

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) and are at increased 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 1,590 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2023 (including those awaiting trial), 93% (1,486) were fathers and 7% (104) 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.⁹ Although these children may present complex cases for child welfare agencies, caseworkers are required to pursue reunification and regular visitation as they would for other nonincarcerated, child-welfare-involved parents.¹⁰

Programs and policies targeting 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 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 1,590 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2023 (including those awaiting trial), 36% were white, 31% were Black, 30% were Hispanic, and 3% were another race.¹⁴



Parents at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI), September 30, 2023

	INMATES SURVEYED*	# REPORTING CHILDREN	% REPORTING CHILDREN	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED
Awaiting Trial	760	563	74%	1,511
Serving a Sentence	1,596	1,027	64%	2,475
TOTAL	2,356	1,590	67%	3,986

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2023. *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 2,356 inmates awaiting trial or serving a sentence at the ACI on September 30, 2023 who answered the question on number of children, 1,590 inmates reported having 3,986 children. Forty-two percent of sentenced mothers and 9% of sentenced fathers had sentences that were six months or less.¹⁵

★ Of the 64 sentenced mothers on September 30, 2023, 53% for a nonviolent offense, 28% were serving a sentence for a violent offense, 16% for a drug-related offense, and 3% for a sex-related offense. Of the 963 sentenced fathers, 49% were serving sentences for a violent offense, 17% for a nonviolent offense, 16% for a sex-related offense, 13% for a drug-related offense, and 4% for breaking and entering.¹⁶

★ Thirty-seven percent of incarcerated parents awaiting trial or serving a sentence on September 30, 2023 had less than a high school diploma, 49% had a high school diploma or a GED, and 14% 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 28.

Children of Incarcerated Parents, Rhode Island, September 30, 2023

CITY/TOWN	# OF INCARCERATED PARENTS	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED*	2020 POPULATION UNDER AGE 18	RATE PER 1,000 CHILDREN
Barrington	0	0	4,489	0.0
Bristol	5	12	2,887	4.2
Burrillville	7	14	3,229	4.3
Central Falls	34	75	6,411	11.7
Charlestown	3	7	1,161	6.0
Coventry	10	20	6,655	3.0
Cranston	57	124	15,744	7.9
Cumberland	9	23	7,550	3.0
East Greenwich	7	14	3,465	4.0
East Providence	15	35	7,886	4.4
Exeter	1	2	1,175	1.7
Foster	3	5	790	6.3
Glocester	2	9	1,896	4.7
Hopkinton	3	6	1,613	3.7
Jamestown	1	2	871	2.3
Johnston	17	29	5,119	5.7
Lincoln	4	10	4,640	2.2
Little Compton	1	4	568	7.0
Middletown	4	10	3,487	2.9
Narragansett	2	6	1,651	3.6
New Shoreham	0	0	189	0.0
Newport	21	49	3,660	13.4
North Kingstown	7	19	5,496	3.5
North Providence	21	48	5,802	8.3
North Smithfield	2	6	2,274	2.6
Pawtucket	89	215	16,455	13.1
Portsmouth	3	10	3,444	2.9
Providence	325	764	41,021	18.6
Richmond	1	2	1,627	1.2
Scituate	4	5	1,866	2.7
Smithfield	4	7	3,411	2.1
South Kingstown	6	10	4,339	2.3
Tiverton	5	13	2,723	4.8
Warren	3	5	1,826	2.7
Warwick	30	63	14,034	4.5
West Greenwich	1	1	1,251	0.8
West Warwick	30	61	5,787	10.5
Westerly	12	35	3,826	9.1
Woonsocket	63	178	9,467	18.8
Unknown Residence	156	447	NA	NA
Out-of-State Residence**	59	130	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	511	1,232	73,354	16.8
Remainder of State	301	666	136,431	4.9
Rhode Island	812	1,898	209,785	9.0

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2023. Offenders who were in home confinement and the awaiting trial population are excluded from this table.

U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2020, P2,P4.

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 March 29, 2023, 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 Wildeman, C., Goldman, A.W., Turney, K. (2018). Parental incarceration and child health in the United States. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 40(1), 146-156.
- ^{6,8,10} Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Child welfare practice with families affected by parental incarceration*. Retrieved March 30, 2023, from www.childwelfare.gov
- ^{7,14,15,16,17} Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2023.

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