

# Parental Incarceration and Children: A Review of Recent Findings



## Children of Incarcerated Caregivers

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## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Overview</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Literature Search Process</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Source Selection Process.....	<b>6</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework Informing Findings</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>The Bioecological Model</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Individual .....	<b>8</b>
Microsystem .....	<b>8</b>
Mesosystem .....	<b>10</b>
Exosystem .....	<b>10</b>
Macrosystem .....	<b>11</b>
Chronosystem .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Key Principles</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Additional Resources and Further Reading</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>17</b>

Despite an attempt to review recent and relevant findings on the impact of parental incarceration on children, there is a dearth of systematic studies (Harris & Graham, 2007). Reasons include, but are not limited to, conceptual biases and methodological constraints. Conceptual biases refer to negative stereotypes that plague children of incarcerated caregivers (e.g., that they are more likely to be incarcerated themselves). Methodological constraints, on the other hand, include validity and reliability deficits (e.g., recruiting vulnerable groups, such as prisoners, is challenging for a number of reasons).

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### Vision

Informed by ongoing and robust research, state sentencing guidelines and practices adhere to international standards and best practices in considering the parent-child relationship at sentencing.

When imprisonment of a caregiver is unavoidable, there are alternative forms of incarceration that can be considered in the interests of maintaining the parent-child bond.

The state provides sufficient resources for the development of alternative incarceration facilities and provides effective oversight to reduce opportunities for abuse.

In cases where caregivers must be incarcerated away from their children, the state has policies in place to facilitate the maintenance of the parent-child bond.

### Mission

In support of our vision, Children of Incarcerated Caregivers will give presentations to judges and lawyers to increase their awareness, capacity, and willingness to incorporate consideration of the best interests of the child into their sentencing practices.

We will provide research to, and advocate with, policy makers to adopt a new statutory scheme that will provide alternatives to incarceration for parents in appropriate cases.

We will also advocate with decision-makers to amend policies to promote the creation of programs designed to maximize the potential for incarcerated caregivers to return to the community as successful members and parents.

To improve evidence-based policymaking around sentencing and incarceration, we will collaborate with universities in the production of relevant and timely research.

Finally, we will also consult and collaborate with other local, national, and international organizations working on related issues in order to share resources, minimize the duplication of efforts, and to leverage support for our mission.

## Executive Summary

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With the number of incarcerated parents in the United States growing rapidly, understanding the effects of parental incarceration on children has never been more important. Research over the past two years (i.e., 2016-2017) has demonstrated the immediate and long-term effects of parental incarceration on children. The bioecological model, which suggests that the environment interacts in development, is a useful framework in understanding these effects not only on children but also their families. It enables researchers and legal professionals (i.e., judges and attorneys) to move beyond considering the individual effects of incarceration. This model illustrates that parental incarceration has a wide impact on the parent, his or her partner, and their children.

At the *individual ecology*, parental incarceration is associated with depressed affect (e.g., feeling sad, anxious or empty, and worthless) in children. Greater risk for various negative mental health problems (e.g., self-injury, suicidal ideation or attempts, emotional problems, and behavioral problems) are associated with parental incarceration at the *microsystem ecology*. At the *mesosystem ecology*, children of incarcerated caregivers are more likely to cope with stressful circumstances using alcohol, marijuana, tobacco products, or prescription drugs. Partners of incarcerated caregivers are also affected. At the *macrosystem ecology*, perceived stress puts their children at greater risk of developing internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing (e.g., physical aggression and disobedience) behaviors. As for the *chronosystem ecology*, it is important to recognize that incarcerated caregivers are rarely involved in post-release childcare planning. When officials took the family into consideration during sentencing, children of incarcerated caregivers were less likely be uprooted by moving and engage in a destructive cycle that often leads to violence.

Taken together, the findings in this report illustrate how the effects of parental incarceration cut across different ecologies. They also emphasize the importance of taking into account a family's collective experience, from their interpersonal relationships to the environment, during sentencing.

