

Growing Pains: The Complicated Lives of Children with Incarcerated Parents

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Kaylah Napolitano, 21, born, raised, and still living in Bay Shore, New York says,
“When I was around 5, I watched my dad get arrested, right in front of me.”

This is one of Kaylah's earliest memories of her dad getting in trouble with the law. It started as any other day: 5-year-old Kaylah is sitting on the living room couch, still in her pajamas, watching cartoons, probably "SpongeBob," she says. Also in the house is her mom Catherine Napolitano (now Catherine Harrison), her dad Kerry Lester, and her 7-year-old brother Vaughan. Suddenly, three local police officers show up in front of the house and start banging on the front door. Kaylah's mother answers the door and steps outside with the cops. Confused and alarmed, Kaylah tries to come out to see what is going on, but her mom frantically tells her, "No, no! Don't come out here! Stay inside with Vaughan." Kaylah asks her mom what is going on and her mom responds, "Nothing, Kaylah! I'm just going out to talk to them, everything's fine."

Kaylah is nervous, standing with bare feet on the cold, wooden, living room floor. She has no idea that her dad has committed a crime and is about to be taken to jail. She has only known her dad to be a funny, fun, and involved parent, so she feels beyond confused and unsure. Kaylah's grandmother Rosemarie, who lives with them, pulls up in her car as this is going on and urges Kaylah and her brother to get in the car with her. As Rosemarie is getting ready to drive away, Kaylah's last image of her father is from the back of her grandmother's car watching her dad arguing back and forth with the police.

"It never escalated into anything crazier than, like, a heated discussion, but it of course ended with them taking my dad away," Kaylah recalls. "It was really chaotic because so much was happening at once. My grandma was scooping us up in the car, my dad going back and forth with the cops, and the whole time I have no idea what is going on. I'm thinking, What do they want with my dad anyway?"

More than 15 years later, Kaylah can still recall that morning on Long Island. "When all this happened, I felt nervous because it was a tense situation, but I was also mostly confused," she says. "I didn't put two and two together that my dad was getting arrested because he did

something wrong, because, well, I was only 5 and no one told me. Mostly I was just looking at the cops and I didn't understand who these people were, and why don't they understand he has a family, and he's my dad so they can't just take him and do whatever they want."

Kaylah, who identifies as mixed race or Black, with a white mother, and an African American father, has always been very close with her family. She was especially close with her father as a young girl, which is why her dad being in jail for six months when she was 5, and then in prison for drug possession and dealing for a year and a half, when Kaylah was 8, complicated her young life. It has shaped her and continues to impact her life to this day, as she navigates through young adulthood.

As of 2019, the American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in prison, according to prisonpolicy.org, which is the most of any country in the world by far. The U.S. incarceration rate has grown rapidly and consistently in the last three decades; it has nearly tripled since 1970. Researchers attribute 80–85% of the growth to sentencing policy changes, such as locking up more nonviolent offenders for drug and property offenses, rather than to increases in illegal behavior, according to the Institute for Research on Poverty.

An example of diplomatic action that has been taken that has resulted in more people being in prison is the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 that current President-elect Joe Biden helped fashion when he was a member of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee and that overhauled the country's crime laws. "The law imposed tougher prison sentences at the federal level and encouraged states to do the same. It provided funds for states to build more

prisons, aimed to fund 100,000 more cops, and backed grant programs that encouraged police officers to carry out more drug-related arrests — an escalation of the war on drugs,” according to Vox.

Mothers and fathers are incarcerated every day in this country; Kaylah Napolitano is one of millions of children left behind with the challenges and hardships of navigating the world with a parent behind bars. In the United States, 2.7 million children currently have a parent in jail or in prison, according to the independent non-profit organization Pew Charitable Trusts. That’s 1 in 28 kids. Just like abuse, divorce, or trauma, parental incarceration is considered an adverse childhood experience that can affect a child long after a parent returns home from prison. Children of incarcerated parents are also more likely to have witnessed violence in their communities or, more directly in their homes, and/or been exposed to drug and alcohol abuse.

