

Children of Incarcerated Parents

DEFINITION

Children of incarcerated parents is the number of children with parents serving sentences at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections per 1,000 children under age 18. The data are reported by the place of the parent's last residence before entering prison and do not include Rhode Island children who have parents incarcerated at other locations.

SIGNIFICANCE

More than five million children in the U.S. have had a parent incarcerated in jail or state or federal prison at some point in their lives.¹ Parental incarceration can contribute to children's insecure attachment to their parent, which can lead to poor developmental outcomes. Children of incarcerated parents experience high rates of physical and mental health problems (including asthma, obesity, and depression) and educational challenges (including grade retention, placement in special education, and suspension). Parental incarceration increases children's risk for learning disabilities, ADHD, conduct problems, developmental delays, and speech problems.^{2,3,4,5}

Nationally, most children of incarcerated parents live with their other parent, a grandparent, or other relatives.⁶ Of the 1,610 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2019 (including those awaiting trial), 93%

(1,496) were fathers and 7% (114) were mothers.⁷ Nationally, nearly half (48%) of incarcerated parents lived with their children one month prior to incarceration.⁸

Children of incarcerated parents are more likely than other children to be involved with the child welfare system. In the U.S., 40% of children in foster care had experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.⁹ These children often represent complex cases for child welfare agencies, involving balancing parental rights with the safety and well-being of the child.¹⁰

Programs and policies targeted at the unique needs of incarcerated pregnant women and mothers can improve outcomes for them and their families. Keeping siblings together, providing family counseling and access to mental health care, mentoring, peer support services, and prison transition supports can alleviate the worst effects of parents' imprisonment on children and improve the family reunification process.^{11,12}

The criminal justice system disproportionately affects people of color, and in the U.S. 24% of Black children and 11% of Hispanic children will experience parental incarceration compared to 4% of White children.¹³ Of the 1,610 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2019 (including those awaiting trial), 43% were White, 28% were Black, 26% were Hispanic, and 3% were of another race.¹⁴



Parents at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI), September 30, 2019

	INMATES SURVEYED*	# REPORTING CHILDREN	% REPORTING CHILDREN	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED
Awaiting Trial	671	430	64%	1,017
Serving a Sentence	2,019	1,180	58%	2,722
TOTAL	2,690	1,610	60%	3,739

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2019. *Does not include inmates who were missing responses to the question on number of children, inmates on home confinement, inmates serving at Institute of Mental Health, or those from another state's jurisdiction.

- ◆ Of the 2,690 inmates awaiting trial or serving a sentence at the ACI on September 30, 2019 who answered the question on number of children, 1,610 inmates reported having 3,739 children. Thirty-seven percent of sentenced mothers and 15% of sentenced fathers had sentences that were six months or less.¹⁵
- ◆ Of the 75 sentenced mothers on September 30, 2019, 48% were serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense, 33% for a violent offense, 11% for a drug-related offense, 7% for breaking and entering, and 1% for a sex-related offense. Of the 1,105 sentenced fathers, 50% were serving sentences for a violent offense, 18% for a nonviolent offense, 15% for a sex-related offense, 12% for a drug-related offense, and 5% for breaking and entering.¹⁶
- ◆ Thirty-eight percent of incarcerated parents awaiting trial or serving a sentence on September 30, 2019 had less than a high school diploma, 48% had a high school diploma or a GED, and 13% had at least some college education.¹⁷
- ◆ A supportive family, safe and secure housing, assistance obtaining employment, medical and mental health services, and substance abuse treatment are critical to parents' successful transition to the community after incarceration and to support the well-being of their children.^{18,19}
- ◆ Families with parents with a criminal record can experience significant challenges even if the parent has never been incarcerated. A parent's criminal record is often a barrier to housing eligibility, employment opportunities, and access to public benefits. For immigrants a conviction can lead to deportation.²⁰

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Table 30.

Children of Incarcerated Parents, Rhode Island, September 30, 2019

CITY/TOWN	# OF INCARCERATED PARENTS	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED*	2010 POPULATION UNDER AGE 18	RATE PER 1,000 CHILDREN
Barrington	0	0	4,597	0.0
Bristol	4	11	3,623	3.0
Burrillville	9	17	3,576	4.8
Central Falls	40	100	5,644	17.7
Charlestown	2	2	1,506	1.3
Coventry	16	35	7,770	4.5
Cranston	76	163	16,414	9.9
Cumberland	13	34	7,535	4.5
East Greenwich	4	17	3,436	4.9
East Providence	19	38	9,177	4.1
Exeter	2	3	1,334	2.2
Foster	2	4	986	4.1
Glocester	2	8	2,098	3.8
Hopkinton	3	5	1,845	2.7
Jamestown	1	2	1,043	1.9
Johnston	24	42	5,480	7.7
Lincoln	2	6	4,751	1.3
Little Compton	0	0	654	0.0
Middletown	8	20	3,652	5.5
Narragansett	4	9	2,269	4.0
New Shoreham	2	4	163	24.5
Newport	25	55	4,083	13.5
North Kingstown	9	23	6,322	3.6
North Providence	29	61	5,514	11.1
North Smithfield	3	7	2,456	2.9
Pawtucket	114	256	16,575	15.4
Portsmouth	5	15	3,996	3.8
Providence	358	867	41,634	20.8
Richmond	3	5	1,849	2.7
Scituate	3	6	2,272	2.6
Smithfield	5	9	3,625	2.5
South Kingstown	12	29	5,416	5.4
Tiverton	9	23	2,998	7.7
Warren	5	7	1,940	3.6
Warwick	61	118	15,825	7.5
West Greenwich	2	14	1,477	9.5
West Warwick	42	89	5,746	15.5
Westerly	17	37	4,787	7.7
Woonsocket	89	212	9,888	21.4
Unknown Residence	95	226	NA	NA
Out-of-State Residence**	61	143	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	601	1,435	73,741	19.5
Remainder of State	423	918	150,215	6.1
Rhode Island	1,024	2,353	223,956	10.5

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2019. Offenders who were on home confinement and the awaiting trial population are excluded from this table.

U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010.

Since the 2007 *Factbook*, data are reported as of September 30, with the exception of the 2015 *Factbook*, in which data were reported as of October 10, 2014.

*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 includes inmates who are under jurisdiction in Rhode Island, but report an out-of-state address. Inmates who were from another state's jurisdiction, but serving time in Rhode Island, are not included in the Rhode Island, four core cities, or remainder of state rates, nor are those with an unknown residence.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

References

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- ² Shlafer, R. J., Gerrity, E., Ruhland, E., & Wheeler, M. (2013). *Children with incarcerated parents - Considering children's outcomes in the context of family experiences*. Retrieved January 12, 2020, from www.cyfc.umn.edu
- ^{3,13} Turney, K., & Goodsell, R. (2018). Parental incarceration and children's wellbeing. *Future of Children*, 28(1), 147-160.
- ⁵ Turney, K. (2014). Stress proliferation across generations? Examining the relationship between parental incarceration and childhood health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 55(3), 302-319.
- ^{6,8,10} Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). *Child welfare practice with families affected by parental incarceration*. Retrieved January 13, 2020, from www.childwelfare.gov
- ^{7,14,15,16,17} Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2019.

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