



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance



FATHERS
INCORPORATED



Fathers and Incarceration

The number of incarcerated parents in U.S. prisons and jails has increased significantly since 1991. In 2016, 92 percent (627,000) of parents incarcerated in state and federal prisons were fathers (Maruschak et al., 2021), and 1.7 million children were separated from a parent due to incarceration. Incarceration impacts every member of an individual's family, especially children, and can cause substantial social, emotional, and economic harm to a family unit.



This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) Data Spotlight provides statistical information on parental incarceration to help practitioners, researchers, and policymakers consider the implications of parental incarceration for children and families. Although our focus is on incarcerated fathers, we also share some findings related to incarcerated mothers and people who are incarcerated but not parents. We present a series of data tables on various statistics related to parental incarceration and its impact for other family members, with key takeaways for each table. In addition, we include relevant literature that captures the impact of incarceration on both incarcerated parents and their children. We conclude with a discussion on the limitations of available data concerning parental incarceration and the need for further research.

¹ Suggested citation: Gilbert, N., & Reginal, T. (2022). Fathers and incarceration. [Data Spotlight]. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

² Surveys on parental incarceration are limited; therefore, limited data are available. As such, some data tables featured in this Data Spotlight rely on data from before 2010. Throughout the Spotlight, the most recent and reliable data for each finding will be presented. In areas with older data, more research is needed to provide a greater understanding of parental incarceration.

OVERALL TRENDS

TABLE 1: ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONS WITH MINOR CHILDREN, BY GENDER, 1991 THROUGH 2016

	PEOPLE IN STATE PRISONS			PEOPLE IN FEDERAL PRISONS			TOTAL
	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	
Number of Parents							
1991	413,100	386,500	26,600	39,400	36,500	2,900	452,500
2004	644,100	592,300	51,800	110,800	104,200	6,600	754,900
2007	686,000	627,800	58,200	123,800	116,400	7,400	809,800
2016	585,453	534,345	51,468	98,838	92,739	6,195	684,500
Number of Minor Children							
1991	860,300	802,300	58,000	85,100	79,200	5,900	945,600
2004	1,340,300	1,223,700	116,600	249,800	235,200	14,600	1,590,100
2007	1,427,500	1,296,500	131,000	279,100	262,700	16,400	1,706,600
2016	1,252,100	1,133,800	118,300	221,600	208,200	13,400	1,473,700

Source: Adapted from Maruschak et al., 2021; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; and Mumola, 2000.

NOTE: Estimates in this report may not be directly comparable to previously published reports due to updated reports released by Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The numbers of parents in prisons in 2016 are calculated based on the percentages of fathers and mothers in state and federal prisons and are not actual reported numbers. Therefore, due to rounding of percentages, the number of mothers and fathers in state and federal prisons in 2016 does not sum to the total of 684,500 parents.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The number of children with incarcerated parents has generally increased over time. In 1991, approximately 945,600 children under the age of 18 had a parent in prison; by 2016, that number had risen to an estimated 1,473,700 children.

On average,
an incarcerated parent has approximately two children under the age of 18,
a number that has remained consistent over time.

In the last 30 years, the number of incarcerated mothers has almost doubled. In 1991, approximately 29,500 mothers were incarcerated; by 2016 that number rose to 57,663.

Fathers make up the large majority of incarcerated parents. In 1991, 386,500 fathers were incarcerated in state and federal prisons; by 2016 that number was estimated at 627,000, which represented 92 percent of all incarcerated parents.

SUBPOPULATION DATA AND TABLES

DIFFERENCES BY GENDER

TABLE 2: STATE AND FEDERAL PRISON POPULATIONS BY GENDER, 2019–2020

YEAR	MALE	FEMALE
2019	1,322,256	107,909
2020	1,132,767	83,054

Source: Adapted from Carson, 2021.

NOTE: This table is presented separately from Table 1 because the latest data does not indicate parental status.

Key Takeaways

Substantially more men are incarcerated than women.

