

**California State Prisoners With  
Children: Findings From  
the 1997 Survey of Inmates  
in State and Federal  
Correctional Facilities**

*By M. Anne Powell, M.S.W.  
Clare Nolan, M.P.P.*

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This report is part of the Children of Incarcerated Mothers study being conducted at UC Data Archives & Technical Assistance, at the University of California, Berkeley, for the California Research Bureau, California State Library, in response to AB 2316, Mazzoni, (Chapter 965, Statutes of 2000). M. Anne Powell is a doctoral student in the School of Social Welfare and is Project Director. Clare Nolan assisted while a graduate student researcher at the Goldman School of Public Policy. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the authors, and do not reflect the opinions of the University of California or the California State Library. Other reports in this research series (by Marcus Nieto, Clare Nolan and Dr. Charlene Wear Simmons) may be found at <http://www.library.ca.gov/html/statseg2.cfm/>.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent incarceration trends in California state prisons have profound implications and likely unintended consequences for the children of incarcerated parents. According to the California Department of Corrections (CDC), over the past seven years, the number of adults incarcerated in the state's prisons has increased seven-fold, with growth in the population of women in prison outpacing that of men by nearly 50 percent. Because incarcerated women are more likely than men to have children, and are much more likely to have been caring for their children prior to their arrest, the growing number of women prisoners has important implications for children, and for state policies and programs.

This report presents information on the characteristics of parents incarcerated in California state prisons and their children, based on previously unexamined data from the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, the most recent survey. The analysis investigates differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers, between incarcerated parents and other inmates, and between incarcerated parent and non-parent women and men in California and in state prisons elsewhere in the United States.

A majority of women and men incarcerated in California prisons in 1997 reported having at least one child under the age of 18 when they entered prison. A larger proportion of women than men were parents (64 percent as compared to 57 percent). Half of incarcerated mothers lived with at least one of their minor children in the month before arrest, while only one-third of incarcerated fathers did so (53 percent as compared to 36 percent). In 2001, California's prisons held an estimated 10,300 mothers and 84,000 fathers. These parents had an estimated 192,000 minor children.

A substantial proportion of incarcerated parents' children were under age six (children of 27 percent of the mothers and 34 percent of the fathers), a finding that has profound implications for their early childhood development.

Care taking arrangements for the children of women in prison differ dramatically from those of the children of incarcerated fathers. While most fathers (85 percent) reported that at least one of their children were being cared for by the child's other parent or step-parent, only 29 percent of incarcerated mothers reported their children in parental care. Mothers were much more likely than fathers to report that a grandparent was caring for their children (49 percent as compared to 14 percent). In addition, the children of incarcerated women were more likely than the children of incarcerated fathers to be in the care of a foster home, agency or institution (nine percent as compared to two percent).

More than half of the women and men in California state prisons had not graduated from high school or received their GED. Incarcerated mothers and fathers were less likely than their non-parenting counterparts to have finished high school or attained a GED (55 percent of mothers as compared to 61 percent of other women, and 55 percent of fathers as compared to 58 percent of other men). These data suggest that the earning power of incarcerated parents is quite limited.

In the month prior to their arrest, mothers reported having substantially lower levels of income than fathers. While 16 percent of fathers had incomes below \$200, one in four women (25 percent) received less than \$200 a month. These findings are particularly striking in light of the fact that mothers were more likely to be caring for their minor children prior to arrest than were fathers.

Mothers most frequently reported committing drug and property crimes (38 percent and 30 percent, respectively), while fathers most frequently committed violent and drug crimes (36 percent and 27 percent, respectively). In addition, women reported shorter sentence lengths than men.

The use of alcohol and drugs by incarcerated adults differed primarily across gender, as opposed to parenting status. Overall, a higher proportion of mothers than fathers reported using drugs, both at the time of arrest and in the month before their offense. There were notable differences in the types of drugs used by mothers and fathers. In the month before their arrest, nearly half of mothers reported using cocaine or crack (43 percent) and 26 percent reported using heroin or other opiates. Fathers were most likely to report using marijuana (34 percent).

In conclusion, this report presents information about a wide range of factors concerning parents incarcerated in California state prisons. These findings have important implications for state programs and policies, and for everyone concerned with the safety and well being of children.

## INTRODUCTION

### CALIFORNIA FINDINGS FROM THE 1997 SURVEY OF INMATES IN STATE AND FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Over the past 20 years, America's prison population has increased dramatically. The number of women and men in state and federal prisons nearly quadrupled between 1980 and 2000, growing from roughly 320,000 to 1.3 million.<sup>1</sup> At yearend 2002, the total population of adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons and local jails exceeded two million.<sup>2</sup> An estimated one out of every 20 persons in the U.S. can now expect to spend time in prison.<sup>3</sup> This unprecedented growth in the American prison population has generated increasing levels of concern about the unintended consequences our criminal justice system may have for children and families.

