentucky to add nuance and depth to the multiple-choice and short answer questions included in the survey.\*\*\* Each focus group consisted of between six and 12 women. Essie Justice Group conducted five in-depth interviews with leaders of the Research Team to uplift their lived experiences, leadership, and advocacy expertise. Our focus group research—including decisions about size, location, questions, participants, compensation, and analysis—was informed by feminist research ethics and methods.

The findings in “Because She’s Powerful: The Political Isolation and Resistance of Women with Incarcerated Loved One” are informed by over a thousand conversations we have had with women with incarcerated loved ones since Essie Justice Group was founded in 2014. Our findings explain and illustrate the ways that incarceration operates outside of prison walls to isolate and control women. Throughout the report, we add historical examples to contextualize contemporary experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones within centuries of racialized and gendered oppression in the United States.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

We conducted an extensive literature review on the history and consequences of mass incarceration. This literature review took place over the course of several years. Particular attention was paid to the areas of race, gender, and mass incarceration; shame and stigma; isolation; and feminist research methods.

\* We collected 1,992 online surveys and 604 paper surveys.

\*\* The states were Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

\*\*\* The focus groups were conducted in Oakland, CA; Los Angeles, CA; San Francisco, CA; Louisville, KY; and New Orleans, LA.



At several points in our research process, scholars and criminal justice experts were consulted to identify relevant literature. This literature review shaped the research design process as well as the analysis presented in this report.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The criminal justice thinktank Prison Policy Initiative conducted bivariate analyses of our final dataset of 2,281 surveys from women with incarcerated loved ones.\* Prison Policy Initiative cleaned the raw dataset by deleting any survey that had no data, or surveys that were substantially incomplete. They addressed missing answers from surveys by removing (ignoring) respondents with missing data on any particular variable in an analysis. For example, if respondents A, B, and C answered question #1 but respondent D did not, only the answers from respondents A, B, and C were analyzed. This allowed us to keep the highest number of respondents in the dataset without deleting those who may have failed to answer a few questions.

The focus group sessions were transcribed, translated if necessary, and analyzed by Essie Justice Group using discourse analysis. Particular attention was paid both to individual speakers as well as the nature of the interactions between the participants.

The in-depth interviews with five members of Essie Justice Group were conducted by telephone. These interviews were subsequently analyzed using discourse analysis.

The majority of the quotes and stories used in this report were taken from these focus groups and interviews.

The demographics of participants can be found at:  
[becauseshespowerful.org](http://becauseshespowerful.org)

*\* After cleaning our dataset and removing 560 incomplete surveys, we had 2,281 surveys that were included in our analysis.*







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## SCOPE & LIMITATIONS

**T**his report does not focus on, nor does it fully apprehend, uplift, or enumerate, the multiple harms women from many important communities experience.

First, the women who responded to our survey represent an overwhelmingly cisgender\* and heterosexual demographic. We do not believe that this is representative of women with incarcerated loved ones. We know, from our experiences and the experiences of our friends, families, and communities, that many women identify simply as women, regardless of sex assigned at birth. Furthermore, we know that our research design and outreach process impacted who knew about and had access to our survey. Our research process was far from fully accessible to transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people. In partnership with the Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Group in San Francisco, we held one focus group with women who identify along the spectrum of gender.\*\* We include many of the analyses from women in that group in this report. And still, we know that the work of gender, race, and criminal justice movements needs to center—and not just consider—the impact of incarceration on transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people.

Twelve percent of women who responded to our survey identified as either “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “queer.” The vast majority, 87%, identified as “straight.” Incarceration impacts women who are queer, lesbian, gay, and bisexual in specific ways—from increased barriers to visiting a loved one due to homophobia or laws that limit contact to legally recognized kin. These harms are not adequately addressed in our analysis. Though this report is a first step towards addressing the full extent of mass incarceration as a system of gendered oppression, without understanding the ways in which incarceration is operating to control women who are marginalized by heteronormative conventions and stereotypes, we will not understand how incarceration harms women.

*\*To be “cisgender” is to have a sense of your gender identity (man, woman, transgender, gender queer, etc.) that aligns with the sex you were assigned at birth (male, female, etc.).*

*\*\*Including cisgender, transgender, gender variant, gender queer, and gender non-conforming.*



Finally, a little over a third (34%) of women we surveyed identified as Black or African-American; thirty-seven percent identified as white; eighteen percent identified as Latinx. Only 10% of respondents identified as either Asian, Pacific Islander (API), Middle Eastern or Arab, or Indigenous.

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**Our analysis of incarceration's harm is intentionally grounded in a Black feminist analysis. We believe that incarceration's harm of all people is rooted in slavery and anti-blackness.**

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While our research was substantially led and informed by Latinx women, our report does not center the ways in which incarceration operates as a continuation of the colonialism, imperialism, and genocide enacted upon Latinx, API, Middle Eastern, Arab, and Indigenous communities.

We therefore do not present this report as a comprehensive analysis of incarceration's harm to women with incarcerated loved ones, knowing we cannot fully understand incarceration's harm to all women. We offer this report as an imperfect and hopeful beginning.





# Introduction

*“To take away, to break up family is the best way to break a community.”*

— *“Anne”*\*

*Oakland Focus Group*

**E**si Maria remembers the day she received a call in her North Carolina home from a family friend, telling her that her 17 year old son had been arrested in Florida. She was expecting the call; only an hour earlier she had received a call that her youngest brother, who was also in Florida, had just been arrested.

Because she was not physically in Florida, Esi made repeated calls attempting to find out what was happening to her son and brother. She was not a newcomer to a system that seemed set up to confuse, misdirect, and at times treat her with outright hostility: like most of the women we surveyed, Esi has had multiple loved ones taken from her through incarceration. Her oldest brother was in jail when he was a teenager. Her middle brother was incarcerated for various brief periods. Her second youngest brother died in a Florida hospital while serving a life sentence; Esi was the only family member to see him before he passed, daring to question the rules which forbade such a visit. Her oldest nephew still serves a life sentence in the Florida prison system. And finally her older son served almost 22 years in prison before he was released.

But navigating court, jail, and prison systems that can be bewildering in their arbitrariness and downright cruel in what they demand from family members—most often women—does not become less painful or confusing with time or repetition. “The whole thing was crazy,” Esi says now, almost 30 years later. Like many women, she was under-resourced and unsupported. “I didn’t have money. I didn’t have information. I didn’t have knowledge. I could not afford to hire a lawyer.”

*\*Where pseudonyms are used, we place the name in quotation marks the first time it appears.*

Shortly after her son was arrested, he was sentenced to three consecutive life sentences for a nonviolent drug conviction and transferred to a federal penitentiary in Georgia—far away from his family. Esi believes his sentence was so severe because he refused to testify against her brother, his uncle. During sentencing, the judge remarked that her son should “make the most of his time”—which Esi understood to mean that her son was expected to die in prison.

At no time before, during, or after her son’s sentencing were the traumatic emotional, mental, physical, and financial harms to Esi formally—or informally—considered, or even acknowledged.

The cumulative harm to Esi was severe, as she describes it: “I went into a hole. I went into my personal twilight zone. I was functional, but I wasn’t fully present. This period of shocked, numb disbelief went on for me for years.”

Women with incarcerated loved ones—who are disproportionately Black and Brown women<sup>12</sup>—women who are low-income, and women who are currently or have previously been incarcerated, are left to make sense of their loss, pick up the pieces of their lives, and support their loved ones, often having to provide basic necessities to loved ones that are not offered by the jails, prisons, and detention centers that confine them. Throughout this struggle, women report receiving little support from family, friends, or larger communities. The result is a debilitating experience women themselves refer to, over and over again, as *isolation*.

