

Discussion Guide

Produced by
Resilience Beyond Incarceration
A Program of Lamoille Restorative Center

For additional resources: downstreamfilm.com



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Introduction

DOWNSTREAM, a 60 minute documentary recommended for adult and teen viewers, is a joint effort between filmmaker and cinematographer Brad Salon of Bear Notch Productions, and producer Tricia Long from Resilience Beyond Incarceration (RBI) of Lamoille Restorative Center. At the heart of DOWNSTREAM are the stories and perspectives of nine children and three caregivers affected by parental incarceration. Twelve specialists from a variety of systems that impact children also offer insights from their professional perspectives.

Message from the director



In our first conversations about how to approach this film, I asked Tricia Long of RBI what the solutions are. What solutions did we want to portray in the film to help these families deal with parental incarceration?”

She responded, “There isn’t just one. Every situation is so different. What we want is for people to care enough to create the solutions these children and families need in their lives.”

As a Vermonter without a friend or family member incarcerated, it was very hard for me to see these problems as mine. What I found through making the film is that every Vermonter is affected. We lose engaged and happy children who will grow up to be important members of our communities. We lose tax dollars as we pay for the repercussions of parental incarceration as they ripple out through health care, education, and the cost of the prison system at large.

I hope this film moves you to action – to create solutions in whatever small or large way you are able. This is one of those fulcrums in our community where a little bit of effort can lift a very large weight.

Please share the film on the web, discuss it with friends and family, and spread the word about this issue. We are a small state and there is power in that. Every vote, every voice, every action, has a real and measurable impact on our community.

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Message from the producer



Ever since I began working with children impacted by their parent's incarceration, I knew theirs was a story that needed to be told. I hope our film will raise awareness throughout Vermont and motivate individuals, service organizations, schools and communities to better understand and support these children and their caregivers.

When we invited our families to participate in the film, several found the courage to share their stories saying that they wanted to make a difference. They wanted the film to help make things better for others who were going through what they had.

What began as a 20-minute video grew to become a full-length documentary, largely because of the children's honesty and openness along with the enthusiastic participation of so many specialists who all believed in the film's mission.

There are many ways to address the harmful effects of parental incarceration on children. We trust that when you're aware of the challenges they face, you'll come up with your own creative ways to make things better for these children.

Thank you for caring about all our children!

Using this guide

This discussion guide serves as a companion to *DOWNSTREAM*. It contains more material than one person could possibly use in a post-film discussion, however it can be valuable for a variety of audiences at different viewings. Our goal is to reinforce the core messages in the film and provide material for further reflection.

You can select the questions and activities that resonate with you and are most appropriate for your screening. We hope they prompt rich discussions and create opportunities to bring hearts and minds together in addressing the many issues raised in *DOWNSTREAM*.

We welcome your feedback. Please email tlong@lrcvt.org.

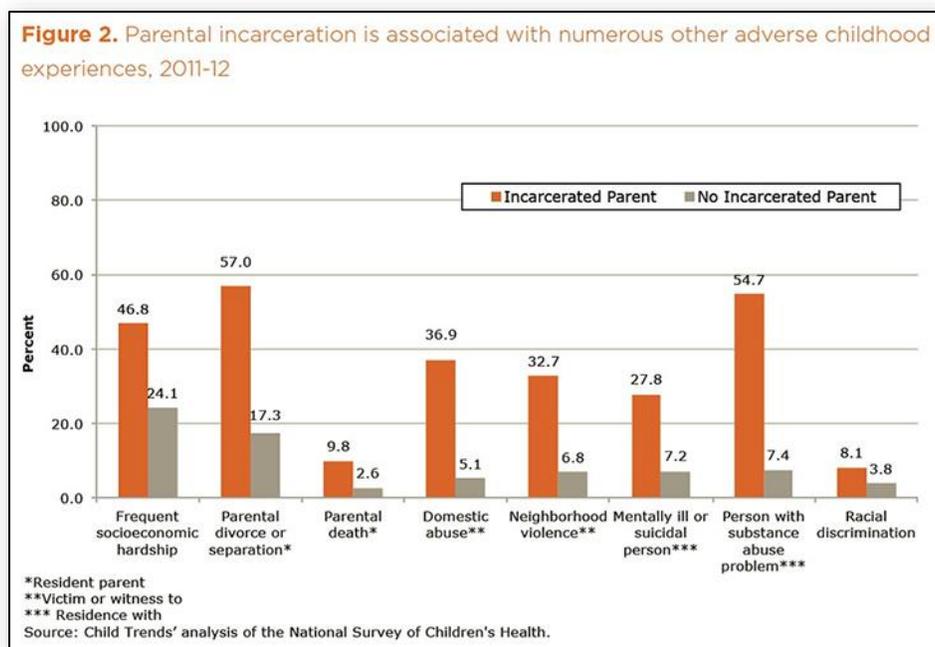
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What the numbers tell us

