



## DATA BRIEF

# Children of Parents Incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail

January 2023

### BACKGROUND

Nationally, more than 2.7 million children have a parent currently incarcerated; over 5 million have had a parent incarcerated at some point during their childhood. Parental incarceration is traumatic for children and families, and is associated with behavior problems, lower educational achievement, future health issues and more (Miller, 2006; Dobbie et al., 2018).

In 2008, to better identify the needs of children with incarcerated parents, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) partnered with several organizations to analyze use of behavioral health (substance use and mental health) treatment as well as child welfare outcomes (foster care and case openings) for children with a parent in jail. Since this report was published, improvements in data collection have made it possible to conduct a deeper examination of the needs of these children, what gaps may exist in service provision, and how to better serve this population.

This data brief updates the previous DHS findings, and further explores service involvement, holding status, health and child welfare outcomes for incarcerated parents and their children from January 2018 through December 2021.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Out of 26,641 people booked in Allegheny County from 2018 through 2021, 51% (13,529) had children 18 or under at the time of booking, totaling 25,335 minor children
- 58% (7,868) of parents who were incarcerated were Black, compared to 12.8% of the county adult population. This means that Black children and parents are disproportionately affected by incarcerations.
- Most parents (65%, 8,794) are in jail for less than 30 days and only 4% of the parents were sentenced to the jail during this period. Most of the parents booked are held pretrial (46%, 6,207) or on a local probation detainer (23%, 3,127).
- There are county programs to keep children connected with parents who have longer jail stays. This includes the Allegheny County Family Support Program which provides parenting classes, visitations, phone calls and facilitates support networks for families during and post the incarceration.
- In addition to targeted programs, 10,335 of the children of incarcerated parents (41%) were involved in DHS services within a year after parental incarceration
- Early childhood services (such as Head Start and home visiting programs) and behavioral health services (such as mental health counseling) were the most common services used by children of incarcerated parents
- 1,894 children had a home removal or new placement within a year before or after the parental incarceration. Of these, 54% (1,022) were placed with family.

- 39% (9,760) of children had a mom who was incarcerated. Of these, 8% (776) had a home removal. The largest group of children (194) were removed in the 6 months *before* the maternal incarceration.
- Examining trends in the 30 days pre- and post- incarceration, there is an increase in home removals in the 5 days before an incarceration. 33% (49) of home removals of children that occurred within a month of a mother's incarceration occurred in the 5 days prior.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The data used in these analyses come from the Allegheny County Data Warehouse. The warehouse contains more than 20 sources of information, including information about people involved in the publicly funded behavioral health system, booked into the Allegheny County jail, referred to the child welfare system, accessing homeless and housing supports, and accessing early childhood services.

The following methodology was used to identify parents who were incarcerated:

- First, birth certificates were used to identify parents. While an important source of data, birth certificates under-report fathers and other parental figures, as some caregivers are not present on birth certificates. About 6% of fathers are not present on birth certificates for these children. This is a limitation because a large portion of parents who are incarcerated are men.
- Next, records from DHS's child protective services office were used to match parents to children. For instance, a biological, adoptive, foster or stepparent listed on a child protective services referral was matched as a parent to a child on that referral.

We examined the population of parents who were incarcerated at the Allegheny County Jail<sup>1</sup> and their children from January of 2018 through December of 2021.