In her interview, Esi talks about the costs of incarceration, her voice traveling over the phone from her home in Southern California. “For almost 20 years I was isolated, numb, alone, not knowing that any other woman on the planet was carrying the pain I carried. I didn’t realize how beat down I was internally, not appreciating and loving who I was, not feeling worthy of having anything worthwhile. It was emotionally and psychologically debilitating.”

It wasn't only the physical loss of her son. It was everything else surrounding his confinement inside a system that did not care about his life, or hers. Shortly after he was incarcerated, her son was stabbed twice in an incident that Esi believes was orchestrated by prison guards to kill him. "By the grace of God, he survived," says Esi. Throughout that time, she had no one to talk to, no one with whom to process her trauma. "I didn't talk about my son's incarceration. My colleagues didn't know; people at church didn't know. I didn't know how to talk about anything related to the nightmare that I lived with daily. I was numb and shocked. I don't even remember a lot of those years; I really don't."

The experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones reveal the unprecedented and underestimated extent of mass incarceration's reach in the United States. Nearly 2.3 million people are imprisoned in the country, an additional 3.7 million people are on probation, and nearly a million more people are on parole.<sup>13</sup> Incarcerated people are disproportionately Black, Brown, low-income, and formerly incarcerated.<sup>14</sup> Legal scholar Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, has written extensively on mass incarceration as a racialized tool of social control.<sup>15</sup> U.S. sentencing laws incarcerate people "for longer periods of time than most other countries in the world," and a network of reentry policies relegate formerly incarcerated people to "a permanent second-class status in which they are stripped of basic civil and human rights, like the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, and the right to be free of legal discrimination in employment, housing, access to public benefits."<sup>16</sup>

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**And yet, the scope of mass incarceration's punishment and control is not limited to the millions of individuals who are incarcerated or formally surveilled. At a bare minimum, the incarceration of one person seizes everyone in that person's immediate circle. At scale, it controls entire communities—reaching millions more than we already estimate.**

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Esi is one of the women who, along with the thousands of others we surveyed, has been punished by the system of incarceration. Women with incarcerated loved ones are subject to laws that assign them permanent second-class citizenship, stripped of basic civil and human rights.<sup>17</sup> Sentencing laws that remove loved ones suddenly and for long periods of time expose women to psychological trauma in the form of grief, depression, anxiety, and isolation that is tantamount to emotional and psychological abuse.<sup>18</sup> Laws regulating housing, public benefits, and fines and fees related to incarceration (including bail and attorney's fees) siphon financial resources and limit women's financial autonomy.<sup>19</sup> They also make women vulnerable to eviction and housing instability.<sup>20</sup> The stereotypes, stigma, and taboos that surround incarceration, in addition to the gendered norms that devalue women's labor and cast their choices to remain connected to their incarcerated loved ones as shameful or misguided,<sup>21</sup> prevent any true recognition and appreciation by the greater public of the ways in which mass incarceration controls and limits the lives of women who have incarcerated loved ones.

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**One of the most debilitating aspects of mass incarceration is how it isolates women, exposing women to isolation's disastrous mental and physical health consequences.<sup>22</sup>**

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Even in small degrees, social isolation significantly impacts a person's life.<sup>23</sup>

Isolation also has vast political implications when it impacts entire communities. Esi's sentiments echo those of the women whose experiences are shared throughout this report, who detail years, if not decades, of their lives "lost in twilight zones"—only partially functioning, grieving, in debt, struggling to make ends meet, and, throughout it all, largely silent and unacknowledged. The political implications of isolation stem from the ubiquity and intensity of shared experiences of incarceration in women's lives, and the concurrent shame and blame that silences them. The genesis of the specific trauma, resource deprivation, and instability women experience is not in women themselves, but in a

system of incarceration that devalues Black, Brown, poor, and currently and formerly incarcerated women's emotional wellbeing, labor, and health, while relying on stigma and stereotypes to silence, shame, and isolate women. In this context, isolation acts as a major barrier to challenging the systems that enact this harm.

And yet, women are breaking isolation to challenge mass incarceration. Though it took her many years of healing and grieving, eventually Esi began to reach out to others, particularly other mothers, who also had an incarcerated family member. She saw that what she was experiencing was systemic. "They were carrying the pain I was carrying," says Esi. In 2014, she won a prestigious fellowship to train directly impacted family members—mostly women—to help end the sentencing of young people as adults. Today, she is an active member of Essie Justice Group and a lead researcher for this report.

Esi's son has been free for four years. "There are some people who might say, 'Well your child is free...'" she says. "But to me, I don't have the right to walk away. I am committed to being in this in whatever ways I can be involved, in changing and challenging the system to have other loved ones brought home." Alongside the trauma and scars of incarceration lives the deep and fierce resilience that women bring, over and over again, to healing themselves, liberating their loved ones, and ending incarceration's harm to all women.

The results of our study are presented in three sections. In Part I, we discuss the mental and emotional trauma that incarceration inflicts upon women and the ways in which that trauma is ignored and discounted. Part II explores the critical role that women play throughout their loved ones' incarceration, and the cost to women in terms of finances and long-term stability. Part III introduces the concept of political isolation, and defines it as a tool of social control, the aim of which is to make difficult or impossible the connections between individual people, families, and communities that are necessary to build political power and drive changes in culture, policies, and laws. We conclude with demands from women with incarcerated loved ones to end the harm of mass incarceration.









## *Part I. Pain Denied*

# Social Isolation & Women's Mental Health

*"I have borne thirteen children, and seen  
them most all sold off to slavery, and when  
I cried out with my mother's grief, none but  
Jesus heard me! And aren't I a woman?"*

— *Sojourner Truth*  
*Ohio*

### THE TRAUMA OF A LOVED ONE'S INCARCERATION

Women with incarcerated loved ones are living in life-altering pain: Ninety-four percent of women with incarcerated partners experience significant or extreme strain on their mental or emotional health. A majority (63%) of all women reported that their physical health is negatively affected by a loved one's incarceration.

Such high rates of significant or extreme mental, physical, and emotional health strain among women deserves scrutiny. Mass incarceration severs relationships between women and loved ones. The often sudden loss can be comparable to the trauma of losing someone to an unexpected death.<sup>24</sup> Women who lose a loved one to incarceration often have little or no warning and may experience shock, numbness, social withdrawal, and intense sadness in the months and years following. The stories that women share in focus groups convey pain that is meted out both incidentally and intentionally. Many of the stories bear the weight of a person recounting years of abuse.



"I get a phone call about one, two in the morning," recounts one woman on the evening of a focus group held in Oakland, California. She is describing the night she found out that her husband, who was incarcerated for over 20 years, had been arrested. "I found out he's at General Hospital in the jail ward. And it was just devastating. Nobody really tells you what to do. Nobody tells you who to talk to."

She pauses in her storytelling, and someone hands her a box of tissues. "That was the first time ever that I realized how quick your life can change, and how lost I was. I had nobody to go to. Nobody in my family ever really had to experience that, so who do you talk to? And people in my family, they wouldn't understand and they'd be judgmental. So who do you go to?" Nobody answers. This focus group is not a space for answers, but for listening, holding a weight collectively that, usually, each woman in the circle holds alone.

Some months later, in Louisville, Kentucky, on a frigid day in a warm library, one woman says, "You know how something happens, you feel like you can't breathe? I was in the court and the first time I seen my son in handcuffs, I just knew, I just knew that I was just gonna die right then because I had never ever—no. Not one of my mine, not mine, and not this one."

She is a Black mother of a Black boy—"dark-skinned," she adds, during the session—and an advocate in Louisville. Later, she will describe how little empathy she found in her activist community in Louisville—mostly because, she reckons, they were white women who judged the way she chose to raise her Black sons in a white Southern town.

