

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. (7% of all U.S. children) have had a parent incarcerated in jail or state or federal prison at least once.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, depression, and anxiety) and educational problems (including grade retention, absenteeism, and dropping out). 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 1,857 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2016 (including those awaiting trial), 93%

(1,730) were fathers and 7% (127) 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. in 2013, 8% (almost 20,000) of children who entered foster care did so at least in part due to the incarceration of a parent.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}

Of the 1,857 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2016 (including those awaiting trial), 41% were White, 30% were Black, 26% were Hispanic, and 3% were of another race. Sixty-four percent of incarcerated parents with a known in-state residence identified one of the four core cities as their last place of residence.¹³

Parents at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI), September 30, 2016

	INMATES SURVEYED*	# REPORTING CHILDREN	% REPORTING CHILDREN	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED
Awaiting Trial	621	390	63%	861
Serving a Sentence	2,476	1,467	59%	3,285
TOTAL	3,097	1,857	60%	4,146

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2016. *Does not include inmates who were missing responses to the question on number of children, inmates on home confinement, or those from another state's jurisdiction.

- ◆ Of the 3,097 inmates awaiting trial or serving a sentence at the ACI on September 30, 2016 and answered the question on number of children, 1,857 inmates reported having 4,146 children. Thirty-six percent of sentenced mothers and 12% of sentenced fathers had sentences that were six months or less.¹⁴
- ◆ Of the 83 sentenced mothers on September 30, 2016, 43% were serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense, 36% for a violent offense, 11% for a drug-related offense, 6% for breaking and entering, and 2% for a sex-related offense. Of the 1,385 sentenced fathers, 45% were serving sentences for a violent offense, 19% for a nonviolent offense, 16% for a drug-related offense, 13% for a sex-related offense, and 6% for breaking and entering.¹⁵
- ◆ Thirty-nine percent of incarcerated parents awaiting trial or serving a sentence on September 30, 2016 had less than a high school diploma, 47% had a high school diploma or a GED, and 13% had at least some college education.¹⁶
- ◆ A supportive family, education, job training, stable housing, employment assistance, medical and mental health services, and substance abuse treatment are critical to parents' successful transition to the community after incarceration and also to support the well-being of their children.^{17,18}
- ◆ 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 an obstacle to securing employment, participating in education and training programs, accessing housing supports, and obtaining public assistance.¹⁹

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Table 29.

Children of Incarcerated Parents, Rhode Island, September 30, 2016

CITY/TOWN	# OF INCARCERATED PARENTS	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED*	2010 TOTAL POPULATION UNDER AGE 18	RATE PER 1,000 CHILDREN
Barrington	1	2	4,597	0.4
Bristol	10	19	3,623	5.2
Burrillville	10	24	3,576	6.7
Central Falls	69	169	5,644	29.9
Charlestown	3	3	1,506	2.0
Coventry	20	37	7,770	4.8
Cranston	69	132	16,414	8.0
Cumberland	20	60	7,535	8.0
East Greenwich	5	13	3,436	3.8
East Providence	33	81	9,177	8.8
Exeter	2	3	1,334	2.2
Foster	2	5	986	5.1
Glocester	1	2	2,098	1.0
Hopkinton	3	4	1,845	2.2
Jamestown	3	5	1,043	4.8
Johnston	24	49	5,480	8.9
Lincoln	3	5	4,751	1.1
Little Compton	1	2	654	3.1
Middletown	8	18	3,652	4.9
Narragansett	7	16	2,269	7.1
New Shoreham	0	0	163	0.0
Newport	28	74	4,083	18.1
North Kingstown	8	21	6,322	3.3
North Providence	31	65	5,514	11.8
North Smithfield	4	6	2,456	2.4
Pawtucket	129	289	16,575	17.4
Portsmouth	3	5	3,996	1.3
Providence	486	1,090	41,634	26.2
Richmond	3	8	1,849	4.3
Scituate	1	2	2,272	0.9
Smithfield	5	10	3,625	2.8
South Kingstown	15	29	5,416	5.4
Tiverton	9	22	2,998	7.3
Warren	6	12	1,940	6.2
Warwick	56	97	15,825	6.1
West Greenwich	2	5	1,477	3.4
West Warwick	56	117	5,746	20.4
Westerly	7	16	4,787	3.3
Woonsocket	135	327	9,888	33.1
Unknown Residence	120	280	NA	NA
Out-of-State Residence**	69	161	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	819	1,875	73,741	25.4
Remainder of State	459	969	150,215	6.5
Rhode Island	1,278	2,844	223,956	12.7

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2016. 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

- ¹⁴ Murphey, D. & Cooper, P. M. (2015). *Parents behind bars: What happens to their children?* Retrieved February 13, 2017, from www.childtrends.org
- 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 December 22, 2015, from www.cyfc.umcn.edu
- ³ Uggen, C. & McElrath, S. (2014). Parental incarceration: What we know and where we need to go. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 104(3), 597-604.
- 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.
- ^{6,8,9,10} Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). *Child welfare practice with families affected by parental incarceration.* Retrieved December 22, 2015, from www.childwelfare.gov
- ^{7,13,14,15,16} Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2016.

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