

**WHEN ARE YOU COMING HOME: AN
EXPLORATORY ESSAY CONFRONTING THE
ISSUES INVOLVING CHILDREN WITH
INCARCERATED PARENTS AND HOW TO
BREAK THE CYCLE**

*Dominique Jones**

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I. INTRODUCTION

*Born in the ghetto raised in the hood but unless you've lived it
yourself, it just can't be understood. – Bun B.*

As a child, my mother would stand on the porch of the third-floor projects in the St. Bernard Housing Development and scream my name when it was time to come inside. Worried about what was waiting in the hallways leading to our apartment, she would meet me half way to ensure my safety. You see, trauma was normal growing up, but the hardest part was finding the best way to deal with it.

* Dominique Jones is native of New Orleans and a graduate of Warren Easton Senior High School. She serves as Executive Assistant to the Chief District Defender of the Orleans Public Defenders Office. In addition to providing support to the Chief, she also serves as the office generalist by supporting the human resource and communications departments. Within her first six months as the executive assistant, Ms. Jones assisted in coordinating the office's first annual Rally for Equal Justice, which was broadcast across the city. She continues to provide outreach within her community by organizing public speaking events for public defenders at local high schools and career events. Ms. Jones advocates for children of incarcerated parents by serving as a mentor with Volunteers of America. She received her undergraduate degree in Criminal Justice from Alabama State University in 2004, and she is currently pursuing her Master's in Human Resources at Louisiana State University.

This November, I'll be thirty-five years old. To some, it is a time to celebrate, but for me, it is the time I fight to hold back tears because it means another year my dad has been incarcerated. For thirty-five years, I have been denied the opportunity to wake up and say, "Good morning, Daddy," and "Have a great day." Instead, I have repeatedly heard, "You have a collect call from an inmate at a Louisiana State Prison." I have spent my life with my dad behind bars, trying to raise me as if he were present in my life. I cannot tell you what it is like to have dinner with my dad or to attend an event with him. I was never afforded that opportunity.

These are my words and my thoughts on breaking the cycle that children of incarcerated parents often face in New Orleans and how it affected me personally. In addition, this essay will argue for the critical role city and state officials, along with community leaders, have in providing solutions to end the trauma that children with incarcerated parents face. More importantly, this essay provides guidance on how to break the cycle of broken families in New Orleans.

II. COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The vast majority of kids from my neighborhood (the St. Bernard housing projects, hereinafter referred to as "the hood") suffered a tremendous amount of setbacks and failures throughout their lives. The daily gunshots, fights, broken promises, and endless thoughts of hope were all part of a daily routine in the hood. The worst thing is that this all seemed normal growing up. I often find myself lacking empathy for those who grew up in pristine environments because their struggles do not compare to mine. Growing up surrounded by drugs, violence, and broken families was our norm. Some only see the façade of a beautiful city, but just past this façade, cruel realities are forever altering the lives of local kids in New Orleans.

Many of my childhood friends grew up in a single-parent home or with grandparents. I grew up with my mom, step-dad, older brother, and younger sister. My dad was incarcerated before I was born. Often times, my brother would share stories with me about my dad, but I would quickly grow jealous. Growing up, my mom always told me how great my dad was and that I should be proud regardless of his situation. I could not understand it, though. As a child, how was I supposed to be proud to have a dad behind bars? No way!

Despite my dad's criminal past, which caused him to be taken out of our lives, he was still a provider and a caregiver. Every day I wondered how people who knew my dad, or knew of him, would think of me. People would look at me and say, "Hey, I know your dad," but I was frightened of what they could possibly say next. Can you imagine how tough I had to be?

Around the age of eight or nine years old, I remember going through a phase of embarrassment. When someone who did not know me asked, "Where's your dad?" my response would be, "He lives out of town." Man, that was rough! There were so many nights I cried myself to sleep because I needed my dad. I was tired of not being able to hug my dad, laugh with my dad, or enjoy an outing with him on my own terms. I was deprived, and no city, state, or local official even cared.

During visits, I would always ask my dad when he was coming home. He would always say, "Soon baby, real soon." Those words generated so much excitement and hope. For years, I would ask that same question and always get the same answer, leaving me humiliated and broken once again from unfulfilled promises. I believed everything my daddy told me. Nothing, and no one, could change my perception of my daddy. To deal with the embarrassment, I spent most of my time with my childhood friends and my therapy of choice: track and field.

Everyone knows that the best way to survive in the hood is to find a hobby and good level-headed friends. I was lucky to have both. My friends and I were always together. We attended the same schools up until high school, but we still managed to always connect with each other. My girls kept a smile on my face and brought laughter to my soul. We each had our own levels of trauma, which we thought were ordinary and normal. I remember one of my friends telling me, in a normal tone of voice, "Bruh, I was walking upstairs to go inside and a dead man was in the hallway!" We were *kids!* What were we supposed to say to each other? To be quite honest, we learned to mask our feelings and rarely discussed them. No one questioned us. No one asked us or our family if we were okay. We simply moved on. When we were together, we felt normal. To each of us, we mattered.