She breaks down midway in her account to the focus group, momentarily overwhelmed by the weight of loss—not just her own, but that of her entire community. "I look at the amount of sadness," she says, "and I think it's just part of the grief that I carry for my community of Brown and Black people with the amount of incarceration."

Her personal loss is enormous. Her son is still incarcerated, and in Louisville she has very few resources to turn to for emotional support. “I couldn't even go and see my son for the first eight months because I was so emotionally crippled by the whole fucking process. I thought I was going to have to go to the hospital and the mental ward because I was so devastated.”

She is describing the first stages of the often years-long waiting process of trials and sentencing—a period of time during which many women recount being simultaneously depended on to provide constant support, and summarily dismissed. The combination can be cruel. Her son was facing convictions that could carry multiple 10- to 20-year sentences. As the Black mother of a Black boy in the South, she knew the consequence of those numbers. She found out for just how long she might be losing her son—her blood—through a text message from her son’s lawyer. “A text message,” she says. “I got that shit on a text message.”

While many women with incarcerated loved ones share similar experiences of devastation and trauma, transgender women of color are targets of structural racism, violence, and discriminatory policies that can exacerbate poverty, and physical and mental health distress, including suicidality.<sup>25</sup> The result is that transgender women’s experiences are likely to include more multi-dimensional harms combined with even fewer resources and less sympathy, just as they are more likely to be ignored or invisibilized.

“Lisa”<sup>\*</sup> sits in a room in San Francisco. Coffee cups and sandwich wrappers are scattered around a table, and other women are leaning back in their chairs after lunch. She shares that her husband was arrested when they went to a police department to try to clear his record so that they could apply for housing assistance. Unbeknownst to the two of them, he had an open case.

*\*We try as much as we can throughout this report to identify women in the ways in which they self-identified. This focus group was held for transgender women. The prevailing term most people used to identify themselves was woman, rather than transgender or trans woman. Therefore, we use the word woman rather than trans woman or transgender woman here.*

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**After he was arrested and incarcerated, she was not initially allowed to visit, because their marriage wasn't recognized as legal.**

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In palpable distress at a system that has routinely jeopardized her husband's life, she spins her coffee cup, and tells the group of women around her: "I feel like I'm lost. I'm completely lost. I don't want him to die. He was on a certain medication, that if he missed one dosage, it would fuck up your organs. And they didn't give him his medication for five fucking days."

"All they're trying to do," she adds, "is they're trying to break me—that's what they're trying to do." Other women in the group add their agreement. One woman reaches over to squeeze her shoulder. "And they ain't gonna win," she finishes.

"When one of our sisters goes through something like this," a woman in the circle says, talking about her transgender sisters, "no one is helping her." There is more agreement around the group.

Though our survey and report focused on the experiences of being a woman supporting an incarcerated loved one, women have also been incarcerated themselves, and have supported incarcerated loved ones while incarcerated. More than a quarter of the women whom we surveyed were formerly incarcerated, and over a third of Essie Justice Group's membership base in California is made up of women who have incarceration histories. Formerly incarcerated women's experiences of supporting loved ones behind bars often reveal the compounding and intergenerational psychological harms inflicted by incarceration.

In a focus group led by formerly incarcerated women in New Orleans, one woman shares, "After my incarceration, all three of my children went to jail. My daughter went to jail, two of my sons. Then I became the grandmother watching six children. And I had to take care of my daughter-in-law in prison, my daughter, my son. I went to San Gabriel every week, to see my daughter. And then I had to go to the parish,





CHERYL DISTON, ESSIE RESEARCH TEAM



then I had to go see my daughter-in-law. I had to bring her mama to see her. Then I had to bring my grandchildren. I did this for like two years straight, every week 'til my daughter came home." Her tone and her body express utter exhaustion.

The organizer of the group then shares, "So my last sentence—I did seven years, four months, and 28 days in prison. And when I left, I left five children, ages 16, 14, 12, 11, and 10. And so when they hit me with this big old sentence, you know, the first thing I did was count how old my children would be when I get out."

Her face works around some emotion, her mouth pulling down, before she begins again. "And my a-ha moment was when I had an inter-institutional visit with my son. I was in one facility, and he was right across the gate. But before that time, I was the only person going to jail in my family. Alright. And so that's how I became a person with a loved one inside, because when I got out, he was still in."

When she finishes, she shares a look with the woman who is sitting across the circle from her, and the two of them pause. Throughout the session, these two women have talked to one another, shared inside jokes, and, at moments, closed their eyes against tears. She is the speaker's mother. They are both women with incarcerated loved ones. The love they share pulls through the circle, gently urging other women in, rather than closing anyone out. After a few moments—during which it seems they are deciding whether to cry, shout, laugh, or all three—they both break into the same truly jubilant laughter, rocking forward against their knees, letting go for a moment the pain that threads the same pattern through generations of their family, happy to both be here tonight. There has been a lot of laughter in this session. Maybe it is the home-cooked fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, greens, and cornbread that has loosened everyone up. Maybe it is just this group of women, reveling in the resilience they each have built up over the years, and how good it feels to live in that resilience for a few hours.





MARIE LEVIN, ESSIE RESEARCH TEAM



Throughout the five focus group sessions co-led with our state partners, women reported enduring grief, trauma, and destabilization in the years that followed a loved one's incarceration. The majority of women we surveyed have a loved one who has been sentenced to more than 10 years in prison; twenty-seven percent have loved ones who have been sentenced to more than 20 years. Long sentences and the revolving door of incarceration mean that women are decades upon decades without close family and friends who are incarcerated. The impact is prolonged and pervasive devastation.

### **WOMEN ARE SILENCED**

Wrapped into the commonality of women's responses to the question, "how does it feel to have an incarcerated loved one?" is another, repeated refrain: we do not often ask women with incarcerated loved ones how they are doing, failing to see how much incarceration hurts them.

And it is not just "not asking." Women are actively abandoned, ignored, blamed or shunned in their pain by friends and family members. "After my husband got locked up, no one was there for me and the boys. No one ever came around, no one never talked and asked to see how we was doing, did we need help, nothing. It was silence," reports a woman in a focus group.

When people find out a woman has an incarcerated loved one, they abandon her. When a woman finds out a loved one is incarcerated, she may isolate or silence herself in order to avoid shame, blame, and abandonment.

One woman explains the fear she experienced, and the way in which she used silence to protect herself from scrutiny. "I felt I had to isolate myself and not talk," she says simply. "I didn't feel safe talking to anybody. Cause what is that person going to think of me? What are they going to say?"

Women who have been incarcerated and women who have incarcerated loved ones are actively encouraged not to share their experiences of

incarceration and having incarcerated loved ones. When women are asked questions, these tend to relate to their loved one's incarceration—often, specifically, their loved one's conviction.<sup>26</sup>

This silencing can take over entire communities. Caty, one of the lead researchers for this project, organized a focus group for Spanish-speaking women, held in Spanish (and later translated). “I know that there are women who are monolingual Spanish speakers,” she says about the need for this group in particular. “It was important for them to be able to express themselves in their native language, where everything is going to be in their language.”

During this session, one woman remarks, “I changed completely. No more parties at my house, no Christmas tree, no gifts. My kids become sad and are always asking me why I no longer put up a tree, why no dinner, why I don't do what I used to. If I listen to music, it is to cry.”

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**"When I am home alone, I am crying. For me, my life ended. I am alive because God so desires it, but I enjoy nothing."**

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“I never talk about my troubles with anyone. People, instead of being helpful, they criticize you. If they see that you have an incarcerated loved one, they become distant,” says one woman in the same Spanish-speaking focus group.

“The judgment is so thick,” another woman reflects. “It isolates you.”

The women in this group have known each other for many years. After the session, however, one woman shares with the facilitator that she has never talked about her loved one's incarceration to anyone else, including the other women in the room. And they have never talked to her about their loved ones.