Emily Polstein is a social worker who currently works for HIAS Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia-based non-profit organization that assists refugee and immigrant families. She is a case worker who works with families and children navigating the legal system and often getting separated because the parents are being detained. In 2019, during her last year of graduate school at The University of Pennsylvania, as part of her field placement, Polstein worked with incarcerated individuals from all age groups. Polstein worked with those as young as teenagers who were tried as adults and in adult jail, to adults who have kids themselves.

Polstein talks about some of the issues that children with an incarcerated parent deal with. “So many people are in and out of the prison system in a way where they unfortunately can’t be super consistent in their children's lives and that can create a lot of attachment problems with kids,” she says. “They get used to the fact that they can’t count on a parent being around.” She gives an example of a real life on-the-job experience that she’s encountered: “One of my clients when he came home from being in jail for about a year, his kids wouldn’t go to sleep because

they were scared that what if when they went to sleep he wouldn't be there anymore again." She says in this case the child was just 4.

The experience of being a child with an incarcerated parent is extremely isolating and lonely due to the stigma and shame felt from their peers and teachers. Children with incarcerated parents deal with more emotional trauma and often have a harder time in school, according to the nonprofit organization Child Trends.

School troubles were certainly the case for Jeremy Estrella, now 23, who lives in Mount Vernon, New York, and grew up without his father around because his father went to prison when Jeremy was 5, and is still in prison to this day.

"It was difficult in school for me for a lot of reasons," Jeremy says. "My mom was a single mom and didn't have any money until she got her bachelor's degree, so she was working all the time and didn't have time to help me with school work. We've also lived in really rough neighborhoods and the schools were rough as well."

Jeremy was born in the Bronx, to his mother Gretel Gonzalez and his father Fernando Estrella. He identifies as Hispanic. He moved to Harlem when he was 6 with his mother, his older half-sister, Jessica Gonzalez, and his older brother, Justin Estrella. They eventually moved in 2008 to White Plains, where Jeremy attended and graduated from White Plains High School. Jeremy has always regarded his family as a family of four, not five. His dad was in his life a little bit when he was a toddler, but he doesn't remember any of that. Jeremy's dad stopped being around before he was even in kindergarten, when he was sentenced to prison for the possession and distribution of heroin.

From first to fifth grade, Jeremy went to school in Harlem. Thinking back to that time, he says, "I was always smart, and always liked to learn, and liked to please, so my grades were actually great at that time, but it was a horrible and isolating experience." Jeremy was bullied

because he was different and looked different from everyone else. “Even though I am Hispanic, I was this shrimpy, nerdy, pale kid, with glasses, who kind of looks white, and all the other kids were Black,” he says. “They picked on me because I was an easy target, I guess. I had really no friends in elementary school.” Jeremy says a good number of kids in his school had to repeat a grade at some point, so some kids were older and bigger than he was, which only added to the bullying. “I wouldn’t wish my grade school experience on anyone,” he says.

In the fifth grade, Jeremy changed school districts and went to a charter school that was a lot more strict. The student population was more well behaved, driven, and mostly all the students got good grades. Jeremy did very well at that school and was even told by educators that if he kept it up, he’d be in line for scholarships for colleges in the future.

Once he hit middle school, though, Jeremy started struggling. “Once I got to 6th grade we moved to White Plains and I got some freedom, and I just kind of abused that freedom, that power of freedom,” he says.

According to the National Education Association, children with an incarcerated parent not only struggle more in school, but children ages 6 to 11 with an incarcerated parent are on average more likely to be less engaged in school.

That is exactly what happened for Jeremy at that age. “I didn’t care, I didn’t study, or hand things in,” he says. “I was still just as smart and capable as I was when I was younger, I even had teachers tell me I was smart and could get good grades if I tried but I didn’t bother to. Not having a father around, and then having a mother that was always working, meant that neither parent was checking my book bag to make sure I did my homework, and so more and more I neglected it.”

