

# 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

Between 1991 and 1999 in the U.S., the number of children with imprisoned fathers increased 58% and the number of children with imprisoned mothers increased 98%.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of parental incarceration, and the crimes and arrests that 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>2</sup> Children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk for many negative behaviors including poor academic achievement, substance abuse, and criminal behavior and incarceration.<sup>3,4</sup> Most children with incarcerated parents live in poverty before, during, and after their parents' incarceration and many have been exposed to violent or traumatic experiences.<sup>5,6</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>7,8</sup>

During the past twenty years, there has been a steady increase and change in the make-up of the prison population, due partly to stricter sentencing guidelines and mandatory sentences, particularly for drug-related offenses.<sup>9</sup> One in three mothers in state prison committed drug-related crimes. Mothers are more likely than fathers to report drug use in the month prior to their arrest.<sup>10</sup>

Seventy percent of imprisoned parents in the U.S. do not have a high school diploma. More than one-quarter of fathers and half of mothers were unemployed in the month before their arrests.<sup>11</sup> Upon release from prison, a successful transition to the community often requires ongoing substance abuse or mental health services, adequate housing and assistance entering the job market.<sup>12</sup>



## Incarcerated Parents in Rhode Island

- ◆ Of the 209 women in Rhode Island who were at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) on December 31, 2002, 76% reported they have children. Of the 3,176 incarcerated men, 52% reported they have children.
- ◆ Of the 126 women with children who were serving a sentence at the RIDOC on December 31, 2002, 60% were serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense and 17% for a drug offense. Another 17% had committed violent offenses and 6% were serving sentences for other reasons. Of the 1,336 men with children serving sentences, 22% were serving sentences for nonviolent offenses, 22% for drug offenses, 35% for violent offenses and 20% for breaking and entering, sex offenses or other/unknown offenses.
- ◆ Of the 1,779 parents incarcerated in 2002 in Rhode Island, 49% were White, 29% were Black and 21% were Hispanic.

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, December 2002.



## Incarcerated Parents and Their Children in the United States

- ◆ Children of incarcerated fathers are three times more likely to be in the care of their other parent (the mother) than children of incarcerated mothers. The increasing incarceration of women is particularly disruptive for children, who are likely to lose their primary caretaker when a mother is incarcerated.<sup>13,14</sup>
- ◆ Male offenders facing sentencing are more likely to be employed outside the home than female offenders, and employment history is often considered in sentencing. Female offenders, in contrast, are more likely to have primary parenting responsibilities, yet these responsibilities and the related well-being of children are rarely considered in sentencing decisions.<sup>15</sup>

Table 20.

## Children of Incarcerated Parents, Rhode Island, 2002

CITY/TOWN	# OF INCARCERATED PARENTS	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED*	2000 TOTAL POPULATION UNDER AGE 18	RATE PER 1,000 CHILDREN
Barrington	2	3	4,745	0.6
Bristol	8	12	4,399	2.7
Burrillville	12	23	4,043	5.7
Central Falls	80	171	5,531	30.9
Charlestown	3	5	1,712	2.9
Coventry	29	66	8,389	7.9
Cranston	90	186	17,098	10.9
Cumberland	16	29	7,690	3.8
East Greenwich	5	13	3,564	3.6
East Providence	53	119	10,546	11.3
Exeter	9	22	1,589	13.8
Foster	1	3	1,105	2.7
Glocester	5	9	2,664	3.4
Hopkinton	3	4	2,011	2.0
Jamestown	2	3	1,238	2.4
Johnston	35	72	5,906	12.2
Lincoln	11	27	5,157	5.2
Little Compton	0	0	780	0.0
Middletown	7	16	4,328	3.7
Narragansett	13	37	2,833	13.1
New Shoreham	1	3	185	16.2
Newport	62	151	5,199	29.0
North Kingstown	16	30	6,848	4.4
North Providence	30	51	5,936	8.6
North Smithfield	3	8	2,379	3.4
Pawtucket	154	316	18,151	17.4
Portsmouth	4	10	4,329	2.3
Providence	651	1,483	45,277	32.8
Richmond	3	4	2,014	2.0
Scituate	3	5	2,635	1.9
Smithfield	6	12	4,019	3.0
South Kingstown	14	28	6,284	4.5
Tiverton	5	6	3,367	1.8
Warren	11	24	2,454	9.8
Warwick	60	113	18,780	6.0
West Greenwich	3	5	1,444	3.5
West Warwick	47	109	6,632	16.4
Westerly	23	39	5,406	7.2
Woonsocket	101	276	11,155	24.7
<i>Unknown Residence</i>	<i>198</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>NA</i>
<i>Core Cities</i>	<i>1,095</i>	<i>2,506</i>	<i>91,945</i>	<i>27.3</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>684</i>	<i>1,395</i>	<i>155,877</i>	<i>8.9</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>1,779</i>	<i>3,901</i>	<i>247,822</i>	<i>15.7</i>

**Source of Data for Table/Methodology**

Data are from the Rhode Island Department of Corrections based on self-reports from prisoners at the Adult Correctional Institution in Cranston, Rhode Island as of December 31, 2002.

\*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.

**References for Indicator**

<sup>1,10,11,13</sup> Mumola, C. (August 2000). *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, US Department of Justice.

<sup>2,3,8,12</sup> Beatty, C. (1997). *Parents in Prison: Children in Crisis: An Issue Brief*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

<sup>4,5,14,15</sup> Krisberg, B. et al (October 2001). "The Plight of Children Whose Parents Are in Prison" in *NCCD Focus*. Washington, DC: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

<sup>6</sup> Seymour, C. (1998). "Children with Parents in Prison: Child Welfare Policy, Program, and Practice Issues" *Child Welfare*, Vol. 77, No.5, (September/October 1998). Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

<sup>7,9</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.