**“All they’re trying to  
do, is they’re trying to  
break me—that’s what  
they’re trying to do.**

**And they ain’t  
gonna win.”**

—***“Lisa”***  
*San Francisco*



When we do not ask women questions, what kinds of truths about incarceration are ignored? Silence perpetuates incarceration's harm to women, just as it allows us to drastically underestimate and deny that harm. Women with incarcerated loved ones, as we see from the stories above, have different and specific knowledge of carceral violence. "Women whose loved ones and close acquaintances are caught in the revolving door of 'corrections' experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement," writes sociologist Megan Comfort in her article describing the punishment and humiliation that women visiting their loved ones incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California routinely experience.<sup>27</sup> When we ask women, we expand our knowledge of incarceration's harm by making visible previously invisible and unexplored interactions between women and the carceral state.

## **WOMEN ARE SOCIALLY ISOLATED**

It is not that women with incarcerated loved ones are merely "lonely." Social isolation has devastating impacts on individual women's lives. Isolated people are between 25% and 32% more likely to die earlier than those who are not isolated.<sup>28</sup> Isolation is also associated with a higher risk of anxiety and depression.<sup>29</sup> It has been linked to the development of high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.<sup>30</sup> Isolation can even cause wounds to heal more slowly.<sup>31</sup>

Incarceration isolates women. It severs women's connections with their loved ones. In our survey, 65% of women said that they would see their loved one daily if they were not being incarcerated. More than half of women (55%) currently are only able to see their loved ones monthly or a few times a year. More than a quarter of women never see their incarcerated loved one at all.

"Roxane," a Black woman in her early twenties who lives and works in San Francisco, describes the loss of her uncle through incarceration. "The only contact I had with him was on the phone," she shared during a focus group in San Francisco. She would answer when the family

could afford it. “That was the love connection I had,” she said. “It was bittersweet, because I wanted to hug him. Because he was the first uncle to say, ‘you are a beautiful woman.’ He was the first person to respect my femininity as a trans woman of color.” She continues, “My other four uncles were ashamed of me.” This is particularly important given that “in the face of institutional discrimination, family acceptance [has] a protective effect against many threats to wellbeing, including health risks such as HIV infection and suicide.”<sup>32</sup>

Over two thousand women completed a 6-point loneliness scale included in our survey that measured women’s subjective feelings of loneliness, as well as whether women have enough people in their lives that they can rely on, trust, and feel close to. Answers were rated on a “0” to “6” scale, where a score of “0” is the least isolated, and a score of “6” is the most isolated. The majority of women (60%) scored a “4” or higher; the single largest majority of women (28%) scored a “6” on the scale.”

Most women we surveyed (57%) reported feeling a general sense of emptiness. And, as women shared in our focus groups, women do not talk about their loved one: 62% of women reported hiding the fact that they have an incarcerated loved one. The majority of women who hide this information say that it is “because most people don’t understand what it’s like.”

The implications are tremendous. “Every mother around me in my community has the same fight,” a woman in Los Angeles says. “We’re not talking about how we’re struggling through this together, but we are all aware that she has a brother, or she has a father. We’re aware; we just don’t talk about it.”

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**When women are isolated individually, the results are emotionally, physically, and psychologically devastating. When women are isolated at scale by the same system, the result is political.**

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We will discuss the political isolation of women in Part III.





## ***"Bad Black Mothers"***

*"Slavery is terrible for men; but it is  
far more terrible for women."*

— **Harriet Jacobs**

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

**T**hroughout American history, racialized and gendered myths about Black mothers have been enshrined in law—from slavery through current-day foster care—to justify the separation of Black and Brown women from their children and other family members.<sup>33</sup> Slavery required a conceptualization of Black women to emerge that could justify rape, killing, familial separation, and economic deprivation without undermining white slave-owners' sense of justice. This mode of understanding Black women has been enshrined in our laws, and continues to persist in laws, policies, and behaviors that harm Black mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, and other loved ones today.<sup>34</sup> The system of laws upholding slavery made the invisibility of Black women's families, pain, and love an integral part of our legal system, and is fundamental to what we think of today as "justice"—namely a legal framework for the separation of families not deemed worthy of being whole.

Today, myths about Black people persist and overlap in legal and health systems—with devastating consequences for Black mothers. Stereotypes assert that Black people feel less pain than white people, such as "Black people's skin is thicker than white people's skin," or "Black people are stronger than white people."<sup>35</sup> Medical practitioners are more likely to empathize with and treat pain symptoms when patients are white<sup>36</sup> and disbelieve pain complaints coming from patients of color<sup>37</sup> and especially Black patients.<sup>38</sup> People of all races assume that Black people feel less pain than white people because they are perceived as having less privilege and more hardship.<sup>39</sup>

Black mothers' bodies bear the price of these stereotypes. As Linda Villarosa has written in a New York Times feature on the crisis of Black mothers and infants, "for black women in America, an inescapable atmosphere of societal and systemic racism can create a kind of toxic physiological stress, resulting in conditions—including hypertension and pre-eclampsia—that lead directly to higher rates of infant and maternal death."<sup>40</sup> Today, the disparity between Black infant and white infant mortality rates is greater than it was during slavery; Black infants are more than twice as likely to die.<sup>41</sup> Black mothers die in childbirth at three to four times the rate of white mothers.<sup>42</sup>

If Black mothers cannot feel pain, and if the connection between Black mother and child does not exist, breaking it cannot matter—not through death, and not through incarceration. Mass incarceration follows in the tradition of slavery, which forcibly separated families, denied Black women's pain, and has its roots in early American jurisprudence. Property laws during slavery tore Black family units apart. Women were involuntarily separated from their children, and men were denied the right to nurture and live with their families. In order to justify these practices without disturbing their own conceptions of morality, slave-owning white people perpetuated the idea that Black women had less innate feeling than others,<sup>43</sup> and that Black men were indifferent fathers and partners, or worse.<sup>44</sup> Framing bonds between Black women and their family members as more fragile, less secure, and less dear was a narrative that became necessary to perpetuate the institution of slavery. It is a narrative that today contributes to the death of Black mothers and Black babies in childbirth. It is a narrative that allows for Black mothers to be separated from their children through incarceration—and for the world to tell them that it is because they are bad mothers; it is because their connection is not real, not tender, not divine.







## *Part II. The World On Her Shoulders*

# Financial Burdens & Opportunity Costs

*“I’m the doctor and the lawyer...and the psychiatrist and the counselor all rolled into one.”*

— *“Collette”*

*Los Angeles Focus Group*

Women provide irreplaceable and essential support for the people in their lives, incarcerated and not, but receive little support. The financial, emotional, and time costs of mass incarceration siphon resources from women over the course of years and make it difficult for women to pursue opportunities to increase or even just replenish those resources over time.

### **WOMEN PROVIDE UNACKNOWLEDGED LABOR TO SUPPORT THEIR LOVED ONES**

Caty grew up in Oakland and remembers advocating for her loved ones from the time she was a teenager. “I remember when my brother would go to juvenile hall. Having to advocate for visits, for his attorneys, making sure that his rights weren’t violated. Mind you I was a teenager myself.” Caty played multiple roles as a teenager, none of which she was compensated or recognized for. She explains the roles she played for her family—roles that a highly experienced criminal attorney might have played. “I had to translate for my mom. I remember this one time [my brother] had court, and the judge starts saying his sentence. And then he says, ‘once you are done serving your sentence, you are going to be turned over to deportation and you’re going to be deported.’ “And I look



up and say, 'What are you talking about? He is a U.S. Citizen; he was born here.' Having to deal with people thinking that because we are of Mexican descent, we don't belong here. Having to tell the attorneys, 'No, look at your paperwork!'"

