



# LOVE BEYOND BARS

Children of Incarcerated  
Parents Need More Support

Girls Embracing Mothers | December 2022

# Girls Embracing Mothers

**GEM is a nonprofit organization empowering young girls with mothers in prison to break the cycle of incarceration and to lead successful lives with vision and purpose.**

To learn more, visit [www.girlsembracingmothers.org](http://www.girlsembracingmothers.org)



# Introduction

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**1374671.**

A sequence of numbers I can never forget. This was the number assigned to my mother by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice when she began serving an eight-year prison sentence. I was twenty-two years old.

On my first visit to the women's prison in Gatesville – a remote city in Texas and hours from where I lived – I remember feeling anxious and lonely. There was my mom, right in front of me, separated by thick Plexiglas. I just wanted to hug her. My mom scooted as close as she could and raised her hand to the glass. I rested my forehead on it and put my hand to hers.

Next to our palms was the smudged imprint of a tiny pair of lips where some other, younger child tried to reach their own mother before me. The sight of it almost broke me. Even as a young adult, my mother's incarceration was emotionally, physically, and materially devastating. How could a child possibly bear this weight?

Over the next two and a half years, visiting my mother regularly was not only critical for maintaining our relationship, but restorative to my wellbeing. **It eventually led me to the creation of Girls Embracing Mothers (GEM), a nonprofit organization where we promote healing justice among women and girls impacted by the criminal legal**

**system. Over the last decade, GEM has empowered hundreds of girls and their mothers to break the cycle of incarceration.** We see firsthand the power of building the bond between mother and daughter. Moms in prison are able to build community together, work to create sustainable futures for themselves and their children, and are less likely to return to prison upon release. Girls develop a strong sense of self, create important bonds of friendship with one another, improve emotional resilience, and do better in school. Most importantly, girls and their moms get to stay connected and love on one another. **Ten years in, we now have formerly incarcerated GEM moms leading our programs and older GEM girls facilitating workshops for the younger generation.**

Justice-impacted girls are bright and resilient – just like the earth's precious gems. However, unfortunately, much like precious gems, they are also hard to find. Our work has always been challenged by the lack of data on children with incarcerated parents, which is virtually nonexistent. Without reliable data, agencies and organizations like ours have no official or clear way to reach children in need of our programming. These most vulnerable, but least visible children are truly the hidden victims of mass incarceration.

Over the summer of 2022, GEM set out to learn to what extent data on children of incarcerated parents is missing or unavailable and to provide recommendations for rectifying this critical oversight. We hope the information presented here encourages all institutions and communities to immediately and intentionally operate with justice-impacted children in mind.

*Brittany K. Barnett*

**Brittany K. Barnett, *Founder and President***

# Incarceration in the United States



The United States accounts for less than

**5%**

of the world's population, but almost

**25%**

of the world's incarcerated population<sup>1</sup>

**Over a 40-year period** the United States incarcerated population increased by almost **500%**<sup>2</sup>

Almost

**1 in 2**



Americans has had a family member incarcerated<sup>3</sup>

**Nearly half of the incarcerated population**

in the United States are parents of children under age **18**<sup>4</sup>

At least

**5.2 million**

American children (under age 18) have had an incarcerated parent<sup>5,6</sup>

# Background

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Mass incarceration is a moral epidemic devastating individuals, families, and entire communities.

The United States criminal legal system incarcerates its people at the highest rate in the world. It strips millions of Americans of their freedom and their dignity. It disproportionately harms low-income people, Black communities, and other communities of color. And it has proven to be an ineffective approach in reducing crime or providing meaningful opportunities for rehabilitation, all at an enormous cost to taxpayers.

One of the biggest tragedies of mass incarceration, however, is the generational trauma it creates and perpetuates for millions of children. At least 5.2 million children in the United States have been separated from a parent in jail or prison at some point in their life,<sup>7</sup> and at least 2.7 million children currently have a parent in jail or prison.<sup>8</sup> More than 10 million children have had a parent caught up in some aspect of the criminal legal process.<sup>9</sup>

Whether it is several nights spent in jail or years in prison, the effects of parental incarceration on children are well documented. Justice-impacted children have an increased risk in experiencing a multitude of behavioral, socioeconomic, and health consequences. In particular, children with an imprisoned parent are three times more likely to experience depression than children without an imprisoned parent and they are at least twice as likely to suffer from learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, and anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

