

# WHO

## The True Cost of Incarceration on Families

# PAYS?

A national community-driven report led  
by the Ella Baker Center for Human  
Rights, Forward Together, and  
Research Action Design

**Executive Summary**  
September 2015





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# RESEARCH TEAM

## COORDINATING ORGANIZATIONS



### **Ella Baker Center for Human Rights**, [ellabakercenter.org](http://ellabakercenter.org)

*Azadeh Zohrabi, Maria Dominguez, Darris Young, Zachary Norris, Patrisse Cullors, Jennifer Kim, and Zaineb Mohammed*

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights advances racial and economic justice to ensure dignity and opportunity for low-income people and people of color. We are building a people-powered movement to end mass incarceration, criminalization, and state violence by moving funding away from prisons and punishment and toward family-driven solutions that improve public health, safety, and prosperity for all communities.



### **Forward Together**, [forwardtogether.org](http://forwardtogether.org), [strongfamiliesmovement.org](http://strongfamiliesmovement.org)

*Alicia Walters and Eveline Shen*

Forward Together is a multi-racial organization that works with community leaders and organizations to transform culture and policy to catalyze social change. Our vision is that every family have the rights, recognition, and resources it needs to thrive. Through movement building that centers women, trans, and gender non-conforming people of color, Forward Together is working to change the way people think, feel, and act in support of the most marginalized families of all formations.



### **Research Action Design**, [rad.cat](http://rad.cat)

*Chris Schweidler, Pascal Emmer, and Sasha Costanza-Chock*

Research Action Design (RAD) uses community-led research, transformative media organizing, technology development, and collaborative design to build the power of grassroots social movements. We are a worker-owned collective. **Our projects are grounded** in the needs and leadership of communities in the struggle for justice and liberation.

## RESEARCH PARTNERS



### **BreakOUT!**, [youthbreakout.org](http://youthbreakout.org)

*Wes Ware, Milan Nicole Sherry, Nate Faulk, and Shaena Johnson*

(Louisiana) BreakOUT! seeks to end the criminalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth to build a safer and more just New Orleans. We build on the rich cultural tradition of resistance in the South to build the power of LGBTQ youth ages 13 to 25 and directly impacted by the criminal justice system through youth organizing, healing justice, and leadership development programs.



### **Causa Justa :: Just Cause**, [cjjc.org](http://cjjc.org)

*Rheema Calloway and Jaron Browne*

(California) Causa Justa :: Just Cause builds grassroots power and leadership to create strong, equitable communities. Born through mergers between Black organizations and Latino organizations, we build bridges of solidarity between working class communities. Through rights-based services, policy campaigns,

civic engagement, and direct action, we improve conditions in our neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area and contribute to building the larger multi-racial, multi-generational movement needed for fundamental change.



**Center for Nu Leadership**, [centerfornuleadership.org](http://centerfornuleadership.org)

*Cory Greene, Divine Pryor, Kyung-Ji Kate Rhee, and Chino Hardin*

(New York) The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions influences socio-economic, criminal, and juvenile justice policy by providing research, advocacy, and leadership training to formerly and currently incarcerated people, their families, communities, allies, and criminal justice professionals. Our purpose is to increase public health and safety, reshape the media portrayal and public opinion of people with criminal records, and promote active participation in criminal and social justice policy decisions, discussions and deliberations by the people whose lives are most directly affected. The Center is dedicated to creating new paradigms of justice directed towards reducing mass incarceration, mass unemployment, and mass disenfranchisement in communities of color. We promote the development and use of “community-specific” and culturally competent models for research inquiry and public policy formulation from the viewpoint of urban communities most affected.



**DC Jobs With Justice**, [dcjwj.org](http://dcjwj.org)

*Nikki Lewis*

(District of Columbia) DC Jobs with Justice is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights of the Metropolitan Washington DC Area workers and residents. DC JWJ is a long-term coalition of labor unions, community organizations, faith institutions, and student groups who work together because they share the common core value that people are more important than profits.



**Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE)**, [daretowin.org](http://daretowin.org)

*John Prince, Sheila Wilhelm, Rachel Bishop, Laura Ucik, Madeline Ray, and Jean Carbone*

(Rhode Island) DARE’s mission is to organize low-income families in communities of color for social, economic, and political justice.



