



Parents in Prison

Summary

According to the Ministry of Justice, New Zealand has one of the highest imprisonment rates, with 170 people in prison per 100,000 New Zealanders compared to the OCED average of 147 prisoners per 100,000 people¹. Most of the people who are incarcerated in New Zealand are parents to children 17 and under. Children who have had their parents incarcerated experience a range of negative outcomes including long-term poor health, educational and social outcomes and are at high risk of future imprisonment themselves². With Māori disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated compared to non-Māori, these effects will disproportionately affect them and their whānau.

To understand how many parents are in prison, and how many children have parents in prison, an analysis was run in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) using the Children's Wellbeing Model.

Disclaimer

These results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI please visit <https://www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/>.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages to gain a foundational understanding of the impact of incarceration on children and their whānau. The first stage focuses on the perspective of incarcerated parents and their children. It examines the number of prisoners who have dependent children, categorised by gender, and determines the number of children they have. Additionally, it examines the number of children who have their parent incarcerated and identifies which parent was incarcerated. The aim of this part of the analysis was to give an overview of the impact of incarceration on children and parents.

In the second stage of the analysis, it focuses on what happens to the children of incarcerated parents when their parent enters prison. Specifically, it examines changes in formal custody, which are defined as either going into Care or on the Unsupported Child Benefit. This is because these are the only two formal data points signalling changes in custody. The aim of this stage is to observe what happens to the children when their parent is incarcerated.

Population

The population of interest for the first stage of the analysis includes all prisoners who have been either in remand or prison over a 12-month period ending 30 June 2021 and their biological children. Children will only be included in this analysis if they were 17 and under in the period 30 June 2020 to 30 June 2021.

In the second stage of analysis, the population is further refined by only examining incarcerated parents with sentences longer than 60 days. For prisoners who go from remand to prison this will be seen as a single event if the prison sentence starts within one day of remand ending.

¹ [Hāpaitia te Oranga Tangata | New Zealand Ministry of Justice](#)

² [What-Works-Children-of-Prisoners-190615-WEB.pdf \(swa.govt.nz\)](#)



Prisoners and their children

In 2021, 65% of incarcerated females (covering remand and prison) had children under the age of 18 while 53% of incarcerated males had children in this age range. Incarcerated mothers had on average 2.65 children while incarcerated fathers had 2.1. The number of Incarcerated females in remand is about 2 times than the number in prison, while for males the prison and remand numbers are similar. See below for the complete breakdown. These numbers align well to the age profile of prisoners with the majority of prisoners aged between 25 to 40 years old³.

Sex	Type	Number of Prisoners	Parents to children under 18		Number of children*	
			Number	Percent	Total	Per Parent
Female	prison	624	399	64%	1,068	2.7
Female	remand	1,179	783	66%	2,028	2.6
Male	prison	6,777	3,522	52%	7,326	2.1
Male	remand	8,001	4,488	56%	9,489	2.1

* Note: children can be counted twice because both their mother and father could have gone to prison.

Children and their parents

Of the children with both parents matched in the IDI, a total of 18,582 (or 1.90% of the child population) have had at least one parent incarcerated in 2021. On the other hand, 624 (0.06% of the child population) have had both their parents incarcerated. A child is significantly more likely to have their father incarcerated (1.72% of the child population) than their mother (0.24% of the child population).

		Mother	
		None	incarcerated
Father	None		1773 0.18%
	incarcerated	16185 1.65%	624 0.06%

A small proportion of children had only one parent matched in the IDI (4%), this closely matches the number of children with only one parent on their birth certificate⁴. The parent matched on their birth certificate was always their mother. Of these children around 1.34% had their identified parent incarcerated.

