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Keep Families Together: An Anarchist Christmas Message

Nathan Goodman

December 25, 2012

Around this time of year, we all hear a lot about the importance of family. Some people dread awkward encounters with relatives, while others cherish the opportunity to spend time with those they love most. Whatever your feelings about family gatherings, however, you would probably be appalled if the government used force to prohibit you from seeing your family this Christmas.

For many people, however, this is not simply a horrifying holiday hypothetical; it's a cruel reality. The drug war has given us an America that locks more human beings in cages than any other country on Earth. This has had devastating impacts for families. According to Michelle Alexander, the US government has locked up so many black fathers that, "A black child born today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child born during slavery."

While Michelle Alexander primarily focuses on the mass incarceration of black fathers, American prisons also lock up mothers, with devastating consequences for their children. According to Victoria Law, "62% of women in state prisons and 56% of women in federal prison reported being mothers of minor children." Many of

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Retrieved on November 20 2025 from
<https://c4ss.org/content/15748>

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them are single mothers, meaning that their children go into foster care rather than staying with family members. Women are often incarcerated far from their children, making visits difficult. And even when visits are logistically possible, prison administrators have control over whether these visits are permitted. Law writes that prison authorities “use their control over visits to punish prisoners who challenge existing prison conditions.” This can be used to deter prisoners from challenging serious human rights violations. For example, Stacy Barker was barred from receiving visitors after she successfully sued the Michigan Department of Corrections for sexual abuse.

Mandatory minimum sentences can further exacerbate mass incarceration’s impact on families. A recent article in the New York Times explains how Stephanie George, a single mother, is currently serving a sentence of life without parole for playing merely a minor role in drug dealing. While the judge in her case acknowledged that sentencing her to life imprisonment was inappropriate and unjust, mandatory minimum sentencing laws demanded such a sentence given the quantity of drugs Ms. George was convicted of being involved in selling. This is the reality of mass incarceration: Mothers are separated from their children for life, simply for playing a minor role in drug dealing operations. The majority of incarcerated women are behind bars for non-violent offenses.

And mass incarceration isn’t the only form of state violence that breaks up families. Deportations steal immigrants away from their families, forcing them into abusive detention centers before banishing them from the country where they’ve worked to build a home. A recent report from ColorLines found over 200,000 deportations of parents with US citizen children over a two year period. And many of these parents never committed a serious crime. According to ColorLines, “nearly 40 percent of deportees with convictions were charged with the lowest level crimes, including driving offenses.”

Mass incarceration and mass deportation are not separate policies that both happen to destroy families. Rather, they are two different facets of the prison industrial complex. The same corporations that operate prisons for profit, such as Corrections Corporation of America, GEO Group, and Management and Training Corporation, also profit by running immigration detention centers. These companies back politicians that support authoritarian laws on both immigration and criminal justice issues. When people of color have their families violently broken apart by the state, the prison industrial complex profits.

This Christmas, I urge you to keep families together. I urge you to organize against the prison industrial complex and the state apparatus that have broken so many families apart.