As a teenager, Jeremy would come home to a parentless home after high school because his mom would still be at work, and Jeremy found it more appealing to pick up a controller rather than his pencil and would often play video games into the night, forgetting his school work.

Gretel Gonzalez wishes she would have given her children more attention regarding school and life in general but knows she has always done the best she can. Today, as she sits shoulder-to-shoulder with her son on the living room couch in their small, one-bedroom apartment in Mount Vernon, she looks back on those years with some regret. “There are things I missed teaching you that were my responsibility to teach you as the sole parent,” she says to Jeremy. “I should’ve been more focused on you and your brother to complete your schoolwork, and that was my mistake, but in the moment I wasn't conscious of how important that was.”

Unlike Jeremy, whose dad has been in prison for all of his life, Paul Jeanette’s dad was in prison when was young and he says they have a great father son relationship to this day. Paul, who goes by Paulie, is a 21-year-old Black man who grew up an only child in Harlem, with his parents, Charlie and Johanna. Like Kaylah and Jeremy, Paulie’s early years were affected by his father being in prison. His father was charged with manslaughter in the second degree. He served three years in prison and was paroled when Paulie was 4.

Paulie actually didn’t know that his father had a history of getting in trouble with the law when he was very young. As he got older, he became aware of the fact that his father had run-ins with the law by overhearing things his family members would say. He eventually did get confirmation by his mother that his father had a criminal record when he was 8. His dad never

directly told him what crime he was in prison for until Paulie was 17. He says the information didn't surprise him. "Based on what I heard throughout the years, I knew that he didn't always make the best decisions in his day. So when he finally told me face-to-face what his crimes were, I would describe it as turning the page to a book, like as you get older, parents tell a little bit more. All the previous details about my dad's early life I had learned slowly through the years, and this was like the final chapter and completion to his story that he finally decided to share with me."

"I mean I never really felt like they [his family] were lying or hiding anything," he says. "The thing about my family, meaning my extended family as well, is that everybody has something crazy in their past, so it was never dwelled on that my dad was in prison. And especially because I was so young when everything happened, my dad avoided talking directly to me about it very often." Paulie vividly remembers when his father told him that he had been in prison for manslaughter in the second degree. "It was a Friday evening pretty late actually, maybe a little before midnight, when I was 17," Paulie says. "He came into my room when I was chilling on my bed and just started talking, and he told me the whole story of what he was charged for and why." Paulie continues, "I'll never forget, he said he felt comfortable telling me at that point because he knew that I wasn't headed down that path and telling me wouldn't give me any ideas. He wanted to let me know as a warning that this could always happen to you if you go down the wrong path, and also just to share more of who he is with me to connect with me." Paulie remembers that moment fondly because he felt a strong connection to his father after learning this information. "From that moment on, I knew that I could say or ask my dad anything and he would be transparent with me."

Kaylah Napolitano also had no idea of her father's past. She was unaware that her father was getting arrested when she saw the cops take him away that day. She was told by her mother and grandmother that the cops just needed to talk to her dad and that's why they were taking him in. She didn't know he was going away to jail, and would be away for months, because he did something wrong and was serving his time for it. It wasn't made clear to Napolitano until years later where her dad was and why he wasn't home.

Kaylah didn't find out what had actually gone on until she was 10. She says, "He got out of prison, when he was there the second time, when I was 8 and a half , and he died when I was 10. So it wasn't until his funeral when people there came up to me and started talking about how they met my dad in prison and I, of course, thought: "Prison!?"

