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Prisons

## The Children of Chowchilla

The painful divide between California's prisoners and their 200,000 kids  
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California's dysfunctional prison system – the largest and most expensive in the country – is producing a growing population of some 200,000 children who are separated from their incarcerated parents.

The state's sprawling prison system already consumes nearly 10 percent of California's general fund. But caring for these dislocated children carries its own financial and psychic burdens for families and communities, according to state prison officials and criminal justice experts.

“California locks up more women, and more mothers, than any other state in America,” said Barry Krisberg, a senior fellow at the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice. “The collateral consequences are substantial.”



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California's overall inmate population has reached 175,000 – larger than the population of Hayward. The number of female prisoners has nearly tripled, to 10,200, since 1987, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, which estimates the number of children of incarcerated

parents at 200,000; some experts believe the figure is higher. About 75 percent of female inmates are mothers.

Almost none of the state's \$8 billion prison budget is dedicated to the children of prisoners or helping them maintain contact with their parents. A 2005 study published in the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* found that maintaining the relationship between an inmate and child significantly reduces recidivism. According to a 2009 CDCR estimate, 42 percent of California's female inmates commit crimes within two years of their release.

Hundreds of these dislocated children come together each May and June, when a program called Get on the Bus provides free transportation to help kids visit their incarcerated parents on Mother's and Father's Day. The program is sponsored by The Center for Restorative Justice Works, a non profit organization dedicated to uniting children and their incarcerated parents.

On May 7, Tashawna Javius, 15, boarded a bus in San Leandro to visit her mother at Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla. Tashawna was 8 years old when her mother, Kecia Houston, of Oakland, was convicted as an accessory to murder. After her mother's arrest, Tashawna bounced between family members and friends before settling in an Oakland foster home. She has visited her mother in prison about a dozen times.



"The first year or two was the hardest," she said during the bus trip. She and her 11-year-old sister Isis colored Mother's Day cards during the three-hour ride. "I was afraid all the time, and I cried myself to sleep a lot," Tashawna said.

That afternoon, after visiting with her mother, Tashawna said she felt like she had each time she has visited over the last seven years. "Every time it's something new, something new about her and about me," she said, smiling. "She has lost some weight and is getting into shape, and she noticed that I cut my hair."

The smile faded when she discussed her mother's release.

"She is supposed to get out on September 14, 2014," she said. "I will be 19 then."

Tashawna and her sister were two of 700 children who visited California women's prisons with Get on the Bus this May. They departed from locations throughout the Bay Area, including San Francisco, Richmond and Oakland. Some buses traveled from as far away as San Diego and San Bernardino.

Get on the Bus organizers expect to take more than 500 children and caregivers to four men's prisons for Father's Day events this month.

According to a report by the California Research Bureau, a nonpartisan group that provides the governor and other elected officials with research findings and data analysis, kids with imprisoned parents are five times more likely to wind up incarcerated themselves, and three quarters suffer from learning or behavioral problems.



Tasneem Raja

[Click for full size.](#) Source: CDCR



Tasneem Raja

Source: CDCR

But while many academics agree that being separated from an incarcerated parent has long-term effects on children, it is difficult to measure the degree of harm, said Jennifer Lynn-Whaley, a senior research associate at the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice. Other variables come into play: These children often grow up in impoverished communities, attend subpar schools and have other socioeconomic disadvantages.

"Kids who have parents who go to prison aren't typically in good shape to begin with," Lynn-Whaley said. "So the research out there points to a lot of negative outcomes in the lives of these children. But

the problem is that it's very difficult to disentangle the parent's incarceration from all the other variables having negative impacts on that child's life."

Lynn-Whaley said she thinks the CDCR's estimate of 200,000 children is low. The department's numbers are based on inmate surveys, and she believes that many inmates falsely claim they do not have children because they fear losing custody upon release.

California does not request or maintain family information about inmates.

Research indicates that when a father is incarcerated, the mother typically cares for their children. But when a mother goes to prison, the children's fate is less certain. Most often, those children stay with a grandparent or another relative, but may also live with family friends or enter the foster care system.

It's costly and difficult to maintain relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. Collect calls from prison are expensive. Distance, lack of transportation and the expense of the trip prohibit relatives from visiting, according to surveys of families compiled in an annual report for Get on the Bus.

During Get on the Bus visits, children arrive with adult guardians — often grandparents — and spend time with their imprisoned parent in a recreation room. Guards are present, but the inmates and their children move freely, talking, playing board and card games and taking photos.

For many participants, it is the only time all year they'll see their mom or dad.

"This is an extremely positive event," said Michael Burns, a spokesman for the Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla, nearly shouting over the din of families talking and laughing during the Mother's Day visit. "This event goes right to the CDCR's vision of healthy family reunification and rehabilitation of the inmate, which we know helps improve success rates on the outside."

Get on the Bus is part of a patchwork of nonprofits and state programs that try to bridge the distance between inmates and families, including the Chowchilla Family Express, a busing program started by the CDCR in 2007. The program has brought 7,000 visitors to state prisons, about 25 percent of them children.

But in three years, there have been three interruptions in service caused by state budget tie-ups and contract delays, said program director Eric DeBode. The most recent happened late last year, when the overdue state budget led to a spending freeze on all contracts. The buses began running again this January, after four months without service.

"People were calling us crying on the phone when we started up again," DeBode said.

With children often separated from their parents by hundreds of miles, the job of maintaining relationships often falls not to non-profits but to people like Pearl Gordon.

In an effort to keep her great-grandchildren as close to their mother as possible, Gordon, 74, makes the trip from Sacramento to Chowchilla every other month. She's raising three great-grandchildren because their mother — her granddaughter — has been in state prison for 13 years.

"I brought all her kids home from Kaiser, brand new," Gordon said. The oldest weighed just over a pound, and now, she says, "I'm happy to say now he weighs 255. So on top of everything else, I can cook."

