

Stat Sheet

September 2024

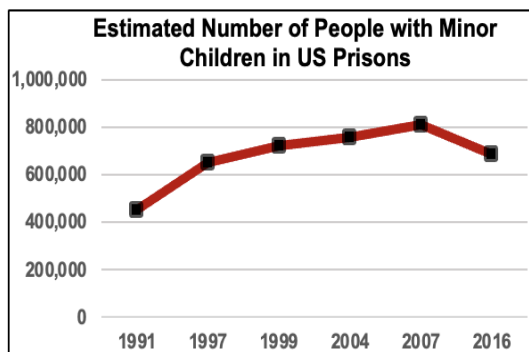
Parental Imprisonment and Its Impact

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The impact of incarceration does not halt at the prison walls. Many of the children of incarcerated parents are affected outside these walls. This Stat Sheet examines trends in parental imprisonment and its consequences on their children.

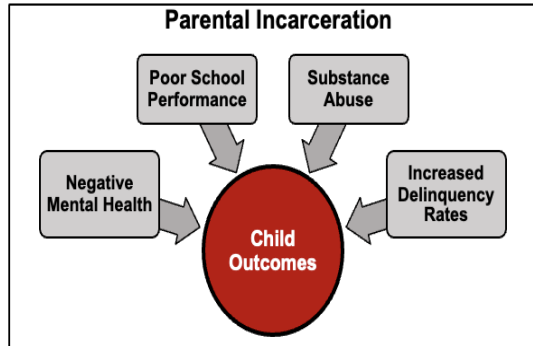
Key Stats



Source: Glaze & Maruschak (2008); Maruschak et al. (2021)

Since 1991, over 400,000 parents of minors have been locked away each year in prisons across the US (Figure 1)

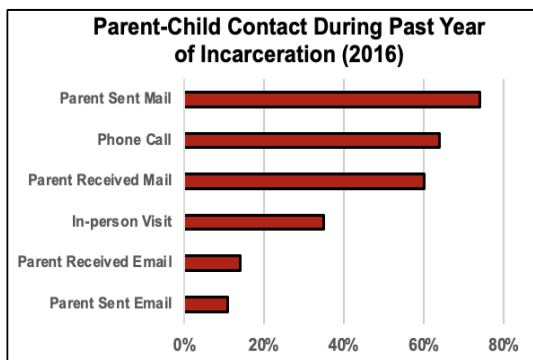
According to Maruschak and colleagues (2021), the US prison system has consistently housed over 400,000 parents of minors since 1991. Although this rate has declined in more recent years, about 1.5 million children under the age of 18 were separated from their parent because of state and federal incarceration in 2016 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).



Source: Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney (2020)

Children of incarcerated parents face many adversities because of their parent’s imprisonment (Figure 2)

Children of imprisoned parents experience a multitude of negative outcomes. These negative outcomes include lower test scores and grades, higher rates of psychiatric disorders, and even an increased likelihood of becoming justice-involved themselves (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020).



Source: Ahlin et al. (2023)

Various modes of communication are used by children and their parents involved in the US prison system (Figure 3)

Despite physical barriers that accompany imprisonment, parents behind bars still found different ways to communicate with their children on the outside. This communication contributes to successful re-entry for the incarcerated parent (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011).

Data Source

In 2016, the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted their eighth Survey of Prison Inmates study. This study collected data from 364 prisons, consisting of both federal and state across the United States. The final sample of prisoners was 24,848. This study revealed that 58% of the women and 46% of the men surveyed were the parents of a minor. It was also found that 52% of the women and 40% of the men surveyed lived with their minor child prior to incarceration (Maruschak et al., 2021).

With their parent behind bars, thousands of children are uprooted from the life they knew and are forced to adapt. For some of these youth (71%), they can live with their other biological parent or stepparent. For others, they move in with a grandparent (4%) or another relative (5%). However, about 3,400 parents indicated that their child was placed in foster care following their incarceration (Wang, 2022).

Consequences of Parental Incarceration

Changes in their living situation is just one of many outcomes children face with parental incarceration. As shown in figure 3, children of imprisoned parents are at a higher risk for particular negative outcomes than their peers with non-incarcerated parents. In regard to mental health, it has been shown that children of incarcerated parents were more likely to experience anxiety, depression, or panic disorders (Luk et al., 2023). In terms of school and educational involvement, children of incarcerated parents have been shown to have poorer school performance, lower educational attainment, and were about twice as likely to report being unhappy in school than their peers without incarcerated parents (Shaw, 2019).

Parent-Child Contact During Incarceration

Maintaining parent-child contact is critical for decreasing negative outcomes for both incarcerated parents and their children.

Several studies indicate the positive impact of visitations and contact on recidivism. For example, a study by Minnesota's Department of Corrections (2011) found that felony re-convictions were down 13%, and

technical violations on probation or parole were down 25% for those who received visitors while incarcerated.



Image Source: Barton (2017)

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