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## **Former inmates: Incarceration makes economic stability nearly impossible for our families**



By Wesley Lowery  
September 15, 2015

With an incarcerated husband, each of Shamika Wilson-Johnson's expenses is deliberate. A 35-year-old, full-time student who gets support from her family, Wilson is constantly counting pennies and wondering whether she should spend the last \$20 in her purse on food or on clothing for her two children or, as she often does, to reload more phone minutes to her husband's prison account.



Housing in Redwood City, Calif., where she moved to be closer to the prison, is much more expensive than in her home state of Georgia, she said. And each prison visit can cost anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000, once travel costs are factored in.

Her small family lives on about \$500 a month — \$300 of that for rent — and at times has had to live in homeless shelters.

“Economically, we struggle,” Wilson-Johnson said.

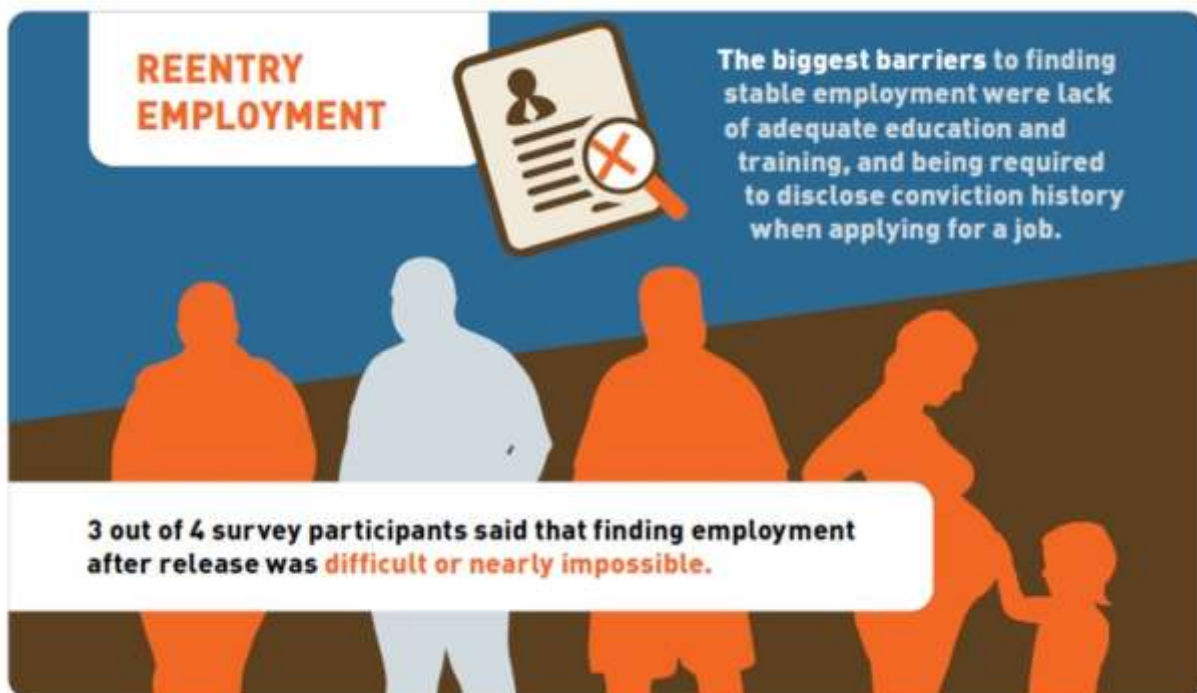
And Wilson-Johnson’s plight, it seems, is far from unique.

Nearly two in three families (65 percent) with an incarcerated member are unable to meet their family’s basic needs, according to [a new report](#) released today — which found that even after a family member is released from prison, the lingering impact incarceration is often economically crippling, not only for former inmates but also for their families.

The report, conducted by the [Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#), [Forward Together](#) and [Research Action Design](#), is based on interviews with 1,500 formerly incarcerated people and their families and employers about the long-term impacts of incarceration. It focuses on the ability of former inmates and their families to find and retain employment, housing and economic stability.

Particularly difficult for former inmates, the study found, was finding adequate employment after being released.

More than three in four of the 700 former inmates surveyed rated their experience of finding work after their incarceration as either “very difficult” or “nearly impossible.” The study found that 67 percent of respondents were still unemployed or underemployed five years after their release, and just 40 percent of them said they were working full time after five years.



Other findings include:

\* Nearly 2 in 3 families (65 percent) with an incarcerated member were unable to meet their family’s basic needs.