California has the largest prison system of all 50 states and the largest number of women in prison.<sup>4</sup> While America's prisoner population quadrupled, California witnessed a seven-fold increase between 1981 and 2000.<sup>5</sup> Although women are a small proportion of the state prison population throughout the country (seven percent) relative to men, in California women comprise 11 percent of the state's prison population, nearly double the proportion of women in California state prisons in 1981 (six percent). According to the California Department of Corrections (CDC), the number of women in California prisons increased 660 percent between 1981 and 2001. In comparison, during this same time of time the rate of increase for men in California prisons was less than 500 percent. Growth in the number of incarcerated women has particular implications for children, because women are much more likely than men to have children and to have been caring for them prior to their arrest (Mumola 2000).

Despite the serious implications of these trends, little information about children who are affected by parental incarceration is available. Few California child welfare agencies collect information regarding a parent's incarceration, and the state's correctional system does not gather and report information regarding incarcerated parents' children (Harnhill et al. 1998, Nieto 2002). Although a growing body of social science research is investigating the impacts that the correctional system has on families, much of this literature is characterized by small sample sizes, is not generalizable to California, or relies on information provided by individuals incarcerated in a single prison facility.\*

Without reliable information, it is difficult to develop sound strategies for serving these at-risk families, such as systematic collaborations between criminal justice, family and child-serving organizations—most notably state and county child welfare agencies, local law enforcement, schools, the courts, state and county juvenile justice departments, and state prisons. Given the number of children affected by parental incarceration, policy

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\* With support from the California Research Bureau in the California State Library, a comprehensive study exploring the characteristics of the children of women incarcerated in California state prisons is underway at the University of California, Berkeley's UC Data Archive & Technical Archives.

makers will increasingly require sophisticated data in order to evaluate and improve existing practices and programs.

## DATA AND METHODS

This report examines data about California state prisoners who participated in the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities.<sup>†</sup> About 750 mothers incarcerated in state prisons were included in the national sample, of which only 110 were in California state prisons. Given this relatively small number, the analyses in this report are primarily descriptive in nature. Where noteworthy differences occur, comparisons are made with data drawn by this survey from other state prison populations. This data does not include information about parents incarcerated in California's county jails, or on parole or probation. In addition, 1,410 incarcerated women and 1,650 incarcerated men in the sample had only grown children. Since the study is about incarcerated parents and their minor children, no data regarding these incarcerated parents or their adult children is provided in this report.

We focus particularly on the differences between incarcerated mothers and fathers, and between incarcerated parents and other inmates.\* These differences have important implications for state policies and programs targeting incarcerated parents and their children. For example, mothers are more likely to have been single caretakers of their children, a fact which has significant implications for the design of sentencing policies, child welfare services, family law and prisoner parenting programs.

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<sup>†</sup> This survey is designed by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics and conducted by the Bureau of the Census every five to seven years. The 1997 data represent personal interviews with 18,326 incarcerated women and men incarcerated in state and federal prisons, 2,433 of whom were incarcerated in California state prisons. The survey covers a wide range of topics, producing detailed information about the demographics, criminal history, family and personal background, lifetime drug and alcohol use and treatment, and inmate participation in prison-based programs.

\* Incarcerated parents are defined as incarcerated mothers and fathers with children under age 18 at the time of their most recent entry into prison. Inmates whose children were adults at the time they entered prison are excluded from this analysis.



## 1997 SURVEY FINDINGS

In 2001, there were 157,142 persons in the custody of California state prisons.<sup>‡</sup> We estimate that 90,200 of these women and men were parents whose children were age 18 or younger when the parent entered prison. Imprisoned parents were predominantly male (93 percent). In 2001, California's prisons held an estimated 6,200 mothers and 84,000 fathers. We estimate that 15,600 children had a mother in state prison, and 176,400 children had a father in state prison. These 192,000 children represent 2.1 percent of California's child population.<sup>§</sup>

Most incarcerated parents, especially fathers, did not live with their children prior to incarceration (defined as living with the children the month before arrest). In 2001, an estimated 33,553 California households with minor children had a custodial parent in state prison; 3,300 households had a custodial mother in prison and 30,200 households had a custodial father in prison. Even though incarcerated mothers were more likely to have been living with their children prior to their arrest, because the prison population is predominantly male, a greater number of households were affected by the father's incarceration in state prison.

### *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*

When interviewed during the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, a majority of California women and men in state prison reported having at least one child under the age of 18 at the time of their admission to prison. A larger proportion of women (64 percent) were parents of minor children than men (57 percent).

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Has Minor Children	64%	57%
Does Not Have Minor Children	36%	43%

A majority of these parents reported having more than one minor child, with women more likely than men (69 percent as compared to 58 percent). Female parents reported an average of 2.5 children, while male parents reported an average of 2.1 children.

<sup>‡</sup> 2001 is the latest year for which state prison census data was available when this study was conducted.

<sup>§</sup> This estimate is based on projections made using findings from the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities to state prison census figures published by the California Department of Corrections (CDC). In 2001, CDC reported 9,751 women and 147,391 men were incarcerated in state prisons. Based on these data, 6,241 women (64 percent of 9,751) and 84,013 men (57 percent of 147,391) had children who were under age 18 when the parent entered prison. In 2001, 15,602 children had a mother in state prison and 176,427 children had a father in state prison (6,241 mothers with an average of 2.5 children each and 84,013 fathers with an average of 2.1 children each). The U.S. Census Bureau reported that California's child population was 9,249,800 in 2001; therefore, the estimated 192,000 minor children of California state prisoners are 2.1 percent of that child population.