Caty's experience is not unique. Women take on roles and make decisions that may have life-or-death consequences for their children, partners, or siblings, often as a matter of course. Proceedings don't stop to recognize the pivotal role they are playing; no one offers to help or provide support. Instead, women have to fight for their support and expertise to be acknowledged. Nearly 70% of women who responded to our survey are the primary support for at least one incarcerated loved one, and 96% of women helped their loved one during or after incarceration. Before and during incarceration, nearly all women (92%) provide emotional support, almost half (45%) help their loved one to find an attorney, and 38% help decide whether to take their loved one's case to trial or accept a plea bargain. More than half of women (56%) care for children during their loved one's incarceration.

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### **Women are the informal reentry system of this country.**

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After a loved one's release, women continue to provide crucial support. Women provide the bulk of housing, job training, child care and emotional support, including encouragement to desist from substance use—resources that laws and policies can explicitly bar formerly incarcerated people from accessing.<sup>45</sup> Forty percent of women who responded to our survey housed their loved one after release. Twenty percent found their loved one a job. Nearly a third (30%) of women provided substance use recovery support; 30% of women helped loved ones pursue education; and 31% of women helped loved ones find mental or emotional health support.

Women are dramatically under-resourced to fill these roles, and are neither recognized nor financially supported.<sup>46</sup> The majority of women who responded to our survey work full-time, but are disproportionately low-income: Thirty-eight percent make less than \$25,000 a year and 60% make less than \$35,000 a year. For a third of women surveyed, the incarceration of a loved one has resulted in the loss of the household's main source of income. Nearly 70% of women surveyed are their family's only wage earner.

### **A LOVED ONE'S INCARCERATION CAN DERAIL WOMEN FINANCIALLY**

The incarceration of a loved one siphons the limited resources women do have towards bail, jails, and prisons. While a limited amount of research has studied the cost of incarceration to family members more broadly,<sup>47</sup> evidence suggests that women bear the financial burdens of incarceration of their loved ones. A 2015 report, "Who Pays: The True Cost of Incarceration on Families", found that more than 80% of those who paid court-related costs on behalf of an incarcerated loved one were women. The same study found that due to the burden of paying for a loved one's incarceration-related costs, 65% of families experienced difficulty buying food, paying for housing, utilities, transportation or clothing.<sup>48</sup>

Women in the lowest income brackets spent between a quarter and a third of their incomes to maintain contact with their partners.<sup>49</sup> One study on the costs of incarceration on families found that 1 in 3 families went into debt due to the costs of staying in touch with a loved one in jail or prison.<sup>50</sup> A 1998 study of the female partners of incarcerated African-American men in a California state prison found that on average women were spending \$292 a month on visitations, phone calls, and packages.<sup>51</sup> This is equivalent to about \$450 today.









Women are in addition subjected to punishment and heightened surveillance while they provide care and support for an incarcerated loved one.<sup>52</sup> Many states and counties explicitly exclude family members from receiving financial or government assistance for formerly incarcerated loved ones. Policies that prevent incarcerated people from accessing needed resources while imprisoned or after returning home impose the burden of care on women.<sup>53</sup>

The results are financial losses, mounting emotional tolls, and reverberating community destabilization. A woman in Louisville recounts how she could tally up the financial costs of her son's trial: "I saw how brutal this process was going to be, sitting in that courtroom all of those dates, missing work, falling behind, making sure he wasn't jail-poor... Take the whole day off and go down there, and you know court—I'm missing money."

She continues, "I tried to be a resourceful person, tried to do my research, tried to know what's going on in my community. But there was nothing for anybody like me at the local level. There wasn't anybody here."

"It's all on me," says another woman in Louisville who is caretaker for her grandson. "I've been poor all my life and I'll just be a little bit poorer."

Isolated, and without additional resources, women's lives can derail. After her brother was incarcerated, one woman tells the focus group, "I slept in a car with my kids for a week. I wasn't able to complete school, finances got out of control, I got into a bad accident." Transgender women especially may experience housing instability, and are discriminated against in public accommodations such as hotels, buses and government agencies.<sup>54</sup> "You keep pushing somebody into the corner," one woman says during a focus group, when asked about her incarcerated loved ones who are transgender or gender non-conforming, "and they're crying out for help and you don't listen and you laugh at them, oh baby. It's gonna be a problem." She is grieving the women she knows, who are transgender, who end up incarcerated because of a lack of resources.



In Louisiana, one woman expresses a deep sense of frustration and despair. “I feel like, I get so aggravated and so frustrated sometimes. [I’m] laying in the bed, I get leg twitches, and spasms. Because I can’t do anything but think think think think. ‘How am I gonna feed them, how am I gonna clothe them, how am I gonna do this, how am I gonna do that?’ And you don’t have anybody there to help you.”

Women are, by and large, expected to step in where public policies eliminate support for loved ones, children, and families.<sup>55</sup> To do so, women go into debt and often absorb the emotional toll of not being able to cover the costs to visit, talk to, bail out, or otherwise support a loved one. Women get little to no financial support from counties or states, and are sometimes formally barred from social support services.<sup>56</sup> As we will discuss below, incarceration has longer-term costs for women, as well.









## Women Pay

*"If you **can** afford to make bail, you're suffering. If you **can't** afford to make bail, you're suffering."*

— **Tanea Lunsford**  
*Essie Justice Group member*

**W**omen pay the price of bail, whether or not they can afford to. Women pay through their own confinement in county jails, through the cost of paying a loved one's bail, and through the emotional and psychological cost of being separated from a loved one whose bail they cannot afford to pay.

Forty-five percent of women surveyed by Essie Justice Group paid bail for a loved one. However, 54% of women were unable to pay for their loved one's bail.

“You have a choice,” says member Renaie Hill in a video for Essie Justice Group’s campaign to end money bail, “of leaving your family member in there, paying the 10% of however much the bond is, or you go into debt and get a loan.”<sup>55</sup>

In focus groups led for this project, women recounted the consequences of these choices. In a Louisville focus group, one woman recalls, “I was able to finally secure a loan [to pay my loved one’s bail]. The interest rate on it is 150% because my credit was not good. Because as a single mother, I was robbing Peter to pay Paul, and trying not to dance in clubs anymore to make the money I needed to raise my children. But I’m still robbing Peter to pay Paul, because of how much that loan cost me every month.”

Another woman did not have enough funds to pay for her son’s attorney and his bail, and so he was incarcerated for over two years without a trial. She tells the group, “I’m a single mom. I don’t have resources for what he was required to have in order to be free. He served 26 months in county [jail]. Sitting there, no trial, no nothing. Just sitting. We had an attorney, he just quit going to court. So I had to fire him, and I was out of funds.”

The bail industry preys on women with incarcerated loved ones.<sup>58</sup> Of the women who were able to pay their incarcerated loved one’s bail, 20% have owed money to a bail bonds agency. Women take out private loans, borrow money from family or friends, or put up their assets—houses, cars, savings—as collateral in order to pay this money back.

“They wanted so much money that my mom had to take the house that my grandma owned for 32 years, and she had to put it as collateral for my brother. Because we didn’t have the money,” Le’Char Toki, an Organizing Fellow at Essie Justice Group says in the End Money Bail campaign video.

The lucrative business of fronting money to pay for a person’s freedom has made the bail industry worth an estimated \$2 billion,<sup>59</sup> and has destabilized women’s lives. If a loved one doesn’t show up to court, any





assets they have put up can be seized. Our survey found that almost half (48%) of women who owed money to a bail bonds agency experienced some form of housing insecurity.

