



Incarcerated Parents and Their Children

Trends 1991-2007

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For further information:

The Sentencing Project

514 Tenth St. NW

Suite 1000

Washington, D.C. 20004

(202) 628-0871

www.sentencingproject.org

This report was written by Sarah Schirmer, Ashley Nellis, and Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project.

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INTRODUCTION

Mass incarceration has had significant and long-lasting impacts on American society, and particularly on communities of color. There is now a growing awareness that parents who go to prison do not suffer the consequences alone; the children of incarcerated parents often lose contact with their parent and visits are sometimes rare. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency, and subsequently be incarcerated themselves.¹

In 2007 there were 1.7 million children in America with a parent in prison, more than 70% of whom were children of color. Children of incarcerated parents live in a variety of circumstances. Some were previously in homes of two-parent families, where the non-incarcerated parent can assume primary responsibility for the children. Many children, especially in cases of women's incarceration, were in single-parent homes and are then cared for by a grandparent or other relative, if not in foster care. And in some cases, due to substance abuse and other factors, incarcerated parents had either not lived with their children or not provided a secure environment for them. Following release from prison both parents and children face challenges in reuniting their families. Parents have to cope with the difficulty of finding employment and stable housing while also reestablishing a relationship with their children.

The increasing incarceration of women means that more mothers are being incarcerated than ever before. There is some evidence that maternal incarceration can be more damaging to a child than paternal incarceration, which results in more children now suffering negative consequences. The number of incarcerated mothers has more than doubled (122%) from 29,500 in 1991 to 65,600 in 2007. The effect

¹ Dallaire, D.H. (2007). Incarcerated mothers and fathers: A Comparison of risks for children and families. *Family Relations*, 56(5), 440-453.

of parents' incarceration on children is related to a number of factors, including whether the child was living with the parent, whether the family unit was a one-parent or two-parent household, whether the parent was the sole earner, the age of the child, and the surrounding support network. While the effects can differ among children, the consequences of incarceration of a parent on a child are long-lasting and need to be considered when analyzing the ramifications of an expanding prison population.

This briefing paper evaluates data from reports compiled by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics² citing data from 1997, 2004, and 2007. It also includes information from and comparisons to data from 1991, where possible, to allow analysis of trends over the last two decades.

Key Points

- In 2007, 1.7 million minor children had a parent in prison, an 82% increase since 1991.
- One in 43 American children has a parent in prison, with particularly broad racial/ethnic variation.
 - One in 15 black children and 1 in 42 Latino children has a parent in prison, compared to 1 in 111 white children.
- In 2007, there were 809,800 parents incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons, an increase of 79% since 1991.
- In 2007, half (52%) of all incarcerated men and women were parents.
- In 2004, 59% of parents in a state correctional facility and 45% of parents in a federal correctional facility reported never having had a personal visit from their child(ren).
- Two-thirds of the incarcerated parent population is non-white.
- From 1991 to 2007, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122%, compared to a rise of 76% for incarcerated fathers.

² Glaze, L. E. & Maruschak, L. M. (2008). Parents in prison and their minor children. *U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report*. NCJ 222984. Mumola, C.J. (2000). Incarcerated parents and their children. *U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report*. NCJ 182335.

INCARCERATED PARENTS

Population, 1991-2007

In 2007, there were 809,800 parents incarcerated in state and federal prisons, a 79% increase since 1991, when there were 452,500 incarcerated parents. The population of parents is following a trend similar to that of all incarcerated individuals. While the prison population has almost doubled since 1991, the largest increase occurred between 1991 and 1997, with a slower rate of increase since then. Similarly, the number of parents jumped from 452,500 in 1991 to 721,500 in 1997 (an increase of 59%), but has increased more slowly (12%) since 1997. As Table 1 shows, while the proportion of incarcerated individuals with minor children increased slightly between 1991 and 1997, it has since decreased 11%. Nevertheless, while the proportion of people in prison who are parents is declining, the overall numbers are still increasing steadily.