\* one in five families of the incarcerated were unable to afford housing because of the lost income of the incarcerated

\* 79 percent reported either being ineligible for or denied housing because of their past conviction

There are currently more than 2.4 million people [currently housed](#) in the nation's jails and prisons, and the nation as a whole currently spends upwards of \$80 billion a year on incarceration today. [As Wonkblog's Max Ehrenfreund wrote](#) in July:

The population in American prisons began to increase in the 1970s when Congress and state legislatures started passing [harsher sentencing laws](#) in response to rising rates of violent crimes. As criminals were convicted, they stayed in prison longer, and the total number of prisoners began to increase.

“The reality is, we got a lot more punitive about everything,” said Jesse Jannetta, a scholar at the Urban Institute.

Long after crime rates began to fall again, those who had been convicted at the peak of the crime wave weren't getting out. Only since 2007 has the share of Americans in prisons stabilized and [begun to fall](#).



And the survey released today declares that the families of those incarcerated are saddled with copious fees, fines, and debt related to their loved one being locked up — only to later be plagued with diminished economic opportunities once a jail time or a prison term is over.

“This study confirms what society has ignored for too long — that already vulnerable families and the women who sustain them are being plummeted into greater poverty, stress, and strain when their loved ones are incarcerated,” said Alicia Walters, Movement Building Director at Forward Together, a leading organization in the project, in the report’s release. “Decades of bad policy have torn families apart, typically leaving mothers to make up the difference and bear the brunt of these costs.”

And the new report comes at a time when the country is focusing specifically on issues of crime and criminal justice. The nation has focused heavily on issues of race and policing after several deaths of unarmed black men — Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray — gained national prominence. This year, [The Post is tracking all fatal on-duty shootings by police officers](#), in part to highlight the lack of available data about deaths at the hands of police officers.

And a bipartisan group that includes both the ACLU and the Koch Brothers has been pushing for Congress to act on criminal justice and sentencing reform ([although that remains an uphill battle](#)). Earlier this year, President Obama became the [first sitting president in history](#) to visit a federal prison.

Meanwhile, police unions and some law-and-order conservative politicians have argued that the current conversation around race and policing is making the job of police officers more dangerous (and assertion contradicted by all available data). Several cities — specifically Baltimore, St. Louis, and Milwaukee — are experiencing an uptick in violent crime, which some have argued is evidence of a “crime wave.”

In a piece published Tuesday, Ta-Nehisi Coates [explores](#) “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” attempting to specifically chronicle the policy evolution that led to current incarceration levels and the disparate impact that mass incarceration has had on black families — specifically economically.

Writing in The Atlantic today, Coates [argues that correcting the current levels of incarceration would be a “Herculan” task](#):

The changes needed to achieve an incarceration rate in line with the rest of the developed world are staggering. In 1972, the U.S. incarceration rate was 161 per 100,000 — slightly higher than the English and the Welsh incarceration rate today (148 per 100,000). To return to that 1972 level, America would have to cut its prison and jail population by some 80 percent. The popular notion that this can largely be accomplished by releasing non-violent drug offenders is false ...”

That means that cutting down on the roster of the imprisoned would mean releasing more men like [Damon Shuja-Johnson](#), Wilson-Johnson’s husband, who has served almost 30 years on a first-degree murder charge. The charges stem from the 1986 murder of Betty Taruke Canty, a restaurant worker who was shot and killed during an attempted robbery. Shuja-Johnson’s attorneys and family argue that he was just an accomplice in the robbery, and that DNA tests found no gunshot residue on him after the shooting.

He has been denied parole four times.

“He did not murder anyone,” said Wilson-Johnson, who was introduced to Shuja-Johnson via a friend about five years ago and developed a friendship and then romantic relationship with him over the phone. “He was with the person who was robbing the restaurant, and that was the person who shot and killed the clerk.”

Even though the two are not legally married, Wilson-Johnson considers him her husband, and is one of his primary sources of financial support. She says Shuja-Johnson has treated her two children, ages 4 and 7, as his own.

“He is the only father figure in their life,” she said. “We don’t go out to do family things unless it is cost effective. When it comes to birthdays, we have to decide if we’re going to go to Chuck E. Cheese, or if we’re going to go see dad.”

Today’s report concludes that criminal justice, prison and sentencing reform must focus on restructuring sentences, removing barriers to economic opportunities for reentering offenders, and increase opportunities for offenders through renewed investment in job training.

“Shrinking the criminal justice system through sentencing reforms is not enough,” said Azadeh Zohrabi, National Campaigner at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, in a statement Tuesday. “We must enact policies that restructure sentences, remove barriers, and restore opportunities to create lasting change that reinvests in the families and communities most harmed by mass incarceration.”

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