



Washington Examiner

Criminal justice reform should focus on family

By Alice Marie Johnson | Sunday, February 6, 2022

In 1996, I was sentenced to life in prison for my role in a nonviolent drug trafficking offense. It was the hardest day of my life. I knew I had done wrong by breaking the law, but the prospect of spending the rest of my life behind bars was shattering. Worse than anything else was the knowledge that I would be apart from my children and grandchildren for the rest of our lives.

As hard as I expected the separation from my family to be, it turned out to be even worse than I imagined. After I was convicted, I was sent to a [prison](#) 1,500 miles away from my children. I never saw them because they couldn't afford to make the long journey to come and visit me. There were phone calls and occasional letters, but nothing could substitute for the emotional connection of actual human interaction.

Eventually, I was transferred to a facility closer to home and was finally able to see my children. Although it was heartbreaking to say goodbye at the end of visits, I at least felt like I was a part of their lives again. In this regard, I was more fortunate than many of my fellow inmates. Many of them never heard from or saw their families because they couldn't afford to travel long distances or cover the cost of prison phone calls, which are extremely expensive.

After I had served nearly 22 years, my sentence was commuted, and I was [ultimately pardoned](#) by President Donald Trump. Thankfully, because I had been able to stay in touch with my family during most of my time in prison, when I came home to them, I wasn't a stranger. Many others aren't so lucky. They've spent so long behind bars completely disconnected from their loved ones that their children don't even know them.

I know firsthand what a tremendous source of strength families are for people in prison. More than anything else, what kept me going all those years was seeing and talking to my children and grandchildren and knowing that I had a responsibility to try to set a good example for them, even from behind bars. When I got out, my family was just as important in helping me readjust to life on the outside. The world had changed during my time in prison, and I needed my family to help me navigate all the changes.

Too often when we talk about [criminal justice](#), we overlook the essential role family members play. We focus on convicted people or on victims (essential populations, to be sure) without considering broader family impacts or how family members can help support and rehabilitate individuals in the criminal justice system. It's time to change that.

Last year, I participated in a webinar hosted by the Orrin G. Hatch Foundation at which I offered the following lesson based on my own personal experience: "When one person goes to prison, their entire family goes with them." Inspired by this message, the Hatch Foundation has recently released a [comprehensive report](#) that highlights in a new and significant way how family

impacts can, and should, inform a broad range of criminal justice policy decisions, from sentencing practices to prison policy to reentry.

As this groundbreaking report details, decades of research have found that incarceration carries an array of negative consequences for the children and spouses of individuals in prison. These harmful effects include poorer physical and mental health, diminished family income, increased housing instability, and poorer educational outcomes. And even after a person is released from prison, the so-called “collateral consequences” of conviction, such as laws that deny employment eligibility for certain offenses, can make it difficult for the person to find work, stable housing, and other requirements for successful reentry into society. This only further exacerbates the harm and instability created for family members.

At the same time, the research shows that strong family relationships can help reduce recidivism, in part because family members often provide crucial assistance in finding jobs and a place to live. Studies have also found a connection between the frequency and quality of prison visits from family members and the likelihood that a person will reoffend or be rearrested.

Drawing on these lessons, there are a number of proposals policymakers should consider. When it comes to inmate placement, for example, officials should seek to house inmates closer to home so that family members are able to visit. Reducing the cost of prison phone calls and facilitating video visits for family members unable to afford in-person trips are other commonsense ideas that build directly off the research on family impacts.

When it comes to reentry, officials should focus on reducing barriers that make it more difficult for formerly incarcerated individuals to find jobs and housing, such as laws that automatically disqualify individuals with a criminal record from certain jobs. Policymakers should also focus on ensuring that individuals have the tools, information, and documents they need to find work. Successful reentry outcomes benefit not only the person returning home, but the person’s family and children as well.

And when it comes to sentencing, one of the most challenging aspects of criminal justice reform, consideration of family impacts can lead to a new framework for sentencing discussions, one that seeks to impose the minimum amount of punishment necessary to achieve legitimate public safety objectives in order to reduce the negative consequences of punishment on third parties, such as spouses and children.

I know from personal experience how difficult it is to be sent to prison and how difficult it can be to return home. I know as well how essential family is to keeping spirits up and providing the motivation to keep going when things just seem too challenging. By bringing attention to an overlooked aspect of criminal justice reform, the importance of family, we can bring together both Republicans and Democrats on this critical issue. Family matters. Our policies should reflect that.

Alice Marie Johnson is a grandmother who was granted clemency by President Donald Trump after serving two decades in federal prison.