She left the funeral confused and for weeks afterward, kept thinking about why all those people were saying things about her dad. Kaylah's world suddenly felt very different, as if she had just put on vision goggles and could now see her world for what it actually was. She thought of all the events her father had missed, all the phone calls and, long car rides to see him, the presence of police at her house on that one scary day, and Kaylah started to wonder if her dad was indeed in prison when she was young. This suspicion was clarified for her weeks after her father's funeral. "I will never forget, a few weeks later, we were going through all his stuff, cleaning things out, and I saw the letters he'd sent to us in the original envelopes. I had seen the letters plenty of times before, but for the first time I saw that the envelopes that they were sent in said 'penitentiary' on them."

Polstein, the social worker in Philadelphia, talks about how it is not uncommon for young children to not know that their parent is incarcerated.

“One reason is if kids are really little, sometimes parents just don’t think they’ll understand,” she says. “I’ve heard parents say ‘they’re working’, or they are going somewhere to work and that’s why they’re not around. One client explained it to his kids that he ‘got sent to school.’” Polstein says it can often backfire once kids find out the truth, but parents will often lie anyway. She adds, “Reasons for not telling can be from embarrassment, but really with little kids parents don’t know how to explain what prison is and also it is hard to explain to kids that you are somewhere against your will. Parents don’t know how to explain to kids that they can’t leave and can’t come see them even though they want to.”

Today Kaylah says, “I’m definitely disappointed in both parents that they couldn’t be honest with me about who my dad actually was, and what he was doing. I think I should’ve been told and learned that what my dad was doing was bad, instead of it trying to be covered up.”

Despite this, Kaylah’s memories of her father are fond and she doesn’t view him negatively for committing crimes. She says, “He’d call a lot, so it didn’t completely feel like he wasn’t present; I just didn’t know when he’d be living with me again. Sure, he would miss a recital or play, but he would call me and listen while I told him everything about it, so I ever felt that lack of attention or any abandonment. Also, I never felt too sad about him not being there much because, luckily, my family has always filled the gaps when he wasn’t around. If he wasn’t around, we’d go to amusement parks, or my grandma, his mom, would have me over her house to hang out with her, things like that.”

Kaylah says, “I know now that everything isn’t black and white. Just because he did bad things doesn’t mean he is a bad person, in fact I know he wasn’t. I was a daddy’s girl and loved my dad. He would always play with us and play sports with us, which is actually how I got into playing basketball in school until high school.”

“There is so much this country needs to fix about the system,” she says. “I know my dad chose to do what he did, but I know in some ways he was a victim to the system.”

The issue of mass incarceration in the United States is complex and there isn't one set reason as to how it came to be. A number of historical precedents have likely contributed to the issue that causes millions to be imprisoned and leave their children behind.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, the U.S prison population began to grow in the 1970s due to the fact that politicians from both parties pushed to increase punishment policies, driven by fear and racial motives. In 1971 President Nixon declared a “war on drugs” in a speech and pushed for stricter drug laws, which resulted in a higher number of people getting convicted. President Ronald Regan continued to enforce the same tough hand on crimes, and during his presidency the prison population truly exploded. When Reagan took office in 1980, the total U.S. prison population was 329,000, and when he left office eight years later, the prison population had essentially doubled, to 627,000, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

Incarceration has hit communities of color hardest. Even though anyone of every race may abuse drugs, those who are actually charged with drug crimes are disproportionately people of color. Drugpolicy.org notes that higher rates of arrest and incarceration for these communities of mostly Blacks and Latinos are not reflective of increased prevalence of drug use, but rather of law enforcement's focus on urban areas, communities of color, and lower income communities. An example of this comes from an article by the American Civil Liberties Union on racist laws, when in 2013 the San Francisco Police Department and the Drug Enforcement Administration teamed up to go after people selling small amounts of drugs in the city's Tenderloin District. During this operation, according to the ACLU, the SFPD focused on Black people. Even though people of all races engage in the Tenderloin's drug trade, all 37 individuals federally prosecuted in the two SFPD/DEA operations were Black. In fact, one San Francisco officer working the

operation was captured on video ignoring an Asian-American person engaged in drug activity and focused on arresting a Black person instead. Another officer was heard saying “fucking BMs,” which is code for Black males, as the camera was focused on a group of Black men and women.