On any given day, an estimated 2,000 Vermont children experience parental incarceration; that's **6,000 children a year**—the same as the number of Vermont babies born annually. One out of every 17 children in Vermont has had a mom or dad in prison.

Children with an incarcerated parent experience ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) at a much higher rate than other kids: **3.7 ACEs, versus 0.7** for children whose parents were never in prison (Child Trends, 2015).



Parental Incarceration serves as an indicator of other co-occurring risks that make children particularly fragile. Experiencing ACEs at a very high rate, they are **three times more likely** to develop:

- learning disabilities and school drop-out
- serious mental and physical health problems
- substance use disorders, and
- delinquent behavior

All of this can eventually lead to incarceration. Without intervention and support, **1 in 4 children of incarcerated parents will likely face imprisonment** in their lifetime.

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Questions to consider after watching DOWNSTREAM

General Questions:

What are two or three of the most memorable aspects of the film for you personally, and why were they poignant for you?

From your professional perspective, what stood out?

What questions has the film raised for you?

Did your response to anything in the film surprise you?

What is a new insight into your work that you have now—something you had not thought about before watching DOWNSTREAM?

Questions about Impacts on Children:

In the film, both Ezra and Alyena mentioned how one parent wanted to prevent them from having contact with the other parent. What do you think is in the best interest of a child regarding their relationship with an incarcerated parent? What does it depend on?

How would the needs of a child who has an incarcerated parent change at different ages and developmental stages? Consider their need for stability, attachment, belonging, and truthful communication, as well as the changing relationship with their parent.

What are some of the barriers that prevent children of incarcerated parents from getting what they need?

How might you use a personalized storybook, like RBI case manager Lida Lutton made Hunter, to answer a child's big questions and help make meaning out of what's happened to them?



Questions about Secrets and Stigma:

Are you aware of your own bias? Can you give an example? What insight do you have regarding your opinion of individuals who are involved in the criminal justice system?

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How does bias affect a child who has a parent currently or formerly incarcerated?

Krystal said, *“I didn’t want people to know because I didn’t want them to view me differently.”* What are some ways to reduce the stigma that creates such a burden of secrecy and shame for these children?

In the film, early childhood educator Laurie Metcalfe said, *“I didn’t have the awareness or the insight into the stigma and bias that I was bringing into my work... It’s the oddness, or the weirdness, or the uncomfortableness that continues to perpetuate the stigma. As educators, not only can we support children who have incarcerated parents, but we can also help other children to break down that stigma.”* How can you imagine working with others to do that?

Haylee said, *“My best friend in elementary school stopped being my friend. Her mom told her she shouldn’t be my friend because somehow what my mom did made me a bad person.”* What could you do if a child you know needs support—such as one of your children’s friends?

Questions about Justice Reform:

What do you believe to be the underlying causes of criminal behavior?

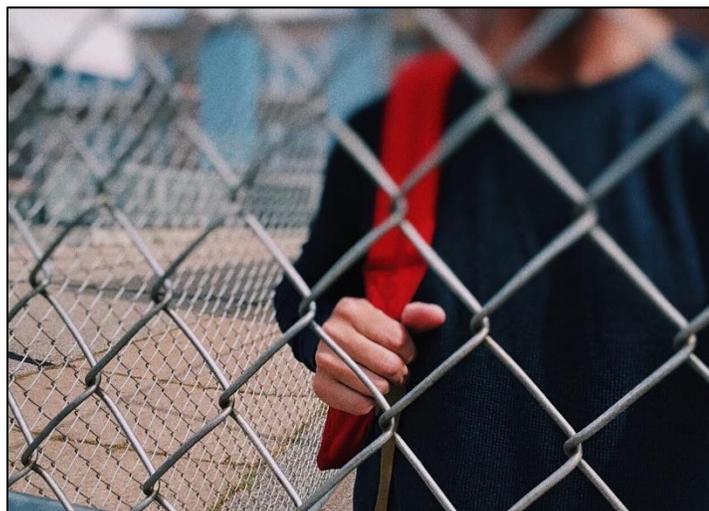
What purpose do you think incarceration serves?

