

Parental incarceration takes a devastating toll on kids

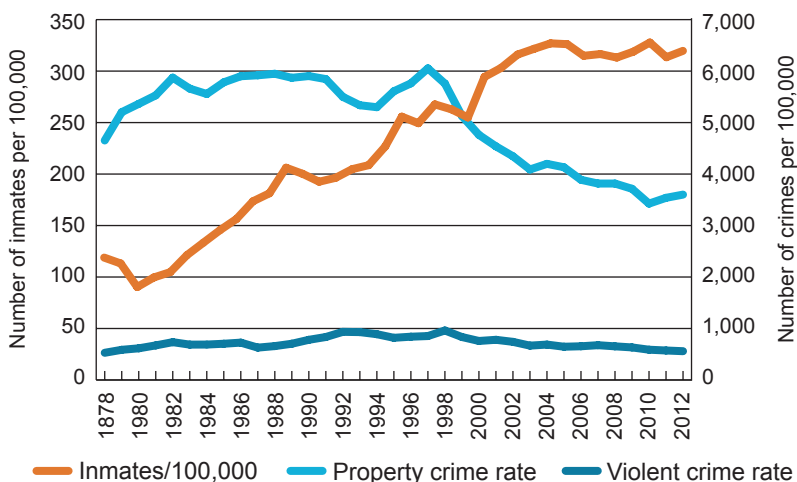
There is no bond more powerful or important for a child than the bond they have with their parents. When a parent is incarcerated, that bond is threatened. Incarceration of a parent causes stress, emotional trauma, and often economic hardship for the child and their family.

While it is essential that our criminal justice system works to keep our citizens safe from violent offenders, the war on drugs and the “tough on crime” sentencing laws enacted in the 1990s have resulted in the over-incarceration of non-violent offenders. Not only has this not improved safety in our communities, it has devastated families and communities across the nation.

What’s more—due to systemic racism within the criminal justice system and the fact that a person’s level of wealth and connection to people of influence impacts the level of justice they receive—the families and communities that have been hit the hardest are those that are already the most vulnerable: low-income and communities of color.

Incarceration rates in New Mexico are rising even as crime rates are decreasing

Rates of incarceration and crimes per 100,000 residents per year



Source: US Department of Justice, FBI, Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics—UCR Data Online
NEW MEXICO VOICES FOR CHILDREN

New Mexico by the numbers:

- 10% of our kids have a parent who has been incarcerated.
- That’s 52,000 kids.

New Mexico trends in crime:

- We’re among the five worst states.
- But crime has been steadily decreasing since the late 1990s.

New Mexico trends in incarceration:

- We’re among the ten worst states.
- And rates have been steadily increasing since the 1980s.
- We have the second highest prison growth rate (8.5% since 1999).
- States with higher parental incarceration rates have experienced the fastest growth in their state prison populations since 1999.
- Disparities are seen across race and ethnicity, with people of color much more likely to be incarcerated.
- Criminal justice policies—not crime rates—are the prime drivers of changes in prison populations.

Having a parent incarcerated is a traumatic experience that can be along the same magnitude as abuse, domestic violence, and divorce. It also creates a tremendous vacuum in a child’s life, creates an unstable environment for a child that can have lasting effects on his or her development and well-being, and often adds to the generational pull of poverty.

Incarceration further destabilizes many families who were teetering on the edge of financial disaster. Losing a parent, especially a breadwinner, for a prolonged period of time,

leaves families scrambling to cover basic needs along with legal and other court fees. Sixty-five percent of families with a member in prison cannot meet basic needs. Those left behind report being unable to pay for necessities such as food, utilities, rent, and medical care for their children.

After release, parents and their children may struggle to reconnect on an emotional level, and those with a prison record will likely have a difficult time finding employment.

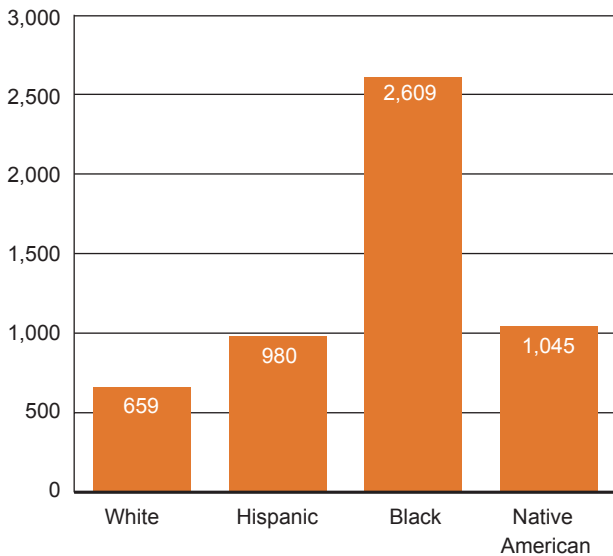
We must prioritize the needs of children when decisions are made about sentencing parents in order to minimize the impact of incarceration on their lives and give them a fair chance for a bright future.

State and local officials have a series of commonsense solutions at their disposal that could help children now:

- Families and communities impacted by incarceration must be better equipped to care for children financially and emotionally, and their parents prepared

Blacks are greatly over-represented in New Mexico's jails and prisons

Rates of incarceration by race/ethnicity per 100,000 residents in that racial/ethnic group (2010)



Source: Calculated by the Prison Policy Initiative from U.S. Census 2010 Summary File 1. Incarcerated populations are all types of correctional facilities in a state, including federal and state prisons, local jails, halfway houses, etc.
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- to effectively provide for them upon release.
- Schools, neighborhood health centers, and other community- and faith-based agencies need to work more closely with the criminal justice system to build a network of support for children whose parents are incarcerated.
- Correctional systems, communities, and state and local public agencies should allow families the opportunity to preserve their connections during incarceration—ensuring that children are not severed from a loved one and the family can successfully move forward once parents come home.

Trends across the nation:

- 29 states have adopted reforms designed to scale back the scope and severity of their mandatory sentencing policies over the past decade.
- The states with the most substantial reductions have had no adverse effect on public safety.

Outcomes where states significantly reduced prison populations (California, New Jersey, New York):

- Crime rates generally fell at a faster pace than in the country as a whole.
- Violent crime rates decreased more than they did nationwide.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, in their policy report *A Shared Sentence: The devastating toll of parental incarceration on kids, families and communities* offers these primary policy recommendations:

1. Ensure children are supported while parents are incarcerated and after they return.
2. Connect parents who have returned to the community with pathways to employment.
3. Strengthen communities, particularly those disproportionately affected by incarceration and reentry, to promote family stability and opportunity.

Ensuring that our children who have an incarcerated parent have the support systems they need will improve their well-being and their chances for success in school and in life. Only when our kids and families are thriving, can our state can thrive.

Download *A Shared Sentence* here: www.aecf.org/sharedsentence

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