Criminal justice researchers note that statistics indicate the U.S justice system is inherently racist. The NAACP reports that in 2014, African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional populations; they are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites, and the imprisonment rate for African American women is two times that of white women. Unsurprisingly, that means that the prison system affects children of color at a higher rate since it is their parents getting locked up. One in nine Black children has an incarcerated parent, compared to one in 28 Latino children and one in 57 white children, according to the Drug Policy Alliance.



Kaylah with her mother and father when she is 4 years old.



Jess, Jeremy, and Justin commuting in the city. (Top)

Gretel, Jeremy and Justin cummuting in the city. (Bottom)

When Jeremy Estrella thinks about his earliest childhood memories, he can close his eyes and picture all the mornings his mom held his hand while walking him to preschool through the streets of the Bronx. He was about 5 years old, and most of his memories around this age involved his family navigating, not so easily at times, through their life with just the four of them in metropolitan New York. In Jeremy's earliest memories, his father simply doesn't exist. For Jeremy his dad was just an idea, or far away figure, rather than a person he actually knew and had any connection with. This is the reality of his world due to having a father who's been in prison for as long as he can remember.

There are only a few tangible memories he holds where he had actual communication or any glimpse of a relationship with his imprisoned dad. "When I was 6 or 7 he sent a few handwritten letters to my brother and I, and once or twice my mom made us write back to him," he says. The letters were also his first clarification as to exactly why his dad wasn't around. After receiving the letters, his mom explained to him that his dad was writing letters from prison, and he was there because he got in trouble. At 5, Jeremy was still too young to grasp exactly what that meant to him and for his future. He absorbed the information as best as he could, continuing to live with a single parent like he's always been used to.

Jeremy says he honestly doesn't remember what the letters said. He knows that his dad asked pretty general questions in the nature of: How have you been doing in school and how were the holidays? Jeremy's letters back were similar; he'd tell his dad what was going on in school or talk about how much he loved a Christmas gift he got from Santa. Even as a child, writing back to his dad felt very disconnected. "It didn't feel like when I wrote it that I was being genuine," he recalls. "It felt like I was thinking of things to say. When asked how he felt receiving the letters he says, "I felt nothing really, it was just like receiving any other mail. I've never really had any connection, or real relationship with him, because it isn't possible to with

someone like that...someone who is spending the rest of their life in prison.” Jeremy explains, “I just wrote back because my mom told me. I think I was too young, or was definitely too young to think much about it. I just wanted to go back to playing video games or whatever. It’s actually now that I’m older that I think back to doing that, and now I have more feelings about it.”

The impact on a family once the parent gets out of prison is something that the Jeanette family is all too familiar with. After being released from prison, Paulie’s dad couldn’t get a job for many years. No place would hire him because he had a criminal record. It is common for the formerly incarcerated to not be able to find work after being released. The Prison Policy Initiative used a diverse database of 5 million formerly incarcerated people living in the United States, and analyzed that formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27%. This is higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression. Furthermore, studies show that the formerly incarcerated *want* to work, but employers discriminate against those with criminal records, even if they claim not to. Although employers express willingness to hire people with criminal records, evidence shows that having a record reduces employer callback rates by 50% according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

After three years of looking for a job after he got out, Charlie Jeannette was eventually able to get a job as a custodian at Harlem Renaissance High School. Both parents struggled to make ends meet, therefore moving out of Harlem, to a better neighborhood was a wish, never a reality.

Referring to the difficulties faced when he got out of prison, Charlie Jeannette says, “Once you are released it takes a lot of years before you do actually feel like a free man. I was on parole and had to make sure I was able to meet with my parole officer, so I couldn’t be across town looking for a job if I had to meet with him.” Jeanette says, “If you gotta get to their office you gotta get to their office. You have to get travel fare, and take off from whatever you got going on.”