## Overview

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Understanding the effects of parental incarceration on children has never been more important than now. The number of people incarcerated in the United States is staggering. Recent estimates suggest that 6.7 million adults are incarcerated in federal and state prisons, which yields about 1 in 37 residents behind bars (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). About 1.7 million children currently have a parent in prison (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). But more than 5 million – or about 1 in 14 – children the United States experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives (Cramer, Geoff, Peterson, & Sandstrom, 2017). Parental incarceration puts children at a higher risk for poverty, instability, and various mental health problems (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Drawing on the bioecological framework, this report outlines recent findings (i.e., 2016-2017) on the devastating effects of parental incarceration. Direct implications for practice are summarized. Additional resources are provided for readers interested in learning more about the effects of parental incarceration.

*While about 1.7 million children in the United States currently have an incarcerated parent, more than 5 million children – or about 1 in 14 – experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.*



## Literature Search Process

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The literature search was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, Scopus One File (GALE), Taylor and Francis Online, Arts and Sciences (JSTOR), Medline, SAGE, and the Wiley Online Library were searched. Inclusion and exclusion keywords were distilled (i.e., *incarceration*, *caregivers*, and *children*) to reflect the guiding question: *What is the impact of parental incarceration on children?* Publication date was set to post-2015, which yielded 399 journal articles and 1 book chapters or books. Preliminary results were sorted in descending order by most recent. A brief overview and critique of the most recent results further identified two sources that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria (i.e., Harris, 2017; Mears and Siennick, 2016). Identifying keywords from these was used to revise the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the second stage of the search process (i.e., *life course* and *parental incarceration*). In addition to searching PsycARTICLES and Google Scholar, the Boolean operator *and* was used to increase precision (i.e., *parental incarceration AND caregivers AND children AND life course*). Revised parameters yielded 136 journal articles and one book chapter, which is a 65% reduction in results from the first stage.

### Source Selection Process

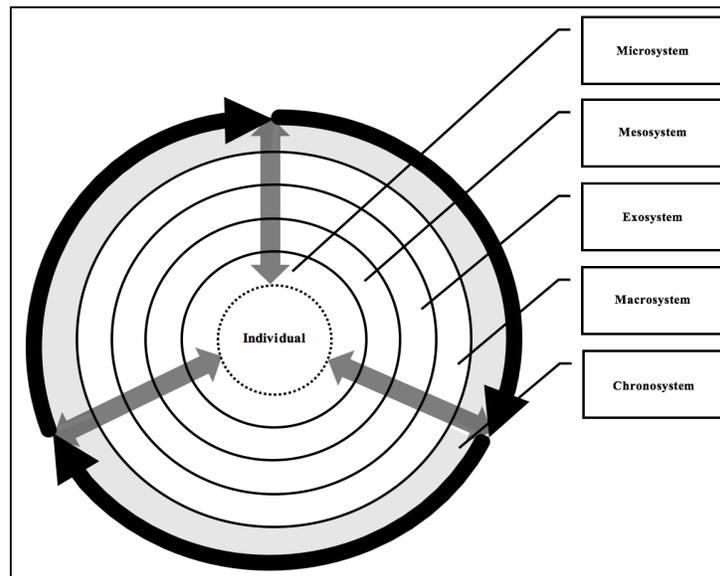
Selection of literature focused on identifying twelve empirical journal articles and books or book chapters. Each source had to describe, at least in part, the impact of parental incarceration on children. Thirteen journal articles and one book chapter previously identified were cross-referenced using the Web of Science Citation Index. An ancestry search was then conducted until saturation was reached and no new articles emerged. To maintain consistency of cross-referenced sources, only original citations were used in reviewing findings. Since selection was limited to empirical journal articles and books or book chapters – the latter of which frequently extends the former – unpublished manuscripts, conference presentations, and literature reviews were excluded from the search. Findings are presented using the bioecological model with critical results highlighted in call-out boxes.

## Theoretical Framework Informing Findings

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Previously identified sources were critically evaluated using the bioecological model. While other theoretical frameworks or models would add insight into the impact of parental incarceration on children (e.g., Double ABC-X Model Stress and Adaptation), it is beyond the scope of this brief review to include a more exhaustive list. Moreover, this model reflects the systemic impact of parental incarceration that has been widely accepted by scholars (Harris, Graham, & Carpenter, 2011).