Table 1: Change in Incarcerated Parent Population

	1991	1997	2007	% Change 1991-2007	% Change 1997-2007
Prison Population	789,610	1,244,554	1,570,115	98.8%	26.2%
Incarcerated Parent Population	452,500	721,500	809,800	79.0%	12.2%
Parents as % Total Incarcerated Population	57.3%	58.0%	51.6%	-10.0%	-11.0%

Marital Status, 1997-2004

More than half of all incarcerated parents have never been married, an increase of 19% since 1997, and only 17% of incarcerated parents were married at the time of their imprisonment, a decrease of 28% since 1997. The changes in marital status could have an adverse affect on the children of parents who do not have another parent at home when one parent goes to prison. Table 2 details the change in marital status of incarcerated parents from 1997 to 2004. Although most incarcerated parents have never been married, many have lived with their children prior to arrest. Among parents in federal prisons in 2004, half (48%) had lived with their children in the month prior to their arrest.

Table 2: Marital Status of Incarcerated Parents

	1997	2004	% Change 1997-2004
Never Married	46.8%	55.9%	19.4%
Widowed/Divorced/Separated	29.1%	26.8%	-8.0%
Married	24.1%	17.4%	-28.0%

Gender of Incarcerated Parents, 1991-2007

In 2007, 92% of incarcerated parents were fathers and 8% were mothers. Since 1991, the number of incarcerated fathers has increased 76% while the number of incarcerated mothers has increased 122% (Table 3).

Table 3: Incarcerated Mothers and Fathers, 1991-2007

	1991	1997	2007	Change 1991 - 2007	%Change 1991-2007
Fathers	423,000	667,900	744,200	321,200	76%
Mothers	29,500	53,600	65,600	36,100	122%
Total Number of Parents	452,500	721,500	809,800	357,300	79%

The rising number of women in prison poses particular challenges for family stability. While the vast majority of children of male prisoners are living with their mothers, only about a third (37%) of the children of incarcerated women are living with their fathers. Most of these children are living with grandparents or other relatives, while one of every nine (10.9%) women in prison has a child living in foster care.

MINOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

In 2007, there were 1,706,600 minor children with an incarcerated parent, an 82.2% increase over the 936,500 children in 1991 (see Table 4). In 2007, one in 43 (2.3%) American children had a parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison.

Approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are under ten years old; 22% of children of state inmates and 16% of children of federal inmates are under five years old. The large number of young children with an incarcerated parent creates problems that vary depending on each family's circumstances. In some instances, such as a child living in a home where substance abuse was prevalent, the incarceration of a parent may actually result in a more stable environment for the child if a responsible relative is able to take on the child's care. In other cases, the child will suffer from the shame and stigma of having a parent in prison, along with the disruption of moving to a new home environment one or more times.

Table 4: Number of Minor Children of Incarcerated Parents

	1991	1997	2007	% Change 1991 - 2007
Children with Incarcerated Parent	936,500	1,498,800	1,706,600	82.2%

Racial and Ethnic Composition

In 2007, one in 15 (6.7%) black children, one in 42 (2.4%) Latino children, and one in 111 (0.9%) white children had an incarcerated parent (see Table 5). Since 1997, the number of white and Latino children with an incarcerated parent has increased 26% and 20% respectively, while the number of black children remained the same.

Table 5: Racial and Ethnic Characteristics of Minor Children of Incarcerated Individuals

			% Change	One in	
	1997	2007	1997-2007	1997	2007
White	384,500	484,100	25.9%	125	111
Black	767,200	767,400	0.0%	14	15
Latino	301,600	362,800	20.3%	39	42

Contact with Parents

In 2004, more than half of parents housed in a state correctional facility had never had a personal visit from their child(ren), and almost half of parents in a federal facility had experienced the same. Frequency of contact between children and parents incarcerated in federal correctional facilities has dropped substantially since 1997; monthly contact has decreased 28%, while those who report never having contact with their children has increased 17%.

Table 6: Frequency of Contact between Children and their Incarcerated Parents

	1997		2004		% Change 1997 - 2004	
	State	Federal	State	Federal	State	Federal
At least once a month						
Any	22.2%	23.8%	22.3%	17.0%	0.5%	-28.6%
Telephone	16.5%	23.2%	15.6%	17.2%	-5.5%	-25.9%
Mail	23.1%	30.4%	23.2%	31.0%	0.4%	2.0%
Visits	13.9%	15.1%	12.5%	14.7%	-10.1%	-2.6%
Never						
Any	20.4%	7.5%	21.4%	8.8%	4.9%	17.3%
Visits	56.6%	44.1%	58.5%	44.7%	3.4%	1.4%

A key factor explaining the limited contact is that incarcerated parents are generally housed far from home. In 2004, 62% of parents in a state correctional facility and 84% of parents in a federal correctional facility were housed more than 100 miles from their place of residence at arrest, and only 15% of parents in a state facility and about 5% of parents in a federal facility were housed fewer than 50 miles from their place of residence at arrest (see Table 7). This finding indicates that children of incarcerated parents typically live too far from their parents to see them very often.

