

Shining a Light on the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents

Lived Experience Engagement

Summary Document

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AMPLIFY ENGAGEMENT

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Executive Summary

In Canada, it is unknown how many children experience parental incarceration, despite research suggesting parental incarceration is associated with poor health outcomes for children. Estimating the number of children who experience parental incarceration and their health status can help inform programs and policies that may directly and profoundly affect child and family health. The Children with Incarcerated Parents (CHIRP) study aims to estimate the number of children who experience parental incarceration using linked population data for five Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia).

To provide context to the research, the involvement of people with lived experience of parental incarceration is crucial. The project team engaged the following people who have experience in parental incarceration:

- Parents who were incarcerated in the last 5-10 years while their child was under 18
- Adults who cared for a child with a parent who was incarcerated in the past 5-10 years (e.g., non-incarcerated parent, grandparent, guardian)
- Youth/young adults (aged 18-29) with a parent who was incarcerated in the last 5-10 years
- Service providers who work with children and families that experience parental incarceration

The project team hosted three focus groups in February 2025. In each focus group, participants learned about the research project, data and results, had the opportunity to provide feedback and insights into the results, and discussed who the findings should be disseminated to.

Key feedback on the research findings:

1. The overall number of children who experience parental incarceration is very high.
2. The numbers are likely lower than the real number of children.
3. The data lacks important qualitative context.
4. These data are essential to highlight the need and advocate for change.
5. Expand the scope of future research to show a fuller picture.
6. Be explicit about limitations.

Key feedback on what sharing this research can lead to:

1. Increased awareness about the impact of parental incarceration to foster understanding, reduce stigma, and drive meaningful change.
2. Better supports (e.g. programs, resources) for families and children.
3. Policy changes to support families affected by parental incarceration including improved parent-child access and child-centered policies.

This report outlines the feedback received through the focus groups from all participants. The feedback was aggregated and anonymized to ensure that the privacy of participants is respected, while staying true to the nature of the discussion.

Introduction

Incarceration rates in Canada are high relative to other high-income countries, and inequitably experienced, with overrepresentation of people who are Indigenous and Black in Canadian jails and prisons. International research suggests parental incarceration is associated with poor health outcomes for children, including increased risk of death. In Canada, we have limited population-level data on children who experience parental incarceration and their health, despite obligations through the United Nations to collect these data and to take actions to support child and family health. Estimating the number of children who experience parental incarceration and their health status can help inform programs and policies that may directly and profoundly affect child and family health.

The project team- consisting of researchers, representatives of community-based organizations, and people with relevant lived experience, led by Principal Investigator Fiona Kouyoumdjian, want to bring visibility to this issue. With funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Children with Incarcerated Parents (CHIRP) study aims to estimate the number of children who experience parental incarceration and describe some sociodemographic characteristics of these children using linked population data for five Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia).

To provide context to the research, the involvement of people with lived experience of parental incarceration is crucial. People who have experience with parental incarceration, whether as a parent, a guardian, a child, or a service provider, were invited to help interpret the results of the study by participating in focus groups. Including their voices and perspectives is a priority for this research, especially due to the over-representation of equity-deserving groups in Canada's criminal justice system.

Project Goals

This project aims to bring visibility to the unique needs that children with incarcerated parents experience. The goals of the project are to understand the:

- Number of children who experienced parental incarceration between 2015 and 2021
- Their sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., province, age, sex of the child, sex of the parent, race/indigenous identity of parent) and indicators of their health status based on available data (i.e. child hospitalization and mortality rates)

The data from this project will hopefully help inform the need for government action and legislative change to better support these children.

Involving Lived Experience

People with lived experience provide unique insights into the realities of what an individual or community is experiencing. When conducting population data research, involving people with lived experience can better contextualize the findings in order to share a more fulsome story beyond just numbers. In the CHIRP study, the project team invited people with lived experience to review the research findings and provide their insights and interpretations of the results.

The project team identified four key groups of people who have lived experience with parental incarceration and would provide valuable perspectives on this research:

- Parents who were incarcerated in the last 5-10 years while their child was under 18
- Adults who cared for a child with a parent who was incarcerated in the past 5-10 years (e.g., non-incarcerated parent, grandparent, guardian)
- Youth/young adults (aged 18-29) with a parent who was incarcerated in the last 5-10 years
- Service providers who work with children and families that experience parental incarceration

The project team hosted three 2-hour focus groups in February 2025, grouped by audience:

1. Parents who were incarcerated & adults who cared for a child with an incarcerated parent (10 participants, February 19, 2025)
2. Service providers (6 participants, February 19, 2025)
3. Youth and young adults (4 participants, February 23, 2025)

The focus groups were co-designed with a few people from these key audiences, who helped position the discussions about parental incarceration research, review the chosen audiences, and design the focus group structure. They affirmed the importance of transparency, communication, support, understanding stigma, and creating a safe space when engaging people with lived experience of parental incarceration.