In the film, Attorney General TJ Donovan says, *“If you walk into any courthouse or prison, you’re mostly going to see the poor, and people of color. We’ve really marginalized a subset of our population in the name of public safety.”* What is your interpretation of public safety?

What assumptions could be tested or challenged in thinking about the role of incarceration and public safety?

Based on what you’ve heard in this film, what are your thoughts about requiring prosecutors and judges to consider potential impacts on a child prior to sentencing their parent?

In the film, Professor Robert Sand says, *“Some prosecutors take into consideration the ripple effect of their plea proposals, and others tend to look at the criminal behavior in a vacuum and are not as concerned with the ripple effects on the person convicted, family members, community... It’s unavoidable that a prosecutor’s bias,*



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perspective and philosophy won't influence the outcome." Do you know who the prosecutor is in your county? What is their perspective on the role of incarceration in public safety and rehabilitation?

Questions about ACEs:

Most people in the justice system have experienced childhood trauma. What changes can you imagine in our justice system to better respond to and treat individuals with those experiences?

How does knowing about ACEs shift the way you might view an incarcerated individual?

What can be done to reduce the potential number of ACEs for incarcerated parents' children?

Questions about Engaging Educators:



School counselor Kathy Ferguson said, *"It's such a well-kept secret in families which makes it hard to reach out to those children."* How might schools and child care facilities create an opportunity to identify children who are impacted by parental incarceration?

Kindergarten teacher Ekta Sampson suggested, *"Be cognizant of the family dynamic when planning your curriculum, themes, and activities and make sure that a child with mom or dad in prison is not feeling left out."* What kinds of things could leave the child of an incarcerated parent feeling left out at school?

Krystal said, *"My teachers just kind of tip-toed around the situation which made it harder because I felt almost like I couldn't talk about it with them because it wasn't something they wanted to talk to me about. It is hard as a kid to talk about it, but just to know that there's someone who is willing to talk to you is more important than anything."* What opportunities could you create to help a child know that you're available, and that you'd be comfortable talking about whatever they might bring up? How could you check in with the child in a way that would feel supportive?

Kathy Ferguson observed that, *"These children want control in their life because their life has been so up-ended and out of control. They often come to school seeking control, and there's a whole host of behaviors that come with that."* What sorts of adaptive behaviors might an educator see? How might you respond to the challenging behaviors in a way that will address the child's underlying needs within the school setting?

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Questions about Growing Resilience:

Ezra said, “You’ve got to just push through it and live every day the best you can because you might not get that day again. Something bad brings something good.” What do you think has contributed to his resilience in the face of the many challenges he’s experienced?

In the film, when the children at Camp Agape were receiving their quilts, Tricia Long said, “You don’t know how your simple action will land and what it can do in someone’s life ... These children are astonished by the realization that people who haven’t even met them care about them... We all play a part in building one another’s resilience.” How has someone contributed toward building your resilience?

Dr. Beth Ann Maier said, “Spirituality is one element that we know boosts resilience. It doesn’t have to be one religion or another. It’s the concept that there is something stronger than ourselves that we can tap into for strength and support.” How can we provide resources to help children with incarcerated parents to build their resilience? What can we do in our schools, neighborhoods, and community?



Questions about Advocacy and Action:

What would it take to create change on the issues raised in the film?

What opportunities can you see to take action?

What would you recommend that could help make a difference—making things better for children and families who are dealing with the effects of having a parent in prison?

As a community member, how could you offer support and remove barriers for these children?

How might you inspire others to be an ally for children who have a parent in prison?

Can you identify three people with whom you could share this film and/or the *Families Strong*?

Robert Sand says in the film, “We do see intergenerational offending and that should not be a surprise.” How do you envision interrupting the intergenerational cycle of incarceration?

