



Families with Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet



In support of the Second Chance Coalition Principle to limit the potentially adverse impact of the criminal justice system on children and families.

Over the last 25 years, the number of incarcerated persons has quadrupled.¹ The number of children with a father in prison increased 77% from 1991–2007 and the number with a mother in prison increased 131% in the same time.² Incarceration of a parent is very much a family matter. It has long-range economic, emotional and social consequences that affect prisoners and families, and that can affect children’s well-being.³ Children of the incarcerated are one of the most at-risk, yet least visible, populations of children.⁴ Data about families affected by incarceration is fraught with major data gaps. For example, Minnesota doesn’t collect information on whether an inmate is a parent. National estimates are our best source of data. (Unless otherwise indicated, data cited below is from the Parents in Prison and Minor Children special report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, published in 2008.)

A strong predictor of successful prisoner re-entry is lasting family bonds.⁵

Who are the children?

- At least 1.7 million minor children in the U.S. have a parent in prison, about a quarter of whom are under age 5 (see Table 1).
- More than 15,000 children in Minnesota have a parent who is incarcerated in a state or federal prison or in a county jail.⁶
- Black children were 7.5 times more likely and Hispanic children 2.5 times more likely than White children to have a parent in prison.
- More than a third of minor children with an incarcerated parent will reach age 18 while their parent is still incarcerated.

Age of minor child	State		Federal	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Less than 1 year	2.5%	1.6%	0.7%	1.1%
1-4 years	20.3%	16.7%	15.3%	12.6%
5-9 years	30.3%	29.1%	34.0%	30.1%
10-14 years	31.4%	33.8%	35.0%	35.8%
15-17 years	15.5%	18.8%	15.0%	20.4%

	State		Federal	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
U.S. Total	627,800	58,200	116,400	7,400
White, non-Hispanic	197,800	29,000	25,900	2,700
Black, non-Hispanic	262,400	16,100	57,000	2,200
Hispanic	127,600	8,800	32,500	2,300

Who are the parents?

- 92% of incarcerated parents are fathers.
- More than 4 in 10 fathers in state or federal prisons were black; almost 5 in 10 mothers were white.
- 37% of parents in state prison and 52% of parents in federal prison reported living with at least one of their minor children one month before arrest.
- About half of parents in prison reported providing the primary financial support for their minor children before incarceration.
- Parents who have been incarcerated are more likely to be poorly educated, lack material resources, and have problems with drugs, alcohol, and mental illness.⁷

Children of incarcerated parents feel a shame and stigma that distinguishes incarceration from other types of parental loss.⁸

How does incarceration of a parent impact the needs and development of children?

- Reactions to incarceration vary in children among several demographic variables: gender, age, income, and ethnicity.⁸
- Studies show that young children of incarcerated parents may have emotional problems and school-aged children feel stigma from their peers, have behavior problems, and may perform poorly academically. More research is needed as these problems may result from other risk factors faced by the children and families of incarcerated individuals.⁷
- Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have significant family and residential instability and more likely to face the foster care system than other children.⁷
- Research shows that children whose parents are incarcerated are not only exposed to more risk factors but are also more likely than other youth to have behavior problems.³
- However, the majority of children of incarcerated parents do not exhibit delinquency or antisocial behavior; but they do need extra help in school.³

Why should we help children maintain relationships with incarcerated parents?

- The majority of families participating in research surveys indicate that children want and need to see their incarcerated parents and support the idea of children visiting their parents during incarceration.³
- Research shows that children may benefit from maintaining healthy and positive relationships with their incarcerated parents. These benefits include less emotional distress and fewer problematic behaviors.⁹
- Approximately 79% of parents in prison report having some form of contact with their children while incarcerated such as phone calls, letters and visits.⁹
- It is important to remember that each family situation is different, but parents in prison can talk with children about life behind bars in ways that can reduce the child's feelings of guilt and responsibility.¹⁰
- For children in foster care, visiting a parent in prison is needed to avoid permanent placement.¹⁰
- But, many children do not have the resources needed to visit a parent in prison (i.e. not child-friendly visitation policies and distance between location of prison and the child's home).¹¹

In addition to lowering the likelihood of recidivism among incarcerated parents, there is evidence that maintaining contact with one's incarcerated parent improves a child's emotional response to the incarceration and supports parent-child attachment.¹³

What can policymakers do about this issue?

A LOT. The National Conference of State Legislatures has produced an excellent summary of effective policy responses, focusing on the perspective of children of incarcerated parents.¹² Because parental incarceration is not an isolated event, but a process that unfolds over time, each stage of the process is important: arrest, sentencing, intake, incarceration, and re-entry. This report explores each phase. Among the ideas implemented in other states:

- Allow arrestees additional phone calls to arrange for care for their children (CA); train law enforcement on how to ensure child safety during the arrest of a parent (NM);
- Require a family impact statement as part of a pre-sentence investigation (AK, TN);
- Require prison officials to determine if newly committed inmates are parents and require consideration of the family relationship (distance for visits, etc.) in determining where inmates are placed (HI, CA); collect data on children of incarcerated parents, including caregiving arrangements and needed services;
- Require broad-based policy reviews, multidisciplinary planning, and data collection to address issues faced by families with incarcerated parents (MO, OR, HI, WA, VA, VT, TN); special visitation program, including parenting skills instruction (MI)

About the Second Chance Coalition and the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network

The **Minnesota Second Chance Coalition (SCC)** is an unincorporated coalition of diverse community-based organizations and individuals advocating for fair and responsible laws, policies, and practices that allow those who have committed crimes to redeem themselves, fully support themselves and their families, and contribute to their communities to their full potential. The **Minnesota Fathers and Families Network** is a statewide nonprofit organization that enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

Visit www.mnsecondchancecoalition.org. For more info related to this fact sheet, please contact Melissa Froehle, Policy and Program Director, MFFN, (651) 222-7432 or mfroehle@mnfathers.org or visit www.mnfathers.org.

Sources

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