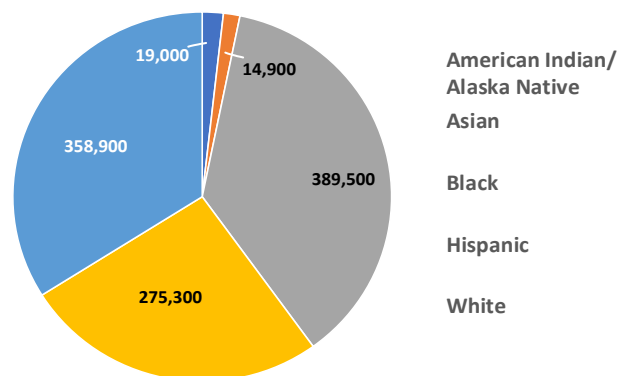
More than 1.1 million men were incarcerated in 2020, and approximately 92 percent of the state and federal prison population is male.

Between 2019 and 2020, the number of men incarcerated decreased from 1.3 million to 1.1 million, and a similar decrease occurred for females (from 108,000 to 83,000). The data source indicated that this **decrease in the prison population for both genders was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic**, as courts pursued different alternatives to incarceration.

DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY (EQUITY/RACIAL DISPARITIES)

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS SENTENCED TO STATE OR FEDERAL PRISONS BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 2020

RACE/ETHNICITY	NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS*
American Indian/Alaska Native	19,000
Asian	14,900
Black	389,500
Hispanic	275,300
White	358,900
TOTAL	1,057,600



Source: Adapted from Carson, 2021.

Note: The data only represent individuals who have been sentenced to prison. It does not include people who are incarcerated while they await trial or sentencing.

Key Takeaway

Incarceration has a disparate impact on communities of color. In 2020, **66% of people sentenced to prison were racial or ethnic minorities.**

An estimated 389,500 (56%) of those people were Black, and they represented the largest number of people of any race or ethnicity in prison or jail. As a frame of reference, **only 24% of people in the general population are racial or ethnic minorities** (U.S. Census, 2021).

DIFFERENCES BY AGE

TABLE 4: NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN STATE OR FEDERAL PRISONS AND LOCAL JAILS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS, BY AGE, 2005

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	% OF TOTAL
18–19	1,508	100	7.3%
20–24	2,728	253	13.5%
25–29	3,018	293	15.1%
30–34	3,215	344	16.2%
35–39	2,813	336	14.3%
40–44	2,435	279	12.4%
45–54	3,061	182	14.8%
55 or Older	1,325	70	6.4%

Source: Adapted from Harrison & Beck, 2006

Note: Based on the U.S. resident population for January 1, 2005.

Key Takeaways

In 2010, 58% of incarcerated individuals were between the ages of 25 and 44 years old; 21% were younger than 25; and 21% were 45 years of age or older.

These age distribution percentages are similar for males and females, which means **men and women tend to spend time in correctional facilities at similar life stages.**

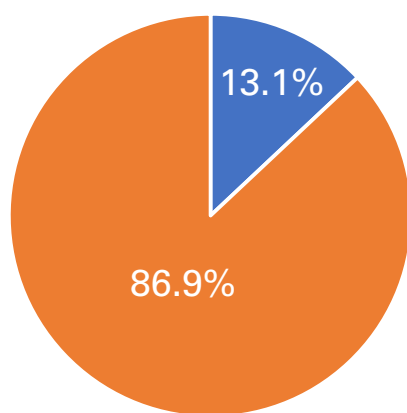


DIFFERENCES BY REGION

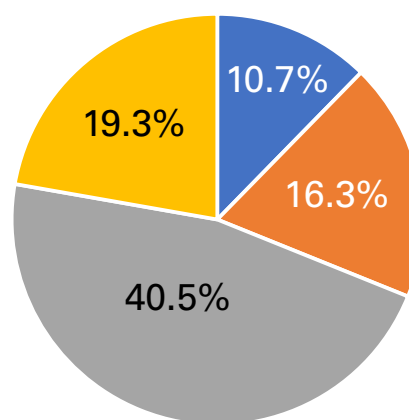
TABLE 5: NUMBER OF PEOPLE INCARCERATED UNDER STATE AND FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL AUTHORITIES BY REGION AND GENDER, 2010

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	% OF TOTAL
U.S. Total	1,499,573	112,822	100%
Federal	196,222 (13.1%)	13,549 (12%)	13%
State	1,303,351 (86.9%)	99,273 (88%)	87%
Northeast	165,100 (11%)	8,811 (7.8%)	10.7%
Midwest	245,373 (16.3%)	18,055 (16%)	16.3%
South	604,934 (40%)	49,208 (43.6%)	40.5%
West	287,944 (19.2%)	23,199 (20.5%)	19.3%

Source: Adapted from Carson, 2021.