Now that you have seen this film, what one thing are you going to do next?

How can we support one another in taking the next steps?

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Quotes for reflection

When you heard the following statements in the film, what was your reaction? What are you prompted to think about, and how do you feel about what was said?

I was angry for a long time, and I didn't want to forgive her. I felt like my whole life was a lie. I didn't know who was telling me the truth and who was not telling me the truth. —Haylee

It's hard not having a father to go to if you need anything, not having that person to look up to and try to be. It leaves you aimless without anywhere to go. You need someone to talk to, someone to tell yourself to ... someone willing to listen at any time. —Ezra

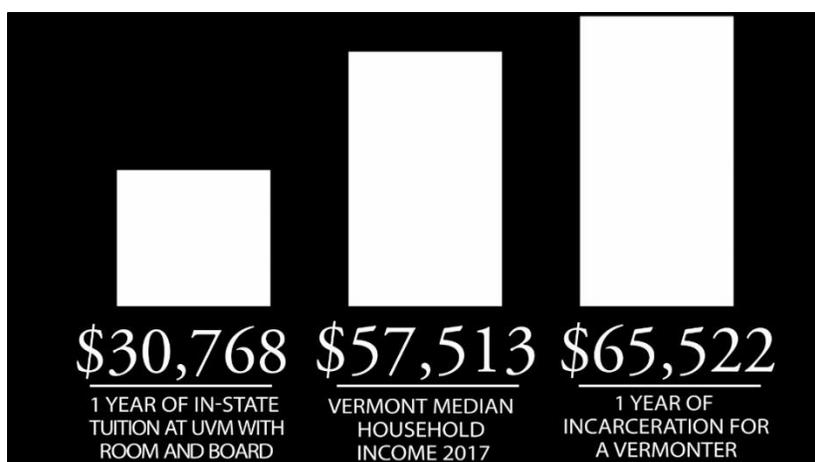
Having my mom gone was like there's a whole piece of your heart gone. Regardless of everything she's done, she's still my mom. She's not a terrible person; she's a human being, a mother, and I'm still a child. —Alyena

I don't think it's well known the degree to which families in Vermont are struggling with poverty. 48% of Vermont's children are living on the edge of catastrophe. —Dr. Beth Ann Maier

Think about it: if you don't have a car, a job, a home, and a friend—in fact remove even one of them from your life—how successful can you be? —RBI director Tricia Long

Judges often times do not know what a convicted individual's relationship is with their children. The best way we can take that into consideration is for us to be provided that information. —Judge Brian Grearson

We spend more money locking people up than we do sending them to colleges in this state. Look at the cost, and the recidivism rate over 50%. You can't name a business that fails five out of 10 times and stays in business. You can't name a state agency that doesn't fulfill its mission five out of 10 times and stays in business, but we do with our correctional system. And we continue to spend money on it. —Attorney General TJ Donovan



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Sample learning activities for small group discussion:

Activity #1: Exploring personal bias

There are no right or wrong answers. This is an opportunity for self- reflection and thought-provoking conversation. This activity can be done in 15 to 20 minutes.

Create an imaginary continuum across the room. Opposite sides of the room are designated as the extremes (very strongly agree and very strongly disagree). People stand wherever they choose on the continuum to reflect their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement made.

The facilitator reads a statement from the list below and asks participants to move to the place on the continuum that reflects their level of agreement with the statement. After everyone has chosen their spot, the facilitator asks people at different places to explain why they chose to stand where they are.

The statements are intentionally vague to prompt discussion. Don't try to clarify, just ask people on the continuum why they are standing where they are. Encourage comments from differing perspectives and invite participants to shift places on the continuum as they consider other viewpoints.

I believe that children need to know the truth about their incarcerated parent.

I believe that the removal of a criminal parent improves a child's life.

I believe that children should be allowed to see and touch their parent when they visit in prison.

I believe that incarceration is a family secret that should be kept in confidence.

I believe that incarceration is the best way to enhance public safety.

I believe that Vermont's prisons are humane.

I believe that a person who has committed serious crimes against others deserves help.

I believe that prosecutors should be required to justify spending tax-payers' dollars when they include imprisonment in a plea deal.

Activity #2: Shifting perspectives

This 20-minute activity offers an opportunity to consider how the stigma of incarceration can create a burden of secrecy and a reluctance to seek support.