	<u>Mothers</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
Multiple Minor Children	69%	57%
One Minor Children	31%	43%

## **DEMOGRAPHICS OF INCARCERATED WOMEN AND MEN**

This section of the report presents data pertaining to the demographics of women and men incarcerated in California state prisons—including their marital status, age when surveyed, age when first child was born, race and ethnicity, educational attainment and mental health.

### **AGE OF INCARCERATED WOMEN AND MEN**

Incarcerated parents who had minor children when they entered California state prisons were generally younger than prisoners who did not have children. This discrepancy was more pronounced among women; the average age of incarcerated mothers was 33, compared to an average age of 37 for non-mothers. This data does not necessarily indicate a difference in childbearing rates, since older incarcerated women and men are likely to have children 18 years of age and older.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
24 or Younger	10%	10%	11%	12%
25 to 34	49%	47%	29%	32%
35 to 44	36%	35%	40%	28%
45 or Older	6%	7%	19%	17%
Mean Age	33	33	37	34

### **MARITAL STATUS**

In general, incarcerated parents in California reported higher rates of marriage (30 percent) than do incarcerated parents in other states (22 percent). Mothers incarcerated in California prisons were less likely to report being married (25 percent) than were incarcerated fathers (30 percent), but they were more likely to be married than mothers incarcerated in other states (20 percent). California's incarcerated mothers were also less likely to be widowed, divorced or separated than were women in other states' prisons (33 percent compared to 52 percent).



	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Never Married	43%	42%	48%	68%
Married	25%	30%	18%	11%
Widowed, Divorced or Separated	33%	28%	52%	21%

## RACE AND ETHNICITY

The race and ethnicity of California parents incarcerated in state prison differed somewhat from that of other prisoners. Mothers of minor children were almost evenly divided among Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites (32 percent, 31 percent and 31 percent, respectively), while the other women prisoners were more likely to be Black (39 percent). Fathers were more likely to be Hispanic and Black (39 percent and 31 percent, respectively) than were the other men in prison.

The racial and ethnic makeup of parents in California prisons is markedly different from that of parents in other states' prisons, largely due to larger population differences between the states. Incarcerated mothers in other states were more likely to be Black (52 percent), with 32 percent White and 13 percent Hispanic. There were similar racial and ethnic differences among incarcerated fathers.

<b>California</b>				
	<i>Incarcerated Parents</i>		<i>Other Inmates</i>	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Black Non-Hispanic	32%	31%	39%	25%
Hispanic	31%	39%	29%	33%
White Non-Hispanic	31%	28%	29%	34%
Other	6%	3%	3%	8%
<b>Other States</b>				
	<i>Incarcerated Parents</i>		<i>Other Inmates</i>	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Black Non-Hispanic	52%	52%	45%	44%
Hispanic	17%	17%	14%	13%
White Non-Hispanic	28%	28%	37%	40%
Other	3%	3%	4%	3%

## AGE OF PARENT WHEN FIRST CHILD BORN

Teenage childbearing can result in diminished educational and economic opportunities for both mothers and their children, particularly if the birth occurs before a teenager has completed high school (Brown and Eisenberg, 1995). Most mothers incarcerated in California state prisons were between the ages of 18 and 24 when they gave birth to their first child (51 percent). However a large proportion of California’s mothers incarcerated in state prison (37 percent) were themselves children (under age 18) when their first child was born.

	Mothers	Fathers
14 or Younger	4%	2%
15 - 17	33%	11%
18 - 19	27%	20%
20 - 24	24%	39%
25 - 29	9%	20%
30 or Older	3%	8%

## AGE OF INCARCERATED PARENTS’ CHILDREN

Most children of California’s incarcerated parents were under ten years old at the time of the 1997 federal survey (54 percent of the children of incarcerated mothers and 60 percent of the children of fathers). Furthermore, a substantial proportion were under six years old (25 percent of the children of incarcerated mothers and 30 percent of fathers). These children were even younger at the time of their parents’ arrest. This finding has important implications for the early childhood development of these children, since “children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, responsive interaction and encouragement for exploration.” (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

	Mothers	Fathers
Less Than One Year Old	2%	4%
1 - 5	25%	30%
6 - 9	27%	26%
10 - 14	34%	27%
15 - 17	12%	13%

## INCARCERATED CUSTODIAL PARENTS

The effect of parental incarceration on a child can be moderated by a number of factors. Foremost among these is whether an incarcerated parent was living with his or her children (as a “custodial” parent) prior to arrest and incarceration. This section presents data focusing on incarcerated custodial parents, and includes an estimate of the number of California households affected by the arrest of a custodial parent.

### PARENTS LIVING WITH CHILDREN PRIOR TO ARREST

Approximately half of mothers incarcerated in California prisons (53 percent) lived with at least one of their minor children in the month before their arrest, compared to only 36 percent of incarcerated fathers. Possible reasons that so many parents lived separately from their children include loss of custody, the child’s involvement in the child welfare system or drug-related issues. In addition, it is likely that some parents, particularly fathers, never lived with their children.

