A Life on Pause

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In Prison, On the Outside: The High Toll on New York’s Women who are Left Behind

Every Friday and Saturday night around 10 o’clock, a line appears on a corner near Columbus Circle in Manhattan. On warmer nights, the line will continue down both sides of 58th and Broadway, but tonight it’s cool, and the people congregate inside the bank on the corner where warm bursts of air nip at their ankles and heat the suitcases at their feet.

On her way somewhere else, a stiletto-heeled woman walks past and stares at the bank’s windows for a glance of herself. Couples dressed up, maybe for a show at Lincoln Center, pass by, continuing on to hail a cab.

The people in line are going somewhere too. It will take least six hours to get there, although it’s usually more like eight. It’s mostly women in line, heading to places called Albion or Franklin, Attica or Bear Hill. They’re visiting New York’s distant prisons, and this is Manhattan corner is the closest stop to home to get there.

While it may be their loved ones who are incarcerated, the burden rests on these people to maintain the lives and relationships they’ve left behind. It can be tiring and expensive to sustain love when one person can’t move from behind bars.

Standing alongside the A.T.M.s in the bank’s heated interior, tonight the people chat and swap stories. There’s the best friend who is making the trip and says that her friend had better appreciate it. Several women bring their children with them. Close by, a stone-faced woman in a hijab who comes almost every weekend sits on her suitcase and stares forward without speaking.

Sujey Bpatiz says she has fallen in love with a man since he’s been in prison. Now he’s months away from release. “We write letters,” she said. “I bring them with me and read them on the ride up.”

But for many, like Heddy Chisolm, 28, these prison trips have lost their luster. Chisolm has been with her fiancé, Terrence, for around five years; he’s been in prison for about three of them. She said he completed a two-and-a-half year sentence for drug sale, he is back again for violating parole. Heddy went back to her typical visiting schedule. Every other week she’ll travel 400 miles to visit him at Franklin Correctional Facility.

“You’re life is completely on pause,” she said. “It feels like you’re a prisoner yourself, not just them.”

It’s 10:30 p.m. A 12-seat blue van pulls up and idles at the corner. Trips with fewer passengers take a van instead of a charter bus. A round-bellied man opens the bank’s glass doors and sends in a cold burst of air.

“If you’re going to Altona,” the man, Tyronne Simmons says, referring to the medium-security facility near the Canadian border, “just have a seat in that blue van over there.”
An elderly woman approaches Tyronne Simmons, and asks if her bus is running to Wyoming Correctional outside of Buffalo. It does, but not yet. He instructs her to wait inside where it’s heated.

“Ninety, ninety-five percent of people who get on the bus are women and children,” Simmons said. He helps run this bus company, Operation Prison Gap, with his brother, who started the company in 1973.

Some men, too, wait in line. George Wright stands outside the bank in a black leather coat, hands in his pockets. His son has been in prison since he was 16 after he shot up a high school party in 1994, killing one person. Nowadays, Wright visits just once a year and tonight is the night. He notes the long trip ahead of him. “It’s like I’m being punished with him,” he said.

Half of all people imprisoned in New York State are placed at least 200 miles from home. For New York City residents, situated in the far corner of the state, and far from the major prisons along the borders, the number is slightly higher. Around 58 percent of imprisoned New York residents live at least 200 miles from home, roughly 32,500 inmates, each with a web of lovers, children, and financial commitments they leave behind.

The family and friends these prisoners leave behind tend to count these distances in hours. It’s about a five-hour drive from New York City to visit Clinton Correctional Facility, the state’s highest-capacity prison. A drive to Attica, the second-largest prison, will take five and a half. By bus, it will be longer.

THE HIGH PRICE OF MAINTAINING A RELATIONSHIP

Tonight’s trip will cost around $60 round trip. For Heddy, who makes this trip every other week, the costs don’t end at transportation. She also pays for the phone calls, at about $100 a week, plus cigarettes, commissary, meats and any other packages she hopes to send.

“It’s like buying for two houses. His cell is a whole house, and then my house,” she said. “It becomes an awful lot. It can make you go broke.”

In total, Heddy said she spends between $800 and $1,000 a month on her incarcerated fiancé.

It’s hard to estimate the real cost of maintaining a relationship in prison, or how common Heddy’s expenditures are, as no real data exists on the financial burden it takes to maintain a relationship from either side of the bars.

“It’s totally invisible,” said Tanya Krupat, Director of Children and Youth Services at the Osborne Association, a non profit that works in reengage formerly incarcerated people. “It’s totally invisible and it’s a toll that totally invisibly burdened.”

Costs vary depending on the person. Some prisoners have a stronger support system, while others receive no packages or visitors. Christina Taylor, who married a man in prison, said she spends about $300 a month on visits, vending machines, and pictures when she visits. Amy, who spoke through the online forum PrisonTalk but preferred not to give her last
name, said she spends about $500 a month on her boyfriend who is incarcerated two hours away.

While women make up a small part of the prison population—about 4 percent in New York State—the financial and emotional burden of mass incarceration falls heavily on women who are left behind.

“It’s a women’s crisis on so many levels,” said Krupat, noting that women are often the ones who are absorbing childcare and financial burden, and that grandmas are probably the primary caretakers besides mothers.

