

# Introduction

FROM DEADBEAT TO DEAD BROKE

“You lookin’ for Ronnie Jones?” the man at the cash register asks me, in a tone that rings of suspicion. “And who would you be?” Sensing his distrust, I shower him with explanation: how I am a researcher interested in talking to fathers in the area, how I spoke to Ronnie earlier, and how I was referred to him by a trusted confidant. Still doubtful, he instructs me to wait while he disappears into the back of the otherwise empty bodega. I follow his instructions, lingering for what seems like eternity in the sweltering Jacksonville summer heat, occasionally noticing as someone peeks out at me from behind the aisle of canned food, only to scurry away. Finally, the man from the cash register emerges alongside a tall African American man with a broom in his hand. “We weren’t sure who you really are,” the cashier explains. Then the man with the broom adds, “My boss was just being careful. ’Cause you never know what they’ll do to find me.”

At his boss’s encouragement, Ronnie puts down the broom and joins

me outside at a small table in front of the store. After we talk for a bit, it becomes clear what they were so worried about: the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office. Given their fear, one might assume Ronnie is wanted for some serious offense, but his crime is financial: he owes back child support. Due to that debt, Ronnie has been dodging law enforcement for almost a decade. A few years earlier, they captured him during one of their "Father's Day roundups." Ronnie was in the front of the family house, barbecuing with his kids and extended kin, when the sheriff's car pulled up. "It was like the cops came right to our street, looking for us with warrants," Ronnie remembers. The police found him, handcuffed him, and took him to jail. His kids watched it all. "I should have been smarter," Ronnie recalls. "I shouldn't have been exposed. . . . My kids shouldn't have seen something like that." He promises never to make that mistake again.

Indeed, throughout our discussion, Ronnie admits to making many mistakes in his life. He also concedes that those mistakes underlie his large child support debt. A series of robberies he committed in his twenties got him incarcerated for much of his thirties. That time in local jail and state prison took a toll on his work and family life. They took an even greater toll on Jackie, the mother of his children, who was left to raise their three kids alone. As Ronnie went in and out of prison, she went on and off public assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid as needed. This was years ago, when Florida still had some semblance of a welfare system and, as required by federal law, the state charged the costs of those public benefits to Ronnie in the form of child support. While in prison, Ronnie was totally unaware that he had a support order, much less child support debt. Later, as he cycled through jail and prison, his address changed so often that mail never reached him. He kept moving, and his child support debt kept mounting, unbeknownst to him.

Ronnie's account of his child support woes is largely structured around the times they landed him back in jail. He initially learned about his order and the accompanying debt the first time he got arrested for it—and the judge informed him that he owed over \$25,000. The second time, he was picked up on an outstanding warrant and learned that the debt had climbed to over \$40,000, in large part because Florida charged 10 percent interest on outstanding child support debt owed to the state. Several more child support arrests followed, more than he could count. But the last one,

the Father's Day roundup a few years earlier, had been perhaps the most consequential. This time it took him two weeks in jail to come up with the \$1,000 the judge required him to pay in order to purge himself of contempt and be released. In fact, the cost was much higher than that: he lost his job and his apartment during that stint in jail, which put him further behind on his support payments as he struggled to get back on his feet. All of this infuriated Jackie, who received next to nothing from Ronnie's payments. "This money I keep paying . . . all goes to Tallahassee. None of it [goes] to my kids," Ronnie laments, with his head down. "So I try to help out in other ways."

One of those "other ways" led him here, to this bodega on the outskirts of Jacksonville. Jackie and his children live nearby, so he came to the area after losing his job downtown. Unable to afford an apartment in the area, Ronnie resides in a nearby homeless shelter. But he considers himself fortunate, and his life on the upswing, since the situation allows him to walk his kids to and from school every day, so that Jackie can get to work early and return late. Sometimes he even escorts other kids in the neighborhood to school, painting the image of himself as a "big duck with all these little ducklings" following him down the street. His job in the bodega enables all of this: his boss pays Ronnie under the table and lets him off for a few hours every afternoon to accompany his kids from school. And he is protective of Ronnie, always watching out and running interference for him. "He's the best worker I got," his boss yells to us from inside the bodega. Taking this comment as a hint that he should return to work, Ronnie grabs his broom and wraps up our interview. But not before making one thing very clear: "My kids are everything to me. I may be a felon, but I'm no deadbeat!"

