

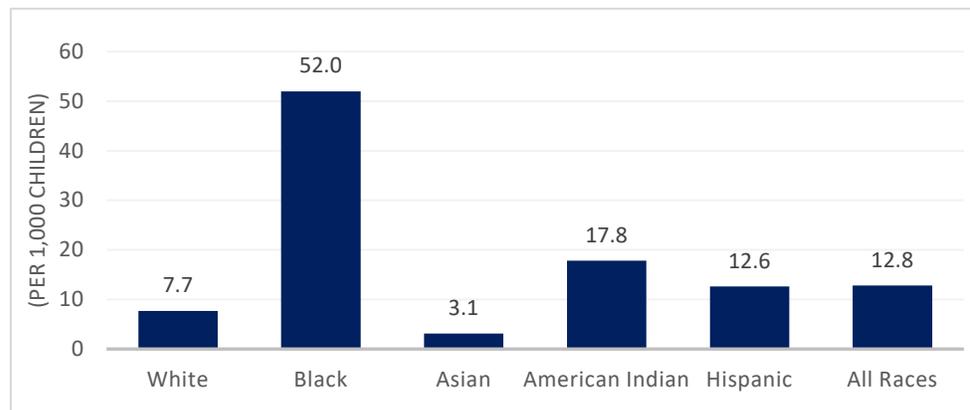


**Testimony Re: House Bill 8117, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government-- Corrections Department
House Judiciary Committee
March 24, 2026
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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We would also like to thank Representative Felix for sponsoring this important bill. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for H-8117, which would end the provision that allows the Department of Corrections (DOC) to charge people who are incarcerated in their facilities for phone calls and would require the DOC to provide free communication services. This act also would establish a ratio of telephones to people in custody and would require that facilities provide in-person contact visits.

Nearly 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. Parental incarceration can contribute to children’s insecure attachment to their parent, which can lead to poor developmental outcomes. Of those incarcerated at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI) on September 30, 2025, 67% (1,631) were parents. **According to a fiscal analysis conducted by [Worth Rises](#), Rhode Islanders spend \$1 million annually to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones.** Many families are trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty, with one in three families going into debt to stay in touch with an incarcerated loved one. This burden falls disproportionately on BIPOC and low-income communities, deepening cycles of poverty. In Rhode Island, Parents of Color are overrepresented in the incarcerated population compared to their proportion in the general population. In Rhode Island on September 30, 2025, 52.0 per 1,000 Black children had an incarcerated parent compared to 7.7 per 1,000 white children. Native American children also experience higher rates of parent incarceration (17.8 per 1,000).

Children with Incarcerated Parents, by Race and Ethnicity, Rhode Island, September 30, 2025



Source: Rhode Island Department of Corrections, September 30, 2025. Sentenced population only.

Children with incarcerated parents face increased risks of negative outcomes when they are not in communication with their loved one. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describe **the instability due to parental separation, including a caregiver being in jail or prison, as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) that leads to the development of toxic stress for children in those circumstances.** This long-lasting stress response causes damage both to the physical body and to the child's mental well-being. ACEs disrupt the development of the brain and biological systems and can result in short-term harm and long-term negative outcomes, such as depression, substance use disorders, suicide, and certain chronic diseases in adulthood. Children with incarcerated parents experience high rates of physical and mental health problems, and educational challenges (including grade retention, placement in special education, and suspension). Providing free communication to incarcerated people and their loved ones helps to mitigate these long-term harms, as those children who maintain relationships with their parents have better behavioral and educational outcomes.

Additionally, research shows that making communication free to incarcerated people and their loved ones increases rehabilitation and safety. Studies have found that receiving phone calls from loved ones reduces the rate of violent incidents in prison by roughly 20%. Regular communication with support systems also allows incarcerated people to make plans for release, such as securing housing and employment.

Lastly, this bill amends Chapter 42-56 of Rhode Island General Law which pertains to the Department of Corrections, but this bill also addresses "youth residential placements or detention centers," which are under the authority of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). Our understanding is that our state's only secure detention facility for youth, the Rhode Island Training School, which is under DCYF, does not charge fees for telephone calls.

We urge you to pass House Bill 8117 to give families an equitable opportunity to stay in communication with their loved ones, enhance reentry transition, and recover \$1M back into the pockets of Rhode Island families. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.