

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 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 1,299 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2020 (including those awaiting trial), 94% (1,224) were fathers and 6% (75) 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. Placing children with family members, 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}

Nationally and in Rhode Island, the criminal justice system disproportionately affects People of Color. 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 1,299 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2020, 40% were white, 29% Hispanic, 28% Black, and 3% another race.¹⁴



Parents at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI), September 30, 2020

	INMATES SURVEYED*	# REPORTING CHILDREN	% REPORTING CHILDREN	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED
Awaiting Trial	562	371	66%	899
Serving a Sentence	1,594	928	58%	2,140
TOTAL	2,156	1,299	60%	3,039

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2020. *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 2,156 inmates awaiting trial or serving a sentence at the ACI on September 30, 2020 who answered the question on number of children, 1,299 inmates reported having 3,039 children. Thirty percent of sentenced mothers and 9% of sentenced fathers had sentences that were six months or less. Parents of Color were overrepresented compared to their proportion in the general population.¹⁵
- ◆ Of the 44 sentenced mothers on September 30, 2020, 45% were serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense, 43% for a violent offense, 5% for a drug-related offense, 5% for breaking and entering, and 2% for a sex-related offense. Of the 884 sentenced fathers, 53% were serving sentences for a violent offense, 17% for a sex-related offense, 13% for a nonviolent offense, 11% for a drug-related offense, and 6% for breaking and entering.¹⁶
- ◆ Thirty-seven percent of incarcerated parents awaiting trial or serving a sentence on September 30, 2020 had less than a high school diploma, 49% 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, maintaining parental rights, 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, 2020

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	5	12	3,623	3.3
Burrillville	7	15	3,576	4.2
Central Falls	40	113	5,644	20.0
Charlestown	2	2	1,506	1.3
Coventry	12	19	7,770	2.4
Cranston	54	119	16,414	7.2
Cumberland	15	37	7,535	4.9
East Greenwich	5	19	3,436	5.5
East Providence	21	37	9,177	4.0
Exeter	2	3	1,334	2.2
Foster	1	1	986	1.0
Glocester	3	7	2,098	3.3
Hopkinton	2	4	1,845	2.2
Jamestown	0	0	1,043	0.0
Johnston	15	35	5,480	6.4
Lincoln	5	9	4,751	1.9
Little Compton	0	0	654	0.0
Middletown	4	11	3,652	3.0
Narragansett	2	6	2,269	2.6
New Shoreham	3	6	163	36.8
Newport	22	43	4,083	10.5
North Kingstown	4	11	6,322	1.7
North Providence	18	43	5,514	7.8
North Smithfield	2	3	2,456	1.2
Pawtucket	89	191	16,575	11.5
Portsmouth	0	0	3,996	0.0
Providence	294	685	41,634	16.5
Richmond	1	3	1,849	1.6
Scituate	2	4	2,272	1.8
Smithfield	5	10	3,625	2.8
South Kingstown	5	14	5,416	2.6
Tiverton	6	17	2,998	5.7
Warren	7	13	1,940	6.7
Warwick	41	72	15,825	4.5
West Greenwich	0	0	1,477	0.0
West Warwick	26	59	5,746	10.3
Westerly	11	22	4,787	4.6
Woonsocket	73	162	9,888	16.4
Unknown Residence	71	207	NA	NA
Out-of-State Residence**	53	126	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	496	1,151	73,741	15.6
Remainder of State	308	656	150,215	4.4
Rhode Island	804	1,807	223,956	8.1

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2020. 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 complex family experiences*. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from www.conservancy.umn.edu
- ^{3,13} Turney, K., & Goodsell, R. (2018). Parental incarceration and children's wellbeing. *Future of Children, 28(1)*, 147-160.
- ³ 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 February 18, 2021, from www.childwelfare.gov
- ^{7,14,15,16,17} Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2020.

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