

The Sentencing Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-parents-and-their-children-trends-1991-2007/>

Policy Issue Resources

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In 2007, there were 1.7 million children in America with a parent in prison, more than 70% of whom were children of color. Children of incarcerated parents live in a variety of circumstances. Some were previously in homes of two-parent families, where the non-incarcerated parent can assume primary responsibility for the children. Many children, especially in cases of women's incarceration, were in single-parent homes and are then cared for by a grandparent or other relative, if not in foster care. And in some cases, due to substance abuse and other factors, incarcerated parents had either not lived with their children or not provided a secure environment for them. Following release from prison both parents and children face challenges in reuniting their families. Parents have to cope with the difficulty of finding employment and stable housing while also reestablishing a relationship with their children.

The increasing incarceration of women means that more mothers are being incarcerated than ever before. There is some evidence that maternal incarceration can be more damaging to a child than paternal incarceration, which results in more children now suffering negative consequences. The number of incarcerated mothers has more than doubled (122%) from 29,500 in 1991 to 65,600 in 2007. The effect of parents' incarceration on children is related to a number of factors, including whether the child was living with the parent, whether the family unit was a one-parent or two-parent household, whether the parent was the sole earner, the age of the child, and the surrounding support network. While the effects can differ among children, the consequences of incarceration of a parent on a child are long-lasting and need to be considered when analyzing the ramifications of an expanding prison population.

This briefing paper evaluates data from reports compiled by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics citing data from 1997, 2004, and 2007. It also includes information from and comparisons to data from 1991, where possible, to allow analysis of trends over the last two decades.

To read the report, download the PDF below.

Children in the United States has a parent in prison

Incarceration

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