

# When Parents Go to Prison Children Pay the Price



A lot has been documented when people leave prison and the challenges they face in re-integrating back to their communities. These include, lack of social skills that helps them navigate in the necessary but sometimes complex care systems, no stable residence, and perhaps not retaining necessary documents for employment and other endeavors. It is also clear the insurmountable challenge having felony record puts them in re-establishing a meaningful life.

What has not properly been addressed until recently are the households the inmates leave behind, particularly the devastating and enduring consequences it has on children.



When parents are sentenced and housed away from their communities, the geographical barriers separate children not only physically but also emotionally. A report by the Urban Institute, *Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Re-entry*, documents that women are typically housed in prisons an average of 160 miles from their children, while men are an average distance of 100 miles away. For many low-income families that would make it difficult to visit their parents, and more likely not to be able to afford the collect calls inmates use to reach families.

According to the report, many parents had prior offenses and sentences, which show that their absences from their children is a recurring event and disrupts their familial relationships. Children often felt detached, resentment and abandoned.

[http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310882\\_families\\_left\\_behind.pdf](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310882_families_left_behind.pdf)

In many cases children would develop animosity toward the parent and sever their ties, especially when the parents were unmarried. When a parent is sent to a prison, children initially would lose the supervision to complete homework before going to play outside or watch television. They would probably fail to go to bed early and get enough rest, which has health consequences. The children would not also find someone to warn them about associating with the wrong company. The incarceration deprives the children from all the support the parent otherwise would provide, including showing up at their school games. These risk factors are just the beginning of a long road to failure as children grow to adulthood.

A report by the Justice Strategies, *Children on the Outside: Voicing the Pain and Human Costs of Parental Incarceration*, brings to light the adverse outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. The report indicates that parental incarceration is as harmful as losing a parent to death or divorce.

The study reports that 53% of the 1.5 million people held in the United States prisons in 2007 were the parents of one or more minor children. It means, more than 1.7 million children with an incarcerated parent at the time. The report reveals that African American children are seven and Latino children two and half times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children. (By 2014, newer estimates indicate that there are about 2 million incarcerated parents of minor children.)

Additional effects were described in the report and they can become a societal cost to the communities in which these children would grow and remain as adults:

- Undermining children’s sense of stability and safety
- Threatens economic security and increases the likelihood of poverty
- Risk of getting involved with drugs to earn money
- Compromised sense of connectedness and worthiness
- Social stigma and shame
- Trouble trusting others
- No sense of having a place in the world

<http://www.justicestrategies.org/sites/default/files/publications/JS-COIP-1-13-11.pdf>

A new study by Kristin Turney, University of California-Irvine sociologist documents the physical and mental health consequences of children that have incarcerated parents. The study used data from the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) to estimate the relationship between parental incarceration and an array of health outcomes. These include, fair or poor overall health, physical and mental health conditions, activity limitations, and chronic school absence. The study found that parental incarceration, after adjusting for demographic, socioeconomic, and familial characteristics, is independently associated with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, behavioral or conduct problems, developmental delays, and speech or language problems.

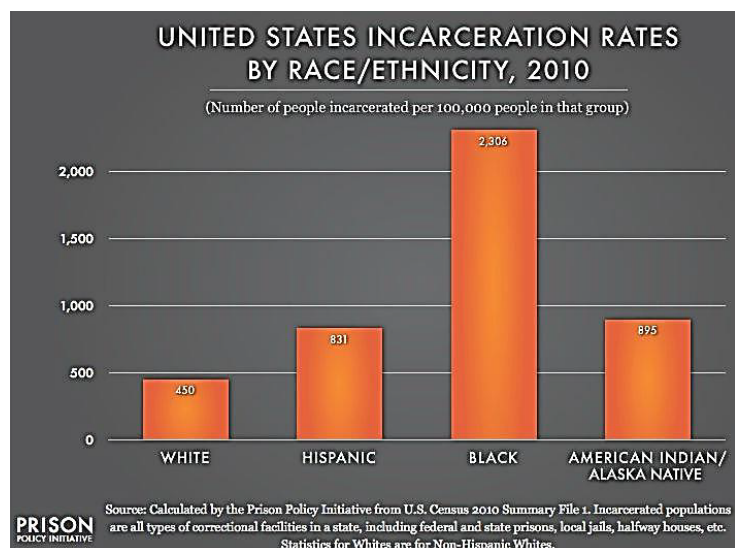
The study also found that children of incarcerated parents are as likely to suffer certain health problems—including learning disabilities and developmental delay—as children who experience divorce or the death of a parent, witness parental abuse, or share a home with someone with a drug or alcohol abuse problem.