What we saw on a daily basis as children should be considered torture. How is it okay for children to witness people being shot? Better yet, we even watched drug addicts shooting dope in the hallway leading to my third-floor apartment. That *alone* is trauma. A child should not have to wake up on

Christmas day, look out her window, and see a dead body.

There is no one in the world that can tell you how hard it is growing up in the hood of New Orleans unless they have lived through it. I remember sitting outside with my friends when a guy walked past us and said, “Y’all go inside, and don’t come back out.” We immediately ran upstairs. Minutes later we heard the sound of a Glock 45 right outside of the window.

III. DEALING WITH REALITY

For fifteen years my grandparents would bring me to Angola State Penitentiary twice a month. We would take the RTA bus to the meetup spot for the charter bus that transported families to and from Angola. I remember the bus ride lasting about three hours. It reeked of mothballs. But all of this was fine because my visits with my dad were amazing, and I absolutely adored my paternal grandparents. My grandfather was my rock. He was the closest connection to my dad. In my grandparents’ home, it was all about love and enjoying each other’s company; that is, until he passed away when I was sixteen. I was left all alone, broken, and stranded.

Angola’s visiting room was always filled with families anxious to see their loved ones while prison guards stood by micromanaging. As a kid, I remember asking my dad why all the men in jail looked like him? His response was, “Baby, the world is afraid of men who look like me,” and then he gently kissed my forehead. This stuck with me, and its meaning is now apparent. Our conversations were based on building my intelligence and character. Daddy defined a strong virtuous woman as one who was intelligent, attractive, and physically fit with a high level of aggression and confidence. With the help of my parents and stepdad, they were able to instill that definition deep within me.

Partly due to the lack of interventions from school counselors during this critical phase of my life, I developed emotional and cognitive issues. Naturally, I became belligerent. The fighting in high school coupled with images of dead bodies, drugs, guns, and the huge disconnect from my dad inhibited my ability to produce empathy and trust. I therefore began to direct my anger and aggression towards track and field.

Running quickly became therapeutic for me. I was truly talented! I won every local track meet or I would set a new meet record. The people I grew up with, along with my family, would

all attend my competitions. More importantly, daddy kept every one of my newspaper articles. It was amazing to hear him coach me over the phone. With the help of my dad and my coaches, I became the fastest girl in the 400-meter dash in the entire state of Louisiana. This accomplishment was huge for my dad and me. This was an exciting victory, and I wanted to share my excitement with my dad in person. All of our hard work and consistent motivation had paid off. During our phone call after my victory, I asked him once again to tell me when he would come home. Once again, he gave me the same response, but this time it was not good enough. Eventually, my visits to Angola came to an end. My grandmother, after the death of my grandfather, was unable to take on the role alone, and I could no longer accept the same response from my dad.

IV. RESOLVING THE PROBLEM

To understand how to help children with incarcerated parents, state and local officials should *listen to us*. We each have a different story to tell. Bringing in a stranger that knows nothing about our city, schools, and local communities will not help. We truly believe in the saying, “it takes a village,” but you have to study the background of that village first. We are more likely to listen to someone that we know has successfully made it out of the hood than a complete stranger. For example, through the Volunteers of America, mentees are placed with mentors who match their background. I currently mentor two teenage girls whose dad is incarcerated at the same prison as my dad. I take time to work with them on developing life and leadership skills and, more importantly, I teach them advocacy.

Every school in New Orleans should institute a curriculum that teaches kids how to develop life and leadership skills early on and continue throughout high school. From then on, the goal should be to teach students and their families how to sustain economic independence while developing leadership competencies. Through this path, families are given multiple resources to assist in nurturing their competencies and developing the student’s administrative, conceptual, and interpersonal skills. Providing families with an opportunity to grow within their community, while having a parent that is incarcerated, not only generates strength within the community, but implants hope in its members.

One of the most important aspects of life is creating

memories with your family. As a thirty-five-year-old woman, I have never enjoyed breakfast with my dad. My dad has never enjoyed a graduation or a victory dance after winning a race. Still, today, he remains behind bars as many other parents do, while their kids become statistics. There are so many kids growing up in New Orleans with a parent that is incarcerated. Some of us are able to succeed, others are not so lucky. As a graduate of Alabama State University and a candidate for Louisiana State University's Master's program, I pledge to advocate for all kids with incarcerated parents. With the help of my village, I was able to overcome obstacles and excel beyond my imagination. Be a part of their village and help break the cycle. We simply want a fair chance at life.