■ Federal ■ State



■ Northeast ■ Midwest
■ South ■ West

Key Takeaways

- Incarceration by region follows a similar pattern for both incarcerated men and women.

The South incarcerates the largest number of people of any region in the United States. This region represents 40% of all incarcerated men and 44% of all incarcerated women.

19% of incarcerated men and 21% of incarcerated women were incarcerated in the West, compared to 16% of both males and females in the Midwest.

The Northeast incarcerates the smallest percentage of individuals. Only 11% of men and 8% of women are incarcerated in the Northeast.

IMPLICATIONS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION FOR CHILDREN

TABLE 6: LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND CURRENT CAREGIVER OF MINOR CHILDREN OF PARENTS IN STATE PRISON, BY GENDER, 2004; AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND CURRENT CAREGIVER DURING INCARCERATION, 2016

	2004			2016
	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	TOTAL *
Living Arrangements				
Lived with children either in the month before arrest or just prior to incarceration	46.5%	64.2%	47.9%	29.2%
Current Caregiver**				
Child's other parent	88.4%	37.0%	84.2%	71%
Child's grandparent	12.5%	44.9%	15.1%	17%
Other relative	4.7%	22.8%	6.2%	5%
Foster home/agency	2.2%	10.9%	2.9%	1.7%
Friends/other	2.4%	7.8%	2.9%	4%

Source: Adapted from Wang, 2022; Beatty & Snell, 2021; and Glaze & Maruschak, 2010

Notes: *Data for 2016 living arrangements were only presented by the BJS source data as a total; thus, the 2016 data cannot be sorted by gender.

**The total sum is greater than 100% because some incarcerated parents had numerous minor children living with different caregivers.

Key Takeaways

In 2004, prior to incarceration, 64% of mothers and 47% of fathers lived with their children.

Between 2004 and 2016, the number of parents (fathers and mothers) who lived with their children in the month leading up to incarceration decreased substantially from 48% to 29%.

When a father is incarcerated, the children's caregiver most frequently becomes another family member.

- In 2004, the children's primary caregiver became the other parent in 88% of cases and a grandparent in 13% of cases.
- In 2016, when the data did not capture separate data for incarcerated fathers and mothers, only 71% of children with an incarcerated parent were under the care of the other parent, a significant decrease compared to the 84% living with their other parent in 2004.

TABLE 7: MINOR CHILDREN IN THE U.S. RESIDENT POPULATION WITH A PARENT IN STATE OR FEDERAL PRISON, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 2007

RACE/ETHNICITY	ESTIMATED NUMBER OF MINOR CHILDREN WITH A PARENT IN PRISON	PERCENT OF ALL MINOR CHILDREN IN THE U.S. RESIDENT POPULATION
U.S. Total*	1,706,600	2.3%
White, Non-Hispanic	484,100	0.9%
Black, Non-Hispanic	767,400	6.7%
Hispanic	362,800	2.4%

Source: Adapted from Glaze & Maruschak, 2010.
 *Includes children of other racial/ethnic background.

Key Takeaways

Incarceration impacts children of all ages and ethnicities.

More than 1.7 million minor children in the United States had a parent in prison in 2007.

Black children are disproportionately impacted by incarceration.

An estimated 6.7 percent of all Black children had a parent in prison in 2007, while only 0.9 percent of white children and 2.4 percent of Hispanic children had an incarcerated parent.



TABLE 8: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF MINOR CHILDREN WITH PARENTS IN STATE AND FEDERAL PRISON, BY GENDER, 2016

AGE RANGE	PARENTS IN STATE PRISON			PARENTS IN FEDERAL PRISON		
	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE
<1 year	1%	1.0%	0.9%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
1–4 years	18.2%	18.5%	15.5%	12.7%	12.8%	11.2%
5–9 years	32.8%	32.9%	31.4%	31.1%	31.1%	30.9%
10–14 years	30.5%	30.2%	33.6%	35.6%	35.6%	35.7%
15–17 years	17.5%	17.4%	18.6%	20.3%	20.2%	22.0%

Source: Adapted from Maruschak et al., 2021.

Key Takeaways

In 2016, the average age of a minor child with a parent in state prison was 9 years old. Among children of parents in state prison, 1% were younger than 1, about 18% were ages 1 to 4, and 48% were age 10 or older.

