

While incarceration penalizes lawbreakers, it also has unintended punishing effects on the children left behind, often causing stress and family instability that may contribute to challenges to children’s well-being immediately and over the course of their lives.

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U.S. Mass Incarceration: The “Prison Boom”

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, holding over 2.3 million Americans behind bars in 2010—the equivalent of all the students in the Big 10, Pac 12, Big East, SEC, ACC, Big-12, and the Ivy League combined.

Wisconsin also incarcerates a lot of people compared to many other states: In 2010, the state held 22,725 people in prison—roughly equivalent to three-quarters of all undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

The U.S. incarceration rate has grown rapidly and consistently in the last three decades, roughly tripling since 1980, with growth slowing only after 2010. Many researchers attribute 80–85% of the growth to sentencing-policy changes, such as locking up more nonviolent offenders for drug and property offenses, rather than to increases in illegal behavior.

In 2010, 2.7 million U.S. children had a parent in prison—nearly twice the number of children in the entire state of Wisconsin

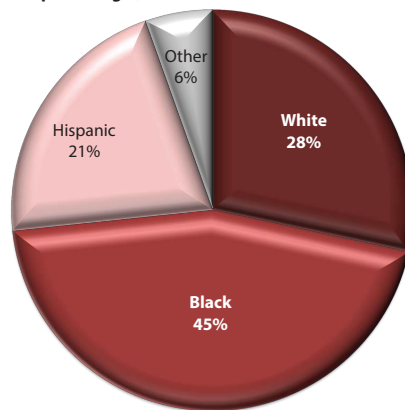
Who Are the Children?

In 2010, 2.7 million children in the United States had a parent in jail or prison. That is about 1 in every 28 minors, or nearly twice as many children as there are in the entire state of Wisconsin.

Black children are far more likely than white or Hispanic children to have a parent in prison, particularly if their parent didn’t complete high school.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of minor children with a parent behind bars by race and Hispanic origin.

Figure 1. Minor Children with a Parent in Prison, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2007



Source: Eddy and Poehlmann 2010.
Note: White and black rates exclude children of Hispanic origin.

Who Are the Parents?

The majority of state and federal inmates report having children under age 18 (see Figure 2 on p. 2). Reflecting broader trends in incarceration, most parents behind bars are fathers (92%), racial minorities, young (ages 25–34), and have low levels of education.

Four in 10 of those fathers are black, 3 in 10 are white, and 2 in 10 are Hispanic. Two-thirds of incarcerated parents—fathers and mothers—did not graduate from high school.

Why Does Parental Incarceration Matter?

The Loss of a Parent

For many children, the most devastating and immediate impact when their parent is incarcerated is the loss of daily contact with that parent. The vast majority of incarcerated mothers, and 30–40% of fathers behind bars, lived with their children prior to imprisonment. Not having a parent around for play, emotional support, and guidance can be emotionally stressful. Another loss is financial—even when fathers did not live with their child, many provided financial support prior to incarceration.

Family Changes

When a parent is incarcerated, family structure often changes. Family members may be forced to take on different roles to care for the children. Sometimes, children may have to move in with extended family if their primary caretaker is incarcerated.

Negative Family Dynamics

Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be exposed to parental substance abuse, parental mental illness, conflicts with a parent, and harsh or punitive parenting practices than their peers who don’t have a parent in prison. While these conditions may have existed even before the parent goes to prison, they magnify a child’s stress following a parent’s incarceration.

Emotional Toll

Children who have a parent behind bars often express negative feelings such as anger, guilt, or confusion about the incarceration.