Fathers like Ronnie Jones rarely come to mind when we think of men with large child support debt—his age, his poverty, and his commitment to his children are not usually captured in images of such fathers. Far more common is the image of a man of means who chooses not to pay child support, like millionaire internet entrepreneur Joseph Stroup, who, after being on the run for over twenty years, was caught in Canada and extradited to Michigan for running up \$540,000 in child support debt.<sup>1</sup> Yet for every Joseph Stroup there are hundreds of thousands of Ronnie Joneses. Or men like Walter Scott, the South Carolina man who was shot

and killed by police after running from a routine traffic stop—all because he feared that his child support debt, which he had been unable to repay, would be discovered and land him back in jail.<sup>2</sup> Men like Ronnie Jones and Walter Scott are in fact the norm: it is estimated that 70 percent of the \$115 billion in child support debt owed by Americans is in fact owed by parents with incomes under \$10,000, half of whom reported no income at all, largely due to imprisonment.<sup>3</sup>

This book tells the collective story of the millions of parents who fall into this latter category: indebted fathers who live at the intersection of the child support and criminal justice systems. These are two of the largest state systems in the United States today. More than 7 million citizens live under some form of correctional supervision, and close to 6 million live with child support debt. Yet we don't know how many parents actually fall into both groups, as indebted parents with incarceration histories. In part, this is because neither system collects reliable data on the other. But it is also because parents themselves try to keep a low profile. When dealing with child support, they are leery of mentioning their criminal justice histories; when interacting with criminal justice officials, they rarely admit to owing child support. They struggle to avoid being detected by either system. While their resulting behavior might seem odd and even a bit paranoid—with fathers like Ronnie Jones peering out from behind the canned food aisle of a bodega, or Walter Scott running off during a routine traffic stop—it is actually quite sensible given the realities of the systems they live under and the punishing consequences of any misstep.

For four years, between 2014 and 2018, I studied those systems and the fathers enmeshed in both of them. To do this, I moved across state terrains, examining the policies and laws established by the federal and state governments as well as the practices of local child support courts. I also sought out men like Ronnie Jones, with histories of incarceration and child support debt, and persuaded them to sit down with me for interviews. And I did this in different parts of the country, to account for variations in state criminal justice and child support systems. By the end, I had conducted three years of ethnographic research in child support courts in New York, California, and Florida and observed roughly four hundred cases in each state—more than twelve hundred in all.<sup>4</sup> I also carried out 145 qualitative interviews with formerly incarcerated fathers with child

support debt.<sup>5</sup> These fathers came from the three states where I had conducted my research, around the same number from each. The interviews probed men's experiences with the penal and child support systems as well as their lives as parents. Always emotional and often angry, regretful, and desperate, these men offered me a window onto the lived realities of parenting while imprisoned in both of these massive state systems.

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“These men are like runaway slaves,” exclaimed Lamar, a former indebted father turned social advocate. “So in that book you’re writing, you need to show them as human.” I take Lamar’s directive seriously and have tried to heed his call—to reveal how those reviled as “deadbeat dads” are in fact real people who lead real lives with real stories behind them. Of course, this does not mean idealizing or romanticizing these fathers and their struggles. And it certainly does not mean excusing their mistakes, misdeeds, or missteps, which should never be the goal of social scientific analysis. Instead, one of my goals is to expose how these men have complex and layered lives that too often get flattened out in portrayals of them, be it in court assessments, bureaucratic formulas, or media accounts. The portrayals I relay here show these fathers in all of their complexity: sometimes doing bad things and making bad decisions; sometimes breaking the law, over and over again; sometimes neglecting their children; and sometimes hurting people. Yet they are also men who have been hurt by others: by court officials who refuse to see them as fully human; by judges who insist on humiliating them as they enforce compliance; by policies that fail to acknowledge the realities of their lives; and by state bureaucracies that seem to conspire against them. These fathers are left grappling with seemingly contradictory feelings of anger and guilt, frustration and remorse, rage and hopelessness.

These fathers’ stories reveal a great deal about how systems of social exclusion and punishment operate. Their accounts expose the webs of inequality entrapping their lives. To start with the basics: the fathers in this study had an average of \$36,500 in child support debt—three times more than the support debt owed by other low-income fathers. The additional debt was a byproduct of their contact with the criminal justice

system. Some of them had done long stints in prison, during which time their debt skyrocketed. Others cycled in and out of jail, during which time their debt accumulated incrementally. No matter which route they took, the path through criminal justice ended in massive debt.

The first set of findings in this book relate to how exactly this happens: how the material costs of imprisonment build up to create a perfect storm of debt. The overwhelmingly majority of fathers in prison receive no modification of child support orders, which means those orders go unpaid during their incarceration. Most states then charge interest on the accumulated debt, at rates between 4 and 12 percent, leading to an exponential increase in what fathers owe. Incarcerated fathers often do not realize their debt is growing until their release, at which point they encounter all sorts of bureaucratic and legal hurdles that further disadvantage them in getting a handle on their debt. Together, their experiences reveal how the physical confinement of prison leads to the financial confinement of child support debt, creating what I call the *debt of imprisonment*.

