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National Resource Center on
Children & Families of the Incarcerated

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF THE INCARCERATED FACT SHEET

The growing number of children with an incarcerated parent represents one of the most significant collateral consequences of the record prison population in the U.S.¹

Children with Parents in Prison

Demographics

- More than 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent. That is 1 in 28 children.²
- Approximately 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.³
- One in 9 African American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%), and 1 in 57 white children (1.8%) in the United States have an incarcerated parent.⁴
- Approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are under ten years old.⁵

Impact

- While many of the risk factors children of incarcerated parents experience may be related to parental substance abuse, mental health, inadequate education, or other challenges, parental incarceration increases the risk of children living in poverty or experiencing household instability independent of these other problems. ⁶
- A misperception exists that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be incarcerated than their peers, and are predisposed to criminal activity. There is no basis for this in existing research. ⁷
- Parental incarceration is now recognized as an “adverse childhood experience” (ACE); it is distinguished from other adverse childhood experiences by the unique combination of trauma, shame, and stigma. ⁸

Child Welfare

- 2% of incarcerated fathers and 8-10% of mothers have children in foster care (these data do not include at least some persons in prison with children in kinship foster care placements) ⁹
- Information from one study on children in Foster Care with

incarcerated parents provides the following data¹⁰

- 25% of children live with their fathers when a mother goes to prison.
- 90% of children remain with their mothers when the father is incarcerated
- 50% of children with an incarcerated mother live with their grandmothers
- In the child welfare system, 1 in 10 children in in-home settings is living with someone who is on probation.¹⁰
- About 15-20% of children entering the child welfare system have incarcerated parent¹¹
- About 1 in every 5 African American children who come to the attention of child welfare agencies have a recently arrested parent compared to only 1 in 10 White children and only 1 in 20 Hispanic children.¹²
- Incarcerated parents lose their parental rights at a disproportionate rate due to the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) which set strict timelines for initiating Termination of Parental Rights (placement cannot exceed 15 of previous 22 months)¹³

Parents in Prison

- In 2010 1.5 million people were in State or Federal prison in the U.S, and 750,000 in jails. ¹⁴
- This is a 10% decline from 2009 but still significantly higher than 1980 when “mass incarceration” began.¹⁵
- 92% of people in prison are male, 8% female.¹⁶
- The number of women in prison increased by 587% between 1980 and 2011, rising from 15,118 to 111,387 ¹⁷
- Including women in local jails, more than 200,000 women are now incarcerated in the US ¹⁸
- Nationally, there are more than 120,000 incarcerated mothers and 1.1 million incarcerated fathers who are parents of minor children (ages 0-17).¹⁹
- 44-55% Percent of fathers had at least one minor child living with them before incarceration ²⁰
- 64-84% Percent of mothers had at least one minor child living with them before incarceration ²¹
- 59 percent of fathers and 58 percent of mothers had no personal visits from any of their children.²²
- 62% of parents in state prisons and 84% of parents in federal prisons are held over 100 miles away from their residence. 43% of parents in

federal prisons are held over 500 miles away from their last residence.

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The uneven geographic distribution of incarceration in poor communities and communities of color means that the effects radiate beyond the individual to the broader community, presenting profound long-term consequences for family integrity, public health and general quality of life.³²

- 54 % of men and 73% of women have a history of mental health “problems” as opposed to 25% entering prison with a mental health diagnosis.²⁴
- In 2010, 93% of Federal Prisoners were convicted of non-violent crimes, including 48% for drug offenses, and 11% for immigration offenses.²⁵
- In 2010, 47% of State Prisoners were convicted of non-violent crimes, including 17% for drug offenses, and 18% for property offenses and 13% for Public Order offenses.²⁶
- More than 60% of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities.²⁷
- These trends have been intensified by the disproportionate impact of the "war on drugs," in which two-thirds of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color.²⁸
- Roughly two-thirds of women in prison are women of color, representing the fastest growing prison population²⁹
- Blacks make up 12.3 percent of US population and 43.9% of the state and federal prison population. Latinos constitute 12.6% of the country’s population, but make up 18.3% of the prison population. Whites are 69% of the general population with only 34.7% of those incarcerated.³⁰
- If these trends continue, one in every 3 Black males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime.³¹

Care must be taken with these data on disproportionate representation of children of color so as not to interpret them as an indictment of specific groups of people but rather as a reflection of the long-term impact of poverty, segregation, discrimination and urbanization.

Caregivers

- Caregivers of children with parents in prison bear numerous burdens, including stigma and shame associated with having a family member in prison, increased financial strain, physical and emotional stress, and lack of external resources.³²
- Public assistance programs, including TANF were not designed with relative caregivers in mind. Grandparents especially are reluctant to seek support for fear of losing the children to the child welfare system.³³
- Caregivers struggle with multiple challenges in fostering continued relationships between children and their parents in prison.³⁴
- Most prisons are not accessible by any form of public transportation, restricting child-parent visits. In some cases this means children will never visit their parents.³⁵
- Collect phone calls from prisoners are subject to excessive surcharges, an economic burden most caregivers cannot manage.³⁶
- Familial incarceration can be characterized as an “ambiguous loss” leading to “disenfranchised grief.”³⁷
- Caring for children who are experiencing the stigma and blame associated with parental incarceration is particularly difficult for caregivers and may be taxing emotionally and physically.³⁸

Arrests

- One study conducted in 1998 estimated that of the parents arrested:
 - 67% were handcuffed in front of their children
 - 27% reported weapons drawn in front of their children
 - 4.3% reported a physical struggle
 - 3.2% reported the use of pepper spray.³⁹
- Children who witnessed an arrest of a household member were 57% more likely to have elevated posttraumatic stress symptoms compared to children who did not witness an arrest.⁴⁰

Fact Sheet Resources

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