## FINDINGS

### Incarcerated Parents

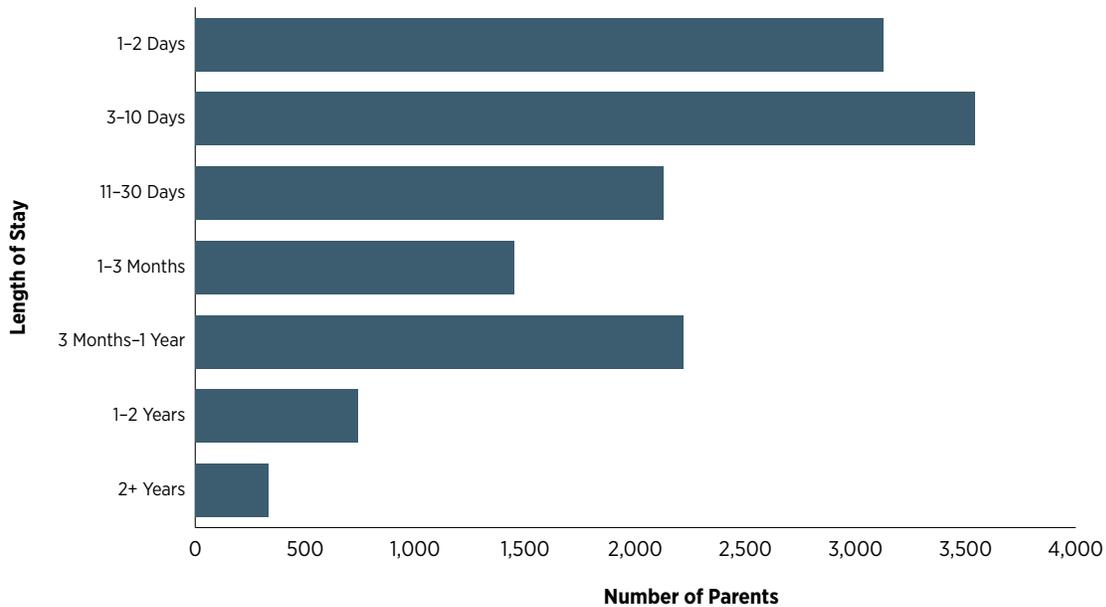
Out of 26,641 people booked in Allegheny County from 2018 through 2021, 51% (13,529) had children 18 or under at the time of booking, totaling 25,335 minor children. Specifically, 62% of incarcerated women and 48% of men had children.<sup>2</sup> 7,930 (59%) of parents had more than one child under the age of 18. Black parents are overrepresented in jail; 58% of incarcerated parents were Black and 41% were White, while the remaining 1% were Asian, other single race, or two or more races.

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1 Children with parents incarcerated in other jails, or state or federal prisons, are not included in this report.

2. 3,536 out of 5,667 women who are incarcerated, and 9,990 out of 20,967 men who are incarcerated have children.

**FIGURE 1: Length of time in Jail for Incarcerated Parents**



Parents who are incarcerated are held in jail for a variety of reasons, and their length of stay in jail differs. Evidence shows that child trauma associated with separation increases with length of stay (Raphael and Stoll, 2009). The median length of stay in jail for incarcerated parents in the Allegheny County Jail was 11 days; over 44% (6,665) of parents were incarcerated for 10 days or fewer (Figure 1). Only 7% (1,071) of parents were incarcerated for 1 year or more.

**TABLE 1: Primary Holding Status for Incarcerated Parents**

VARIABLE	#	%
Pretrial	6,207	46%
Local Detainer	3,127	23%
External Detainer	2,025	15%
Family Court	1,069	8%
County Sentenced	537	4%
Pending Release	355	3%
Other Reasons	208	2%

Source: Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2018 through 2021.

Notes: This table reports the primary holding status for children of parents who were incarcerated from 2018 through 2021. Holding status is calculated for each person each day. Primary holding status is defined as the holding status in which the person spent the most time

People who are incarcerated can be held in jail for one, or multiple reasons. The table above (**Table 1**) shows the primary holding status of parents in the Allegheny County Jail, though this may not be their only holding status.

Further analysis reveals that most parents (45.88%) were being held pretrial, followed by local detainer (23.12%), and then external detainer (14.95%). In practice, a pretrial holding status means that an individual is awaiting trial on a criminal charge, either for a short period until they are released to await trial in the community, or until their case has been resolved in court. Allowing more parents to await pretrial in the community, when possible, is a potential pathway for keeping families together.

Eight percent of parents who were incarcerated had a holding status of family court, meaning they had violated child support orders or protection from abuse orders. The smallest percentage of holding statuses were “other reasons” (which might include a release condition) (2%), pending release (awaiting going through the jail’s discharge process) (3%), and county sentences (4%). Holding status for parents did not differ significantly from non-parents, suggesting that parents are detained for similar reasons to non-parents. For more information on jail holding statuses, please visit our [Allegheny County Jail Dashboard](#).

