

# Children of Incarcerated Parents

## DEFINITION

*Children of incarcerated parents* is the number of children with a parent in prison per 1,000 children under age 18. The data are reported by the place of the parent's last residence before entering prison.

## SIGNIFICANCE

In the United States, one in forty children has a parent in prison.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 3.6 million parents are under some form of correctional supervision, including parole.<sup>2</sup> Women prisoners account for approximately 7% of all inmates and are the fastest growing group in the prison population.<sup>3</sup>

The increase is partly due to stricter sentencing guidelines and mandatory sentences, particularly for drug-related offenses.<sup>4,5</sup> Fathers are more likely than mothers to be in prison for violent crimes, whereas mothers are more likely to be in prison for drug-related offenses and fraud.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of parental incarceration, and the crimes and arrests that often precede it, most children experience disruption in their homes, a series of temporary caregivers or placement in foster care, financial hardship and lack of contact with their parents.<sup>7</sup> Children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk for many negative behaviors including poor

academic achievement, substance abuse, criminal behavior and incarceration.<sup>8,9</sup>

Despite the large and increasing numbers of incarcerated parents, the children they leave behind remain a hidden population with little attention paid to their special needs. The corrections system does not formally recognize these children. Their care arrangements are often handled informally by family members, so they rarely come to the attention of a child welfare agency. While the children may experience problems at school or in other areas of their lives, these problems are often not recognized as being related to the incarceration of a parent.<sup>10,11</sup>

Upon release from prison, a successful transition to the community requires that ex-offenders enhance their education, find stable employment, suitable housing, and health care, as well as receive other supportive services to restore the parent-child relationship.<sup>12,13</sup> Seventy percent of imprisoned parents in the U.S. do not have a high school diploma.<sup>14</sup> Ex-offenders face barriers to earning a living, including limited work histories, the lack of skills and credentials, and discrimination by potential employers.<sup>15,16</sup> Ex-offenders must also deal with pressures from previous peer groups, broken relationships and discrimination.<sup>17</sup>



## Incarcerated Parents in Rhode Island

- ◆ Of the 230 women in Rhode Island who were serving a sentence or awaiting trial at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections as of December 31, 2003, 71% reported they have children. Of the 3,432 incarcerated men serving a sentence or awaiting trial, 50% reported they have children.
- ◆ Of the 118 women with children who were serving a sentence at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections on December 31, 2003, 58% were serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense and 21% for a drug offense. Another 15% had committed violent offenses and 5% were serving sentences for other reasons. Of the 1,300 sentenced men with children, 17% were serving sentences for nonviolent offenses, 20% for drug offenses, 41% for violent offenses and 23% for breaking and entering, sex offenses or other/unknown offenses.
- ◆ Of the 1,889 parents incarcerated in 2003, including those awaiting trial in Rhode Island, 49% were White, 29% were Black and 21% were Hispanic.

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, December 2003



## Incarcerated Mothers in the United States

- ◆ Seventy-five percent of women in prison are mothers. Two-thirds of these women are mothers to children under the age of eighteen. At the time of arrest, 72% of these women lived with their children.<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ Twenty-five percent of adult women in prison reported that they had either given birth at some point during the year prior to their incarceration or were pregnant at the time of arrest. In the United States, fewer than 50% of state prisons have adequate policies focused on providing medical care to pregnant inmates, while only 48% offer prenatal services such as prenatal counseling and help finding placements after their children are born.<sup>19</sup>

Table 21.

## Children of Incarcerated Parents, Rhode Island, 2003

CITY/TOWN	# OF INCARCERATED PARENTS	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED*	2000 TOTAL POPULATION UNDER AGE 18	RATE PER 1,000 CHILDREN
Barrington	2	7	4,745	1.5
Bristol	10	23	4,399	5.2
Burrillville	11	19	4,043	4.7
Central Falls	57	132	5,531	23.9
Charlestown	9	19	1,712	11.1
Coventry	33	71	8,389	8.5
Cranston	97	209	17,098	12.2
Cumberland	17	36	7,690	4.7
East Greenwich	7	21	3,564	5.9
East Providence	47	103	10,546	9.8
Exeter	7	13	1,589	8.2
Foster	4	7	1,105	6.3
Glocester	5	9	2,664	3.4
Hopkinton	4	6	2,011	3.0
Jamestown	4	4	1,238	3.2
Johnston	43	87	5,906	14.7
Lincoln	6	10	5,157	1.9
Little Compton	0	0	780	0.0
Middletown	7	20	4,328	4.6
Narragansett	12	26	2,833	9.2
New Shoreham	3	5	185	NA
Newport	56	120	5,199	23.1
North Kingstown	17	33	6,848	4.8
North Providence	27	56	5,936	9.4
North Smithfield	1	5	2,379	2.1
Pawtucket	158	309	18,151	17.0
Portsmouth	6	10	4,329	2.3
Providence	680	1,568	45,277	34.6
Richmond	3	6	2,014	3.0
Scituate	5	7	2,635	2.7
Smithfield	3	4	4,019	1.0
South Kingstown	12	25	6,284	4.0
Tiverton	4	4	3,367	1.2
Warren	8	18	2,454	7.3
Warwick	70	135	18,780	7.2
West Greenwich	1	1	1,444	0.7
West Warwick	50	103	6,632	15.5
Westerly	15	24	5,406	4.4
Woonsocket	118	270	11,155	24.2
Unknown Residence	148	333	NA	NA
Out of State Residence**	122	248	NA	NA
Core Cities	1,119	2,502	91,945	27.2
Remainder of State	500	1,023	155,877	6.6
Rhode Island	1,889	4,106	247,822	16.6

### Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Data are from the Rhode Island Department of Corrections based on self-reports from prisoners and those individuals awaiting trial at the Adult Correctional Institution in Cranston, Rhode Island as of December 31, 2003.

\*Data on the number of children are self-reported by the incarcerated parents and may include some children over age 18. Nationally and in Rhode Island, much of the existing research has relied upon self-reporting by incarcerated parents or caregivers.

\*\*Data on Out-of-State Residence reports on those who are under jurisdiction of another state but serving time in Rhode Island and those who are under jurisdiction of Rhode Island, but report an out-of-state address.

NA: Rates were not calculated for cities or towns with less than 500 children under age 18, as rates for small denominations are statistically unreliable.

### References for Indicator

- <sup>1</sup> Adalist-Estrin, A. and Mustin, J. (2003). *Introduction to Children of Prisoners*. Palmyra, VA: The Children of Prisoners Library. Retrieved from [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)
- <sup>2,6</sup> Parke, R. and Clarke-Stewart, K.A. (2002). *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children*. Prepared for the "From Prison to Home" Conference.
- <sup>3,4</sup> Hirsch, A., et al (May 2002). *Every Door Closed: Facts About Parents With Criminal Records*. Every Door Closed Fact Sheet Series. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy and Philadelphia, PA: Community Legal Services, Inc.
- <sup>5,10</sup> Seymour, C. B. and Wright, L. E. (2000). *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.
- <sup>7,8,11</sup> Beatty, C. (1997). *Parents in Prison: Children in Crisis: An Issue Brief*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- <sup>9</sup> Krisberg, B. et al (October 2001). *The Plight of Children Whose Parents Are in Prison*. NCCD Focus. National Council on Crime and Delinquency.
- <sup>12</sup> Hirsch, A. (Fall 2003). *Opening Every Door: Policies that Strengthen Families after Prison*. *America's Family Support Magazine*. Princeton, NJ: Family Support America.

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