	<u>Mothers</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
Lived With Children	53%	36%
Did Not Live With Children	47%	64%

### HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

Children who grow up in single-parent families typically do not have access to the same human and economic resources as children growing up in two-parent families. They are at increased risk of poverty, poor academic outcomes, early childbearing, and increased levels of stress, depression, anxiety and aggression (Fields et al, 2000). Moreover, the incarceration of a single parent may have even more severe consequences, because the child’s other parent may not be available to provide care.\*\*

Among parents who were living with their children prior to arrest, household composition differed dramatically by gender. Nearly twice the proportion of incarcerated fathers lived in two-parent households (63 percent as compared to 33 percent of mothers). This means that the children of incarcerated fathers were much more likely to remain in the same household under the care of their mother or stepmother during their fathers’ incarceration. Thus incarcerating a mother is significantly more likely to disrupt her children’s lives than the incarceration of a father.

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\*\* The Federal survey classified parents as “single” if they did not report a spouse present in the household.

	<u>Mothers</u>	<u>Fathers</u>
Lived With Children	67%	37%
Did Not Live With Children	33%	63%

The gender discrepancy in household composition is even more pronounced in other states -- only 19 percent of incarcerated female parents in other states lived with the other parent prior to arrest, compared to 56 percent of male parents.

## **CRIMINAL HISTORY**

The types of offenses committed by parents, and their history of previous incarceration or probation, have important implications for sentencing and for the likelihood that their parental rights will be terminated. Consequently, this section presents data on parents' criminal history.

## **CURRENT OFFENSE**

Incarcerated mothers and fathers committed different types of crimes. Mothers most frequently committed drug and property crimes (38 percent and 30 percent, respectively) while fathers most frequently committed violent and drug crimes (36 percent and 27 percent, respectively). A greater proportion of prisoners without minor age children reported committing violent crimes.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Violent	17%	36%	36%	46%
Property	30%	19%	19%	19%
Drug	38%	27%	27%	19%
Public-Order	17%	17%	17%	15%
Other/Unspecified	*	*	*	*

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

Incarcerated parents in California were less likely to be serving prison terms for drug and violent crimes (28 percent and 35 percent) than were incarcerated parents in state prisons elsewhere (23 percent and 46 percent). The proportion of parents who are sentenced for drug felonies has particular significance in California, because these individuals are no longer eligible to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or food stamps.

## SENTENCE LENGTH

The length of sentences differed dramatically by gender among California prison inmates. Women reported shorter sentence lengths than men, in accordance with their less serious offenses.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Less Than One Year	9%	5%	7%	5%
1 - 3 Years	43%	27%	48%	21%
3 - 5 Years	29%	22%	23%	22%
5 - 10 Years	11%	23%	10%	21%
10 Or More Years	6%	18%	8%	22%
Life or Death Sentence	*	6%	3%	10%

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

The length of sentences imposed on custodial parents can have important implications for child custody—particularly in situations when their children are under age five or the parent is convicted of a drug crime. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, enacted with the intent of ensuring permanency for children in foster care, sets out requirements and associated timelines that parents must meet in order to avoid the termination of their parental rights. According to a recent report issued by the California Research Bureau.

“Agreement to a sentence longer than 18 months may effectively result in termination of parental rights if children are placed in foster care during the parent’s incarceration. This is an aspect of punishment that few parents realize, and which the state has not expressly articulated.” (Simmons 2003).

## CRIMINAL HISTORY

More than three-quarters of the mothers and fathers incarcerated in California state prisons were previously convicted of one or more crimes (81 percent and 83 percent, respectively). Parents were slightly more likely to report having a prior conviction.

	<b>Incarcerated Parents</b>		<b>Other Inmates</b>	
	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
None	19%	17%	24%	20%
Priors	81%	83%	76%	79%
Violent Recidivist	24%	48%	23%	51%
Other Recidivist <sup>1</sup>	57%	35%	53%	28%

<sup>1</sup> Includes all recidivists who did not have at least one current or past violent offense.

Incarcerated mothers in other states' prisons were nearly twice as likely as those incarcerated in California to have no prior criminal history (37 percent compared to 19 percent). This was also true for incarcerated fathers, but to a lesser degree. Twenty-three percent of fathers incarcerated in other states had no prior criminal history, compared to 17 percent of fathers in California.

### ***Criminal Justice Status at Time of Arrest***

More mothers (70 percent) than fathers (59 percent) were on parole or probation at the time of their arrest. A slightly higher proportion of inmate mothers (70 percent) reported being on parole or probation than women who did not have minor children (65 percent).

	<b><i>Incarcerated Parents</i></b>		<b><i>Other Inmates</i></b>	
	<b><u>Women</u></b>	<b><u>Men</u></b>	<b><u>Women</u></b>	<b><u>Men</u></b>
None	30%	42%	34%	43%
Status	70%	59%	65%	57%
On Parole	39%	39%	36%	37%
On Probation	31%	20%	29%	20%

Nationally, inmates in California were much more likely to have been on parole or probation when they were arrested than were inmates in state prisons elsewhere regardless of gender. Seventy percent of mothers and 59 percent of fathers in California prisons were on parole or probation at the time of their arrest, compared to only 53 percent of mothers and 46 percent of fathers in other states' prisons.