### Children of Incarcerated Parents:

From 2018 through 2021, there were 25,335 children under the age of 18 with an incarcerated parent. 51% (12,852) of these children were male and 49% (12,256) were female. Similar to parents, Black children were overrepresented; 57% were Black, 37% were white, 2% were other races, and 5% had unknown race. Three out of every five children with a parent in jail were Black, indicating that Black children in Allegheny County were more likely to have an incarcerated parent than white children.

**TABLE 2: Age Distribution of the Child at Time of Parent Booking**

	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	% OF TOTAL
<1 Year old	2,500	10%
1-5 years old	7,140	28%
6-12 years old	9,833	39%
13-17 years old	5,862	23%
Total	25,335	100%

Source: Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2018 through 2021.

Effects of parental incarceration on children can differ by age, with research showing that younger children’s development and health are negatively impacted (Turney, 2014) while adolescents may experience adverse behavioral and education effects (Philips, Burns, and Wagner, 2002). Beyond differing consequences, children and adolescents may have different service needs related to parental incarceration. For example, for younger children, early intervention may be particularly important, while for older children, out-of-school-time services may meet important needs.

**Table 2** shows the age distribution of children with parents in Allegheny County Jail. Many children were young, with 10% (2,500) under the age of one and an additional 28% (7,140) 1 through 5 years old. 23% (5,862) of children were adolescents at the time of parental incarceration. More than 3 out of 4 children with a parental incarceration were age 12 or younger. Within one year of a parental incarceration, DHS served 10,335 of the 25,335 children (40.79%).

**TABLE 3: Services for Children 1 Year After Parental Incarceration**

VARIABLE	(1) IN SERVICES	(2) ELIGIBLE	(3) %
<b>All DHS Services</b>	10,335	25,335	41%
<b>Behavioral Health</b>	3,651	25,335	14 %
Mental Health	3,275	25,335	13%
Drug/Alcohol	170	5,855	3%
<b>Early Childhood</b>	2,774	16,637	17%
Family Support Center	786	9,639	8%
Home Visiting	692	10,949	6%
Head Start	297	4,280	7%
Early Intervention	913	6,763	14%
ELRC	1,084	11,156	10%
<b>Out-of-school time</b>	1,081	17,121	6%
<b>412 Youth Zone</b>	249	3,568	7%
<b>Intellectual Disability/Autism</b>	74	25,103	<1%
<b>Housing Support</b>	1,047	25,335	4%

Source: Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2018-2022.

Notes: This table reports service use for children of parents who were incarcerated from 2018-2022.

**Table 3** reports the types of services that children of incarcerated parents received from DHS within one year of their parent's booking in jail. The largest service use categories were early childhood services (used by 17% of children) and behavioral health services (used by 14% of children). Early childhood services include home visiting programs, Head Start and Early Head Start, and other early intervention services for children and families. Because 38% of children with incarcerated parents were under the age of 5 (see **Table 3**) and given the negative impacts of these incarcerations on child development (Turney, 2014), providing early intervention services to these families is imperative. Research illustrates that early intervention can improve long-term health (Carneiro & Ginja, 2014), decrease criminal involvement (Garces, Thomas, and Currie, 2002), improve education outcomes, and more (Black and Dewey, 2014).

