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NEW REPORT REVEALS THE DEVASTATING FINANCIAL BURDENS PLACED ON WOMEN WITH INCARCERATED LOVED ONES

Women and families bear the brunt of the costs of their incarcerated loved ones.

KEY DATA:

- **Women:** made up more than 80% of family members primarily responsible for covering court-related costs and the average family paid over \$13,000
- **Women:** made up almost 90% of family members responsible for call and visitation costs, and more than a third of families went into debt to cover those costs
- **Families:** had difficulty meeting basic needs as a result of a loved one's conviction and incarceration

September 15th, 2015: Oakland, Calif. — [*Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*](#), a new report from The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, and Research Action Design in collaboration with Essie Justice Group and other community organizations, reveals that women bear the brunt of the costs of their incarcerated loved ones.

Researchers interviewed nearly 1,500 formerly incarcerated people, their family members, and employers on the impacts of incarceration. The report found that families struggled to cover basic expenses like rent and food, but endured these sacrifices because failure to pay fees and fines can send loved ones back to prison or jail.

Each year, the United States spends \$80 billion to incarcerate more than 2.4 million people. When individuals are locked up, families and communities are broken apart, leaving women with incarcerated loved ones struggling to meet economic burdens often feeling isolated and alone. The report found that financial burdens were found to disproportionately fall to women in the family who also had children living at home. Almost half of the family members primarily responsible for paying court-related costs were mothers, and one in ten were grandmothers.

The report reinforces the stories of women like Essie Justice Member Shamika Wilson, who is working towards a Master's Degree in Education at San Francisco State University, while supporting her family during her husband's incarceration.

"I feel like I've been locked up along with my husband for the past 30 years," said

Wilson. “I work day in and day out to support my husband and to keep my family from falling within the same cycles of abuse, poverty, and negativity that have loomed so heavily over our lives,” said Wilson. “I return home to more than \$45,000 worth of college loans, court fees, and seemingly unnecessary fines, on top of rent to pay and children to support.”

Wilson, who participated in Essie’s San Francisco 2015 program – which through a 9-week curriculum provides opportunities for women to foster support, resources, and advocacy skills to break the cycle of incarceration - says that support has been key to empowering her and others to call for change: “Essie connects me to powerful women like me, and together, we advocate for ourselves and for our loved ones. Together we aim to change the way people think about what it means to have an incarcerated loved one. I am not a prison wife, I am not married to the prison; I’m married to someone who is in prison. I am educated. I am a mother, a friend, an aunt, and a community leader.”

“Our participation in this study was motivated by the desire to see stories like Shamika’s brought to light.” Says Gina Clayton, Founder and Executive Director of Essie Justice Group. “For too long the efforts of women with incarcerated loved ones have been overlooked. We believe mass incarceration is a woman’s rights issue and that it is unacceptable that mothers like Shamika and millions more women are left paying the bills for years of failed social criminal justice policy. We are proud to be launching a report that represents such an important step towards an end in the isolation and invisibility of women with incarcerated loved ones.”

FAMILY-CENTERED SOLUTIONS

The situation may seem dire, but Essie along with other community organizations, are working on helping families get back on their feet. *Who Pays?* suggests three critical and achievable family-centered reforms. Policy changes like these coupled with community based, women-inclusive groups like Essie, can help achieve the safe communities we all want.

- **Restructure sentences** to focus more on accountability and safety, rather than just punishment, thereby saving funds that can be shifted to programs and services proven to reduce crime and enable families to help their loved ones stay out of prison or jail.
- **Remove barriers** so people with past convictions have a fair shot at obtaining economic opportunities to work and support themselves and their families.
- **Restore opportunities** so people who have completed their sentences can secure good jobs and housing. Savings from criminal justice reforms should be invested in job training and subsidized employment services.

“The answer lies with adopting policies that come directly from communities hardest hit. Ask me what my kids really need, and I’ll tell you. My kids need police that protect them, schools that prepare them, and a justice system that doesn’t lock up so many of our loved ones, especially not for so so long,” said Anita Wills, an Essie member who

became caretaker for her grandson when her son was sentenced to 66 years in prison. “Our loved ones should not be sent to prisons hundreds of miles away. The cost of calling and visiting makes it impossible to stay connected. The state is engaging in punishing families along with the person who is imprisoned.”

Essie Justice Group members featured in the *Who Pays* report and our Executive Director & Founder Gina Clayton are available for interviews. To download a copy of the full report visit WhoPaysReport.org.

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Essie Justice Group harnesses the collective power of women with incarcerated loved ones because doing so will lead to a safer society and the empowerment of women from traditionally marginalized communities. Our dream is to turn pain to power for the millions who live silently struggling beneath the stigma and sadness of a loved one's incarceration. Using an innovative curriculum designed by and for women, we seed groups for women to give and receive support and to access their collective power as caretakers, leaders, and advocates. Our curriculum focuses on trauma healing, managing money through crisis, and advocacy. Contact us, if you are interested in helping us start a loving and powerful group for women in your community. For more info visit: <http://www.essiejusticegroup.org/> Like us [Facebook](#) Follow us [@Essie4Justice](#)

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights advances racial and economic justice to ensure dignity and opportunity for low-income people and people of color. We are building a people-powered movement to end mass incarceration, criminalization, and state violence by moving resources and funding away from prisons and punishment and toward family-driven solutions that improve public health, safety, and prosperity for all communities. For more info visit: <http://www.EllaBakerCenter.org>.

Forward Together builds relationships across lines of race, gender, and sexuality to connect marginalized people and catalyze social change. Our work influences culture and policy to ensure that every person, family and community has the power and resources they need to reach their full potential. For more info visit: www.ForwardTogether.org and www.StrongFamiliesMovement.org.

For comment on the report from Essie Executive Director & Founder Gina Clayton, one of Essie’s members, or collaborating organizations please contact us.

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