### **PRIOR INCARCERATIONS AND SENTENCES TO PROBATION**

Inmates who were parents were more likely to report having prior incarcerations and sentences to probation (81 percent of mothers and 83 percent of fathers) than inmates who did not have minor children (76 percent of women and 78 percent of men).

Incarcerated mothers in California were more likely than mothers (60 percent) and fathers (76 percent) incarcerated in other states to have prior sentences.

<b>Table 14</b>				
<b>California Prison Inmates with Prior Incarcerations and Sentences to Probation, 1997</b>				
	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
None	19%	17%	24%	21%
Priors	81%	83%	76%	78%
No Prior Sentence	19%	17%	24%	21%
Prior Sentence as Juvenile Only	*	<b>3%</b>	*	7%
Prior Sentence as Adult Only	56%	41%	48%	36%
Prior Sentence as Both Adult and Juvenile	23%	39%	26%	35%

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

A greater proportion of California inmate mothers reported having none or only one prior sentence to probation or prison compared to inmate fathers (37 percent to 27 percent).

<b>Table 15</b>				
<b>Number of California Prison Inmates with Prior Sentences to Probation or Incarceration, 1997</b>				
	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
None	19%	17%	25%	21%
1	18%	10%	10%	14%
2	10%	15%	13%	14%
3 – 5	24%	27%	21%	23%
6 – 10	17%	18%	16%	16%
11 or More	11%	13%	15%	11%

#### *Education, Employment and Income Prior to Arrest*

Low socioeconomic status has been linked to a number of poor outcomes for children in areas such as health, early childbearing, emotional wellbeing and education (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997)). This section presents information on the employment status and income of California's incarcerated parents prior to arrest and incarceration.

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Parents in California prisons were more likely than other prisoners to report that they had not finished high school or attained a GED (45 percent of mothers compared to 39 percent of other women; 45 percent of fathers compared to 42 percent of other men). The data suggest that the earning power of incarcerated parents was even more limited than that of prisoners without minor children.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
8th Grade or Less	10%	14%	13%	15%
Some High School	35%	31%	26%	27%
GED	17%	1%	18%	24%
High School Graduate	18%	18%	24%	19%
Some College or More	20%	16%	19%	16%

The level of education possessed by California's incarcerated parents was less than that of parents in other states' prisons. A smaller proportion (55 percent) received a GED, high school diploma, or some college education relative to parents incarcerated in other states (61 percent).

## EMPLOYMENT

Female parents (59 percent) were about twice as likely as male parents (31 percent) to report having been unemployed in the month prior to their arrest. They were also more likely than other women in prison to report having been unemployed. Among parents who were employed, mothers (41 percent) were less likely to be employed full-time than were fathers (69 percent).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Unemployed	59%	31%	52%	37%
Employed	41%	69%	48%	63%
Full-Time	31%	55%	33%	46%
Part-Time	9%	10%	13%	10%
Occasional	*	4%	*	6%

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.



A higher proportion of incarcerated parents in California (59 percent of mothers and 31 percent of fathers) were unemployed the month before their arrest, compared to incarcerated parents in other states (49 percent of mothers and 27 percent of fathers).

## INCOME

In the month prior to their arrest, inmate mothers reported having substantially lower levels of income than inmate fathers. While 16 percent of fathers had monthly incomes below \$200, one in four women reported monthly incomes of less than \$200. These findings are particularly striking in light of the fact that mothers were more likely to be living with their minor children prior to their arrest than were fathers, and were more likely to be sole caregivers.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Less Than \$200	25%	16%	22%	24%
\$200 – 599	22%	20%	24%	22%
\$600 – 999	21%	18%	24%	17%
\$1,000 - 1,999	16%	26%	17%	21%
\$2,000 - 4,999	10%	14%	*	11%
\$5,000 or More	*	6%	*	7%

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

## SOURCES OF INCOME

Incarcerated parents reported substantial differences in income sources in the month prior to their arrest, depending on their gender. About half as many mothers as fathers (37 percent compared to 64 percent) received income from work. More than twice as many mothers (39 percent) reported receiving income from public assistance as fathers (14 percent). More incarcerated women than men reported receiving income from illegal sources.

<b>Table 19</b>				
<b>Sources of California Inmates' Income in Month Before Arrest, 1997</b>				
	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Wages or Salary	37%	64%	48%	58%
Transfer Payments <sup>1</sup>	39%	14%	27%	17%
Illegal Sources	28%	22%	29%	24%
Family/Friends	15%	15%	18%	16%
Child Support/Alimony	*	*	*	*
Other <sup>2</sup>	*	7%	*	8%

Note: Detail adds to more than 100% because individuals may have received income from multiple sources.

1 Includes welfare, Social Security and Supplemental Social Security income.

2 Includes pensions, educational assistance, investments, unspecified types of income and compensation payments such as unemployment insurance, workman's compensation and Veteran's compensation.