In each focus group, participants learned about the research project goals, data and results, provided their feedback and insights into the results, and discussed how the research findings should be shared.

Feedback on Research Results

Participants were presented with research findings for children who experienced parental incarceration in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia between 2015 and 2021 (see Appendix 1: Research Findings). They were asked to share their perspectives on the research findings to help contextualize the results based on their lived experience. Participants were given two prompting questions:

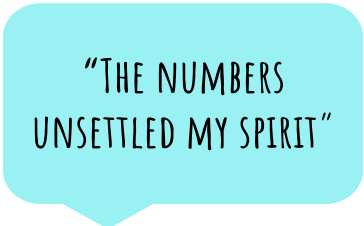
1. In what ways do the findings reflect, or not reflect, your experience?
2. Is there anything surprising about the findings? Why?

Below are the overarching themes generated from the feedback on the research findings. The feedback is aggregated from all four audiences, as the themes generated from the discussion significantly overlapped. The speech bubbles contain anonymized quotes from focus group participants related to the described themes.

Key Feedback Themes on Research Findings

1. The overall number of children who experience parental incarceration is very high.

Participants were alarmed at how many children have experienced parental incarceration, despite the significant data limitations in the project. In particular, the number of children who experienced parental incarceration from 2015-2017 and the percentage of biological fathers being incarcerated were much higher than expected.



"THE NUMBERS
UNSETTLED MY SPIRIT"

2. The numbers are likely lower than the real number of children who experience parental incarceration.

Even with the numbers being high, participants predict that the number is still underreported and likely undercounting the actual number of children experiencing parental incarceration. Their reasonings include:

- There are only 5 provinces included and this is a Canada-wide issue
- Many social parents do not receive the Canadian Child Tax Benefit (e.g., Indigenous people and marginalized individuals) and are disproportionately represented in prisons
- Racialized women/people assigned female at birth are the fastest growing incarcerated population, yet only 15% of parents were biological mothers in this study
- The study time periods and use of only provincial correctional facilities do not allow for inclusion of parents who move between provincial and federal facilities

3. The data lack important qualitative context.

"DATA IS SIMPLIFIED.
THE REALITY IS MORE
COMPLEX"

Participants felt that the numbers alone do not represent the complexity of this issue, and lack the qualitative context needed to understand the reality of these families' lives. They felt that the data and findings are limited and clinical, which can make the research feel extractive. They shared that it is essential to represent the stories of these families in future research and include narratives to show the bigger picture of how children and families are impacted by incarceration.

4. These data are essential to highlight the need and advocate for change.

These data are essential to demonstrate the need experienced by these children and families, and will help make a case for funding and more data in the future. Participants shared that there has never before been an estimate of the scale of this issue, and this often limits service providers and policy makers from participating in discussions. These data will help in advocating to decision makers the need for funding or programs in order for strategies and programs to be created. Providing these data from a trusted, credible source also prevents misinformation and validates the experiences of these families.

"THE NUMBER
IS THE START"

5. Expand the scope of future research to show a fuller picture.

There are gaps in this study that could be addressed in future research to best represent the full picture of these families. Participants gave the following examples of opportunities to expand the scope:

- Include more demographic information and breakdown the data further to show which specific communities are being affected.
- Expand the duration of time spent in custody, as longer stretches of time spent in prison make a significant difference on families (e.g., include multiple episodes a parent is in prison and their total time spent).
- Include and advocate for other data sources from prisons, child services and other areas of the justice system. For example, they already collect data at the time of incarceration, where people are asked if they have children. However, with these additional sources be mindful that some individuals do not want to disclose that they have children to correctional authorities.

6. Be explicit about limitations.

There are several limitations to using these data, and participants felt that the research team needs to be explicit about them in the framing of this work and in the findings. However, even with these limitations they shared that it is still helpful to have these numbers to show the scale of the issue. Some examples of the limitations participants mentioned are:

- Some of the most vulnerable populations (e.g., Indigenous individuals, or families that do not receive Canadian Child Tax Benefit) are not being represented in the results.
- The study time period between 2015 and 2021 only provides a 6 year time frame, and not the overall amount of time children are without their parents.
- Parents can be incarcerated in a province or territory that is different from the one their child is born in.
- Birth certificates may not list all parents, and can include parents who are later removed from the certificate due to family dynamics.
- Be mindful that the data source will impact the numbers, as whoever is collecting the data will inform an individual's responses.
- Recidivism might not be well represented by the limited time frame or the use of only provincial data. Recidivism rates themselves might be impacted by the experience of being a parent.
- There is a large community that is impacted by parental incarceration outside of these numbers, such as aunts, uncles and other family members who care for children but do not receive any benefits.