The high price of bail severs connections between women and their loved ones for incarcerated women as well. The United States incarcerates more women than any other country in the world, and, of incarcerated women, nearly half are confined in county jails.<sup>60</sup> More than 60% of women in jails have not yet had a trial, meaning they are likely there because they cannot afford to pay bail.<sup>61</sup> The high cost of bail has devastating consequences on incarcerated women. A study conducted by Prison Policy Initiative found that 80% of women who are incarcerated in jail are mothers and primary caretakers of their children.<sup>62</sup> County jails make it harder for people to stay in connection with each other than state prisons—phone calls are more expensive, and mail may be limited to postcards.<sup>63</sup>

Essie Justice Group is challenging the bail industry's grasp on women's lives by organizing to reform money bail in California, and to get women out of jail in the meantime. As cosponsors of The California Money Bail Reform Act, we are ensuring that women with incarcerated loved ones are leading the fight to end money bail, knowing that women understand the bail system—and how it needs to be changed—better than anyone. As a part of the National Bail Out—a collective of queer, trans, and Black organizers launched by Mary Hooks of Southerners on New Ground, Arissa Hall, and Marbre Stahly-Butts, who have raised funds to bail out almost 200 people since September 2017—we join with women across the country to bail out Black mothers during the National Mama's Day Bailout.<sup>64</sup>



CATALINA BAUTISTA-PALACIOS, ESSIE RESEARCH TEAM, CO-CHAIR



## **WOMEN ENDURE SIGNIFICANT OPPORTUNITY COSTS**

If her partner hadn't been incarcerated shortly after the birth of their daughter years ago, Caty—the fierce advocate who had to step in to make sure her brother was not deported—muses, “I might have gone to college. I would probably have a better financial situation because I would be able to earn better income. Another one of my dreams was to open up my own business. But again, back burner. Now that I think about it, I felt like I went from helping out my mom to helping my family out—because once my dad left, I'm my mom's oldest daughter. Pretty much I picked up my dad's slack, economically speaking. The minute I started working I didn't keep those paychecks. They went to paying rent and helping my mom out. That stopped when I became pregnant, and for a minute I thought ‘maybe that will come true because there will be two of us working!’ But then [my partner] got arrested, and that went out the door. I was homeless, and I needed to figure other things out.”

Caty gave up her own personal plans in order to support herself and her daughter, without her partner. Today, Caty states proudly that her daughter studies theater at college. She wrote a play on the impact of her father's incarceration on her life. “I made that dream happen,” says Caty. “It hasn't been easy, though. I think eventually, one day I still want to open a business. But I would need to lose the fear of leaving the security of my job. I still need to send [my daughter] to college.”

Like Caty, more than 40% of women changed their personal plans as a result of their loved one's incarceration. Most women have to work more hours (35%), get a different job (33%), or turn down an educational opportunity (31%).

We don't know enough about what “might have been” in women's lives to be able to adequately measure the opportunity costs of incarceration to women. Gendered stereotypes about what women, especially poor, Black, or Brown women “should” achieve distort what we imagine is lost. What we do know is that incarceration forces women to make drastic changes to their future plans.



“The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the U.S.”, a working paper that measured 23 different costs associated with incarceration—including costs to family members and communities—estimates the true cost of incarceration to the U.S. to be close to one trillion dollars.<sup>65</sup> The paper included the costs of moving, evictions, interest on criminal justice debt, adverse health effects on families of incarcerated people, and the aggregated cost of children of incarcerated people’s inability to finish high school or college due to their parent’s incarceration.<sup>66</sup> While costs to children and families have been documented, studies rarely report on specific opportunity costs to women.<sup>67</sup>

We need to learn more about what changes incarceration imposes upon the lives of women with incarcerated loved ones, and what exactly women are losing.





## *Another Great Migration*

*“They traveled deep into far-flung regions of their own country and in some cases clear across the continent. Thus the Great Migration had more in common with the vast movements of refugees from famine, war, and genocide in other parts of the world, where oppressed people, whether fleeing twenty-first-century Darfur or nineteenth-century Ireland, go great distances, journey across rivers, deserts, and oceans or as far as it takes to reach safety with the hope that life will be better wherever they land.”*

— **Isabel Wilkerson**  
*The Warmth of Other Suns*

**D**uring the years between 1915 and 1970, over six million Black people migrated from the rural South to the urban North, Midwest and West.<sup>68</sup> Single men, women, and families left their extended communities, histories, and land for fabled better job opportunities, and to be free from the overt and entrenched racism and segregation of the South.

When a loved one is incarcerated, women lose money and job opportunities, face housing instability and the deterioration of family and social networks, and become the targets of the stigma, segregation, and shame that render incarceration a tool of social control. In response, some women do what author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, Isabel Wilkerson, writes “human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have done. They [leave].”<sup>69</sup>

Just as the oppressive regime of the Jim Crow South pushed Black people towards the imagined freedom of the North, so too does the oppressive regime of mass incarceration push women. The question is, to where, and to what result? As with the Great Migration, a leaderless





mass migration that occurred over the course of six decades, we may not understand the implications of the migrations caused by incarceration for decades to come.

Anita was born in rural Pennsylvania, in Coatesville, and later moved to Reading. They were steel towns, like most towns in Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Almost everybody in rural Pennsylvania at the time worked—and were poor. Still, they looked out for each other. “Everyone always had something to eat, something to wear. The community had all these organizations to make sure that kids who wanted to go to college got to go to college. They would go to Howard or Hampton.”

The household Anita grew up in was a traditional one—something that bothered her when she was young. “I wanted to go hunting and fishing with my brothers!” She was close with her brothers—especially the youngest, “Michael.” “He was our golden boy. He was in all the top classes. Michael was the youngest, my youngest,” she says. Her voice is warm. It seems like it’s smiling.

When she was in the seventh grade, Anita, her brothers, and her sisters transferred to a different school. This school, unlike their past, was integrated. “For the first time there were more whites than Black. And for the first time I realized that this whole community had a lot of white kids! And my brother. Somebody said that he had done something wrong. And they came and sent him away.”

A Black boy didn’t stand much of a chance in the rural Pennsylvania criminal system. Anita’s brother was sent to a juvenile detention facility for three years.

“It hurt so bad,” Anita says. “We missed him. They took him out, we didn’t even know that was going to happen, because they didn’t tell us. I don’t think he knew. I don’t remember them talking to us about it, I just remember them taking him and he didn’t come back.”

“That changed us a lot,” she says. “After they took him away, my father took us away to Reading. Him and my mother separated; my mother was upset with him because she had told him to get an attorney for my





THERESA JETER, ESSIE RESEARCH TEAM







brother and he didn't do it. You know that was just like the lowest point of my life that I could remember up to that point."

Soon after they moved to Reading, and her parents separated, her mother decided to move the family across ten states to Oakland, in search of a more stable way to make a living. The move would take them to a different coast, and, maybe, a better life for Anita and her brothers. For her family, the move did yield some positivity in their life. Anita reflects on seeing her mother—the woman who taught her history and taught her to have a voice, all around their kitchen table back in Coatesville, Pennsylvania—blossom in California. "My mother went to college in San Jose, graduated from community college, and then went to San Jose State," she says. "Just seeing my mother, who never wore pants when we grew up, come into herself. That was beautiful."

Though her brother was arrested and incarcerated again after his initial arrest, he eventually attended and graduated from San Francisco State University, then Stanford, and then finally Harvard back on the East Coast. He is now a distinguished professor. Anita talks about him, her golden brother, with a pride that sounds like sunshine pushing through clouds.

Arvene is a 34-year-old Black woman. She was born in California, but raised on the East Coast and in the Midwest. She is the only girl out of four brothers—all of them have been incarcerated at some point in her life. She herself was incarcerated about seven years ago, when she was pregnant with her daughter. "The judge told me that I would give birth on the jail bed," she says. "But I didn't. And I've been taking care of my family ever since."

Arvene was living in Miami with her husband when her brother was incarcerated in California. "My mother passed away," Arvene says. "And things were going bad for [my brother]. Everybody else disowned him." She decided to move back to California to be closer to him.

