

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/incarceration-by-bravo>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last year, [I outed myself](#) as an inveterate Bravophile [\[1\]](#) when I pointed out the interesting if accidental work that *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* did to illuminate what it's like to wait for incarceration to begin.

What I didn't expect (and probably should have) is that the sad spectacle of watching Teresa and Joe Giudice await sentencing was not a fluke storyline. As that season of RHONJ drew to a close, a new season of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* began and this series took up right where RHONJ left off, with Apollo Nida, the husband of housewife Phaedra Parks, waiting to report for his federal prison sentence. Where RHONJ showed us viewers what it was like to wait and wonder what will happen to you at sentencing, last season RHOA showed us what it can be like when you know. Spoiler: it's not appreciably better.

Parks began as a self-aware, diverting presence on the series, whether representing entertainers in legal proceedings or starting up a luxury funeral business. Far afield from such endeavors, she spent much of last season grappling with how to react both to her husband's crime and to what was happening to him. We saw their marriage effectively end in the wake of his actions [with some highly tense moments](#) and we saw Parks trying to balance all of the concerns that attend bringing her sons to visit Nida in prison: their need for a father; his need for them; her fear of normalizing prison for her sons; and the sheer logistical difficulty of bringing small children from Atlanta to visit a federal prison in Kentucky. With a new season now underway, we're seeing that while the immediacy has ebbed from those concerns, they haven't truly gone away; her sons are still small, Kentucky is still far, she is still without a coparent, and the frequency or infrequency of her children's visits is still a sore subject among her family and friends.

RHONJ has not resumed its tale, but Bravo did air a three-part special on the Giudice family in the wake of Teresa's incarceration. Because cameras could not follow into the prison itself, the miniseries actually served as a negative-space portrait of an incarcerated primary caregiver: we saw a second parent assuming a new role, the oldest child taking care of the younger ones, and everyone foregrounding that this is temporary. It is a story about absence. There was still plenty of ridiculousness—Teresa using her unlimited e-mail to plan some kind of pink explosion party for her daughter and fussing about designer plates—but ridicule is difficult to muster when the cheer feels like a desperate grab for normality, orchestrating by proxy to make up for not being there in person. The special showed some meaningful accommodation of family in the federal prison system, with the Giudices' staggered sentences as well as the calls and e-mails that flowed back and forth, but this is not the primary theme that was conveyed. Rather, amidst Teresa and Joe Giudice's defining denial (saying Danbury is like camp one week, only to talk about a fight and an invasive search the next), viewers were shown two things over and over: that separation from their children is what animates punishment for parents, and that however little or much those children are told, they know something is wrong.

In concept, these shows are about trivial things—lifestyles, not lives—and Bravo cast these women years before their husbands (and Teresa herself) were indicted. But with these found storylines about people whom audiences had already come to understand outside of any prison narrative, Bravo has pulled viewers into an understanding of incarceration as a living force, as something that is not episodic but enduring in its effects. Incarceration is never just a punishment for the prisoner, and you can see that sad truth most weeks on reality TV.

[\[1\]](#) Seriously. I'll watch anything on that network except *Below Deck* (or, as I call it, *Jerks on a Boat*) and *Million Dollar Listing LA*.

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