<http://www.asanet.org/journals/JHSB/Sept14JHSBFeature.pdf>

After many states and the federal government have pushed for tough-on-crime-initiatives, the number of incarcerated Americans has expanded. The increase in incarceration has disproportionately impacted minorities.

The chart at right compares 2010 rates of incarceration in the U.S. by race and ethnicity, including all incarcerated populations (state/federal prisons, local jails, halfway houses, etc.).

By 100,000 people in the group, the chart shows 450 whites incarcerated compared to 2,306 blacks.



As a result, the children of these communities who also experience higher rates of poverty, negative health consequences and impaired educational attainment, all that will have further negative implications on them as individuals and collectively on the communities in which they live.

The U. S. Bureau of Justice Statics issued a special report (revised March 3, 2010), *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, to provide data about incarcerated parents. It reported on the continuing increase in prison populations, including an increase in those who have minor children. *Parents in Prison* included information about the characteristics of the incarcerated parents:

- More than 4 in 10 fathers in state or federal prisons were black, as were slightly more than half of the mothers.
- Most prisoners reported having a minor child, with about 25% being children age 4 or younger.
- More than 1/3 of minor children will turn 18 while their parent is incarcerated.
- Incarcerated parents of minor children are most often ages 25-34.
- Fewer than half the parents in state prisons lived with their minor children either in the month before the arrest or just before the incarceration, with mothers more likely than fathers to live with the minor children.
- About half of parents in state prisons provided primary financial support for their minor children.
- Mothers in state prisons were more likely to report homelessness, past physical or sexual abuse, medical and mental health problems than fathers. (Mothers were at least twice as likely to report homelessness in the year before the arrest).
- Half of the incarcerated parents reported they had a family member who had been incarcerated.

<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>

Many communities have experienced the effects of parental incarceration, and it is beginning to get attention at the national level. In August of 2013, leading national experts gathered at the White House to examine the effects of incarcerated parents on their children. The Obama administration hosted a conference, "Parental Incarceration in the United States: Bringing Together Research and Policy to Reduce Collateral Costs to Children" jointly sponsored by the American Bar Foundation and the National Science Foundation. The conference brought together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to review the latest research findings and begin to develop recommendations for policymaking bodies.

The following findings suggest the extent to which incarcerated parents affect children:

- Approximately half of all imprisoned persons in the United States are parents.
- Parental incarceration disproportionately affects communities of color.
- 1 in 4 black children have had an incarcerated parent.
- Fully 1 in 2 black children of high school dropout fathers have had an incarcerated parent v. that of roughly 1 in 13 white children of high school dropout fathers.
- The overall U.S. College graduation rate of 40% drops to about 1-2% among children of mothers who are imprisoned.
- About 15% of the children of imprisoned fathers graduate from college.

- Children of incarcerated parents also demonstrate difficulty transitioning to successful adult lives, experiencing higher rates of unemployment, lower educational achievement, and greater risk of involvement in the criminal justice system themselves.

Despite the complexity of this issue, five primary themes emerged from the conference on which most participants agreed:

- 1) Parental incarceration disproportionately affects communities of color.
- 2) Many incarcerated parents played roles in their children's lives prior to their incarceration.
- 3) Parental incarceration is linked to a number of negative outcomes for children, including poor school performance, physical and mental health problems, housing instability, and economic strain, both during and after incarceration occurs.
- 4) Parental incarceration is strongly associated with delinquency in both adolescence and the transition to adulthood.
- 5) There are things that can be done to improve the situation, beginning with greater cooperation between researchers, advocates, policymakers and practitioners to help achieve shared goals.