Studies also show that strong, supportive relationships provide the best form of protection against the risks of having a parent in prison.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the strength of the parent-child relationship is the biggest predictor in a child's ability to be resilient to negative outcomes. In addition to reducing disruptive and anxious behaviors among children, maintaining contact while incarcerated helps to reduce recidivism among parents.<sup>12</sup>

**Thus, states genuinely concerned for the health and wellbeing of children – and in reducing the number of incarcerated people – should have mechanisms in place to collect information on the number of children with parents behind bars, as well as facilitate enhanced visitation and bonding among children and their parents.**

Unfortunately, we know from our work on the ground that the opposite is far more likely. Due to strict limitations on prison visitations, costly telephone fees, and great distances (often hundreds of miles) between prisoners and their families, children are completely isolated from their incarcerated parents.

Our research also confirms that states and prisons do little to keep track of which people in prison are parents to minor children or to enhance parent-child connection. The fact that millions of children are separated from their parent each day, without accessible and meaningful opportunities to maintain contact, is unconscionable and demands immediate attention.

# Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children's Wellbeing

Simply having an incarcerated loved one indicates poorer health and a shorter lifespan<sup>13</sup>

Children of incarcerated parents are at an increased risk for mental health problems and substance use disorders<sup>14</sup>

Children who have no contact with their parents while incarcerated often report feelings of isolation and alienation<sup>15</sup>

Children with incarcerated parents experience lower educational achievement and impaired teacher-student relationships<sup>16</sup>

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*Whether it is several nights spent in jail or years in prison, the effects on children of having an incarcerated parent are well documented. Justice-impacted children have an increased risk of experiencing a multitude of behavioral, socioeconomic, and health consequences.*

# Methodology

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**From mid-July through mid-October 2022, GEM conducted extensive outreach to the Department of Corrections (DOC) in all fifty states** to discover whether states currently have mechanisms in place to identify the number of incarcerated people – particularly women – who are parents to minor children.

Among parents in prison, mothers are more likely than fathers to have been living with their children and to have been their primary caregiver. Separation from their mother generally results in more disruption to a child's life.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the rate of incarcerated women has exploded over the last four decades.

**Between 1980 and 2020,**  
the number of all incarcerated women  
increased by more than **475%.**



The number of women in prison has  
increased by more than **750%.<sup>18</sup>**

Outreach was conducted by phone and email, as well as public information, research, and FOIA requests. A total of 171 outreach attempts were made as, in most cases, it took an average of three or more outreach attempts per state before receiving a response. GEM staff spoke with members of numerous DOC departments, most commonly the commissioner's office and the communications, public information, and/or research department(s). Each state varied in to whom our request for information was referred, resulting in conversations with DOC staff at all levels including directors, programming officers, research analysts, wardens, and many others.

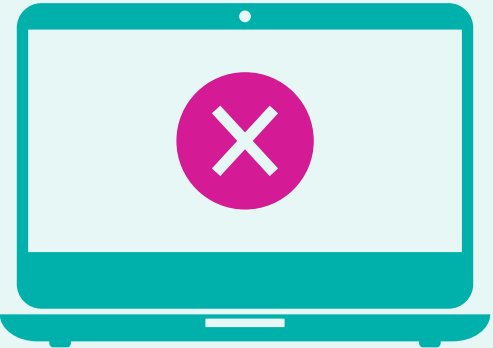
*The Bureau of Prisons (BOP), which oversees federal prisons and includes the District of Columbia and other territories, was not included in the scope of this report.*

