

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 1,586 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2024 (including those awaiting trial), 94% (1,486) were fathers and 6% (100) 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 experienced parental incarceration at some point.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 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 at some point in their childhood compared to 4% of white children.¹³ Of the 1,586 parents incarcerated in Rhode Island on September 30, 2024 (including those awaiting trial), 35% were white, 31% were Black, 30% were Hispanic, and 4% were another race.¹⁴



Parents at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI), September 30, 2024

	INMATES SURVEYED*	# REPORTING CHILDREN	% REPORTING CHILDREN	# OF CHILDREN REPORTED
Awaiting Trial	800	589	74%	1,531
Serving a Sentence	1,581	997	63%	2,463
TOTAL	2,381	1,586	67%	3,994

Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2024. *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 2,381 inmates awaiting trial or serving a sentence at the ACI on September 30, 2024 who answered the question on the number of children they had, 1,586 inmates reported having 3,994 children. Thirty-five percent of sentenced mothers and 9% of sentenced fathers had sentences that were six months or less.¹⁵

◆ Of the 46 sentenced mothers on September 30, 2024, 54% were serving sentences for a nonviolent offense, 35% for a violent offense, 9% for a drug-related offense, and 2% for a sex-related offense. Of the 951 sentenced fathers, 46% were serving sentences for a violent offense, 20% for a nonviolent offense, 16% for a sex-related offense, 14% for a drug-related offense, and 4% for breaking and entering.¹⁶

◆ Thirty-eight percent of incarcerated parents awaiting trial or serving a sentence on September 30, 2024 had less than a high school diploma, 48% 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, even for a low-level crime, can lead to deportation.²⁰

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Table 25.

Children of Incarcerated Parents, Rhode Island, September 30, 2024

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	8	23	2,887	8.0
Burrillville	5	11	3,229	3.4
Central Falls	33	83	6,411	12.9
Charlestown	1	1	1,161	0.9
Coventry	14	37	6,655	5.6
Cranston	46	105	15,744	6.7
Cumberland	7	18	7,550	2.4
East Greenwich	6	11	3,465	3.2
East Providence	11	23	7,886	2.9
Exeter	1	2	1,175	1.7
Foster	2	2	790	2.5
Glocester	3	10	1,896	5.3
Hopkinton	2	3	1,613	1.9
Jamestown	0	0	871	0.0
Johnston	10	23	5,119	4.5
Lincoln	5	12	4,640	2.6
Little Compton	1	4	568	7.0
Middletown	7	12	3,487	3.4
Narragansett	2	6	1,651	3.6
New Shoreham	0	0	189	0.0
Newport	27	77	3,660	21.0
North Kingstown	5	6	5,496	1.1
North Providence	16	38	5,802	6.5
North Smithfield	2	10	2,274	4.4
Pawtucket	73	167	16,455	10.1
Portsmouth	2	2	3,444	0.6
Providence	304	751	41,021	18.3
Richmond	1	1	1,627	0.6
Scituate	5	6	1,866	3.2
Smithfield	5	11	3,411	3.2
South Kingstown	6	16	4,339	3.7
Tiverton	3	9	2,723	3.3
Warren	2	3	1,826	1.6
Warwick	31	78	14,034	5.6
West Greenwich	0	0	1,251	0.0
West Warwick	23	54	5,787	9.3
Westerly	9	29	3,826	7.6
Woonsocket	55	156	9,467	16.5
Unknown Residence	193	516	NA	NA
Out-of-State Residence**	71	147	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	465	1,157	73,354	15.8
Remainder of State	268	643	136,431	4.7
Rhode Island	733	1,800	209,785	8.6

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2024. Offenders who were in home confinement and the awaiting trial population are excluded from this table.

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

*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.

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