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

Nearly seven times as many mothers incarcerated in other states (seven percent) received child support and alimony as did incarcerated mothers in California (one percent). In addition, a lower proportion of mothers incarcerated in California (15 percent) reported receiving income from family and friends compared to mothers incarcerated in other states (27 percent).

## HOMELESSNESS

One in four mothers incarcerated in California state prisons reported living on the street or in a shelter for some or all of the year before their arrest. These mothers (and their children) were more than twice as likely as incarcerated fathers to have been homeless. Homelessness was more prevalent among mothers in California state prisons than among mothers incarcerated in state prisons elsewhere. In contrast, fathers incarcerated in California state prisons were half as likely as fathers in state prisons elsewhere to have experienced homelessness.

<b>Table 20</b>				
<b>Incarcerated Parents and Other Inmates Who Were Homeless in the Past Year, by Gender, 1997</b>				
	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Yes	25%	11%	19%	15%
No	76%	89%	81%	85%

## MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health issues are important in part because a parent’s mental illness can have negative consequences for the children. For example, maternal depression has been linked to social, behavioral, academic and health difficulties among children (Downey and Coyne 1990). Women prisoners in California state prisons were more likely than male prisoners to report having mental health issues. Nearly twice the proportion of incarcerated mothers reported a mental health issue as incarcerated fathers (24 percent compared to 12 percent). The difference was not as great for other incarcerated women and men (24 percent as compared to 18 percent).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Reported Mental Health Issues	22%	12%	24%	18%
Did Not Report Mental Health Issues	78%	88%	76%	82%

### *Alcohol and Drug Use*

A parent’s history of alcohol and drug use can have important implications for children, placing them at risk of child abuse and neglect, adolescent alcohol and drug use, low parental monitoring, and behavioral problems (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002). The following data reveal small differences among California prison inmates in the use of alcohol and other substances based on gender or parental status.

## HISTORY OF ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE

About one in four of California’s incarcerated women and men exhibited a history of alcohol dependence.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Yes	25%	24%	26%	20%
No	76%	76%	74%	80%

Note: Measured by three or more positive CAGE response. CAGE is a diagnostic instrument for detecting a person’s history of alcohol abuse or dependence. In a clinical test, three or more positive responses carry a .99 predictive value for alcohol abuse or dependence.

## UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL AT TIME OF ARREST

Fewer mothers (25 percent) reported being under the influence of alcohol at the time of arrest than did fathers (31 percent). Incarcerated women and men without minor children reported a slightly higher incidence of alcohol use at the time of their arrest.

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Yes	25%	31%	27%	34%
No	75%	69%	73%	66%

## DRUG USE AT TIME OF OFFENSE

In contrast to alcohol dependence, more incarcerated women (47 percent of mothers and 44 percent of the other women) reported having been under the influence of drugs at the time of their offense than did men (32 percent of fathers and 37 percent of other male prisoners). There were notable differences in the types of drugs. Mothers were most likely to report having used cocaine or crack (25 percent) and heroin or other opiates (18 percent). Fathers were most likely to report having used stimulants (14 percent) and cocaine or crack (10 percent).

Women incarcerated in California state prisons reported higher rates of drug use at the time of their offense than did women in other states' prisons (46 percent compared to 39 percent).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Any Drug	47%	32%	44%	37%
Cocaine/Crack	25%	10%	23%	12%
Heroin/Opiates	18%	7%	*	8%
Stimulants <sup>1</sup>	12%	14%	*	12%
Marijuana/Hashish	*	9%	*	13%
Depressants <sup>2</sup>	*	1%	*	1%
Hallucinogens <sup>3</sup>	*	*	*	4%

Note: Detail adds to more than total because some individuals may have used more than one drug. In addition, other unspecified types of drugs were included in the total.

<sup>1</sup> Includes amphetamine and methamphetamine.

<sup>2</sup> Includes barbiturates, tranquilizers and Quaaludes.

<sup>3</sup> Includes LSD and PCP.

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

## DRUG USE IN THE MONTH BEFORE OFFENSE

Three-quarters of the mothers incarcerated in California state prisons reported using drugs in the month prior to their current offense, more than fathers (60 percent). There were notable differences in the types of drugs used during this time. Nearly half of mothers reported using cocaine or crack (43 percent), and 26 percent reported using heroin or other opiates. Fathers were most likely to report having used marijuana (34 percent).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Any Drug	75%	60%	65%	61%
Cocaine/Crack	43%	21%	32%	19%
Heroin/Opiates	26%	11%	22%	12%
Marijuana/Hashish	21%	34%	21%	36%
Stimulants	21%	23%	16%	21%
Depressants	*	3%	*	2%
Hallucinogens	*	3%	*	6%

\* Sample size too small to permit estimating the percentage of individuals in the whole population of inmates with this characteristic.

More incarcerated mothers in California state prisons reported using drugs at the time of their offense and in the month before (47 percent and 75 percent, respectively) than did incarcerated mothers in state prisons elsewhere (42 percent and 63 percent, respectively). In addition, nearly three times as many parents in California state prisons reported using stimulants—which includes methamphetamines—in the month before their offense as did parents incarcerated other states' prisons (23 percent compared to seven percent).

