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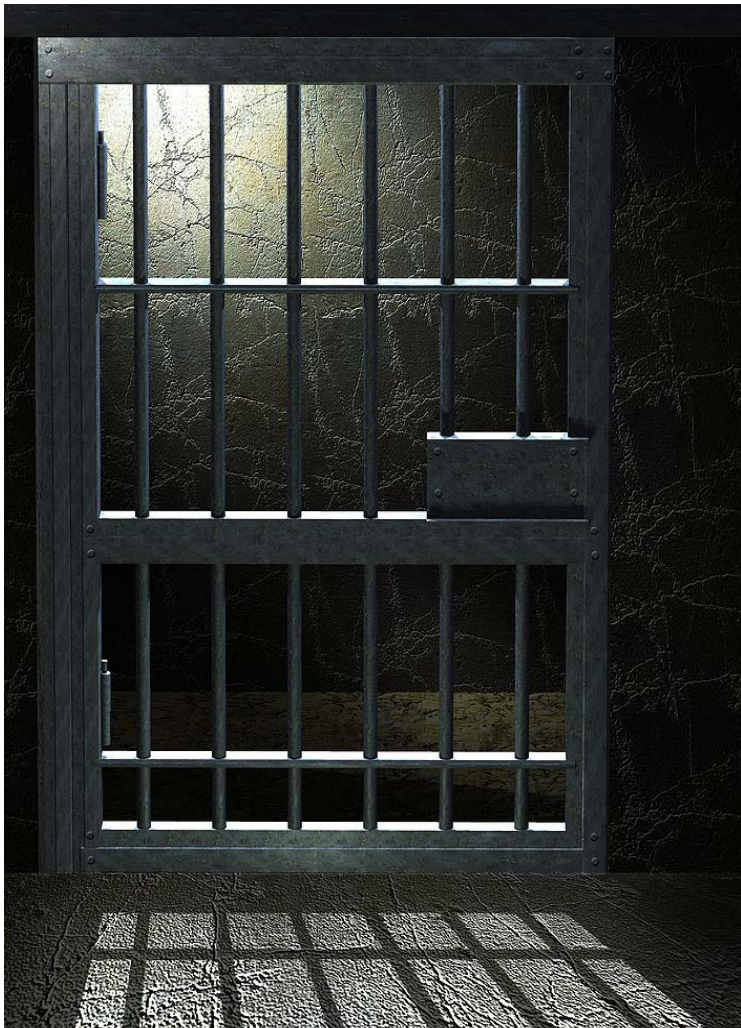
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# Child Support, Debt, and Prisoner Reentry:

Examining the Influences  
of Prisoners' Legal and  
Financial Obligations on  
Reentry



*Final Report to the  
National  
Institute of  
Justice*

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## Executive Summary

### Background

Former prisoners are increasingly facing the burden of financial debt associated with legal and criminal justice obligations (Bannon, Nagrecha, & Diller, 2010). Debt can result from unpaid fines, court fees, treatment fees, law enforcement fees, restitution, and child support orders. A 2004 study found that upon release, 62% of respondents reported having legal/financial debt related to the criminal justice system (Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). Child support obligations can substantially add to this burden of debt. While little research exists on how much former prisoners owe in child support, estimates suggest between 13 to 24 percent of released prisoners owe over \$400 per month in child support (Griswold, Pearson, Thoennes, & Davis, 2004).

Often, child support orders continue unmodified during a prisoner's incarceration. This can lead to large outstanding sums at the time of release. In one of the few studies in this area, the median total for child support debt across state and local prisoners was estimated to be about \$10,000, such that half of prisoners owed more than \$10,000 and half owed less (Pearson, 2004). Qualitative research and anecdotal evidence suggest this debt and related correctional debt from fines and fees can create significant barriers to successful reentry. Because returning prisoners often have to pay large portions of their salary to government agencies and/or the mothers of their dependent children, it has been suggested that incentives to work are reduced. Legal debt may create a disincentive to find any work at all (Harris, Evans, & Beckett, 2010; McLean & Thompson 2007). In terms of recidivism, this disincentive to find work in the formal labor market could increase recidivism by pushing former prisoners into the illicit economy. Alternatively, having this debt could increase ties to family and children, possibly promoting desistance.

Despite this bleak economic outlook for returning prisoners with child support debt and extant theory that informs why it may matter vis-à-vis key outcomes such as employment and recidivism, no large-scale or national studies have examined how the obligations associated with child support or other accruing debt influence these outcomes in the reintegration process. The current work addresses this empirical gap using longitudinal data from the multi-site Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) to examine the associations among child support















































































































































