## The Bioecological Model



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The bioecological model is a framework of human development that considers different ways people interact with the environments. This model suggests five distinct levels, or systems, where interactions take place: a) microsystem, b) mesosystem, c) macrosystem, d) exosystem, and e) chronosystem. There are two main theoretical propositions to consider. According to the first proposition, development is a reciprocal and increasingly complex process defined by interaction between an individual and his or her immediate environment. This proposition considers that "individual living organisms whose biopsychological characteristics, both as a species and as individuals, have as much to do with their development as do the environments in which they live their lives." (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 623). The second proposition states that the biopsychological characteristics of an individual influence the interactions with his or her environment. In other words, personal characteristics play an important role in how an individual interacts with the people, places, and events that surround them. This puts the individual at the center of their environment.

*Parental incarceration has countless implications for children. It interrupts their developmental trajectory through biological and psychological processes that manifest as mental health problems while increasing their risk for suicidal ideation.*

## Individual

The individual ecology encompasses a person's biopsychological characteristics (i.e., biological and psychological factors). Children of incarcerated caregivers experience challenges that make it difficult for them to achieve important developmental milestones. In other words, they shift focus from mastering language and managing emotions to surviving.

Using secondary data from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, Merrick et al. (2017) examined the impact of traumatic experiences in childhood on mental health outcomes in adulthood. They found that parental incarceration was a strong predictor of depressed affect in adulthood (i.e., people who experience depressed affect describe feeling sad, anxious or empty, and worthless). Sachs-Ericsson et al. (2016) also examined the impact of traumatic childhood experiences, including parental incarceration, in adults. They found that traumatic experiences during childhood impact: a) biological, b) psychiatric and health, and c) psycho-social processes. Biological processes include decreased emotional self-regulation and, as a result thereof, higher risk for suicidal ideation. Psychiatric and health processes include several neuropsychiatric disorders such as personality disorders (e.g., bipolar personality disorder or borderline personality disorder) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Psychosocial processes include depression and anxiety, along with, decreased problem solving skills and ineffective coping strategies. These findings suggest incarceration of caregivers has devastating developmental implications for their children.

*Children of incarcerated caregivers are at an increased risk for a myriad of developmental problems with life-long implications. This means that punishing caregivers also inadvertently punishes their children.*

## Microsystem

This ecology is closest to the individual. It describes people and institutions (i.e., environment or context) that directly influence the person, such as family members or neighborhoods. The microsystem includes a child's family, school, peers and other components of the environment (e.g., noise). Interestingly, most research on the effects of parental incarceration focuses on the microsystem (i.e., the child's face-to-face interactions following incarceration of their caregiver). This includes the parent-child relationship before, during, and after incarceration. Absence of a parent due to incarceration has the potential to adversely affect children across different domains.



Several recent studies have demonstrated the strong relationship between parental incarceration and negative child outcomes (e.g., mental health problems, behavioral outbursts, educational inadequacies, and substance use). Davis and Schlafer (2017a) used student survey data from Minnesota and found that children of incarcerated caregivers were at greater risk for various negative mental health problems. These include, but are not limited to: a) self-injury, b) suicidal ideation or attempts, c) emotional problems, and d) behavioral problems (e.g., acting out). Other studies found that children of incarcerated caregivers display higher rates of

internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, depression, and withdrawal) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression and bullying) compared to their peers who had not experienced parental incarceration (Mears & Siennick, 2016; Turney, 2017).

According to Zeman et al. (2016), children of incarcerated caregivers are at an even higher risk for developing internalizing and externalizing behaviors if they experienced “incarceration-specific risks” (p. 1). These include witnessing their mother’s arrest, changing schools or being separated from siblings as a direct result of parental incarceration, or an absence of contact with their mother in detention. Mears and Siennick (2016) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (NLSAH) and found that parental incarceration increased the likelihood of heavy alcohol and marijuana use in young adulthood.