Ask each person to choose a role from the following list. Imagine that you are:

- A grandparent; your son/daughter is in prison and you're caring for the kids
- A sibling; your brother/sister is in prison and you're caring for the kids

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- A spouse/partner of an incarcerated person and you're caring for the kids
- An incarcerated parent
- A child of an incarcerated parent
- A teacher with a child of an incarcerated parent in your care/classroom

Ask each person to take a couple of minutes to answer the questions below from the perspective of whatever role you have chosen; try to really put yourself in his or her place.

- Who would you want to know about the incarceration?
- Who would you *not* want to know?
- Why OR why not?
- What factors affect your decision?

Join with two partners and take a few minutes to share your reactions.

- What did you notice?
- What feelings did you have?
- Is there any awareness or insight you'd like to share?

Think about how you can help reduce stigma. What is one thing you could do?

Activity #3: Unmet needs

For families involved in the criminal justice system, basic needs often go unmet. In many cases parents are barred from employment and housing, they're not permitted to have a driver license, and often they have no friends.

In the film, Ashley says, "You're paying for these mistakes you made and the acts of harm you committed for the rest of your life and those aren't just consequences that the parents face. Those are consequences their children face as well. If we're blocking parents from employment, from education, from housing, and services, we're also hurting the children in those families."

Take a few minutes to consider how your life would change if the resources and assets you currently rely on were no longer available. Consider these four things: a job, a home, a car, and a friend—and now, in your imagination, remove one of them from your life.

Pay attention to what changes. What is your life like without it? Write your insights on a piece of paper. Now choose another to lose, and note the impact of that absence. Without that resource, in what ways are you limited? Note these on your paper. Repeat the process with the third and fourth assets, and pay attention to how the absence of these things can significantly alter your life.

Are you able to function without these resources? Can you be successful without a place to live? Without reliable transportation? Without a job and the income it provides? Without a friend? How do you feel?

Take a few minutes to share your thoughts and feelings with a partner.

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Guide for *DOWNSTREAM* discussion circle

Topic of your circle: The effects of parental incarceration.

Purpose of your circle: Create opportunity for service providers to discuss *DOWNSTREAM*.

Time: 1 hour

*Before starting the film, invite viewers to notice anything that stands out for them as they watch **DOWNSTREAM**, and to jot down notes about these items so they can recall them later.*

Circle process

Opening Activity (ies):

Welcome participants to the Circle, briefly introduce circle keepers of your team, and identify the purpose of the circle.

Centering Breathing exercise

“To make a difference in someone’s life you don’t have to be brilliant, rich or perfect. You just have to care.”

Mandy Hale

Introduce talking piece:

What is the piece and why did you choose it?

Explain the purpose of the talking piece.

Check In round:

Use the talking piece with a brief explanation.

Please say your name and one word about how you are feeling right now.

Introduce guidelines

Introduce Basic Guidelines for the process written on large paper in the center of the Circle.

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Respect the Talking Piece | Speak with Respect |
| Speak from the Heart | Listen with Respect |
| Listen from the Heart | Honor Confidentiality |

Build Guidelines and Values:

What else might you need from others in the Circle today to be able to feel comfortable sharing your ideas? Write this idea on a note card and place in the center of the Circle.

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With a “Thumbs Up” or “Thumbs Down” vote, will you be able to uphold these requests in our circle today?

Building connections and relationships

Round One:

What is something you are thankful for?

Round Two:

What is something that you value about your family, community, or work?

Getting to the heart of the matter

We want to take time to explore some of the foundational concepts presented in this movie. We are going to use the next few rounds to hear from each other about our reactions.

What is the one thing that stood out for you in the film?

What is the one thing that you noticed about the impact of parental incarceration on children?

What is something that you are aware of that prevents children from getting the support they need when their parents are/have been incarcerated?

How do you think parental incarceration impacts our community?

Plan of action

Take a moment to reflect on the movie and our discussion. On the note card provided, write down one thing you can do differently in your work/life as a result of this information? We will go around the circle and hear from everyone.

(Facilitator can take pictures of cards)

Closing the circle

Is there anything else that you would like to share before closing?

Closing quote:

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”

Author, Wendy Mass

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