“If you just look at the multiple ways that women are affected by incarceration,” Krupat said, “it’s a lot.”

TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS TO NEW YORK PRISONS

The state used to offer a free bus service for prison visitors. Beginning in 1975, these free buses would travel from major cities—New York, Syracuse, Albany, Buffalo and Rochester—to almost all of the state correctional facilities. But the free bus system was cancelled in 2011 without public comment, saving the state about $1.5 million, leaving about 25,000 people to search for other options.

Now those who wish to visit New York’s distant prisons must either drive themselves, carpool or make do on a network of informal private buses.

Visiting hours are usually early, from about 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on the weekends, it means anyone needing to visit must drive through the night, and return the following night. So it’s not just people who don’t own cars that use the bus. The prisons are often so far from the city that it makes driving overnight and making visiting hours unrealistic and expensive. Most prisons in New York State are in small towns with few links to public transportation, so for many, these privately-run buses are the only option.

The buses launch from different parts of the city, and each company will go to several of the New York’s 60 correctional facilities. Buses run from Columbus Circle, Penn Station and Harlem at 125 Street, among others. Bus organizers will often create various other pick up sites along the way, depending on demand.

Solid information surrounding these buses is scattered, and scheduling is erratic. Companies are known to cancel reserved trips because they can’t fill the bus. Families and friends often resort to active online prison forums to share information.

The Department of Corrections offers little information on transportation, acknowledging on its website that there are several companies that provide transport to the prison reminding that it does not assume “any responsibility for the quality of the transportation services provided by privately operated bus companies.”

OPERATION PRISON GAP

Ray Simmons was in prison when he first thought of the idea of creating a bus service specifically for transporting people to visit their families and friends in prison. He was
teaching a real estate class to his fellow inmates at the time, and when it was over his students wanted their families to visit to watch graduation.

“I was seeing how frustrating it was for guys not getting visits,” he said, “And we were going to graduate, so I thought, ‘Let’s invite our families up here. Let’s rent a bus.’”

He started Operation Prison Gap, New York City’s first and longest-running private bus company specializing in prison visits. He left behind the hustle of selling drugs and focused on the bus company. At its peak, he said he was running 40 buses a weekend.

“I was making fast money like drug money,” Simmons said.

Now with more competition, his business has gone down, but buses still leave every weekend from the same stop at 58th and Broadway.

**COMPLICATIONS WITH PRIVATE BUSES**

By 11:30, the bus leaves 58th Street, then stops for an hour at Penn Station. A woman walks onto the bus, yells out several facility names, and several women gather their belongings and transfer to a different bus. Others climb on. Everyone vies for a seat to himself or herself, but few are so lucky. Tonight the bus is packed. Women carry blankets, and neck pillows, sometimes a child on their hip. A man climbs aboard the bus, collects the fare, offers no receipt, and moves on to the next passenger.

“Remember our bus broke down last week so we don’t have to pay?” one woman asks the man, pointing to her teenage daughter at her side. The man remembered, and moved on to the next seat.

Heddy Chisholm watches from across the isle. She has a 6-year-old daughter at home who she used to bring on prison visits when her fiancée was incarcerated several years ago, but no longer.

“It’s too risky,” she said. “Prison Gap is not a reliable bus company. There’s a whole bunch of others and they’re all the same.”

Chisholm’s daughter, Nevaeh, has lung problems related to her premature birth. Nevaeh has a tracheostomy, or a tube inserted in an opening in her neck. It assists in breathing but also requires frequent maintenance and disinfection. On one visit, Heddy said, the bus broke down along the side of the highway. Then her daughter had an asthma attack.

“I couldn’t give her treatment,” Chisholm said. “I walked across the street to a gas station and pulled a plug of an ice machine, and plugged up my daughter’s nebulizer.”

Chisholm hasn’t brought Nevaeh back to see her back to see her father since. Instead, she asks one of her sisters to stay at home with Navaeh every other week.

Heddy has recently since switched jobs, from a position working at a non-profit to caring for children out of her house, which allows her better flexibility to care for Nevaeh. With Terrence in prison, all of the financial and childcare burden falls on her. He’s scheduled to
return home in about 3 weeks, but the residual effects of his incarceration will still have to play out.

"Just because he's home it doesn't mean he's free," she said. "He is still on parole. He still is on curfew. He still has stipulations. He still will not be able to work so his means for helping us will be very limited."

Still, Heddy's childcare burden will be eased.

“I'll be able to get things done during the day. I won't always have to haul the baby around or clean up all by myself or be aggravated all night or clean 5 days a week. He does all that,” she said. "We get things done. We take care of our family and that's all that matters."

There are high costs to maintaining a relationship with Terrence, but Heddy said it's sort of like insurance. It's what it takes to keep a father for Nevaeh when Terrence is released. She said that since she stood by him the first time he was incarcerated, Terrence their relationship improved. Terrence became a better father to Nevaeh, and a more committed partner to Heddy.

“It definitely brought us closer,” she said. “I don't have to worry about anything at all and that's probably why I keep on doing it too. It's like what I get in return is kind of worth it.”

Heddy paused.

“I'm supporting him just to make sure I'm okay when he comes home," she said. "And it shouldn't have to be like that."

Fiancé