# Findings at a Glance

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**48%**

*of states*  
do not collect data



**22%**

*of states*  
collect data



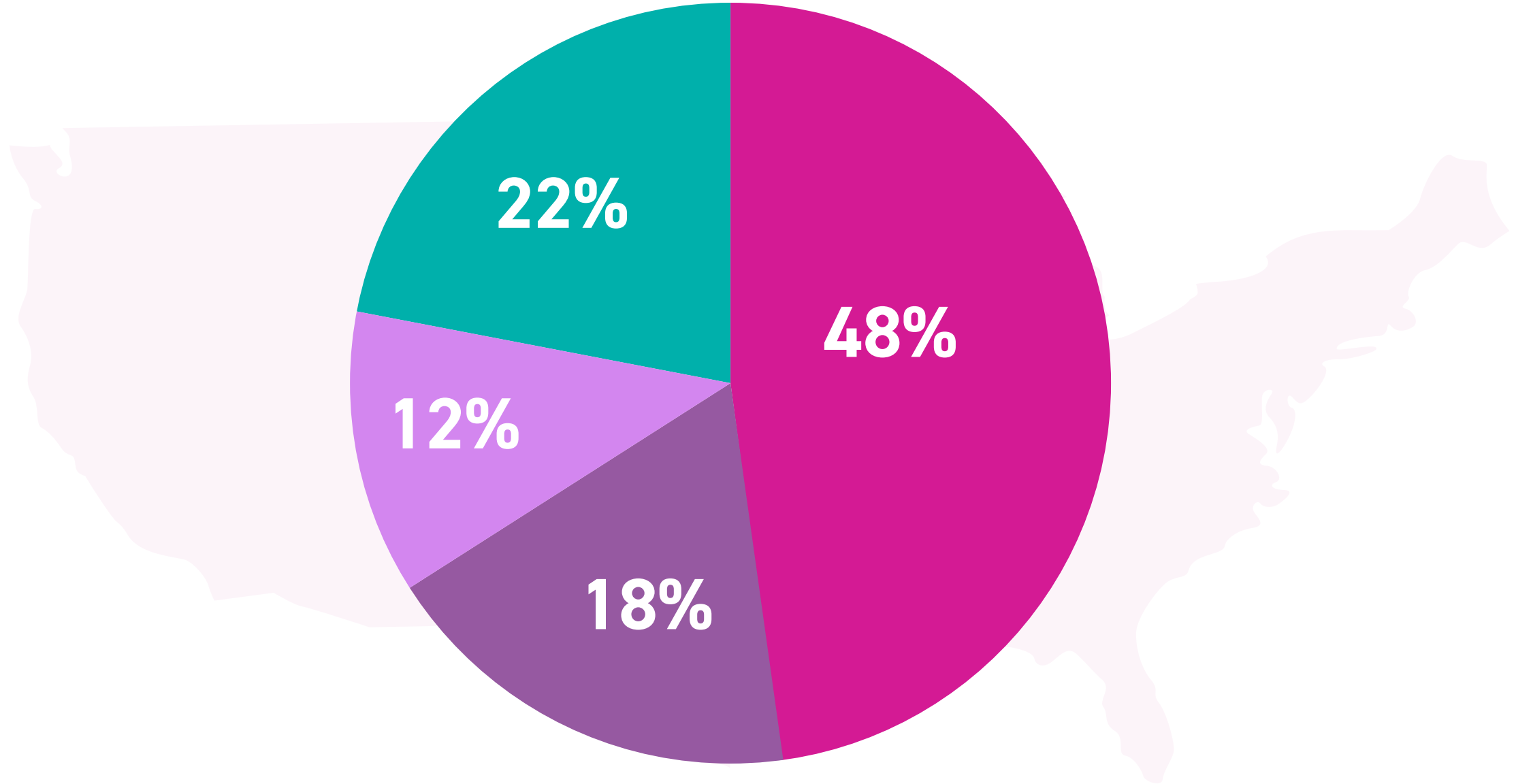
**18%**

*of states*  
felt data collected is "unreliable"



**12%**

*of states*  
did not respond





# No Meaningful Data Collection in the Vast Majority of States



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**Twenty-four states (48%) do not collect any data on the number of incarcerated women with children.**

Close to half of all states reported that they do not collect any information on the number of incarcerated people who have children. The respondent for Wyoming's Department of Corrections expressed that not only do they not track this information, but that it was his opinion, "[this information] is not something that's important to the Department of Corrections." In multiple instances, such as Indiana and Tennessee, it was suggested we contact child services, believing they might be more likely than the DOC to have information on the number of minors with incarcerated parents.

However, research shows the majority of justice-impacted children live with another parent or family caretaker, such as a grandparent, and do not interact with child services.<sup>19</sup> Thus, relying on child services to collect and maintain this information would undoubtedly result in thousands of overlooked children.

**Nine states (18%) felt that the data collected is unreliable because it is self-reported.**

Nine states – Arkansas, Connecticut, Iowa, Michigan, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Texas – felt that the self-reported data they collect is unreliable. States usually described self-reported data as volunteered or informally collected information, typically obtained at sentencing or intake. In addition to not being systematically collected, the self-reported information tends to remain in parents' individual files, rather than being input into any type of database. The data is not used as a reportable metric within the state's system, and it is generally not being utilized by the DOC to create enhanced visitation practices or meaningful programs for parent-child connection.