**Dignity and Power Now**, [dignityandpowernow.org](http://dignityandpowernow.org)

*Carla Gonzales, Marc-Anthony Johnson, Jayda Rasberry, and Alex Alvarez*

(California) Dignity and Power Now (DPN) is a grassroots organization based in Los Angeles that fights for the dignity and power of incarcerated people, their families, and communities. In doing so DPN wages a fight for all lives because the prison industrial complex forms an imaginative limit on everyone’s capacity to envision freedom and liberation. Dignity and Power Now has several projects, including an activist coalition, an artist collective, a zine, a research and reporting group, a leadership institute, and even a reentry program inside a state prison. Immediate campaign focuses include establishing comprehensive and effective civilian oversight of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department and allocating the money from the two billion dollar jail plan into mental health diversion programs and community health centers.



**Essie Justice Group**, [essiejusticegroup.org](http://essiejusticegroup.org)

*Gina Clayton, Lily Mandlin, and Shamika Wilson*

(California) Essie Justice Group (“Essie”) was formed to harness the collective power of women with incarcerated loved ones to build a women-led movement to end mass incarceration and empower women. By infusing the authentic voices of

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women impacted by incarceration into advocacy, Essie's focus is to lift up meaningful, lasting policy alternatives to mass incarceration, expose patriarchy in the criminal justice system, and mitigate the impact on and bring about the dignified treatment of women and their families.



### **Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, [fflic.org](http://fflic.org)**

*Ernest Johnson, Gina Womack, Lillian Tillman, and Troy Robertson*

(Louisiana) Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) is a statewide membership-based organization dedicated to creating a better life for all of Louisiana's youth, especially those who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, and we seek to use education, direct action organizing, and peer advocacy to build strong, powerful families and communities and to fight for justice for our children and ourselves.



### **Fathers & Families of San Joaquin, [ffsj.org](http://ffsj.org)**

*Andrew Lucero, Elena Salazar, Sammy Nunez, Alejandra Gutierrez, Shantesha Fluker, Dashawn Rabon, Eduardo Crabbe, and Chris De Leone*

(California) Fathers & Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ) is a progressive, solutions-oriented organization that works to address the varying needs of men, women, youth, their families, and the community. By providing socially relevant and culturally relevant services, FFSJ develops local leadership while unifying the efforts of existing groups. FFSJ addresses critical problems such as institutional inequity, fatherless homes, widespread poverty, employment disparities, inadequate access to public health services, community reentry, and youth-on-youth violence.



### **The New Florida Majority, [newfloridamajority.org](http://newfloridamajority.org)**

*Devin D. Coleman*

(Florida) The New Florida Majority is an independent organization working to increase the voting and political power of marginalized and excluded constituencies toward an inclusive, equitable, and just Florida. We believe in a participatory democracy where people can be their whole selves. We train grassroots citizens to be leaders, mobilize communities to vote, educate the public to share our values, and inspire Floridians to take action toward their dreams. We organize people, ideas, and resources to build a powerful new vision for Florida's new majority. A cornerstone of our beliefs is defending and expanding the voting rights of all citizens, including those who are new to the country, raising children on their own, struggling to make a living, or returning from incarceration. We believe that a strong democracy for all makes a better Florida for everyone.



### **The Ohio Organizing Collaborative, [ohorganizing.org](http://ohorganizing.org)**

*DaMareo Cooper, Akim Lattermore, Minister Raymond Greene, Wayne Huggins, and Yacove Delany*

(Ohio) Ohio Organizing Collaborative is an innovative and experimental statewide organization that unites community organizing groups, labor unions, faith organizations, and policy institutes across the state. We work to improve the lives of regular Ohioans by fighting for one good job for every citizen. We use community organizing and civic engagement to build power. We focus on fighting against barriers to employment and destroying the Prison Industrial Complex.



**Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, [miccd.org](http://miccd.org)**

*Michelle Weemhoff, Kristen Staley, and Jason Smith*

(Michigan) The Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency (MCCD) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the effectiveness of policies and systems that address the prevention and reduction of youth and adult crime. Founded in 1956, MCCD believes everyone is entitled to equal access and treatment within justice and human service systems and the public must be an informed and active participant in developing crime prevention and reduction policies. Through research, collaboration, and advocacy-oriented strategies we work to shape public policy, educate justice system stakeholders, and support the safety of all Michigan communities.



**Partnership for Safety and Justice, [safetyandjustice.org](http://safetyandjustice.org)**

*Shannon Wight*

(Oregon) Partnership of Safety and Justice (PSJ) is a statewide, non-profit organization that has worked to reform public safety and criminal justice policy in Oregon for more than 15 years. We advocate for public safety and criminal justice policies that address the needs of all people affected by crime and society's response to crime. We believe that effective policy should include an appropriate level of accountability from those who commit crimes, resources to ensure that crime survivors get the services they need, and a commitment to proven strategies that prevent crime and provide opportunities for both victims and people who commit crimes to rebuild their lives.

