Hedwig Lee and Calli Morris: For children’s sake, don’t jail parents for non-violent offenses

By Hedwig Lee and Calli Morris

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State lawmakers this session have an opportunity to invest in Missouri’s children by allowing parents convicted of nonviolent crimes to be sentenced to community-based sentences instead of prison, protecting children’s health and saving money. Bills by Sen. David Sater, Rep. David Evans and Rep. Mary Elizabeth Coleman, if passed, would allow Missouri judges to do just that.

Incarcerating parents hurts children’s health. Research has shown that when parents are incarcerated, their children are at greater risk of asthma, migraines and high cholesterol. In addition, daughters are at greater risk of obesity, while sons are at greater risk of heart attacks later in life. These risks affect a lot of kids. More than 5 million U.S. children have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their lives. In Missouri, more than 47,000 children are dependents of incarcerated parents.

In addition to physical health problems, children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and clinical depression. According to a recent survey, a third of children of a currently incarcerated parent had self-harmed and one-fifth had attempted suicide. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to suffer from behavioral problems and abuse drugs, which can harm their mental health further.

Children don’t just suffer health risks when their parents are incarcerated. They also suffer economic and educational disadvantages. When fathers living with their young children are incarcerated, the children are more likely to go hungry. Children of incarcerated fathers are also more likely to repeat grades and to experience homelessness. In the longer term, children of incarcerated parents, especially incarcerated mothers, are less likely to graduate from high school or college.

Children need their parents. In 2019, the Missouri State Medical Association passed a resolution identifying the unique health risks that incarcerating parents poses to children. In response, the American Medical Association, the largest association of physicians in the United States, passed a resolution endorsing legislation that seeks to reduce the health care risks suffered by children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system.

Incarcerating parents hurts other family members too. When a father is incarcerated, the children usually live with their mother. Mothers of children with incarcerated fathers are at increased risk of major depression and homelessness. When a mother is incarcerated, children often live with their grandmothers. Grandmothers raising young children without help from the children’s parents report greater depression and worse physical health. Additionally, grandparents who raise their grandchildren due to parental incarceration often face a significant financial burden.

In sum, incarcerating mothers and fathers takes a debilitating toll on children, families and communities.

The three pending bills are Senate Bill 813, House Bill 1291 and House Bill 2216. All three of their sponsors are Republicans. These bills encourage Missouri courts to consider sentencing primary caretakers who have been convicted of nonviolent offenses to probation, not prison. The bills would allow parents who are not dangerous to continue caring for their children while completing their sentences.

In addition to reducing parent-child separations, the pending legislation would reduce Missouri’s prison population and foster care caseload. We estimate that about 3,600 people currently serving time in Missouri prisons for nonviolent or drug offenses were parents caring for minor children before their incarceration. As of 2015, 10% of Missouri’s foster children — about 1,200 kids — had entered foster care because a parent was behind bars. A bill similar to Missouri’s proposed legislation passed last year in Tennessee estimated that if the bill diverted only 10 people from prison to probation, it would save the state more than $250,000 a year.
Missouri could use the money saved by these bills for schools instead of prison. Providing probation for parents convicted of nonviolent offenses is an investment in Missouri’s children.

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