Polstein confirms this is a real issue. “It can take people maybe two hours each way, taking up their whole day, and there are consequences if you miss your appointment,” she says. “A lot of people may even get re incarcerated because they don’t meet all the conditions of their parole.”

Paulie always got A’s and B’s, despite his family's struggles, and found school to be easy as he got older and viewed school as something you just had to do in order to move along in life. He was also well behaved in school and the only time he got disciplined would be for occasionally talking to classmates too much. “I never really felt the urge to rebel, no,” he says. “What I did feel is the need to get ahead and survive while putting forward the best effort possible. I guess wanting to do better was my way of rebelling.”

The world that was outside the four walls of his Harlem apartment showed Paulie exactly where he didn’t want to be. “Of course I remember there was drugs all around, violence, and theft. I could name several kids from my high school who sold drugs,” he says. “I’ve walked right into the high school bathroom and seen students doing drugs and I just walked right past them to the urinal and did my business. I knew I could partake if I wanted, but I always knew where that road led to because of my parents having constantly told me.”

Today, Paul Jeannette is a junior at Purchase College studying music production. He loves composing music in his dorm room and is talented at rapping, singing, playing the piano, and guitar. He even has an R&B and electronic album out, called “Scenes,” and would love to continue making music in the future with goals to become a music producer after he graduates. Paulie admits he is lucky he made it out of Harlem and is able to go to college.

“A lot of the people who I grew up around in my neighborhood didn’t go to college or even pass high school, I credit my success to my family and myself mostly. I am the type of guy where I work hard at things I am passionate about. My parents, especially my mom, was

always strict about school and always emphasised how important it is that I value my education and take it seriously.”

He adds, “When I was young it was actually in my best interest to do my work because if I took the easy way out and slacked off I would honestly be scared to face my mom, fearing she would lecture me. It wasn’t even worth it to do badly.” He has a great relationship with his dad to this day and talks to him at least once a week.



Paulie and
his father
Charlie in
their home
in Harlem in
2016.

Jeremy, who also was raised in Harlem for about the first decade of his life, also shares how his environment around him affected him. He admits he didn't like living in Harlem and it was always his mother's goal to move them somewhere better. It wasn't an easy time for him and his family due to consistently bad living conditions in apartments as well as feeling like his neighborhood wasn't safe.

One day when Jeremy was 9, a drunk man walked into his apartment in Harlem at 2 a.m. and started loudly going through his family's things. The stranger must've gotten in because either Jeremy or his brother accidentally left the door unlocked. His mother had to wield a baseball bat and yell, "Get the hell out!" before he left.

Afterwards Gonzalez called the police, said the man was drunk and probably went into the wrong apartment by accident. The police told them to make sure they lock their doors, and that was all they did.

Jeremy says they no longer felt safe. "Safe to say, we didn't stay in that apartment long, or in Harlem in general," he says.

Jeremy was also exposed to drugs at an early age due to living in the neighborhood he did. At one of the many apartments they lived in, Jeremy could smell weed waft up through his window from the downstairs neighbors. Jeremy recalls asking his mom what that smell is and that she was not happy that her son was being exposed to such things. He says when his mother confronted the neighbors and asked them if they could smoke somewhere else because her kids upstairs could smell it, they refused, and continued to smoke weed wherever they pleased.

Gretel Gonzalez shares how tough it was for her as single mother. "It was frustrating because I realized I wasn't going to have the financial or emotional support of another person,"

she says. “I realized I was going to have to do it all on my own. The strength I had came from the love of my children and that was the only thing that carried me through some days.”

She continues, “As a family with only one parent making income, we struggled tremendously with money. We moved often because a place might get too expensive to live. My kids and I, we’ve gotten evicted for not making rent more than once, we’ve had to stay with family, we’ve been uncertain about where we are going to live more times than I’d like to even admit.”