**Prison & Family Justice Project**

**Prison and Family Justice Project**

[law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/pcl/Pages/pfjp.aspx](http://law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/pcl/Pages/pfjp.aspx)

*Amanda Alexander*

(Michigan) The Prison & Family Justice Project serves families divided by incarceration and the foster care system through a combination of direct representation, know-your-rights education, targeted litigation, and advocacy. The Project works with people in prison and their families to reduce the impact of incarceration and to promote family reunification and successful reentry.



**The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens**

[thereentrynetworkdc.wordpress.com](http://thereentrynetworkdc.wordpress.com)

*Courtney Stewart and Sherman Justice*

(District of Columbia) The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens works to connect previously incarcerated individuals to jobs, housing, training, mental health, substance abuse treatment, and recovery programs upon their return to the community. Our primary focus is to establish relationships, help rebuild our community, reconnect with families, and educate the public to improve the quality of life for reentrants.



**Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged (RIHD, Inc.), [rihd.org](http://rihd.org)**

*Lillie Branch-Kennedy*

(Virginia) Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged (RIHD, Inc.) is an all-volunteer, non-partisan, statewide, membership organization working to end the trend of Mass Incarceration in Virginia. We support self-help and prison-based rehabilitation programs proven to end road-blocks for returning citizens. Recipient

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of the 2011 “Lights on After-school” Proclamation(s) from Richmond City Mayor and Richmond City Council for RIHD’s Youth Initiative, preventing and deterring youth related crime.



### **Statewide Poverty Action Network (SPAN), [povertyaction.org](http://povertyaction.org)**

*Rolando Avila, Marcy Bowers, Ardell Shaw, and Lara Sim*

(Washington) Poverty Action builds grassroots power to end the root causes of poverty and create opportunities for everyone to prosper. Our successes directly result from our engagement of people with low incomes and people of color in a full spectrum of civic engagement activities, including: defining our legislative and electoral priorities; playing a key role in advocacy campaigns; and speaking up to change the dominant narrative around poverty. Because poverty is rooted in the intersections of multiple oppressions, we work to change institutions and systems that create and perpetuate poverty for the members of our communities.



### **Sunflower Community Action, [sunfloweract.org](http://sunfloweract.org)**

*Durell Gilmore*

(Kansas) Our mission is to change lives by developing grassroots leaders to identify problems and seek lasting solutions. Sunflower members build power by working together for the common good.



### **Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE), [vote-nola.org](http://vote-nola.org)**

*Gahiji Barrow and Norris Henderson*

(Louisiana) V.O.T.E., Voice of the Ex-Offender, is a grassroots, membership-based organization founded and run by Formerly Incarcerated Persons in partnership with allies dedicated to ending the disenfranchisement of and discrimination against formerly incarcerated people. We believe that formerly incarcerated people, their loved ones, allies, and communities can use their experiences and expertise to improve public safety in New Orleans. Through civic engagement and education about how to maneuver the legal system and draft and advocate for policy and legislation as well as other job and technical skills, VOTE mobilizes grassroots leaders to transform our city’s criminal justice system.



### **Workers Center for Racial Justice (WCRJ), [center4racialjustice.org](http://center4racialjustice.org)**

*Sade Richmond and DeAngelo Bester*

(Illinois) Our mission is to eliminate the barriers to sustainable and living wage employment for Black workers, strengthen economic security for Black families, and advance a progressive pro-worker agenda that will lead to inclusion and prosperity for all marginalized workers.

## PROJECT SUPPORT PARTNERS



**UCLA Labor Center**, [labor.ucla.edu](http://labor.ucla.edu)

*Lucero Herrera, Saba Waheed, and Natalia Garcia*

The UCLA Labor Center creates innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development that helps create jobs that are good for workers and their communities. It also improves the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and strengthens the process of immigrant integration, especially among students and youth.



**Human Impact Partners**, [humanimpact.org](http://humanimpact.org)

*Jonathan Heller and Sara Satinsky*

Human Impact Partners' mission is to transform the policies and places people need to live healthy lives by increasing the consideration of health and equity in decision making. Through research, advocacy, and capacity building, we help organizations and public agencies who work with low-income communities and communities of color to challenge the inequities that harm the health of our communities.