Similarly, Davis and Schlafer (2017b) used data from the Minnesota Student Survey and found that adolescents with incarcerated parents were more likely to report using alcohol, marijuana, tobacco products, in addition to, prescription drugs. They were also more likely, given their self-reported substance use, to meet the diagnostic criteria for abuse or dependence. These findings complement the work by Robillard et al. (2016) who interviewed children of incarcerated mothers and their caregivers. Despite a relatively small sample of 13 participants, they found that substance use was a coping mechanism for the stress associated with parental incarceration. These findings illustrate that children of incarcerated caregivers are at an elevated risk for various adverse health outcomes.

*There is a strong relationship between parental incarceration and various negative child outcomes including, but not limited to, behavioral problems, educational inadequacies, and substance use.*

## **Mesosystem**

This ecology reflects the relationship between people or institutions that are closest to an individual. In other words, it encompasses two or more microsystems, whose interactions indirectly influence the child. For example, interactions among family members and the child's school would be considered part of the mesosystem. Robillard et al. (2016) found that when conflict was present in the relationship between an incarcerated parent and their child's primary caregiver, contact (e.g. visits, phone calls, and written communication) was decreased. Similarly, Harris (2017) found that many incarcerated women had histories of abuse and neglect as children, and that in some cases their former abusers were now the primary caregiver for their child. These intergenerational experiences of conflict, abuse, and trauma have the potential to negatively affect children. The mental health of the child's primary caregiver also matters. Chui (2016) interviewed 54 female caregivers of children with incarcerated fathers in Hong Kong. More than half of the women interviewed met criteria for depression. Importantly, higher levels of perceived stress and depression among caregivers were associated with children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

*Children may not be able, for a myriad of reasons, to visit their incarcerated caregiver. Combined with unclear visitation policies, this frequently leads to a stressful experience.*

## **Exosystem**

This ecology reflects the environmental contexts that indirectly influence the individual. In other words, connections between an environment in which an individual is directly connected and an environment where they are not. For example, a parent's employment status or workplace experiences would be considered part of the child's exosystem. Several factors at this level influence, and are influenced by, parental incarceration. It is important to briefly introduce attachment and its role in child development before moving forward. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) describes the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Perhaps the most important tenet of this theory is that the parent-child relationship is vital to children's healthy psychological and emotional development.

The underlying premise is that sensitive and responsive parents enable children to self-regulate their emotions. In contrast, children of insensitive and unresponsive parents become unable to self-regulate as adults. They view themselves as unworthy, seek less intimacy, and suppress their feelings.

Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2017) examined attachment-related behavior and emotion of 75 children during their visit with incarcerated caregivers by observing visits and collecting self-report measures. Around 75% (i.e., 56 children) of these children witnessed their parent, primarily a father, being arrested. Of those, 59% displayed extreme distress (i.e., increased breathing and heart rate, change in color, and grunting) during their caregiver's arrest. Younger children displayed more distress than their older counterparts. Around 37% of children visited their father in prison, three of whom were accompanied by their mother. However, wait times before visits ranged between 0 and 65 minutes with an average of 14 minutes. It is noteworthy that averages, whether wait times or other estimates, are offset by extremes. Visits lasted between 12 and 65 minutes with an average of 31 minutes. Around 85% of visits were also no-contact, which was stressful for children (i.e., they were more anxious than children during contact visits).

*Children of incarcerated caregivers are at an increased risk for substance use (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, or prescription drugs) as young adults.*

## Macrosystem

This ecology describes the culture and sociopolitical climate, including growing rates of incarceration in the United States. It also includes laws and policies that affect individuals and their families. Children of incarcerated caregivers, the caregiver, and his or her partner are all influenced by these broader contexts. The macrosystem evolves over time because each generation influences change. Differences in visitation policies (i.e., county, state, and federal facilities) intersect with not only the incarcerated caregiver but also child welfare agencies.



According to Glaze and Maruschak (2008), almost 11% of mothers and 3% of fathers had a child placed in foster care after being incarcerated. Wakefield, Lee, and Wildeman (2016) conducted a comprehensive literature review on the impact of parental incarceration on families. In terms of the macrosystem, they argue that *Get Tough on Crime* policies and practices led to an unprecedented increase in jail and prison populations. It is important to note that extreme variations in policy differences – both at the state and federal level – complicate evaluating what led to this *prison boom*. This includes, but is not limited to, the ability of researchers to determine the effects of parental incarceration on children. To that end, Wakefield et al. (2016) emphasize the need for a more holistic approach to understanding the impact of incarceration on families.