While Paulie and Jeremy grew up sometimes feeling unsafe because of their neighborhood, Kaylah doesn’t share that same experience. She confidently says she had a happy and loving childhood despite her father’s incarceration. She was never exposed to crime or drugs in her town. Even though her father did deal drugs, she says they were never once in the house. Occasionally her parents would argue, but if it was anything related to jail or prison it must have been done discreetly because Kaylah doesn’t remember ever overhearing anything.

Kaylah has always enjoyed school and is studious. She has always gotten good grades and been well behaved. Finding out that her dad was an ex-convict only made her want to do better to not follow in her father’s footsteps.

Another experience that was different for Jeremy and Paulie than it was for Kaylah, is that Kaylah actually visited her dad while he was in prison. It is very common for children to not visit their incarcerated parent at all for many reasons.

In New York State there are family centers in seven state prisons as of 2009 according to the documentary “Echoes of Incarceration.” The family centers are play areas that don’t feel like prison. This is an extremely important amenity for children to feel a physical connection with their incarcerated parent. It is evident that such visits are beneficial for both the parent and child. Research shows kids visiting their parents helps reduce prison misconduct and recidivism.

Evidence also suggests that visits can positively affect a child's well-being and improve the chances that families will remain intact when the inmate is released, according to The Marshall Project.

Despite how important it is for kids to visit their incarcerated parent, it is not a reality for a lot of families. Many families don't have the time or money needed for travel expenses and that can make visiting impossible.

A 2015 report by Prison Policy Initiative, using data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, notes that 63 percent of people in state prisons serve their sentences in facilities more than 100 miles from home. It can be 500 miles or more, for those in federal prisons, since it is not uncommon for prisoners to be sent out of state. Due to the fact that prisons are often located in remote areas inaccessible by public transportation, private transportation services have sprung up to bridge the gap. But they can be expensive.

And there's an additional hurdle that Polstein has seen in her work with clients. "Some parents also don't want their kids to come visit them in jail," she says. "If they talk over the phone, the parent can still talk to the child, but actually having them in jail can be a very jarring experience and a lot of people don't want their kid to have that experience. Or the partner, or spouse, or kid's parent who isn't in jail may not want to bring their child to the jail to see the other parent because they find the experience really bad." She continues, "So this all just means that kids often sometimes don't see their parents at all for the time that they are in jail or prison."

Furthermore, making telephone calls to family members isn't free for prisoners. The highest cost of a 15-minute in-state call from a jail as of 2018 in New York is \$9.25, and the average is \$7.25, according to Prison Policy Initiative.

Neither Jeremy nor Paulie visited their fathers in prison. Jeremy's family didn't have the financial means to travel for a visit even if they wanted to. His father was in a prison in upstate

New York, then in an out-of-state prison years later. Jeremy's father didn't attempt to call much either. Aside from letters his father sent when Jeremy was very young, he has had absolutely no contact with his dad in over a decade. "Not having a father is something I've always been used to," says Jeremy, who trained himself to never think about his dad because it was too painful. When he was forced to he says, "I just knew like, oh, you have a father who isn't there for you." He elaborates, "It's all the little things, like even when people would talk about their dad in front of me I would feel like this emptiness or this disconnect because they can't even understand, living your life with a parent who just isn't there. For example, I do have a memory about when I had to wear a tie for a concert rehearsal. I would have to let the teacher tie it, and it's this feeling of oh, well, everyone else comes with *theirs* tied."

Jeremy said it could be challenging when thinking of what to say to peers who asked where his father was. "If anyone said 'your parents' I would just avoid it, I would say something like, 'yeah I didn't know him,' and then just make it clear I wanted to avoid it, you know change the topic," he says.