**Participatory Budgeting Project**, [participatorybudgeting.org](http://participatorybudgeting.org)

*Ginny Browne and Aseem Mulji*

The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) is a non-profit organization that empowers people to decide together how to spend public money, primarily in the US and Canada. We create and support participatory budgeting processes that deepen democracy, build stronger communities, and make public budgets more equitable and effective.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, the United States spends \$80 billion<sup>1</sup> to lock away more than 2.4 million people in its jails and prisons<sup>2</sup>—budgetary allocations that far outpace spending on housing, transportation, and higher education.<sup>3</sup>

But costs run deeper than budget line items and extend far beyond the sentences served. These costs are rarely quantified and measured and primarily impact incarcerated populations and the families and communities from whom they are separated, the same people who are already stigmatized, penalized, and punished.

Families pay both the apparent and hidden costs while their loved ones serve out sentences in our jails and prisons. Because families are formed in diverse ways and take many forms, the definition used in this report encompasses families built across generations and borders and within and beyond blood relations. The families in this report and those who support loved ones bear the burden to help those individuals re-acclimate to society after serving time. Four decades of unjust criminal justice policies have created a legacy of collateral impacts that last for generations and are felt most deeply by women, low-income families, and communities of color.

In March 2014, the [Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#), [Forward Together](#), and [Research Action Design](#) launched a collaborative participatory research project with 20 community-based organizations across the country to address this unjust legacy.

Trained community researchers reached directly into communities in 14 states, probing into the financial costs faced when a family member goes to jail or prison, the resulting effects on physical and mental health, and the challenges and barriers encountered by all when an individual returns home. The research included surveys with 712 formerly incarcerated people, 368 family members of the formerly incarcerated, 27 employers, and 34 focus groups with family members and individuals

impacted by incarceration. The project revealed that many of the costs and penalties associated with incarceration continue long after incarceration ends and reach far beyond the individual being punished, with negative impacts for families and communities.

The findings show that the long-term costs extend beyond the significant sums already paid by individuals and their families for immediate and myriad legal expenses, including cost of attorney, court fees and fines, and phone and visitation charges. In fact, these costs often amount to one year's total household income for a family and can force a family into debt. Latent costs include, but are not limited to, mental health support, care for untreated physical ailments, the loss of children sent to foster care or extended family, permanent declines in income, and loss of opportunities like education and employment for both the individuals incarcerated and their family members, opportunities that could lead to a brighter future.

Specifically, the research group learned:

**People with convictions are saddled with copious fees, fines, and debt at the same time that their economic opportunities are diminished, resulting in a lack of economic stability and mobility.** Forty-eight percent of families in our survey overall were unable to afford the costs associated with a conviction, while among poor families (making less than \$15,000 per year), 58% were unable to afford these costs. Sixty-seven percent of formerly incarcerated individuals associated with our survey were still unemployed or underemployed five years after their release.

**Many families lose income when a family member is removed from household wage earning and struggle to meet basic needs while paying fees, supporting their loved one financially, and bearing the costs of keeping in touch.** Nearly 2 in 3 families (65%) with an incarcerated member were unable to meet their family's basic needs. Forty-nine percent struggled with meeting basic food

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AND MURDERERS, JAMES EARL RAY, JAMES EARL RAY...

TAXES PAY  
CLEAN AND  
GET POT  
FROM CHILDREN

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MATTER

Black Lives Matter  
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NOW!

Prisoners to reach  
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needs and 48% had trouble meeting basic housing needs because of the financial costs of having an incarcerated loved one.

### **Women bear the brunt of the costs—both financial and emotional—of their loved one’s incarceration.**

In 63% of cases, family members on the outside were primarily responsible for court-related costs associated with conviction. Of the family members primarily responsible for these costs, 83% were women.

### **In addition, families incur large sums of debt due to their experience with incarceration.**

Across respondents of all income brackets, the average debt incurred for court-related fines and fees alone was \$13,607, almost one year’s entire annual income for respondents who earn less than \$15,000 per year.

### **Despite their often-limited resources, families are the primary resource for housing, employment, and health needs of their formerly incarcerated loved ones, filling the gaps left by diminishing budgets for reentry services.**

Two-thirds (67%) of respondents’ families helped them find housing. Nearly one in five families (18%) involved in our survey faced eviction, were denied housing, or did not qualify for public housing once their formerly incarcerated family member returned. Reentry programs, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations combined did not provide housing and other support at the levels that families did.

### **Incarceration damages familial relationships and stability by separating people from their support systems, disrupting continuity of families, and causing lifelong health impacts that impede families from thriving.**

The high cost of maintaining contact with incarcerated family members led more than one in three families (34%) into debt to pay for phone calls and visits alone. Family members who were not able to talk or visit with their loved ones regularly were much more likely to report experiencing negative health impacts related to a family member’s incarceration.