## INMATES WHO COMMITTED CRIME TO OBTAIN DRUGS OR MONEY FOR DRUGS

Incarcerated women were more likely than men to report having committed their current offense in order to obtain drugs or money for drugs (23 percent of mothers and 27 percent of other incarcerated women as compared to 16 percent of fathers and 17 percent of other men). Incarcerated parents in other states more frequently reported that they had committed their offense for drug-related purposes (34 percent of mothers and 19 percent of fathers).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Yes	23%	16%	27%	17%
No	77%	84%	73%	83%

*Characteristics of Inmates' Families While Growing Up*

The characteristics of inmates' families when they were growing up have important implications for their ability to parent, and for the risks that their own children face. This section presents information on inmates' families, the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse, and the presence of other potential risk factors in their lives.

*Inmates' Families While Growing Up*

Household composition—two-parent families or single-parent families led by mothers or fathers— provides some insight into the stability of family life and the resources available to children. Most incarcerated mothers (84 percent) and fathers (85 percent) lived predominantly with both parents or with their mothers while they were growing up. Incarcerated mothers were slightly less likely than incarcerated fathers to report having lived with both parents (41 percent as compared to 46 percent).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Both parents	40.9%	45.6%	43.5%	47%
Mother	42.7%	39.2%	40.3%	38%
Grandparents	5.5%	7.8%	9.7%	6.3%
Fathers	1.8%	3.0%	1.6%	3.7%
Other relatives	6.3%	10.8%	1.6%	3.0%
Foster Care, Institutions, Other	2.8%	6.4%	3.3%	2.0%

A very small proportion of incarcerated women and men reported having lived in foster care or another institution most of the time while growing up. However, many prisoners reported having spent some time in foster care during their childhood. In California, incarcerated women were twice as likely as incarcerated men to have lived in foster care (14 percent compared to six percent). In contrast, incarcerated women in other states were only slightly more likely than incarcerated men to have lived in foster care (seven percent compared to five percent).

## PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE

Studies find that although most parents who were physically abused as children do not physically abuse their own children, a history of abuse appears to increase the risk of abusive behavior. Mothers who were sexually abused exhibit more dependence on their children for emotional caretaking, lower levels of maternal involvement, and more permissive parenting practices than do their non-abused counterparts (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002).

In light of this research, it is important to highlight the finding that 61 percent of the mothers of minor children in California prisons reported having been physically or sexually abused (compared to 13 percent of fathers). Thirty-nine percent of the mothers reported that the abuse occurred before the age of 18. A larger proportion of mothers (61 percent) reported physical or sexual abuse than did non-mothers (50 percent).

	Incarcerated Parents		Other Inmates	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Not Physically or Sexually Abused	39%	86%	50%	84%
Physically or Sexually Abused <sup>1</sup>	61%	13%	50%	16%
While Under 18 Years Old	39%	12%	31%	13%
While Over 18 Years Old Only	21%	1%	19%	3%

<sup>1</sup> Includes inmates who did not report what age they were when physically or sexually abused.

## ADDITIONAL RISK FACTORS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS' FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

California prison inmate parents reported the presence of various other risk factors in their lives while they were growing up. The proportion of their own parents or stepparents who were incarcerated is significant: 22 percent for mothers and 17 percent for fathers. A significant proportion of inmates' parents or stepparents received welfare or some other form of public assistance (e.g., food stamps): 42 percent of the families of incarcerated women and 31 percent of the families of male prisoners. In other states the gender difference was smaller (39 percent of the families of female prisoners compared to 38 percent of men). Alcohol and drug abuse by an inmate's parent was common, but more so in the families of incarcerated mothers (39 percent) than fathers (27 percent) in California.

## CHILDREN'S CURRENT CAREGIVERS AND CONTACT WITH PARENTS

During their parents' incarceration, children of prisoners live in a variety of caregiving arrangements. These arrangements have important implications for child wellbeing and for the nature of children's ongoing relationships with their parents. This section

explores survey data on the living arrangements of the children of incarcerated parents, and the frequency and type of contact they have had with their parents.

*Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents*

The care of the children of California prison inmates differed dramatically according to their gender. Most inmate fathers (85 percent) reported that at least one of their children was being cared for by the child’s mother or step-parent; in contrast, this was true for the children of only 29 percent of inmate mothers. Mothers were more likely to report that their children were being cared for by a grandparent (49 percent) or by other relatives (23 percent). In addition, the children of incarcerated women (nine percent) were more likely than the children of men in prison (two percent) to be in the care of a foster home, agency or institution. Single incarcerated mothers were less likely to report that their children were being cared for by the other parent or stepparent than mothers who lived in two-parent households prior to their arrest (29 percent compared to 40 percent).

	Mothers	Fathers
Child’s Grandparent	49%	14%
Child’s Parent/Step-Parent	29%	87%
Other Relatives	23%	5%
Friends, Others or Alone	9%	5%
Foster Care or Other Institution	9%	2%
Note: Detail adds to more than total because some inmates have multiple children living with different caregivers.		