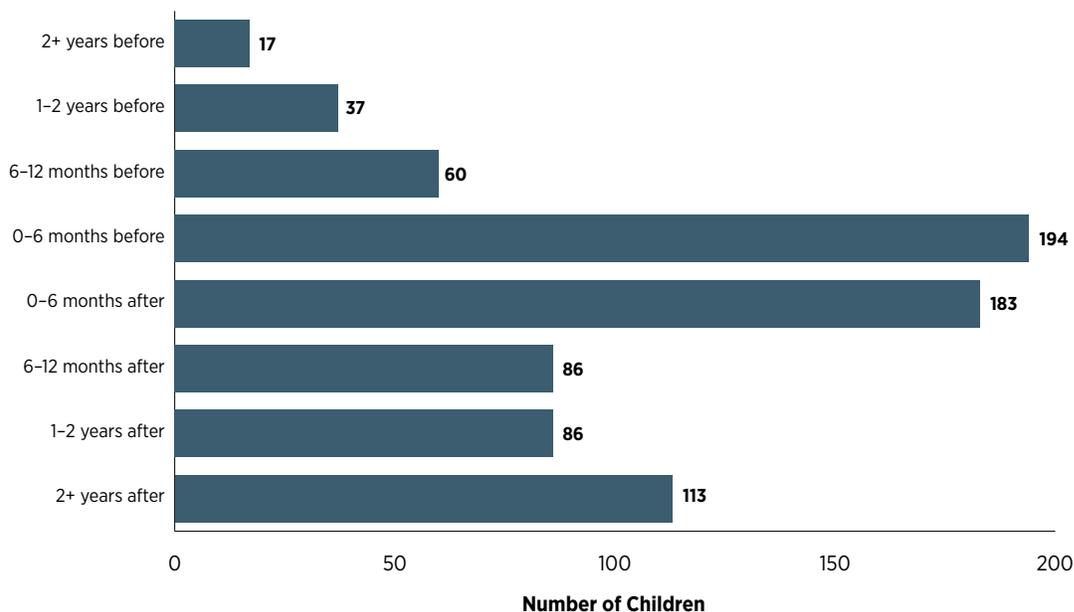
Behavioral health services include mental health and substance use treatment programs. Given that more than half of lifetime mental health conditions emerge by age 14 (Schleider et al., 2019), and the second largest group of children with incarcerated parents are aged 6 through 12, these services are important for preventing and treating mental health conditions and substance abuse disorders. In addition to these categories of service use, over 1,000 children accessed housing support services and DHS’s out of school time network, which are particularly important for this at risk population.

**Child Welfare Involvement**

Data show that approximately 1 in 8 children with a child welfare referral have an incarcerated parent (Philips, Burns, and Wagner, 2010). Children with incarcerated parents are at higher risk for child welfare involvement for multiple reasons: (1) When parents are removed due to incarceration, children experience unstable housing and may enter child welfare placements and (2) Parental incarceration is associated with substance abuse, mental health conditions, and other negative outcomes that may lead to child welfare involvement in a family. Of the 25,335 children of incarcerated parents, 4,364 were involved with child welfare services, with 1,894 experiencing a home removal. For children with a new placement within 1 year before or after a parental incarceration, 54% were placed in kinship care, 25% in foster care, 20% in group care, and 2% in alternative locations or independent living. The percentage of children of incarcerated parents in kinship care is lower than the percentage for placed children overall.

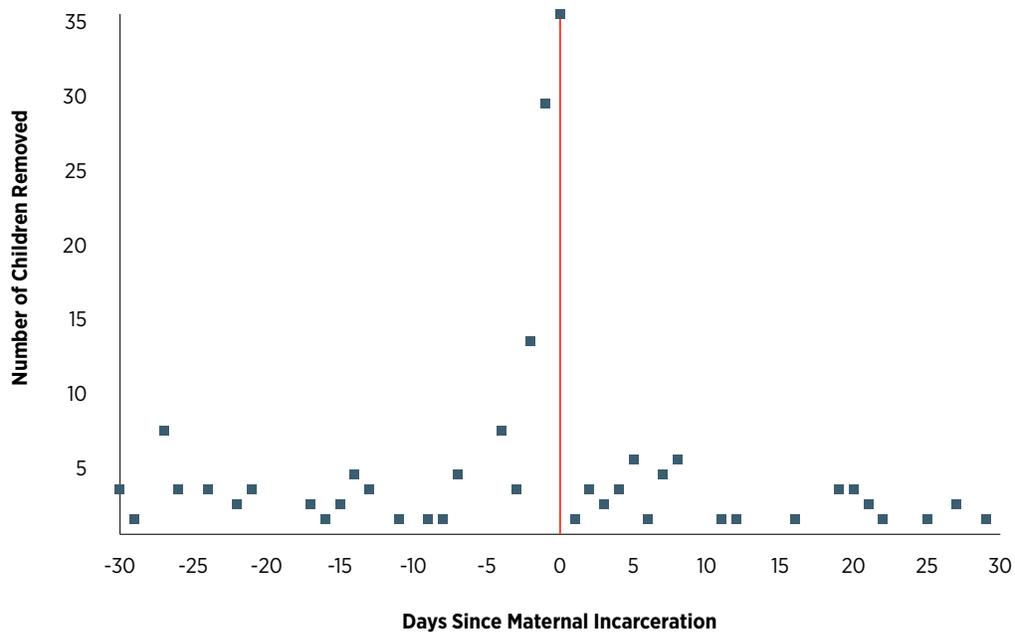
Children with mothers who are incarcerated were at particularly high risk for a home removal and were less frequently reunified with their parents after a home removal (Hayward and DePanfilis, 2007). Additionally, children with a maternal incarceration had longer stays in foster care on average than those with fathers incarcerated. We therefore continue by narrowing our analysis to children with maternal incarcerations from 2018 through 2021.