The average age of a child with a parent in federal prison was 10 years old. Among children of parents in federal prison, 13% were ages 1 to 4, 31% were ages 5 to 9, and 56% were age 10 or older.

No significant differences existed in the age distribution of minor children with parents in federal and state prison by gender of the parent.

POSSIBLE IMPACTS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION FOR CHILDREN

Father-child separation can have a negative impact on childhood development.

- Parental incarceration is associated with a greater likelihood of children engaging in actions that harm others or having long-term behavioral problems, which negatively impacts the family unit (Turney & Goodsell, 2018).
- Having an incarcerated parent is associated with the development of learning disabilities, speech or language problems, and physical ailments (Ervin et al., 2022).
- Incarceration of a parent is associated with greater depressive symptoms in younger children, which results in a higher likelihood of rule-breaking behavior as children become older (Del Toro et al., 2022).

Parental incarceration can cause challenges in children's schooling and educational pursuits.

- Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to surround themselves with peers with lower grade point averages, higher tendencies to skip school, and more antisocial behavior (Cochran et al., 2018).
- Parental incarceration can harm a child's cognitive and non-cognitive performance in school, as well as increase the likelihood of not completing schooling (Ervin et al., 2022).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FATHERS

Regardless of parental status, incarceration impacts the physical and psychological health of men who are incarcerated.

- Approximately one-third of incarcerated men experience physical or sexual assault in correctional facilities, and 30 to 60 percent of men in state prisons suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (Wolff et al., 2014; Wolff & Shi, 2009).
- Experiencing incarceration as a father only worsens these struggles. Fathers who are incarcerated often suffer feelings of guilt and concern, feel separated from their identity as a father, and have a higher risk of depressive symptoms (Dargis & Mitchell-Samoza, 2021).
- Being separated from their children can lead to feelings of distress that last far beyond a father's time in a correctional facility, with lasting impacts on parent-child relationships.

Incarceration is very disruptive to the father's role in the family.

- Men who are incarcerated have lower levels of familial interactions and emotional support during incarceration, which can ultimately harm relationships with family members (Mowen & Visser, 2016).
- Incarceration especially impacts a man's role as a father. Numerous obstacles (e.g., the distance of prisons from caregivers' homes and the expense of transportation and phone calls) may limit the amount of contact and meaningful therapeutic interventions that incarcerated fathers can have with their children (Genty, 2003).

Incarceration poses a substantial risk to the parental rights of fathers.

- With the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997, states were required to terminate parental rights if a child was in the foster care system for 15 of the last 22 months. However, because court guidelines are often inconsistent in the way they evaluate family circumstances during sentencing, fathers are at an even higher risk of having their parental rights terminated (Iskikian, 2020).
- Extensive court procedures and lack of transparency can create barriers for incarcerated fathers with children in the foster care system and make it hard for them to advocate for their parental rights in court. Regardless of the nature of their charge, incarcerated parents are at risk of losing their parental rights if their children enter the child welfare system (Hager & Flagg, 2018).



IMPLICATIONS FOR PARTNERS, COPARENTS, AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

Incarcerating fathers places a substantial economic burden on families.

- The cost of legal fees, phone calls, prison visits, and other immediate expenses can overwhelm family members and result in material hardship for many families (Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011).
- Prior to incarceration, fathers are often the primary source of household income, or they contribute to their families through child support. Therefore, incarceration can lead to a noticeable loss of income, pose significant financial hardship, and increase maternal stress (Bruns, 2019).
- Besides being unable to earn money while in prison, fathers are likely to experience diminished earning capacity after release and contribute less financially to families than fathers who have never been incarcerated (Geller et al., 2011).

Incarceration can also affect romantic relationships.

- The economic, emotional, and logistical complications that follow incarceration make maintaining a relationship difficult, and recent paternal incarceration is connected with lower relationship quality and supportiveness (Turney, 2015).
- Having an incarcerated partner can foster feelings of uncertainty, distress, isolation, and depression for both partners, which leads to a decreased relationship quality and higher likelihood of separation (Turney & Hardie, 2021; Wildeman et al., 2012).
- Although incarceration does not always harm marriages or relationships, the added emotional turmoil and physical distance present significant challenges for partners.

Life changes significantly for coparents, spouses, and partners following the incarceration of their coparent.