Table 7: Parents' Distance from Home, 2004

Distance from Home	State	Federal
Less than 50 miles	15.5%	4.6%
50-100 miles	20.6%	9.3%
101-500 miles	52.3%	41.2%
More than 500 miles	10.0%	42.4%
Unknown	1.6%	2.5%

POLICY IMPACT

Public policies often exacerbate the challenges faced by incarcerated parents and their children. For example, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) signed by President Clinton in 1997, authorizes the termination of parental rights when a child has been living under foster care for 15 of the last 22 months. Because the average prison sentence exceeds 22 months, incarcerated parents dependent on foster care for their child's care are at risk of losing custody. Loss of parental rights is of particular concern to mothers in prison, who are five times as likely as men to report having children placed in a foster home.

Moreover, the collateral consequences of a felony conviction and the obstacles to successful reentry for parents released from prison complicate the resumption of custody. For example, the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), welfare reform legislation passed in 1996, imposes a lifetime ban on cash assistance and food stamps for people convicted of a drug offense, unless a state opts out of the requirement. People denied this assistance, or other social services like public housing or employment training, become limited in their ability to reintegrate and maintain stable households, thus diminishing the likelihood of regaining custody of their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The growing number of children with an incarcerated parent represents one of the most significant collateral consequences of the record prison population in the U.S. To address the issues presented by these developments policymakers should consider a range of programmatic and policy changes to minimize the harm caused to these children and to do so in ways that are consistent with public safety. These include:

Support Parent/Child Relationships

Corrections systems can provide programming that encourages good parenting as well as bonding with children. The Bedford Hills, NY, women's prison, for example, has long maintained a program by which newborn babies can live with their mothers in prison for a period of time. Other prison systems have developed parenting classes to aid mothers and fathers who in many cases may lack the skills for effective child-rearing.

Enhance Reentry Programming

In addition to the need to secure employment and housing upon release from prison, incarcerated parents also face the challenge of developing a means by which to reunite with their children. This often necessitates securing the economic resources necessary to care for children and providing family counseling in appropriate cases. Corrections systems and parole agencies can aid in this process through reentry planning and providing linkages to transitional services.

Revise Ineffective Legislation

As noted above, both the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the PRWORA legislation have impeded the prospects for successful reentry and uniting parents with children. These policies have a particular impact on people convicted of a drug offense and on women. The welfare and food stamp ban serves no rational purpose and should be repealed by Congress. The AFSA legislation should be amended to permit greater discretion in terminating parental rights for persons in prison, consistent with the safety and well-being of children.

Reconsider Lengthy Sentencing Policies

“Tough on crime” policies adopted in recent decades are increasingly being seen as producing overly punitive and costly results that produce severe imbalances in promoting public safety. In regard to the needs of children with parents in prison, of particular concern is the increasing length of prison sentences, which contribute to further fraying of parent-child bonds. Therefore, policymakers should review policies such as mandatory sentencing and similar measures that both fail to take into account the impact of incarceration on children left behind and frequently impose prison terms that are far longer than necessary for public safety concerns.

CONCLUSION

The number of children with a parent in prison has increased 82% since the early 1990s, and children now see their incarcerated parents less frequently than previously. While the racial disparity among children with incarcerated parents has decreased slightly, black children are still seven times more likely, and Latino children twice as likely, as white children to have an incarcerated parent. The proportion of incarcerated individuals who are parents has decreased slightly since 1991, but the exponential increase in the number of parents in prison is likely to have lasting effects on families and communities, particularly in minority neighborhoods. Scholars have found, for example, that young children “have been observed to suffer a variety of adverse outcomes that are consistent with the research on the effects of insecure attachments,” and that more than half of children with incarcerated parents have had school problems such as poor grades and instances of aggression.³ These problems are likely to worsen as maternal incarceration continues to rise. Awareness of the issue and its implications, along with action to reduce the impact of incarceration on children, is necessary in order to protect and support children when their parents are incarcerated.

³ Parke, R. and Clarke-Stewart, K.A. (2002). *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



514 TENTH STREET, NW SUITE 1000

WASHINGTON, DC 20004

TEL: 202.628.0871 • FAX: 202.628.1091

WWW.SENTENCINGPROJECT.ORG