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Removing Barriers to Opportunity for Parents With Criminal Records and Their Children

A Two-Generation Approach

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Introduction and summary

Nearly four decades of mass incarceration and overcriminalization have made the United States the world leader in incarceration and arrests. The number of Americans in federal and state prisons and jails has quintupled over the past four decades—nearly 2.3 million Americans are behind bars today¹—leaving the U.S. incarceration rate at more than six times the average across developed nations. Communities of color—and particularly, men of color—are hit hardest, with black men six times more likely and Latino men two-and-a-half times more likely to be incarcerated than white men.²

An even greater share—between 70 million and 100 million Americans, or as many as one in three American adults—have some type of criminal record.³ Many have been convicted of only minor offenses, such as misdemeanors—and many only have arrests that never led to a conviction. But whether or not an individual has been incarcerated, having a criminal record often carries a lifetime of consequences, lasting long after someone has paid his or her debt to society. As discussed in a previous Center for American Progress report, “One Strike and You’re Out,” having even a minor criminal record can be a life sentence to poverty, presenting obstacles to employment, housing, education and training, public assistance, financial empowerment, and more.⁴

While the effects of parental incarceration on children and families are well-documented, less appreciated are the family consequences that stem from the barriers associated with having a criminal record, whether or not the parent has ever been convicted or spent time behind bars. A child’s life chances are strongly tied to his or her circumstances during childhood. Thus, these barriers may not only affect family stability and economic security in the short term but also may damage a child’s long-term well-being and outcomes.

Our new analysis estimates that between 33 million and 36.5 million children in the United States—nearly half of U.S. children—now have at least one parent with a criminal record.⁵ In this report, we argue that parental criminal records

significantly exacerbate existing challenges among low-income parents and their families. We explore the intergenerational effects of criminal records through five pillars of family well-being:

- **Income.** Parents with criminal records have lower earning potential, as they often face major obstacles to securing employment and receiving public assistance.
- **Savings and assets.** Mounting criminal justice debts and unaffordable child support arrears severely limit families' ability to save for the future and can trap them in a cycle of debt.
- **Education.** Parents with criminal records face barriers to education and training opportunities that would increase their chances of finding well-paying jobs and better equip them to support their families.
- **Housing.** Barriers to public as well as private housing for parents with criminal records can lead to housing instability and make family reunification difficult if not impossible.
- **Family strength and stability.** Financial and emotional stressors associated with parental criminal records often pose challenges in maintaining healthy relationships and family stability.

Because these challenges affect such a large share of our nation's children, we ignore these intergenerational consequences at our peril. In this report, we make the case for a “two-generation approach” to address barriers to opportunity associated with having a criminal record.⁶ We then offer policy recommendations to give both parents with criminal records and their children a fair shot.

As bipartisan momentum continues to mount in support of criminal justice reform, now is the time to find common ground and enact solutions to ensure that a criminal record does not consign an individual—and his or her children and family—to a life of poverty.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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