³ [Prison facts and statistics - March 2023 | Department of Corrections](#)

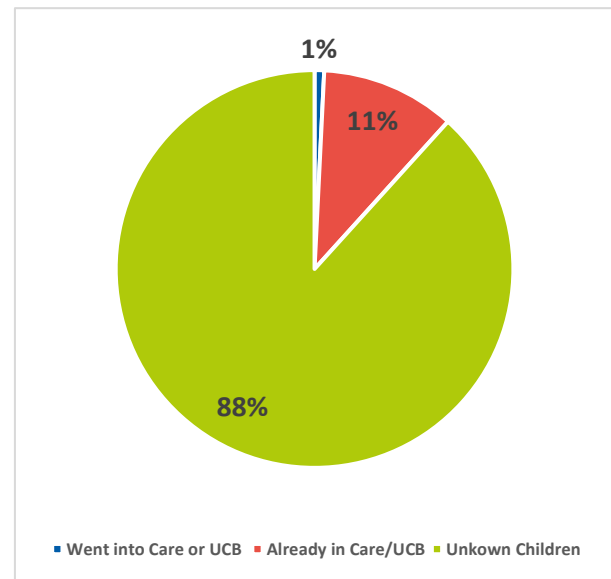
⁴ Communication with Department of Internal Affairs



Changes in custody

Changes in formal custody of children of incarcerated parents with sentences longer than 60 days is relatively unknown with only a few touch points with the state. The two main touch points are if a child has had a Care event or if the caregiver of a child has applied for the Unsupported Child's Benefit (UCB). From these two main touch points, most of the children who have had a change in custody has had it occur before the parent enters prison. 1557 Children (11% of Children) were already in Care or on the UCB before the start date of their parent's sentence. This is because most of the children are from families with multiple existing risk factors⁵.

Relatively few children entered into Care or went onto the UCB 30 days before or after their parent's sentence start date. Only 111 Children (1.8% of Children) fell into this category. The custody status of the remaining 12,573 Children (88%) could not be identified in the IDI. This is a significant proportion of the children and will require further analysis to determine if there was no change or an informal change in custody.



Gender of the parent plays a significant role in determining whether a child changes custody. A mother going to prison is 3 times more likely to be associated with their child going onto the UCB or into Care (1.5%, compared with 0.5% for males). This trend flows onto children who have already had a change in custody before the parent enters prison with these children 2 times more likely to have already be in care or on UCB (17% compared with 8%).

However, 86% of parents who have been incarcerated are male. Therefore, the number of children who were already on UCB or in-Care or started during the father's prison sentence is higher with 1176 Children (mothers: 558 Children).

While ethnicity was not included in this analysis, data from the Department of corrections shows that 52.8%⁶ of the prison population is Māori. This means that the effects of parents going into prison will disproportionately fall on Māori Children and their Whānau.

Prisoner's Gender	Went into Care or UCB		Already in Care/UCB		Other Children		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
Male	69	0.50%	1107	8%	12054	91%	13230
Female	45	1.50%	513	17%	2490	82%	3048
Total	111	0.70%	1620	10%	14544	89%	16275

⁵ [What-Works-Children-of-Prisoners-190615-WEB.pdf \(swa.govt.nz\)](#)

⁶ [Prison facts and statistics - March 2023 | Department of Corrections](#)



What supports work for children with parents in prison?

Given the potential impacts of parental imprisonment on child wellbeing it is important to understand how best to support children, young people, and their whānau during this time. A 2015 paper by the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit⁷ reviewed evidence on potential interventions to mediate the effects of parental imprisonment on children.

Strong evidence of effectiveness was found in these areas:

- Stable living arrangements, ideally with family or friends, can help mitigate the trauma of parent-child separation.
- Caregivers of children with a parent or parents in prison can be supported by nurse-home visiting programmes, parenting skills programs, and programmes taking a broader view of the context the children are in, such as Multisystemic Therapy and Multidimensional Treatment for Foster Care.
- Ensuring eligible financial supports and emergency funding are provided can help overcome any immediate impacts of loss of income due to imprisonment.

For further information please see the original report, which includes the full analysis of effectiveness.

Limitations of the analysis

One of the primary limitations of IDI data is that it only captures biological ties, not who is raising the child. Therefore, figure such as change in custody will undercount due to missing informal changes.

For children under 1 years old it is possible that the child was born after the parent left prison or remand.

⁷ [What-Works-Children-of-Prisoners-190615-WEB.pdf \(swa.govt.nz\)](https://www.swa.govt.nz/publications/What-Works-Children-of-Prisoners-190615-WEB.pdf)