Arvene moved back to California from Miami, where she was working for a medical staffing firm. Her husband didn't agree with her decision; they divorced when she refused to stay. In California, Arvene says, "I

had to start all over, financially and mentally. Nobody in my family divorces, so I was the black sheep in the bunch. There were a few people who understood—my brothers and my father understood. My younger and older brother helped. But me being the only girl, [supporting my brother] came down to me. My grandmother, one or two aunties would chip in every now and then. My Oma, when she came back to the states, she really helped out a lot. She would help me, go half on the packages, the last couple of years [my brother] was in there.”

Arvene’s brother was released last year. And Arvene is an Organizing Fellow at Essie Justice Group. Still, she talks about the cost of relocating to be with her brother. She lost her job and was homeless. She says, when asked what might have happened if her brother had not been incarcerated, “I think I wouldn’t have lost my third child. I lost my child; I was five months pregnant. He would be almost six if I didn’t lose him. Maybe I would still be married.” But, she adds, “The outcome is that now everything is going great since [my brother] has been home, for both of us. So I kind of feel like he had to go through it to get where he is now...the same for myself. I don’t know how to look at it any other way.”

Incarceration of a family member can push women to move, either by choice, as women search for a more favorable life for themselves and their loved ones, or through force, via eviction.<sup>70</sup> While the move Anita’s mother made offered her mother and her family a chance at a renewed life, this may not be true for many women. For more than a third of women (35%) we surveyed, the incarceration of a loved one either caused homelessness, forced a move, or resulted in inability to pay rent or a mortgage. This figure leaps to 56% for women whose incarcerated loved one previously contributed to household expenses. A majority of women with incarcerated loved ones (73%) were willing to move as a result of a loved one’s incarceration. Nearly half wanted to do so to be closer to their incarcerated loved one, but 30% percent said they wanted to move to keep their loved one safe or from being incarcerated again. Our findings did not capture women who must move across borders to reunite with their deported loved ones, but we know that women cross country lines to keep their families whole and safe.

We do not know the true extent of how mass incarceration influences migration. But we know that mass incarceration is breaking up families and communities in unprecedented ways.

**“And I look up and say,  
‘What are you talking  
about? He is a U.S. Citizen;  
he was born here.’**

**Having to deal with people  
thinking that because we  
are of Mexican descent, we  
don’t belong here. Having to  
tell the attorneys, ‘No, look  
at your paperwork!’”**

**— *Caty*  
*Oakland***





FROM L: MARIE LEVIN (ESSIE RESEARCH TEAM), ANN RUSSELL (ESSIE SISTER),  
TAINA VARGAS-EDMOND (ESSIE SISTER), LIZ ROBINSON (ESSIE RESEARCH TEAM)











### *Part III. “My Sister, I Will Never Cease”<sup>71</sup>*

# Political Isolation & Building Power

*Today that 37 year old white man  
with 13 years of police forcing  
was set free  
by eleven white men who said they were satisfied  
justice had been done  
and one Black Woman who said  
“They convinced me” meaning  
they had dragged her 4’10” black Woman’s frame  
over the hot coals  
of four centuries of white male approval  
until she let go  
the first real power she ever had  
and lined her own womb with cement  
to make a graveyard for our children.<sup>72</sup>*

— **Audre Lorde**  
*Power*

**I**n the above poem, Audre Lorde writes about a police killing in 1973. An officer in plain clothes killed a Black, 10 year old child, shooting him in the back. A jury of 11 white men and one Black woman found the officer not guilty. It seems so easy to cast our eye on the Black woman juror and say, “how could you let this happen?” Using torture as a metaphor, Lorde intervenes in this excerpt to problematize our blame.

Today, women with incarcerated loved ones are isolated, sacrificing daily of themselves to bring about justice and protection for their family members within an oppressive context. And when in the midst of this isolated combat, something gives, they are met with society’s judgement, and deeply blame themselves.



*“It’s the mother’s fault for not raising her son right, because the system knows that our fathers and brothers have been sold into slavery and killed in the neighborhood.”*

— **“Mary”**

*Oakland Focus Group*

For the first three years of her husband’s incarceration, Le’Char had “visits” with her husband by video at the local county jail. In those visits she remembers, “[being] in a very small cubicle with three children on my lap. They gave you beach chairs, which were shorter than the camera. I’d have to try to prop up my kids,” who were ages 3, 5, 6, and 7 at the time, so that her husband could see their faces. “It wasn’t real. It didn’t feel real. To see a person this way, the person I’m married to and have children with, felt numbing. I hated it.”

With her youngest in the back seat, driving from yet another weekend at prison on a Sunday afternoon, Le’Char spontaneously pauses her story to talk about what she wants for her kids. With a lift in her voice she says, “I have all these hopes and dreams for them. Then realize I can’t do it because it’s just me,” she concludes contemplatively.

She expresses concern about her oldest son and the role she’s asked him to play in her husband’s absence. If it weren’t for her husband’s incarceration, she reflects, “I wouldn’t make [my son] do things I ask him to do. I know he’s not resentful, but he misses being able to be a child. He should be able to be a child without having so much responsibility at 11 years old.”

And somehow it spills out of her: “I took away part of their childhood.” Le’Char, like many women we interviewed, follows an observation of her family’s day to day reality, with blame that falls squarely on herself.

Yet, two years ago, when legislators introduced a bill on video visitation in jails, Le’Char began to advocate. She spoke to elected officials, went to press with her story, and traveled to the State Capitol with her children. She is now an Organizing Fellow at Essie Justice Group.

Every Saturday and Sunday across the state of California, women line up, often with children in tow, to visit their incarcerated loved ones. The women who wait in the heat in the summers outside visiting



*“It’s our fault.”*

— *“Rita”*

*Oakland Focus Group*

rooms to maintain connections through concrete are the women whose foremothers were owned by white people, women whose ancestral land was stolen for others’ gain, whose lineage is one of resistance.

When millions of women are isolated by mass incarceration, it is necessarily political. Political isolation\* occurs when a system of control socially isolates a significant number of historically and currently oppressed people, and their social isolation reinforces a hierarchy that is based on race, gender, or class. For women with incarcerated loved ones, two agents of political isolation are blame and shame. Political isolation limits collective action, punishes deviance, protects those in power, and ultimately maintains the status quo.

The widespread isolation of women with incarcerated loved ones is part of a long history of political isolation of marginalized populations. As demonstrated in Parts I and II, mass incarceration both relies upon and invests in the circumstances that isolate women. Women pay many of the court fines and fees required by the criminal justice system, and they serve as the de facto reentry system once loved ones are released. The strain of providing this financial and emotional support contributes to and exacerbates women’s isolation. Harsh sentencing guidelines, visitation policies, and conditions of release are justified by rhetoric and reasoning that dehumanizes incarcerated individuals and their loved ones. The stigma and shame caused by this kind of rhetoric further worsens women’s isolation.

Isolation threatens transformative social change. Challenging unjust power structures becomes that much harder if you are alone, without support, and with limited resources. And yet, women with incarcerated loved ones challenge mass incarceration daily. They resist the system’s

*\*We put forward this notion of “political isolation” as a provocation-- as a theory in progress and under construction. We invite readers to help further develop and deploy this concept, particularly in movement contexts, and join us in rejecting the “false dichotomy” of theory and practice. Our hope is that this theory helps us all better understand existing barriers to power building as we organize. As bell hooks has written, “[W]e must continually claim theory as necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism.” bell hooks, Theory as Liberatory Practice, 4 Yale J.L. & Feminism 1, 5, 8 (1991).*

efforts to dehumanize their loved ones, and its efforts to devalue and destroy their love and connection to their incarcerated loved ones.

