

Research Brief

Estimating the number of children with incarcerated parents in five Canadian provinces



Background

Parental incarceration is recognized as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), and previous research shows that children who have parents who are incarcerated tend to have worse health outcomes compared to children whose parents are not incarcerated.

There is a lack of systematic data on the number of children who experience parental incarceration in Canada. This study provides, for the first time, a credible estimate for a group that has been “statistically invisible” in policy and service planning.

About the Study

This research study estimated the number and proportion of children who experienced parental incarceration between 2015 and 2021 in five Canadian provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia, based on available data.

We accessed linked data in the Statistics Canada Social Data Linkage Environment. We used data from Statistics Canada’s Canadian Correctional Services Survey to identify people who experienced incarceration between 2015 and 2021. We identified their children using three types of data: vital statistics data from birth certificates, hospital discharge data associated with births, and child tax benefits.

Key Findings

- We found that **169,740 children** younger than 18 experienced parental incarceration in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia between 2015 and 2021.
- Approximately **1.2%** of all children in these provinces experienced parental incarceration per year during this period.
- This number is likely an **underestimate** due to limitations in available data. The true number of affected children may be **significantly higher**.

Bottom Line

The number of children who experienced parental incarceration in Canada is **high**.

Action is needed to **prevent parental incarceration and to support children and families** affected by parental incarceration.

Read the full article:

Kouyoumdjian FG, Paynter M, Knudsen EM, Croxford R, Bondy SJ, Jennings L, Russell N, Semeniuk R, Bentley-Wang C, Butler A, Butsang T, Catherine NLA, Cavanagh A, Leason J, Liauw J, McLeod K, Owl N, Owusu-Bempah A, Sharma S. Estimating the number and percentage of children who experience parental incarceration in Canada using whole population administrative and vital statistics data. *PLOS One*. 2026.



For more information, contact:

Fiona Kouyoumdjian
(kouyouf@mcmaster.ca)



Family
Medicine