Today, Jeremy lives in Mount Vernon in an apartment with his mom. He attended the University of Albany for three semesters before failing out. He carried the same lack of effort in college that he had towards school in high school and wasn't able to keep his grades high enough to remain at the school. He regrets not taking college more seriously and wishes he would have graduated. "Ironically my last semester at Albany was the best I ever did at college, he says. "I actually started to study, hand in work, and get good grades that semester, but it was too late."

Jeremy elaborates: "I was at a disadvantage to begin with coming from a single parent home. I took out loans in my moms name and in my name just to afford school, and then wasn't doing well, just wasting money. Again I just took too much power in freedom of being able to do

whatever I wanted and so I was there to have fun and didn't, you know, focus on school. It's my own fault and I absolutely completely regret it."

Jeremy currently works full-time at CVS in Bronxville, New York as a shift supervisor. His plans and goals for the future are to continue to work and save money and hopefully get his own place. He says he would like to be able to not work for someone one day and instead work for himself. He also loves music and playing guitar and would love to make music professionally or play video games professionally one day.



Justin, Gretel, and
Jeremy at a New
Years party this
past New Years
Eve.

For Kaylah, the times she visited her father are memories that are burned into her brain. She describes how the first time went: She says she was 8 years old and it was a slightly overcast day in October when she was told by her teacher that she was getting picked up early. She says she was excited because the only other she got picked up early from school was when her parents took her to see “The Greatest Show on Earth.”. “So I was thinking this was probably something good too,” she says.

Outside in the parking lot with her brother, Kaylah’s mom said, “We are driving up to see Daddy at school.” Kaylah says she was looking forward to seeing her dad because it had been nearly two months.

They stopped at the store before heading upstate and Kaylah got to pick out whatever snacks and drinks she wanted. She got chips, a sandwich, and a Slurpee, that stained her mouth blue. The car ride, she recalls, was three hours long and boring.

Kaylah’s father was eventually escorted into the visiting room and Kaylah says she screamed in excitement while running to hug and kiss her dad. “Even though I was in a prison, I didn’t realize this and was told by my mother that we are visiting my dad in ‘school’”, Kaylah says. She says she didn’t feel scared or nervous, she was just happy to see her dad. “I was always happy to see him and didn’t feel scared that I was in a prison because I didn’t know. The hardest part of it for me was after seeing my dad I wanted him to come home with us, and I would cry on the way home because I missed him,” she says.

Kaylah visited her dad twice more and the visitations were basically the same. In between visiting she would still be in contact with him nearly every day she says, through phone calls. She never questioned why her dad wasn’t home. Kaylah’s parents they believed not being honest was their way of protecting their kids. They felt there is no reason for a child that young to know that their father is in prison for selling drugs.

Many years later, Catherine Harrison explains her decision. “They were too young to understand the whole concept of prison and you are taught growing up that bad people belong in prison and your dad wasn’t a bad person,” she says.

Today, Kaylah Napolitano is still living in Bay Shore in the same house she grew up in, with her mom, her brother, her 6-year-old half-sister, and her step-dad. She graduated with honors with her bachelor’s degree in criminal justice in May 2020. She is currently attending Stony Brook University to complete her master’s in social work. Kaylah’s goals for the future are to graduate with a high GPA, transition into her career, and move out.

Kaylah’s choice to do criminal justice as a major was not arbitrary. She has been interested in criminal justice since she was a teenager and her family’s history with the law is one of her reasons. Other members of Kaylah’s extended family have also been in and out of prison. Kaylah says, “My family has always been on the wrong side of crime, so I wanted to have a career path where I would be working on the right side. I’ve always wanted to be able to understand the system better and hopefully instill change.” In fact, one of the job options as a social worker she’s strongly considering is working in a correctional facility and being with children while they are visiting their parents.

“I think it’d be really great to go from being a child who was visiting their dad in prison,” she says, “to being an adult with my masters degree helping kids who were in the exact place I was.”



Kaylah pictured with her brother, mother, and half-sister Chanae, at her graduation party this past June. A picture of her dad is sitting on the table on the right.

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