

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/who-pays-in-an-offender-funded-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A new [report](#) from the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and Research Action Design lays bare the significant impact that mass male incarceration has on women who remain in the community—a critically important and often overlooked aspect of our current offender-funded justice system. Although women also suffer financial and emotional consequences when they are themselves incarcerated and these experiences should not be minimized or ignored, the report reveals that they also shoulder the crushing financial burden of familial incarceration.

With data drawn from surveys and focus groups of more than 1,000 incarcerated people and their families and employers, as well as community-based organizations in 14 states, the report also reveals that this financial burden is disproportionately borne by women of color: Almost one in every four women and two of five black women are related to someone who is incarcerated. The magnitude of the struggles these women and their families face can be seen in the report's findings:

The researchers found that those who were unable to visit or call their incarcerated loved ones experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, nightmares, hopelessness, depression, and anxiety at much higher rates than those who were able to maintain contact and maintaining contact relies on financial resources alone.

Reentry support from community-based organizations was also inadequate in helping families meet their basic needs, piling the costs of reentry on top of already strained budgets. Families report having to find or provide housing, employment, and health care for those returning home, sometimes destabilizing their own housing in the process. Nearly one in five families faced eviction, was denied housing, or did not qualify for public housing once their family member rejoined them post-release.

With all this in mind, it is troubling to revisit the research on the net worth of women of color in the United States: Women of color earn and keep significantly less money than their white counterparts to a shocking extent. In 2010, the Insight Center for Community Economic Development [found](#) that, while the median net worth of single white women ages 18 to 64 is \$41,500, single Hispanic and black women in the same age group have a median wealth of just \$120 and \$100, respectively. White, Hispanic, and black men in their working years, on the other hand, were found to have a median net worth of \$43,800, \$9,730, and \$7,900, respectively.

Holding the two reports alongside each other highlights the extent to which these financial burdens are placed on those who are least equipped to carry them, penalizing entire families and communities in the process. When we find that women are for the most part paying the criminal justice debts of their loved ones; that these women are likely to be black and, therefore, have a median net worth of \$100 dollars; and that court costs alone average \$13,607—that is, 136 times a black woman's net worth—the abusive nature of offender-funded justice systems becomes clear.

Any attempt to end intergenerational incarceration has to include abandoning these harmful, destructive policies. This change alone has the potential to significantly improve the viability of communities and the resilience of our most vulnerable families.

Through the [Gender & Justice in America](#) blog series, Vera will explore issues facing justice-involved women and girls in the fields of adult corrections, youth justice, immigration, victimization, substance use, and mental health.

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