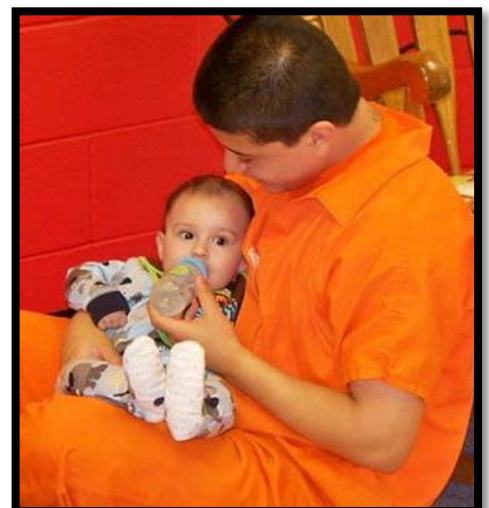
The "Parental Incarceration in the United States: Bringing Together Research and Policy to Reduce Collateral Costs to Children" Conference developed specific recommendations on how to diminish the damage to children caused by their incarcerated parents:

- Call for greater cooperation between researchers, advocates, policymakers, and practitioners.
- Policy and programming should focus on expanding school-based services and drop-out prevention for youth with household member incarceration.
- Judges should be better trained concerning the impact of parental incarceration on children to take better advantage of their discretion in sentencing, particularly when the defendant has committed a nonviolent crime and has sole or primary parenting responsibility.
- Courts should have the power to take distance from home into account in sentencing, as well as the power to decide where a prisoner should be housed.

[http://www.americanbarfoundation.org/uploads/cms/documents/white\\_house\\_conference\\_summary.pdf](http://www.americanbarfoundation.org/uploads/cms/documents/white_house_conference_summary.pdf)

Rutgers University's *Children and Families of the Incarcerated Fact Sheet* estimated that in 2010, more than 2.7 million U. S. children had a parent who was incarcerated, one out of every 28 children. They also noted that about 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some time in their lives. Rutgers also described the racial disparity, with 1 in 9 African American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%) and 1 in 57 white children (1.8%) having incarcerated parents.

*Children and Families of the Incarcerated Fact Sheet* discussed the magnitude of the situation, pointing out that in 2010, the U.S. had 1.5 million people in state or federal prisons, plus another 750,000 in jails. It said, "The uneven geographic distribution of incarceration in poor communities and communities of color means that the effects radiate



beyond the individual to the broader community, presenting profound long-term consequences for family integrity, public health and general quality of life.”

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/nrccfi-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Children of Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet*, parental incarceration can often have negative results on children and families, such as:

- Financial instability and material hardship, with financial problems the most severe for already vulnerable families and caregivers who support contact between the incarcerated parent and his or her child
- Instability in family relationships and structure, and residential mobility
- School behavior and performance problems
- Shame, social and institutional stigma

[http://211.idaho.gov/pdf/COIP\\_Factsheet.pdf](http://211.idaho.gov/pdf/COIP_Factsheet.pdf)

Some specialized programs have been created to address the needs of children who have incarcerated parents, but these are available only in certain locations. Such programs are usually operated at the local level, but the increased number of people affected suggests that additional action is needed. For example, it is difficult to determine how many children in each school system have incarcerated parents. It will be necessary to identify the children with incarcerated parents and their needs before effective programs can be developed. Some programs are designed for children in foster care, although not all children of incarcerated parents are in foster care. Examples of programs are listed below.

- Children of Incarcerated Parents - <http://www.childrenip.org/>
- Legal Services for Prisoners with Children - <http://www.prisonerswithchildren.org/>
- Centerforce - <http://www.centerforce.org/>
- Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership - <http://www.coipp.org/>
- California CASA for Children - <http://californiacasa.org/children-with-incarcerated-parents/>
- U. S. Administration for Children & Families - <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/blog/2013/06/improving-the-future-for-children-of-incarcerated-parents>
- Friends Outside in Los Angeles County - <http://dcfs.co.la.ca.us/forparents/documents/IPP%20Flyer.pdf>
- Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters - [http://www.kansasbig.org/site/c.9sKRJ8NNIpl6F/b.6469041/k.F877/Mentoring\\_Children\\_of\\_Incarcerated\\_Parents.htm](http://www.kansasbig.org/site/c.9sKRJ8NNIpl6F/b.6469041/k.F877/Mentoring_Children_of_Incarcerated_Parents.htm)
- Good Morning Parents-Incarcerated Fathers Program - <http://www.goodmorningparents.com/programs/incarcerated-fathers-program/>
- New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents-Special Project of the Osborne Association - [http://www.osborneny.org/images/uploads/printMedia/Initiative%20CIP%20Stats\\_Fact%20Sheet.pdf](http://www.osborneny.org/images/uploads/printMedia/Initiative%20CIP%20Stats_Fact%20Sheet.pdf)