“Resistance for me is in keeping my family together when I know that they intended to tear us apart,” says a woman near the end of our session in New Orleans. “We went in this situation together and we gon’ come out this shit together as a family so that’s my resistance, and that’s my spit in they face, that yeah, 20 years later I’m still calling you about my man, I’m still knocking on your door, I’m still hunting you down at that event as the DA, I’m gonna find where you’re gonna be so I can show up and I can call you on your cell phone and ask you about my husband and his freedom and my family and my children.”

As Maya Angelou wrote “Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.” This kind of love, one that breaks barriers, that persists across hundreds of miles, and through prison walls is the building block of power-building, organizing, and social change. It births and sustains the connections that shatter political isolation.

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**Political isolation limits collective action, punishes deviance, protects those in power, and ultimately maintains the status quo.**

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**The women who wait in  
the heat in the summers  
outside visiting rooms  
to maintain connections  
through concrete are the  
women whose foremothers  
were owned by white  
people, women whose  
ancestral land was stolen  
for others' gain, whose  
lineage is one of resistance.**







# The Word for Freedom is Demand

*By Adlemy Garcia, Nana Duffuor, Catalina Bautista-Palacios, Jasmine Brown, Jessica Escobar, Anita Wills, and Diana Zuñiga*

**O**akland is where women gather on a Saturday morning in March, to ask ourselves this question: “Drawing from our histories, knowing what we know now, what needs to change?” We came up with a list of five demands. We direct our demands as a call to action to movement leaders, policymakers, our communities, our families, and ourselves.

As we came together to review a first draft of the report for which we spent the last year collecting surveys, meeting women outside of jails, conducting interviews and holding focus groups, we took a collective deep breath. This report process and the review that day has reminded us that as much as we are thriving, we are also still coping.

We spent the day sitting with the data, imagining what could be different, and collectively envisioning the campaigns, organizing strategies, and alternative systems of support that could lead us to a liberated future for us and our loved ones. For the first time, armed with this data, we were in a position to dictate what must happen next.

The demands outlined below reflect our unacknowledged labor, deep pain, and incredible resilience. They are a blueprint from which we hope gender justice, race justice, and criminal justice organizations can build to incorporate us fully as leaders in these shared spaces. To women with incarcerated loved ones we hope you will come find us—but not wait for us—and draw from this inspiration to create your own demands.

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**To women with incarcerated loved ones  
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In order to end the cycles of gendered and racialized harm caused by mass incarceration and rebuild our communities in its wake, we demand the following:

**WE DEMAND THE IMMEDIATE RETURN OF OUR LOVED ONES, AN END TO THE KIDNAPPING OF OUR LOVED ONES, AND AN IMMEDIATE END TO THE INCARCERATION OF ALL PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY, INCLUDING THOSE INCARCERATED IN IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTERS.**

Furthermore, we demand an end to all predatory and discriminatory laws, policies, and practices (including in the criminal, welfare, and immigration systems) that target, harass, and instill fear in us, and remind us everyday that we are not truly free.

**WE DEMAND THAT EVERY WOMAN WITH AN INCARCERATED LOVED ONE HAS ACCESS TO HEALING AND CARE, REGARDLESS OF ABILITY TO PAY OR IMMIGRATION STATUS.**

We know the history of and ongoing negligence and harm experienced by Black and Brown women seeking care within the U.S. healthcare system; we demand care that acknowledges the extent of this harm on our bodies. We demand choice in access to healing and care, including but not limited to: Western medicine, alternative medicine, holistic practitioners, therapy, and support from faith-based institutions.

**WE DEMAND RESTITUTION FROM THE STATE AND ALL CORPORATE BENEFICIARIES OF PRISON LABOR FOR THEIR ATTACKS ON OUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACCESS TO SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING.**

We demand an end to the corporate control of the goods and services we bear the cost of in order to sustain the livelihoods of our incarcerated loved ones.

**WE DEMAND THAT CRIMINAL JUSTICE, RACIAL JUSTICE, GENDER JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS, AND ORGANIZATIONS SERVING VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE RECOGNIZE WOMEN WITH INCARCERATED LOVED ONES AS A HIGHLY IMPACTED AND IMPACTFUL CONSTITUENCY.**

With that, we demand that women with incarcerated loved ones are also prioritized for hiring and leadership within these organizations and our movements.

**WE ASK TO BE HELD AS WE ENDURE THE DEEP PAIN OF HAVING OUR LOVED ONES INCARCERATED AND AS WE CHALLENGE THE SYSTEM THAT CONTINUES TO HARM US AND OUR FAMILIES.**

## About Essie Justice Group

Essie Justice Group is an organization with a mission to harness the collective power of women with incarcerated loved ones to end mass incarceration's harm to women, and communities. Our nine-week Healing to Advocacy model brings women with incarcerated loved ones together to heal, build collective power, and drive social change.

Founded by Gina Clayton in 2014 in Oakland, CA, Essie Justice Group is named after Gina's great-grandmother, Essie Bailey, who grew up on a Louisiana sharecropping farm and whose feats on behalf of family in the face of Jim Crow, sexism, and poverty mirror the uncelebrated efforts women with incarcerated loved ones make daily.

To nominate a woman to Essie Justice Group go to our website at **[essiejusticegroup.org](http://essiejusticegroup.org)**







## Acknowledgments

**It is with an incomplete gesture and deeply felt gratitude that we acknowledge the many people who made this report possible.**

Thousands of women with incarcerated loved ones contributed their emotional labor and precious time to this report. For filling and sending out the survey, facilitating and attending focus groups, and participating in interviews, thank you. We hope that this report can belong to you, and be worthy of the experience and expertise you shared with us.

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With an endless gratitude,

***Gina, Endria, Lily & Brittany***

# End Notes

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<sup>42</sup> Martin, Nina, ProPublica, and Renee Montagne. "Nothing Protects Black Women from Dying in Pregnancy and Childbirth." (Dec. 7, 2017), <https://www.propublica.org/article/nothing-protects-black-women-from-dying-in-pregnancy-and-childbirth>.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 14-15, 24-31. See also Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 30, 43, 58, 207.

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<sup>54</sup> Grant et al., *Injustice at Every Turn*, at 5; Spade, *Normal Life*.

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<sup>65</sup> McLaughlin, Michael, Carrie Pettus-Davis, Derek Brown, Chris Veeh, and Tanya Renn. "The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the U.S." Working Paper #AJI072016, George Warren School of Social Work. October 2016.

<sup>66</sup> For more on the lasting consequences the trauma can cause children, see Nadine Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity* (2018).

<sup>67</sup> Beyond state spending, incarceration also imposes high costs on the families of prisoners and the communities in which they reside. Bruce Western & Becky Pettit, *Incarceration and Social Inequality*, 139 Daedalus 8 (2010). Western and Pettit argue that the costs of incarceration are not limited to the justice system itself, as the fiscal impacts of the nation's incarceration boom stretch well beyond state budgets by diminishing the livelihoods of formerly incarcerated people, their families, and their communities. With a father in prison, they estimate a family's income to fall around 22 percent relative to the father's income a year before incarceration. Incarceration leaves a mark on earnings post-release as well, as they find wages in the first year of release to be 15 percent lower than in the year prior to incarceration. They also estimate that 2.7 million minor children had parents behind bars in 2010, which means 1 in 28 American children had a parent incarcerated (compared to 1 in 125 children in 1980). Immerman, David, "The Economic Impact of Incarceration: Measuring and Exploring Incarceration-Related Costs across the United States" (2017). Economics Student Theses and Capstone Projects, at 7-8.

<sup>68</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* 9 (2010).

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>70</sup> McLaughlin, Michael et al., "The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the U.S.," at 11.

<sup>71</sup> James Daley, ed. *Great Eulogies Throughout History*, "Coretta Scott King by Maya Angelou" 186 (2016).

<sup>72</sup> Lorde, Audre, "Power." *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. 1978.





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