They also note the importance of evaluating differences in the effect of interaction between types of criminal justice and children. Taken together, this may provide additional insight into policy-oriented solutions to mass incarceration. Recent criminal justice reform, which is considered low hanging fruit (i.e., easily accessible) due to its focus on low level and non-violent offenders, represents only a small fraction of state prisoners. Wildeman et al. (2016) make three suggestions to address these discrepancies: a) shortened sentences for caregivers given the impact of incarceration on children, b) considering and justifying reasons for punishment rather than just the method (i.e., incarceration), and c) proposing rehabilitation of a convicted caregiver in lieu of incarceration.

*Given the sociopolitical climate and lack of reform, attorneys are advised to suggest rehabilitation programs as an alternative to incarceration for convicted caregivers. This is not only beneficial to the judicial system but also to the caregiver and his or her children.*

## **Chronosystem**

This ecology reflects environmental patterns, transitions, and sociocultural events. It encompasses age or developmental level, changes in living accommodations, and release or re-incarceration of a caregiver. Incarceration of a caregiver has been described as a critical turning point in children's lives. Trotter, Flynn, and Baidawi (2017) evaluated the impact of childcare disruption in a sample of 151 incarcerated Australian parents with 437 children. Although this study did not occur in the United States, a fact that is not unique to the vast majority of similar research, several interesting findings emerged. Most parents (67%) did not discuss or even take into account making childcare arrangements during their arrest and subsequent imprisonment.

Similarly, less than half the parents (34%) were involved in post-release childcare planning. But their children were less likely to move, and thereby be uprooted, when officials (e.g., police officers, lawyers, and judges) inquired about their wellbeing. These findings reflect the value of taking into consideration the family during sentencing rather than just focusing on the individual.

*Asking about the wellbeing of an incarcerated caregiver's children is useful. It conveys that the judicial system, or any other branch of the government, is interested. This creates an otherwise non-existent dialogue through which mutual understanding can be reached.*

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## Conclusion

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The studies presented in this report illustrate the devastating effects of parental incarceration on children, impacting their health and development in lasting ways. The bioecological model provides a useful framework for understanding the complex and systemic nature of these impacts. The decision to incarcerate a parent has reverberating effects, putting children and families at a higher risk for a variety of negative outcomes. Given that more than 5 million children have experienced the incarceration of a parent at some point in their life, this represents a significant population at risk. Now, more than ever, it is important to consider sentencing reforms, rehabilitation programs, and other alternatives to incarceration.

## Key Principles

✓	Understanding the experience of incarcerated caregivers, along with the effects of incarceration on children, requires taking into account collective experiences.
✓	Despite considerable research on the devastating effects of parental incarceration, each child's experience will vary depending on contextual (i.e., environmental) factors.
✓	Families of incarcerated caregivers often live in poverty, which exacerbates existing vulnerabilities.
✓	Because the mother is likely to assume the primary caregiver role, parental incarceration impacts the entire family structure.
✓	Families, primarily women and children, are likely to experience crushing emotional turmoil due to stigma associated with incarceration of a caregiver.
✓	Parental incarceration interrupts children's developmental trajectory, which frequently leads to ineffective coping strategies and substance use or abuse (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, or prescription drugs).
✓	Parental incarceration has been classified as a traumatic event for children but a child's response will vary depending on numerous factors such as age and access to resources.
✓	Instability and uncertainty following parental incarceration is a common experience for children irrespective of differences such as access to resources or developmental level.
✓	Children experience considerable worry and stress over the outcome of a case against their parent even if they are unable to verbalize it.
✓	After sentencing and incarceration, children experience overwhelming feelings of anxiety over separation.
✓	Internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing (e.g., physical aggression and disobedience) are also common experiences for children following parental incarceration.
✓	Children also experience anxiety and worry visiting their caregiver in jail or prison. Reasons include, but are not limited to, unclear visitation policies and travel time.