Furthermore, states often used phrases to describe such self-reported data as "unreliable", "not helpful", "not routinely updated", and even "not factual." The assumption that incarcerated women are inherently untrustworthy and unreliable in the information they provide is troubling, and these types of dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors within the criminal legal system make maintaining parent-child connection more complicated.

# No Meaningful Data Collection in the Vast Majority of States

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## **Six states (12%) were nonresponsive to the request for information.**

Despite several attempts to contact various offices within the Department of Corrections, six states – Alaska, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, and Utah – simply never responded to our request. It became increasingly difficult to even get someone to answer the phone when calling the DOC main number. In some instances, the number would ring several times before hanging up, without an opportunity to leave a voicemail.

Staff from the Louisiana Department of Corrections refused to provide contact information or transfer GEM staff to anyone who might be able to respond to the requested information. The respondent for the Nevada Department of Corrections stated that their research department did not have capacity to take calls due to legislative session. We were told to instead provide an electronic request for information, to which they never responded. In such cases, the unavailability and lack of responsiveness from the DOC provides a glimpse into the ways prisons and jails are notorious for making communication difficult, cost prohibitive, or even impossible between incarcerated people and their families.

## **Eleven states (22%) confirmed they collect data about the number of incarcerated women with children.**

Only eleven states could confirm that they collect any type of reliable data on the number of incarcerated people who have children – Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Oregon, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Washington. These states were also much more likely to indicate that they partner with nonprofit organizations to keep parents and children connected than states who do not collect data.

In many cases, the non-identifying information collected is shared with the nonprofit organization in order to enhance programming. Some states, such as Rhode Island, were also able to explain how the information collected is being used to contribute to annual statewide reports on the status of children's health and wellbeing.



# Data Collected on Incarcerated Parents to Minor Children by State

Response	
Alabama	Not collected
Arizona	Not collected
California	Not collected
Colorado	Not collected
Delaware	Not collected
Florida	Not collected
Hawaii	Not collected
Indiana	Not collected
Kentucky	Not collected
Maryland	Not collected
Mississippi	Not collected
Missouri	Not collected
Montana	Not collected
New Jersey	Not collected
New Mexico	Not collected
North Dakota	Not collected
Ohio	Not collected
South Carolina	Not collected
Tennessee	Not collected
Vermont	Not collected
Virginia	Not collected
West Virginia	Not collected
Wisconsin	Not collected
Wyoming	Not collected

Response	
Georgia	Collected
Idaho	Collected
Illinois	Collected
Kansas	Collected
Maine	Collected
Massachusetts	Collected
New York	Collected
North Carolina	Collected
Oregon	Collected
Rhode Island	Collected
Washington	Collected

Response	
Arkansas	Collected, self-reported
Connecticut	Collected, self-reported
Iowa	Collected, self-reported
Michigan	Collected, self-reported
New Hampshire	Collected, self-reported
Oklahoma	Collected, self-reported
Pennsylvania	Collected, self-reported
South Dakota	Collected, self-reported
Texas	Collected, self-reported

Response	
Alaska	No response
Louisiana	No response
Minnesota	No response
Nebraska	No response
Nevada	No response
Utah	No response

# A Path Forward

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While the outreach conducted by GEM reveals that scarcely any states have appropriate mechanisms in place to support children of incarcerated parents, it is also clear that establishing policies for collecting non-identifying information and implementing programs to keep children and their parents connected is within reach.

Six states expressed interest in learning more about GEM's programming. Particularly in instances where an extended phone call was possible, and the benefits of keeping children and parents connected were discussed, there was an eagerness to continue the conversation. One respondent, serving as the state's Director of Women's Services, was surprised to find their state wasn't already collecting this information. Responses such as this suggest that states' Department of Corrections, and the facilities they supervise, need additional education and training on the importance of collecting reliable data, as well as the health benefits of keeping incarcerated parents and their children connected.

Additionally, three states – New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Florida – reported that they are currently working to enhance the collection of data for incarcerated parents with minor children. One respondent shared that the state's Department of Corrections is developing an updated intake process in which case managers specifically ask and record the gender and date of birth of all children. The improved intake process involves a sustained follow-up effort to provide accessible, up-to-date, and accurate referral information to incarcerated parents for family programs.

In New Hampshire, a state that currently relies on self-reported information, the Department of Corrections is not only working to enhance their data collection, but has also been operating its own family support program since 1998. The program's mission is to strengthen the connection between incarcerated parents and their families and to facilitate ties to the community through education and support. The state works alongside nonprofit organizations to provide enhanced visitations, parenting classes, support groups, re-entry planning, and more.

