

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 1,318 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2021 (including those

awaiting trial), 94% (1,236) were fathers and 6% (82) were mothers.⁷ Parents of minor children represent over half of the U.S. prison population.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 1,318 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2021 41% were white, 28% Black, 27% Hispanic, and 3% another/unknown race.¹⁴


**Parents at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI),
September 30, 2021**

	INMATES SURVEYED*	# REPORTING CHILDREN	% REPORTING CHILDREN	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED
Awaiting Trial	640	433	68%	1,088
Serving a Sentence	1,491	885	59%	2,031
TOTAL	2,131	1,318	62%	3,119

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2021. *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 2,131 inmates awaiting trial or serving a sentence at the ACI on September 30, 2021 who answered the question on number of children, 1,318 inmates reported having 3,119 children. Thirty-five percent of sentenced mothers and 9% of sentenced fathers had sentences that were six months or less.¹⁵
- ◆ Of the 40 sentenced mothers on September 30, 2021, 45% were serving a sentence for a violent offense, 38% for a nonviolent offense, 13% for a drug-related offense, and 5% for a sex-related offense. Of the 845 sentenced fathers, 53% were serving sentences for a violent offense, 17% for a sex-related offense, 16% for a nonviolent offense, 10% for a drug-related offense, and 4% for breaking and entering.¹⁶
- ◆ Thirty-five percent of incarcerated parents awaiting trial or serving a sentence on September 30, 2021 had less than a high school diploma, 51% 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, 2021

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	12	3,623	3.3
Burrillville	8	18	3,576	5.0
Central Falls	34	78	5,644	13.8
Charlestown	1	1	1,506	0.7
Coventry	15	26	7,770	3.3
Cranston	59	134	16,414	8.2
Cumberland	7	22	7,535	2.9
East Greenwich	5	15	3,436	4.4
East Providence	16	32	9,177	3.5
Exeter	1	2	1,334	1.5
Foster	1	1	986	1.0
Glocester	2	7	2,098	3.3
Hopkinton	5	11	1,845	6.0
Jamestown	0	0	1,043	0.0
Johnston	11	21	5,480	3.8
Lincoln	4	5	4,751	1.1
Little Compton	1	4	654	0.0
Middletown	7	14	3,652	3.8
Narragansett	3	9	2,269	4.0
New Shoreham	1	3	163	18.4
Newport	21	57	4,083	14.0
North Kingstown	5	13	6,322	2.1
North Providence	16	36	5,514	6.5
North Smithfield	3	4	2,456	1.6
Pawtucket	77	159	16,575	9.6
Portsmouth	1	2	3,996	0.5
Providence	271	618	41,634	14.8
Richmond	0	0	1,849	0.0
Scituate	3	4	2,272	1.8
Smithfield	8	20	3,625	5.5
South Kingstown	6	13	5,416	2.4
Tiverton	5	17	2,998	5.7
Warren	4	8	1,940	4.1
Warwick	43	100	15,825	6.3
West Greenwich	1	1	1,477	0.7
West Warwick	27	52	5,746	9.0
Westerly	11	21	4,787	4.4
Woonsocket	69	156	9,888	15.8
Unknown Residence	78	211	NA	NA
Out-of-State Residence**	51	124	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	451	1,011	73,741	13.7
Remainder of State	305	685	150,215	4.6
Rhode Island	756	1,696	223,956	7.6

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2021. 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

- ^{1,4,9} Laub, J. H., & Haskins, R. (2018). *Helping children with parents in prison and children in foster care*. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu>
- ² Jackson, D. B., Testa, A., Semenza, D. C., & Vaughn, M. G. (2021). Parental Incarceration, Child Adversity, and Child Health: A Strategic Comparison Approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(7), 3384.
- ^{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. (2021). *Child welfare practice with families affected by parental incarceration*. Retrieved February 14, 2022, from www.childwelfare.gov
- ^{7,14,15,16,17} Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2021.

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