**FIGURE 2: Child Removals and Maternal Incarceration**



Existing research debates the causal pathway of maternal incarcerations and child removals. While a mother's incarceration may cause a child to be placed in foster care, the reverse could also be true: a child removal could be disruptive enough to cause maternal incarceration (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002). **Figure 2** reports information on the timing of home removals (placements) for children with a mother in jail. Out of 776 children removed with a maternal incarceration, 308 (~40%) were removed before their mother was booked in jail. The largest portion of these children, 194, were removed in the six months before their mother was booked in jail. For those removed after a maternal incarceration (448), 183 were removed in the six months following their mother's jail booking.

**FIGURE 3: Child Removals within One Month of Maternal Incarceration**



Most removed children with maternal incarcerations were removed around the time of their mother's incarceration. **Figure 3** reports the number of children removed each day up to 30 days pre- and 30 days post- a maternal incarceration. The figure reveals that there is an uptick in child removals in the five days before a mother is incarcerated. In fact, 33% of removals that occur within a month of a mother's incarceration occur in the 5 days prior. This figure suggests that child removals may cause disruptions in households that lead to maternal incarcerations or that similar factors may lead to incarceration and child removal.

**DISCUSSION:**

Incarcerated parents and their children have unique service needs, as the jailing of a parent is a disruptive event associated with significant health, education, and behavioral consequences. 13,529 parents were booked in the Allegheny County Jail from January 2018 through December 2022, and these parents had 25,335 children under the age of 18. DHS served 10,335 of these children in various capacities, including early childhood services (home visits, Head Start, Child Care Subsidies (Early Learning Resource Center), Family Centers, and Early Intervention), behavioral health services (Mental Health and Substance Use), and child protective services (referrals, cases and placements).

For children involved in child protective services, findings show that many had maternal incarcerations before their placement, and that 80.69% had either a kinship care or foster care placement. The data show that children of these parents have service needs higher than the general population, and that home removals may be related to maternal incarcerations, which demonstrates that Allegheny County DHS and child protective services are uniquely positioned to serve these at-risk families.

The County serves many families going through times of crisis, with diverse services that meet the needs of many different situations. For families with an incarcerated parent, several programs exist to help maintain and strengthen familial relationships and find and maintain stability for children while their parent is incarcerated. One example of a program is the Allegheny County Family Support Program (operated by Pittsburgh Mercy<sup>3</sup>), which provides several different services both for incarcerated parents and their children. This program has provided parenting classes, coached visitations and phone calls and facilitated support networks for the children and their caregivers outside of the jail. Although COVID-19 interrupted and challenged this work, the program has had the beginnings of success and will move forward. DHS also works with Amachi Pittsburgh,<sup>4</sup> whose mentorship program supports youth with incarcerated parents. In the future, impact evaluations of these programs can help with expansions and program improvements.

The targeted programs for children of incarcerated parents only cover a small portion of the services these populations access. Findings from this report show that many incarcerated parents and their children access other DHS services, which may meet the needs they have as a family. Work will continue to strengthen and expand targeted services for this population, and the non-targeted supports will help further family strengthening.

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3. <https://www.pittsburghmercy.org/>

4. <https://amachipgh.org/mentorship-program/>

## APPENDIX A

## REFERENCES

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