

Opinion: Over-incarceration crosses political, demographic lines



As we head into the holiday season, Americans should be looking for areas of agreement and things that bring us all together. Regardless of how big political disagreements may seem, there are issues that transcend political lines, and criminal justice reform is one of those issues. I know from personal experience that nothing compares to the struggle of seeing that while the holidays are a joy for so many, they can also be a reminder for others of those unable to join them this holiday season because of a criminal justice system that overincarcerates.

One out of every two adults has had an immediate family member pass through the justice system, regardless of political affiliation and demographics. This is just one of the many revelations to come out of a recently released report, 'Every Second - The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America's Families', which surveyed thousands of Americans and found that 43 percent of Republicans and 45 percent of Democrats have known a parent, child, spouse, or sibling who was incarcerated.

This report from FWD.us and Cornell University also found that 43 percent of Protestants and 42 percent of Catholics shared the same experience. Moreover, the likelihood of living through an immediate family member's time in prison is the same in the South and in the West, with approximately 49 percent of all adults having shared such an experience. We now know that time spent in our justice system is more universal than we might have expected.

In 2012, my son Daniel was sentenced to 15 years in a medium-security prison. Daniel fell into an all-too-common spiral of drug addiction due to a criminal justice system more focused on punishment than rehabilitation. I am fortunate that my son has been released from prison and that we'll be spending Christmas together for the first time in six years. But ultimately, I know Daniel's experience with the criminal justice system is not unique.

When my son was incarcerated, I founded the National Incarceration Association which brought me into contact with people who knew exactly what I had gone through on a very personal level. They may not “look” like my son or I, vote like us, or attend the same church as us, but they know what my family went through while my son served his time. Like my family, they were amongst the one in four adults who had a sibling put in prison, one in five adults who had a parent in prison, one in seven with a husband or wife in prison, and one in eight with a child in prison.

FWD.us’ report underscores how many American families across all walks of life are caught up in the justice system. When our friends, family members, and loved ones are incarcerated, it impacts our health, our spending, and it definitely disrupts our families. We need a criminal justice system that rehabilitates criminals and sets them up for success once they are released. But we also need to support the families of these prisoners so they don’t enter the criminal justice system, too. Incarcerating anyone makes their families more prone to divorce, homelessness, and drug abuse.

This Christmas season, we have been given a renewed sense of purpose. We can come together in agreement that it’s not just us or them, but every cross-section of American society that has come into contact with incarceration, whether by a little or by a lot. We can agree that all families who come into contact with incarceration, regardless of their wealth, color, or political stance, deserve the chance to come out of it better.

This Christmas, I’m excited to continue what we have started here in our great state and for all the opportunity I have been given. Thanks to Gov. Nathan Deal, Georgia has made great strides in reforming our criminal justice system, but there is still a lot of work to do. In the new year, I hope new Gov. Brian Kemp will pick up the mantle from Gov. Deal and continue to make Georgia a model for other states to emulate.

Kate Boccia, of Alpharetta, is founder and CEO of The National Incarceration Association.