- When a father is incarcerated, mothers become the primary caregiver for their children 88 percent of the time.
- In addition to caregiving, many women begin working more than one paid job to increase earnings, which limits available time for self-care and personal relationships (Bruns, 2019).
- For some women, the incarceration of a coparent can lead to newfound independence and relief, and for others it can be a source of significant stress and emotional turmoil (Travis et al., 2005).



DATA SOURCES AND DEFINITION OF MEASURES

This data spotlight draws on surveys produced by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and reports written by Laura M. Maruschak, Jennifer Bronson, Lauren E. Glaze, Mariel Alper, and Christopher J. Mumola, who used the BJS surveys to calculate the number of people with minor children held in state and federal prisons.

The reports are:

1. **Parents in prison and their minor children** (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Maruschak et al., 2021).
2. **Incarcerated parents and their children** (Mumola, 2000).

Set out below are the BJS surveys that the authors analyzed.

- **The 1991 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities.** This survey provided nationally representative data on people held in state and federal custody. These data were collected from approximately 14,000 people in 277 state prisons and 6,600 inmates in 53 federal prisons (Mumola, 2000).
- The **2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities** provided nationally representative data on people in state prisons and those sentenced to federal prisons. These data were collected from approximately 13,000 people in 287 state prisons and 3,100 people in 39 federal prisons (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).
- The **2016 Survey of Prison Inmates** provided nationally representative data on people held in state and federal custody. These data were collected from approximately 25,000 people from 364 prisons (Beatty & Snell, 2021).
- The **National Prisoner Statistics Program** produces annual national- and state-level data on the number of people held in state and federal prison facilities (Carson, 2021).
- The **National Probation Data Survey** and the **National Parole Data Survey** are conducted annually and report statistics on state and federal probation and parole counts (Kluckow & Zeng, 2022).
- The **Annual Survey of Jails** collects estimates of the number of people in the local jails around the nation (Glaze, 2011).
- The **2005 Census of Jail Inmates** included all local confinement facilities operated under the authority of 2,853 local jurisdictions. The Census also included 42 privately operated jails, 65 multi-jurisdictional jails, and 14 locally operated jails in Alaska. Temporary holding facilities are not included (Harrison & Beck, 2006).



DATA LIMITATIONS

- Although the BJS surveys are the most comprehensive source of data on incarceration, they are not administered frequently. Moreover, changes over time in the categories of information and questions asked limit multi-year comparisons.
- It is difficult to accurately measure the number of incarcerated parents due to the absence of a systematic assessment tool across correctional facilities.
- Currently, many parents are not asked about their children, or they are uncomfortable disclosing sensitive information regarding their children.
- The statistics that do exist on incarcerated parents do not include the experience of parental incarceration over the lifetime of the parent or child.
- It is difficult to collect data on the true number of children impacted by parental involvement in the criminal legal system, apart from those impacted by incarceration. For example, demographic questions regarding children are often not asked, collected, or tracked during police stops and arrests. Additionally, different states and jurisdictions ask and define this information differently.
- The definitions of what constitutes a parent-child relationship vary, which creates additional complexities.

CONCLUSION AND NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Incarceration impacts every member of an individual's family, especially children, and can cause substantial social, emotional, and economic harm to a family unit. The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled some courts and correctional systems to be more open to alternative solutions to incarceration. As a result of these alternative solutions and the relaxation of laws regarding marijuana possession, the number of incarcerated individuals has begun to decrease; however, sustained efforts by correctional facilities to continue employing alternative solutions are necessary to maintain this trend.

Research on the role of incarceration in fatherhood has grown over the last decade; but there is still a lack of sufficient literature on the topic. Further research is needed into the utilization of alternatives to incarceration and how they might affect fathers and children. With the growing evidence that racial biases may contribute to disparities in incarceration, more research into law enforcement practices, court biases, and disparities in sentencing should also be conducted. In addition to racial and ethnic disparities, future research should look more at the underlying causes of incarceration, such as generational poverty, and the long-term impacts on fathers and their children. Understanding the true impact of fathers' incarceration can help inform future policies and practices to improve outcomes for families and reduce ethnic and racial disparities in the criminal legal system.

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This information brief was developed by Natalie Gilbert and Travis Reginal (Urban Institute) with assistance from Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated) and Paige Thompson (Urban Institute) on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. Andrew Freeberg (Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota) reviewed the document and provided helpful feedback and suggestions.

Suggested citation:
Gilbert, N., & Reginal, T. (2022). Fathers and incarceration. [Data Spotlight].
National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

