

# Millions of Us Are Affected by Draconian Prison Penalties



A crisis is defined as “a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events is determined.” It is a turning point, a condition of instability or danger that will lead us to a decisive change.

We are at such a turning point right now with mass incarceration, which is the No. 1 public health crisis as the Vera Institute says in its [report](#), “On Life Support: Public Health in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” The political climate is poised to make the necessary changes to truly reform our criminal justice system because without these changes we will have a collapse. The catastrophic fallout and collateral consequences have affected each and every one of us who pay taxes.

Studies have proven that incarcerating young offenders actually leads to more criminal behavior and more serious crimes. The harm done to their families and the community is profound. If we don’t create safe, effective solutions now it will get worse.

As the mother of a Georgia inmate, his incarceration has had a profound consequence on the way I have lived for the past four

years. Pain from being dragged through the mire of the criminal justice system and fear of the unknown world of incarceration have directly affected how I do business and who I do business with. It has changed the way I vote, and it has changed the way I see the world. It has changed me.

For the returning citizen (ex-con), the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction are those that are NOT part of the civil penalties (i.e. incarceration, fines or probation). They include loss of professional license, ineligibility for public funds and potential loss of voting rights (depending on where you live), among thousands of other consequences that makes coming home and staying home nearly impossible.

Now keep in mind, I don't have the same losses forced on me as my son will when he returns, but I have collateral consequences nonetheless. My income is less because I had to give up a full-time job so that I can advocate for my son, hence I pay less taxes. Because my income is less, my spending has decreased.

In fact, I have not spent a fraction of what I did pre-prison years, except to support my son. Between phones, commissary, gas to visit, quarters for vending during visits, books, magazines, shoes, shirts, etc., I have spent nearly \$50,000. This doesn't even count legal fees or my time. Money that I can't get back, and money that I didn't spend in my community.

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On top of the loss of money, I no longer find the need to have a spontaneous meal out on the town. I no longer find the need to buy that pretty bauble, and I no longer have the desire to support things that have no depth or meaning. You see, when you have someone you love in prison, you are basically in prison right along with them, so being frivolous with your

time and money becomes painful, especially considering how meagerly they live.

Multiply this by the 2.5 million families who have a loved one in prison and I think the numbers speak for themselves. Families who are torn apart by mass incarceration have an enormous responsibility to forsake things in order to help their loved ones. They also must prepare to support them when they return, because returning citizens are barely able to find work due to the collateral consequences of their conviction. And 90 percent of them will return one day.

Our business leaders and owners need to understand that mass incarceration and the collateral consequences it has on the families hit them directly in their wallet. And more importantly, our lawmakers need to understand that they have collateral consequences as well. With the transparency that social media allows, we can no longer sugarcoat the truth. The prison-industrial complex is a financial burden on all of us, and the taxpayers and family members are the pillars who hold up this very unstable system.

The only way we can properly turn the ship around is by using our political clout. We need to come together as one community and vote according to the needs of ourselves and our loved ones before, during and after incarceration.

We need to vote for people who have compassion for reform, and are willing to address laws that are draconian and destructive to our country. We need to vote for leaders who stand up and speak for us. With almost [7 million people](#) in our country under some form of supervision, jail, prison, probation and parole, we must have another 7 million who love them.

The time for decisive change is now.

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