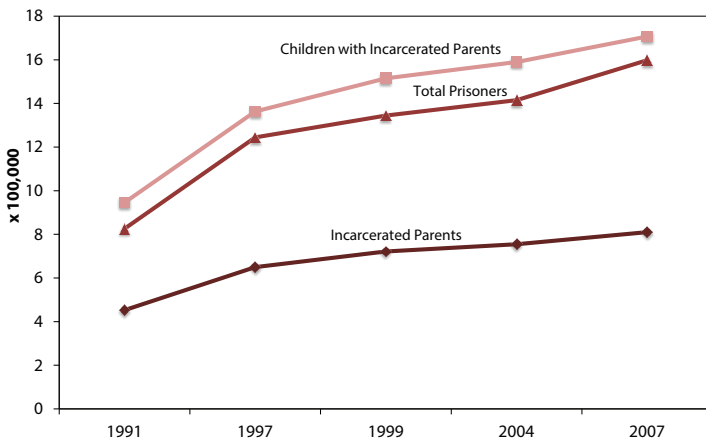
Exposure to correctional facilities when children visit their parents can sometimes cause emotional distress, unless it is a child-friendly visit. Further, many caregivers don’t know how to talk to children about their incarcerated parent, and some don’t talk to them about it at all, leaving the child to deal with a confusing, ambiguous loss without the support they need.

“Even though children with an incarcerated parent are at a higher risk than other children, there are a lot of things we can do to support and help them. The more our society can recognize the need to talk about this issue, the less stigmatized these kids will be.”

— Julie Poehlmann-Tynan

How Might Policy Help Children of Incarcerated Parents?

Figure 2. Estimated Number of Parents in Prison, Their Minor Children, and Total Prisoners in the United States, 1991–2007



Source: Eddy and Poehlmann 2010.

Parental Incarceration: More Effects on Children Material Hardship and Poverty

Compared to other children, children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to experience higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and physical health problems. In addition to potential loss of parents' financial contributions while in prison, prisoners' families may also face increased costs (e.g., phone calls, transportation costs for visits). Studies show that after imprisonment, ex-offenders still struggle to contribute to family income because they lack accumulated work experience or skills and because they face stigma from employers, making it hard to find a job.

Social Behaviors, Cognition, and Stigma

Emotional and economic stress at home puts children at a higher risk for social and cognitive difficulties. Studies show that children with incarcerated parents are twice as likely as their peers without a parent in prison to develop behavioral or mental health problems, including increased aggression, depression, and anxiety. They are also more likely to associate with delinquent peers, get into fights, skip school, have trouble concentrating, and to perform poorly in school. To make matters worse, children of incarcerated parents often face stigma at school from both teachers and peers, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation that contribute to their stress.

A Lifetime Impact

Research suggests that increased exposure to the social, emotional, and economic risk factors of having a parent in prison may affect children beyond childhood. Struggles in school and stresses associated with having an incarcerated parent may affect a child's socioeconomic attainment later in life, limiting their opportunities. Because people with low levels of education and low income have a higher chance of being incarcerated, the effects of parental incarceration may extend beyond one generation, potentially passing disadvantage from one generation to another.

Create Positive Visitation Experiences

Child psychologists have suggested that incarceration facilities implement child-friendly visitation policies to decrease the stress of the correctional experience on the child. Suggestions include creating a positive, safe, and friendly environment for visits (e.g., areas with child-sized furniture, toys, and friendly décor) and preparing both parents and children for visits. Some facilities have even designed semi-structured activities for visits that are meant to cultivate parenting skills.

Defer Child Support Payments

Usually, incarcerated parents can't pay child support while in prison and so they accrue debt, which they struggle to pay off when they are released. Some research suggests that deferring an incarcerated parent's child support payments until they are released may improve child support outcomes such as greater likelihood of payments after release.

Train Teachers

In an effort to reduce stigma in the classroom and improve children's learning outcomes, some have advocated for training teachers how to support children with incarcerated parents. This might include education about how parental imprisonment affects behavior and ability to learn and training on how to talk to children about their situation.

Reform Sentencing Policies

Incarceration is very expensive and as the prison population has increased, so have related costs. Some researchers have argued that incarcerating low-risk, nonviolent offenders isn't as cost-effective as other forms of punishment (e.g., parole). They suggest that it may be more cost-effective to shorten mandatory minimum sentences and to reform "truth-in-sentencing" laws that prevent the possibility of parole for nonviolent crimes.

How to Talk to Children of Incarcerated Parents

Children often feel like it's not okay to talk about their parent's incarceration or they simply don't know how. They may feel vulnerable, embarrassed, or afraid. Experts suggest stressing the following messages:

- "You are not alone."
- "It's okay to have feelings / to talk about it."
- "It's not your fault."
- "You are loved."

Beyond these messages, try to be kind, encouraging, and warm to reinforce the support you're offering.

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