Complicating the situation even more are the punitive costs associated with child support debt that can deepen fathers' criminal justice involvement. My second set of findings revolve around those costs: how the punishments of child support become their own prison. Child support debt is accompanied by an enforcement apparatus that rivals criminal justice in its scope and reach. As Ronnie Jones was all too aware, these apparatuses intersect and merge. They draw on each other to regulate and surveil fathers—support officials issue arrest warrants for the non-compliant, then sheriff officers reel in indebted parents. From the revocation of driver's licenses and passports, to the seizure of property, to liens on bank accounts, to interceptions of state benefits, enforcement measures can make parents feel like they are being processed and punished without end. For fathers with criminal records, the combined effects of debt accumulation and debt enforcement can seem inescapable, creating what I call the *imprisonment of debt*.

Indeed, for many fathers, debt accumulation and debt enforcement are so tightly linked that they amount to a single system. These fathers are quite literally doubly indebted: having paid their "debt to society" through incarceration, they emerge from prison and find themselves facing enormous child support debt, much of which is owed to the state itself and not to their

families.<sup>6</sup> Their indebtedness thus overlaps and crisscrosses. In a sense, this is not entirely surprising: social scientists and criminologists have long argued that incarceration has debilitating “collateral consequences” or “spillover effects” higher than the prison walls themselves. Like a leaky faucet, the mark of a criminal record can continue to drip and spill into work life, family life, civic life, and political life, until it collects into a pool that then expands to become an ocean that drowns the formerly incarcerated.

However, the intersections analyzed here work a bit differently. Instead of dripping in one direction, from one institution to the next, they flow back and forth. Some of these flows begin with men’s involvement in the criminal justice system, others with child support, and still others through a combination of the two. Men’s entanglements also emerge from federal and state policies as reflected in public assistance payback policies, state modification laws, and local enforcement measures. These policies are then implemented through local judicial practices in ways that are both uneven and consistently disadvantageous to this group of fathers. The sanctioning power of these practices blends civil, administrative, and criminal law—combining fines, fees, revocations, and reincarceration—to create a legal hybridity that adds to the institutional complexity. Rather than simply “piling onto” men’s lives, these practices work in circular ways to form feedback loops of disadvantage.

In fact, the looping nature of these entanglements is what makes them so consequential for so many fathers. These loops are difficult to detect or disentangle and are even harder to escape. And the effects of getting caught in them can be devastating. This would be true for even the most stable and committed of parents. But for those who are already disadvantaged, and who are trying to reintegrate after imprisonment, these loops can lead to major derailments. They can exclude parents from the most basic forms of financial citizenship, denying them the ability to transport themselves to work, keep property, or maintain bank accounts. They can undermine relations of social support and put pressure on familial networks, frequently to the breaking point. They can push fathers underground, disconnecting them from community support and deepening their estrangement. These entanglements can thus become their own form of imprisonment, making poor men feel dehumanized and invisible—indeed, like runaway slaves.

A central claim of this book is that the promise of child support as familial support vanishes when it merges with criminal justice. When fathers are enmeshed in both state systems simultaneously, they can end up doubly imprisoned—confined by incarceration and by unmanageable debt. Once enmeshed, they confront seemingly inescapable obstacles that make their lives as fathers even more challenging. This can have ripple effects, ultimately harming those who need the most support. When fathers' lives are broken, mothers rarely get the financial support they need and deserve. Children no longer receive what they need to feel safe, secure, and nurtured. Everyone suffers when the law and state policy undermine those bonds proven most essential for social well-being: relationships of care, reciprocity, and interdependence.

#### PUNISHMENT AS CONFINEMENT, PUNISHMENT AS DEBT

The merging of criminal justice and child support is not entirely unexpected. Over the past forty years, as the criminal justice system has grown in size and scope, it has shown itself to be uncontainable. It has seeped into all areas of social life, particularly in poor communities of color. Unable to restrain its practices of confinement, the criminal justice system has gobbled up more and more lives: at last count, more than 2 million American citizens were in prison or jail and another 5 million were under correctional supervision through parole, probation, and community programs.<sup>7</sup> In the process, the logic of confinement has moved into new institutional spaces. From schools to hospitals to social services, a punitive approach has changed the form and focus of institutional practice.<sup>8</sup> Sociologists Lara-Millan and Gonzalez van Clev call this “penal-welfare hybridization”—a process of governance that adds new levers of punishment to state sectors that, once upon a time, were oriented toward social support and rehabilitation.<sup>9</sup>

Another way the tentacles of criminal justice have extended out is through the collateral consequences of confinement—the cascading effects of removing millions of people from social life have been as punishing as the experience of confinement itself. Social scientists have spent decades researching these effects and the ways they spill into work, civic,