**It is clear from these examples that instituting methods for collecting non-identifying, reliable data and for keeping families connected while incarcerated is possible.**

However, a growing consciousness within state agencies about the importance of supporting justice-impacted children is desperately needed. Without it, millions of children will continue to experience the lifelong consequences and generational trauma associated with parental incarceration.

# Recommendations

## for Improving Children's Emotional Response to Parental Incarceration

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*Strong and supportive relationships provide the best form of protection against the risks of having a parent in prison. In fact, the strength of the parent-child relationship is the biggest predictor in a child's ability to be resilient to negative outcomes.*

- » **In partnership with community-based organizations, the Department of Corrections in each state must work to collect and maintain accurate, non-identifying information** on the number of children with parents behind bars. States should endeavor to establish trust with incarcerated parents by communicating the purpose and function of collecting such information, which is to enhance parent-child connection.
- » **The Department of Corrections and individual correctional facilities should utilize such information to improve accessible contact** between incarcerated parents and their children through enhanced visitations, telephone calls, and mail correspondence.
- » **The Department of Corrections should seek to provide their staff continuous training and education, from community-based organizations led by justice impacted people,** on the health benefits of keeping incarcerated parents and their children connected, as well as the importance of collecting reliable data.



# Recommendations

## continued

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- » **State governments must support this endeavor by providing adequate funding for community-based organizations and the Department of Corrections** to work in partnership, not only to collect meaningful information, but also offer programming inside correctional facilities that help strengthen parent-child connection, improve children's emotional response to incarceration, and reduce recidivism among parents.
- » **State governments should provide funding and infrastructural support to establish working groups committed to exploring and addressing this issue more deeply.** Working groups should include key stakeholders such as justice-impacted people, caretakers of children with incarcerated parents, community-based organizations, DOC representatives, and other institutional players including school districts, legal aid, health and human services, and more.
- » **State governments should support family caregivers in meeting justice-impacted children's needs** by facilitating better access to financial, legal, healthcare, childcare, and housing assistance.
- » **School districts must also receive training and education so they may work to foster justice-impacted children's mental and emotional wellbeing,** reduce social stigma and potential bias among teachers and administrators, and improve learning outcomes for students.



# More About Girls Embracing Mothers (GEM)

GEM was established to help reduce the trauma caused by maternal incarceration, particularly for young girls. We empower girls whose mothers are in prison to make positive life choices by developing a strong sense of self, by helping them access the resources and support they need, and by building a sense of community.

Our evidence-based, gender responsive, and trauma-informed programming is developed by licensed clinical social workers. We ensure that justice-impacted women and girls are seen and supported by strengthening the parent-child relationship, while also attending to the material, mental, and emotional wellbeing of both mother and daughter.

Our programs are highly effective and replicable. We work across five different women's prisons in Texas. In almost ten years, not one girl in our program has entered the juvenile or criminal legal system (despite children of incarcerated parents being three times more likely to become justice-involved). Only 5.7% of the mothers in our program have returned to prison upon release (compared to the national recidivism rate of 46%).





# Our Programs

## **Pearl Program - Building the Mother-Daughter Bond**

We provide monthly enhanced visitations between girls and their mothers in prison including creative arts therapy, shared meals, and facilitated discussions to help reduce trauma, improve the child's emotional response to incarceration, and reduce recidivism among parents.

## **Diamond Program - Empowering Girls to Make Positive Life Choices**

We work with young girls, whose mothers are currently or formerly incarcerated, through year-round workshops and annual summer camp to enhance their confidence and self-esteem, discover their leadership and communication strengths, establish cognizance of health and wellness, and build positive relationships.

## **Ruby Program - Creating Sustainable Futures for Justice-Impacted Women**

We support women to be successful upon release by preparing them for re-entry through career-readiness and skills-based trainings, healing justice and parenting workshops, financial planning, transitional services, and more.



# ENDNOTES

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13. Ram Sundaresh et al., [\*"Exposure to Family Member Incarceration and Adult Well-being in the United States,"\*](#) JAMA Netw Open (May 2021).
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**Girls Embracing Mothers**  
[www.girlsembracingmothers.org](http://www.girlsembracingmothers.org)

**1349 Empire Central, Suite 400**  
Dallas, Texas 75247

**Email: [info@girlsembracingmothers.org](mailto:info@girlsembracingmothers.org)**  
Phone: (214) 530-2316

 @girlsembracingmothers

 @GEM\_AmplifyHER

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