Sharing the Research

Participants were asked to provide their thoughts on how researchers could and should share research on parental incarceration with others. Participants were asked to share their perspectives and ideas on the following questions:

- Who should know about this research?
- What is important for researchers to consider and keep in mind as they share this research?
- What do you hope this research leads to?

Across all audiences, three themes emerged for what participants hope this research leads to:

1. Awareness and education
2. Support for families and children
3. Policy change

Considerations when sharing this research were also discussed and summarized below.

1. Awareness and Education

Participants hope that sharing this research can raise awareness about the impact of parental incarceration. By sharing these findings with the public, families who experience parental incarceration, organizations, and provincial/federal stakeholders, we can foster understanding and drive meaningful change. The table below lists the suggested audiences with whom the project researchers should share this research and why.

Who should be aware of this research?	
Target audience	Rationale
General public	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Public outreach can increase awareness and address stigma● Provides context for everyone on how this impacts families, especially children who are separated from their parents through no fault of their own
Families who experience parental incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Can foster community support, showing families they are not alone● Can empower families to share their stories and self-advocate
Medical system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Parental incarceration impacts the child's interaction with the medical system (e.g. parental consent, health impacts)
Grassroots organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Grassroots organizations may help with data collection in future research

Provincial/territorial/federal stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can drive meaningful change in the justice system • Can encourage more provinces to contribute data and support reform efforts • Quantitative evidence can inform future government grants and funding to lead to positive interventions
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2. Support for Families and Children

Across service providers, parents, adults and youth, participants hope that sharing the research will lead to better support for families and children who experience parental incarceration. They expressed that this research has the opportunity to have a positive impact and improve the experience for families and children. There are currently very few supports or programs for children and families with incarcerated parents. In particular, a few key areas of support were identified by participants which are listed in the table below.

What are the key areas of support needed for families and children?	
Area of Support	Rationale
Transitions to and from prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smooth and safe transitions are crucial for parents and children • Mental health and logistical support can help parents entering prison to adjust and parents returning home to reintegrate safely into their families • When a parent is taken into custody the process happens quickly, often leaving children without explanation or contact which can be a traumatic experience • In the first weeks or months, parents may lack phone credits or financial resources to communicate with their family • Frequent transfers between facilities can place parents far from their children • When parents return to their family, dynamics may be different and it is an important time to ensure everyone's well-being.
Reconnecting children and incarcerated parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need programs to help parents and children reconnect (e.g., counselling or support groups) • Children sometimes feel resentment towards their parents, and support navigating these feelings can have a positive impact
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children spend much of their time in the education system, and school can be a safe and stabilizing space • Many school systems lack the resources and training to provide

	<p>proper support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stigma surrounding parental incarceration can make it difficult for children to share their experiences • Without formal support structures, assistance often depends on the efforts of individual teachers • Strengthening school support can help these children see beyond their immediate circumstances and stay on a positive path
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health supports for children are needed as they do not have physical interactions or daily involvement with their parents • Mental health supports are especially crucial in teenage years
Adults who take custody of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other than the Canadian Child Tax Benefit, little support is provided to these adults who often take on the responsibility of being the primary guardian for these children.

3. Policy Change

Policy changes are needed to better support families affected by parental incarceration. Research findings must reach policy makers and justice system stakeholders to drive reform. These policy changes can include education for justice personnel on the needs of children, improving incarcerated parents' access to their children, and implementing child-centered policies to reduce trauma during arrests. Sentencing decisions should consider the impact on families, and corrections officials can enhance prison conditions and rehabilitation programs to support parent-child relationships and family stability.

Considerations for Sharing this Research

Participants shared what the research team should consider when sharing this research.

Representing the human reality

While numbers help us understand the scale of parental incarceration, they cannot fully capture the chaos, devastation, and long-term impact on families and children. Numbers alone do not portray the human reality of parental incarceration—real people’s experiences, emotions, and struggles. To truly tell the full story, qualitative research is essential for providing the context and narratives needed to complement the quantitative data and give voices to those affected.

Indigenous perspectives

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives and methodology is needed to ensure this research respects and accurately represents Indigenous communities. A purely quantitative, Western approach risks overlooking the impacts of colonization and racism. It is crucial to involve Indigenous researchers, community knowledge, and frameworks that deconstruct colonial narratives while aligning with Truth and Reconciliation efforts.

Sharing limitations

It is important to be transparent about the research project's limitations while recognizing its value as a baseline study. Acknowledging these gaps highlights the need for better research methods and ensures a balance between accuracy and the meaningful insights this work provides.

Report prepared by:

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