## Additional Resources and Further Reading

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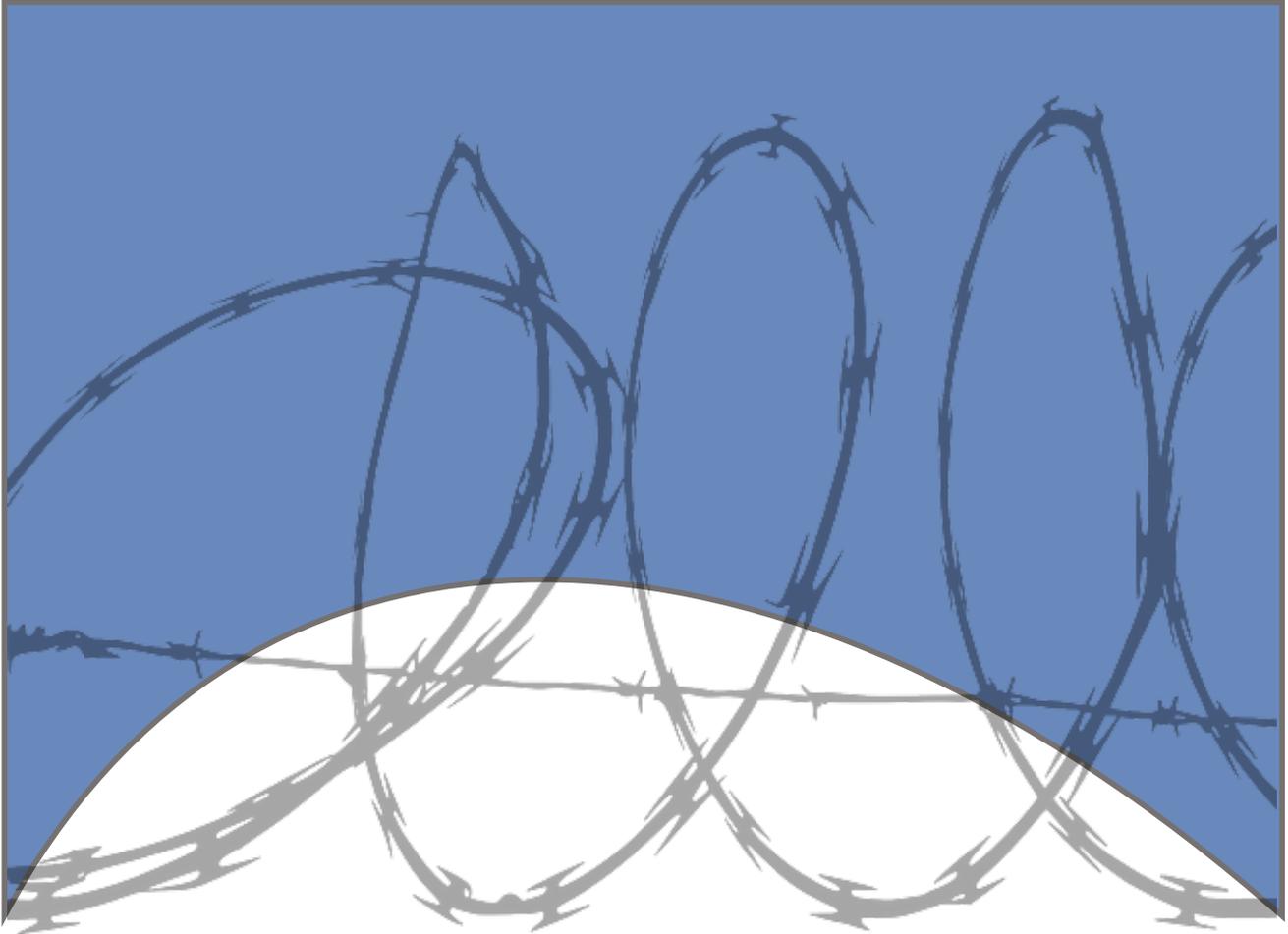
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