### **The stigma, isolation, and trauma associated with incarceration have direct impacts across families and communities.**

Of the people surveyed, about

one in every two formerly incarcerated persons and one in every two family members experienced negative health impacts related to their own or a loved one’s incarceration. Families, including their incarcerated loved ones, frequently reported Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, nightmares, hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. Yet families have little institutional support for healing this trauma and becoming emotionally and financially stable during and post incarceration.

These impacts hit women of color and their families more substantially than others, deepening inequities and societal divides that have pushed many into the criminal justice system in the first place. Almost one in every four women and two of five Black women are related to someone who is incarcerated.<sup>4</sup>

Poverty, in particular, perpetuates the cycle of incarceration, while incarceration itself leads to greater poverty. Estimates report that nearly 40% of all crimes are directly attributable to poverty<sup>5</sup> and the vast majority (80%) of incarcerated individuals are low-income.<sup>6</sup> In fact about two-thirds of those in jail report incomes below the poverty line.<sup>7</sup> The research in this report confirms that the financial costs of incarceration and the barriers to employment and economic mobility upon release further solidify the link between incarceration and poverty.

Most of all, this report’s collaborative research found that while supportive families and communities can help reduce recidivism rates, these bedrocks of support lack the necessary resources to help incarcerated individuals serve out their sentences and reenter society successfully. It is not enough to reform the criminal justice system without considering its purpose and impact on communities. Institutions with power must acknowledge the disproportionate impacts the current system has on women, low-income communities, and communities of color and address and redress the policies that got us here. Additionally, society as a whole must rethink our approach to accountability and rehabilitation, shift perceptions, and remove barriers that prevent formerly incarcerated individuals and their families from getting another chance at life.

## A BETTER APPROACH IS POSSIBLE

For decades, individuals, families, and communities—especially low-income people and communities of color—have faced destabilizing and detrimental impacts as a result of our nation’s unfair criminal justice policies. The repercussions of these policies extend far beyond sentencing and incarceration, affecting the employment, education, housing, and health of individuals and their families for years to come. A unique contribution to the body of research, the study explores the ways in which women support their incarcerated loved ones, often jeopardizing their own stability. Our nation can no longer afford the devastating financial and familial costs of incarceration if we truly want to foster communities that are healthy, sustainable, and just.

As a result of this research, recommendations are made for three key categories of critical reforms necessary to change the criminal justice system and to help stabilize and support vulnerable families, communities, and formerly incarcerated individuals: Restructuring and Reinvesting, Removing Barriers, and Restoring Opportunities.

**Restructuring and Reinvesting:** Following the lead of states like California, all states need to restructure their policies to reduce the number of people in jails and prisons and the sentences they serve. The money saved from reducing incarceration rates should be used instead to reinvest in services that work, such as substance abuse programs and stable housing, which have proven to reduce recidivism rates. Additionally, sentencing needs to shift focus to accountability, safety, and healing the people involved rather than punishing those convicted of crimes.

**Removing Barriers:** Upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals face significant barriers accessing critical resources like housing and employment that they need to survive and move forward. Many are denied public benefits like food stamps and most are unable to pursue training or education that would provide improved opportunities for the future. Families also suffer under these restrictions and risk losing support as a result of their loved one’s conviction. These barriers must be removed

in order to help individuals have a chance at success, particularly the many substantial financial obligations that devastate individuals and their families. On the flip side, when incarcerated people maintain contact with their family members on the outside, their likelihood of successful reunification and reentry increases, and their chances of recidivating are reduced. For most families the cost of maintaining contact is too great to bear and must be lowered if families are to stay intact. Removing cost and other barriers to contact is essential.

**Restoring Opportunities:** Focusing energy on investing and supporting formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and the communities from which they come can restore their opportunities for a brighter future and the ability to participate in society at large. Savings from criminal justice reforms should be combined with general budget allocations and invested in job training and subsidized employment services, for example, to provide the foundation necessary to help individuals and their families succeed prior to system involvement and upon reentry.

Our nation’s criminal justice system has dramatic impacts on the lives of individuals who are incarcerated and the lives of those they touch. These effects wreak financial, physical, and emotional havoc on women, families, and communities, undermining potential for a better life. The true costs of our criminal justice system are complex, deeply rooted, and demand a closer look at the multiple impacts on individuals and families. When these costs are understood and acknowledged, it becomes clear that the system—and society more broadly—must change.

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This report was written by Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi.

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# ENDNOTES

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