Overall, these data indicate that children of incarcerated mothers are more vulnerable to being placed in alternative care with a relative or in foster care than are the children of incarcerated fathers. Incarcerated mothers are less able to rely on the other parent to care for their children and depend more heavily on their own parents or other relatives.

The research literature on children being cared for by relatives, which includes children of incarcerated parents, indicates that most relative caregivers are women over the age of 50, who experience economic hardship and often face significant health challenges (Ehrle and Geen, 2002). Many relative caregivers do not avail themselves of the public economic assistance resources for which they are eligible. This may be because they do not realize they are eligible, because they wish to avoid the stigma associated with receiving assistance, because they have been erroneously denied benefits, or because they do not wish to expose their family to scrutiny by public agencies (Ehrle and Geen, 2002). As a result, children cared for by relative caregivers often go without the services they need.

Finally, it is important to note that the survey data may under-estimate the proportion of inmates’ children who were in foster care. Some children in the care of a grandparent or



other relative may also be engaged with the foster care system, if the caregiver formalized custody in this manner. Some incarcerated parents may not know of this dual arrangement.

## PARENT-CHILD CONTACT

Ties between inmates and their families have been linked to a number of positive outcomes, including improved mental health status and functioning for inmates and their children, the increased likelihood of family reunification following release, reduced parental recidivism, and reduced disciplinary problems for the children (Stanley and Byrne, 2000, Holt, 1972). Visiting a parent in prison may allay children’s anxieties about their parents’ safety and wellbeing.

The survey data reveal that, with the exception of personal visits, a greater proportion of incarcerated mothers than fathers have regular contact with their children. A larger percentage of mothers than fathers had telephone contact with their children at least once a month (55 percent compared to 40 percent). A larger percentage of women than men received mail from their children at least once a month (61 percent compared to 50 percent). However a larger percentage of fathers receive personal visits from their children at least once a month (15 percent compared to ten percent). This is because the children of male prisoners are primarily cared for by their mothers, who make visiting a priority. Nevertheless, a larger proportion of inmate fathers than mothers reported having no contact with their children (27 percent compared to 18 percent). This may be partially explained by the fact that a majority of fathers were not living with their children prior to incarceration.

	Mothers	Fathers
Current Contact With Children		
Any Type of Contact	82%	73%
No Contact Whatsoever	18%	27%
Frequency of Telephone Contact		
At Least Once a Month	55%	40%
Infrequent or Never	45%	60%
Frequency of Mail Contact		
At Least Once a Month	61%	50%
Infrequent or Never	39%	50%
Frequency of Personal Visits		
At Least Once a Month	10%	15%
Infrequent or Never	90%	85%

Incarcerated parents in other states are more likely to receive visits from their children. Fifty-two percent of inmate mothers and 57 percent of inmate fathers in other states

reported that they had never received a visit, compared to 79 percent of mothers and 72 percent of fathers in California prisons.

### **DISTANCE OF FORMER RESIDENCE FROM PRISON**

A number of factors can affect visitation between children and their incarcerated parents, including the distance of the prison from a child’s home, costs associated with transportation and overnight accommodations, disinclination of caregivers to facilitate contact, and parents’ unwillingness to have their children see them in the prison setting (Bloom, 1995). Inmates were not asked in the survey to identify the distance between their child’s home and their prison, nor did the survey include data about other potentially prohibitive factors. Nevertheless, inmates were asked how far the prison was from their former residence, data that provides insight into the potential of distance to operate as a barrier to parent-child contact.

A small proportion of women (15 percent) and men (14 percent) were incarcerated in California prisons located within 50 miles of their former residences. More mothers (63 percent) than fathers (53 percent) reported being incarcerated 101 to 500 miles from their former residence. Even though fewer incarcerated mothers than fathers reported receiving personal visits, a greater proportion of fathers (16 percent) reported being more than 500 miles away from their former residence than mothers (eight percent).

<b>Table 31</b>		
<b>Distance between Incarcerated Parents’ Former Residence and Prison, 1997</b>		
	Mothers	Fathers
Less Than 50 Miles	15%	14%
50 - 100 Miles	14%	17%
101 - 500 Miles	63%	53%
More Than 500 Miles	8%	16%

Parent inmates in other state prisons (40 percent) were more likely to report being within 100 miles of their former residence than were parents in California state prisons (31 percent).

## **CONCLUSION**

This report presents a variety of information on the characteristics of parents incarcerated in California state prisons, including the proportion of inmates with children, basic demographics, who cares for the children, characteristics of inmates' families while growing up, income and employment and substance use. It compares differences between inmate mothers and fathers, between parent and non-parent inmates, and between California inmates and inmates in other states.

Given the scarcity of data on California inmates and their families, this information has important implications for state policies and programs. As elected officials, policy makers and service providers struggle to address the needs of the increasing population of children affected by parental incarceration, this information should assist in planning an adequate system of care for these children and their families.



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<sup>2</sup> Paige M. Harrison, and Jennifer C. Karberg, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002*, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Beck and Glaze.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison and Karberg, Lawrence A. Greenfeld, and Tracy L. Snell, *Women Offenders*, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 1999.

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