

## Daily Report

### **Number of children with parent in prison growing**

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When California lawmakers and policy wonks talk about reforming the state's prison system, they're typically talking about the public's safety. Or how incarceration impacts the people living in cells. Or how expensive this whole exercise has become.

Less often, the conversation is about those who lose a parent to a prison sentence.

This week, Justice Strategies, a nonprofit research group, released a report on [the nation's swelling number \[PDF\]](#) of minor children with an incarcerated parent.

The analysis found there are now more than 1.7 million such children. These minors face emotional trauma that can diminish their future prospects.

As the United States' prison population has surged, so too have the number of incarcerated mothers and fathers. "In particular, the number of incarcerated women, who are most likely to have been the primary caretakers of children prior to their incarceration, has skyrocketed by more than 400 percent since 1986," the report states.

In 2000, the California Research Bureau estimated 292,000 children in the state had a parent in prison or jail. Another 564,000 minors had a parent on parole or probation; with all those numbers combined, [9 percent \[PDF\]](#) of California's children had a parent in the criminal justice system.

Justice Strategies' overarching recommendation is simply to incarcerate fewer convicted felons.

The consequences for children of inmates in our current system are legion: financial instability, compromised educational success, social stigma, and increased risk of drug abuse and criminal activity. The national report continues:

Although the pain of losing a parent to prison is tantamount in many respects to losing a parent to death or divorce, the children who remain 'on the outside' appear to suffer a special stigma. Unlike children of the deceased or divorced who tend to benefit from society's familiarity with and acceptance of their loss, children of the incarcerated too often grow up and grieve under a cloud of low expectations and amidst a

swirling set of assumptions that they will fail, that they will themselves resort to a life of crime or that they too will succumb to a life of drug addiction.

These impacts are not felt equally across racial groups, the report states. “The estimated risk of parental imprisonment for white children by the age of 14 is one in 25, while for black children it is one in four by the same age.”

In addition to the loss of a parent for some period, the California Research Bureau found a decade ago that a large number of children witness the arrest of their parents. A survey of jailed mothers in Riverside discovered “one in five of their children were present at the time of their arrest, and over half of the children were between three and six years old.”

One of state’s efforts to reduce prison overcrowding – and thus, improve inmate health care – has likely exacerbated the toll on some children.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is housing more than [10,000 prisoners \[PDF\]](#) in out-of-state facilities. Of those, 2,300 are serving their time in Oklahoma and 2,500 are in Mississippi. The [San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents](#), an advocacy group, argues that close proximity to parents should be a right afforded all such children. Moving inmates to facilities in other states, or to even the other end of California, harms both children and prisoners.