

# Mothers at the Gate: How a Powerful Family Movement is Transforming the Juvenile Justice System

By Karen Dolan , Nell Bernstein and Ebony Slaughter-Johnson , May 4, 2016 .

Mass incarceration is one of the greatest civil rights issues of our time. It's not just millions of adults, but also staggering numbers of children, who are roped into the criminal justice system.

Civil rights battles in the United States have historically been led by those most affected. Now the mothers of incarcerated children are making history.

**This report** reflects an initial effort to map a movement of family members — particularly mothers — that aims to challenge both the conditions in which their loved ones are held and the fact of mass incarceration itself, and to distill the shared wisdom of its leaders.

*Mothers at the Gate*, produced with the financial support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, looks inside this emerging movement to find first-hand accounts, strategies, and needs of family members in their individual and collective work to transform an unjust juvenile justice system.

“If you want to make change in a community, you go to the women,” The New Jim Crow author Michelle Alexander has said. That is what we have done in researching this report.

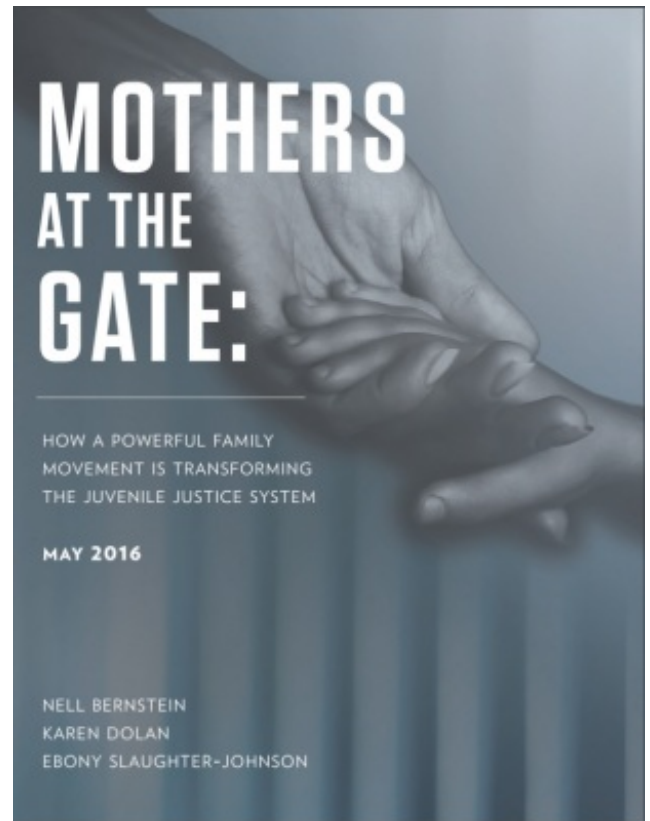
As a debate about crime and justice that has been a long time in the making gains steam across the country, the nation is beginning to pay attention to the impact of incarceration on families. But even as families struggle to gain visibility, what remains to be told is the story of this growing family-led movement. It is a story of collective struggle in the face of crushing pressure from institutions with nearly unlimited power — an insistence to be heard at the political as well as the personal level.

[See shareable graphics below.](#)

## Key Findings:

**1. The activism of the family justice leaders empowers families of incarcerated youth and provides them a voice with which to advocate on the behalf of their loved ones.** They achieve this by:

- Amplifying the unique perspectives of family members and ensuring that they have a seat at the table
- Working with families to counteract stigmas against young people who are arrested or incarcerated, as well as their family members
- Resisting the impulse to tokenize families



**2. The family justice leaders focus on challenging the juvenile justice system to effect enduring positive change for those involved, rather than the reverse.** They are pursuing concrete policy goals and initiatives, specifically:

- Enacting sentencing reform; working with families to counteract stigmas against young people who are arrested or incarcerated, as well as their family members
- Raising the age at which juveniles can be transferred to adult facilities and abolishing adult transfer altogether
- Ending life without parole for juveniles
- Breaking the school-to-prison pipeline
- Ending the use of solitary confinement
- Improving the conditions in juvenile facilities
- Strengthening family ties by improving visiting rules and telephone access
- Advancing justice reinvestment

**3. The family justice leaders engage in a number of organizational strategies to gain public awareness and achieve their legislative and public policy goals, including:**

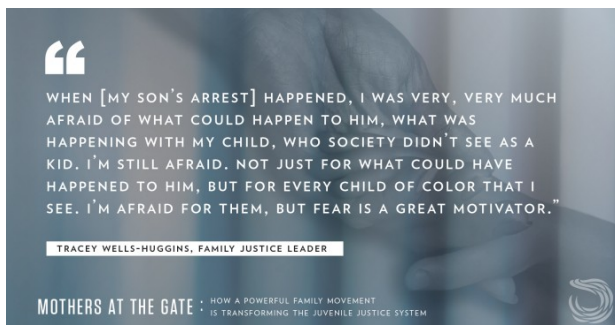
- Advocacy training;
- Practical assistance in increasing family engagement; and
- Lobbying and activism.

**4. To sustain and advance their work, the family justice leaders need assistance in three core areas:**

- Communication services — including storytelling resources, op-ed development training and placement, media messaging, website and social media assistance, and coordination by a dedicated communications director
- Greater outreach to build the juvenile justice reform movement
- Increased funding

[Read the full report here \[PDF\].](#)

Share the graphics below to call attention to the national grassroots movement of families fighting to transform the juvenile justice system:



*co-author of The Poor Get Prison: The Alarming Spread of the Criminalization of Poverty.*

*Nell Bernstein is an award-winning journalist and is the author of All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated and Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison, winner of the 2015 Silver Gavel Award from the American Bar Association as well as the Media for Just Society Award.*

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