



# VITAL SIGNS

## Disrupting Poverty

WINTER 2021/2022 RESEARCH BRIEF

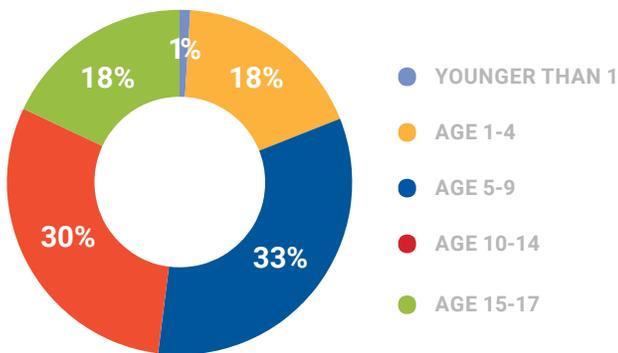
Families in poverty struggle to have both financial and interpersonal resources to prepare children for success. The incarceration status of a parent can compound the harmful effects of poverty, further reducing the future prospects for the wellbeing of children. This research brief details the multifaceted impacts of

parental incarceration on children and families. With these impacts in mind, United Way of Central Oklahoma Partner Agencies are helping children build resilience in coping with the challenges of parental incarceration as well as supporting incarcerated persons with transition to the community and their families.

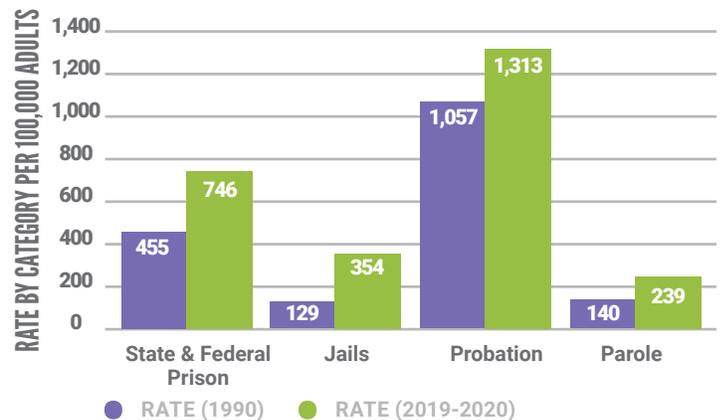
### Quick Facts on Incarcerated Parents and Their Children:

- About **1 in 9** children in Oklahoma have had an incarcerated family member.<sup>1</sup>
  - **Oklahoma ranks 7th for the highest** percentage of children with incarcerated parents.
- **Nationally, more than 4 in 10 male** state prisoners and about **6 in 10 female** state prisoners are parents of minor children.<sup>2</sup>
- The average age of a minor with an incarcerated parent was **9 years old**.<sup>3</sup>

*Percentage of Minor Children of Incarcerated Parents by Age, 2019<sup>4</sup>*



*Increases in Oklahoma Incarceration Rates, 1990 vs 2019-2020<sup>5</sup>*



## TRENDS IN INCARCERATION

Data shows a sharp increase in the number of Oklahomans in all categories of the criminal justice system over the past 30 years. Dramatic disparities by race and education are also a key feature of the current context for incarceration.

Among the estimated 135,000 Oklahoma children experiencing parental incarceration, children of color and low-income families disproportionately bear the burden, through no fault of their own.

## FAMILY EXPERIENCES WITH A “SHARED SENTENCE”

The experience of incarceration can vary widely for a parent depending on the offense. Confinement in jail is usually for shorter periods of time compared to the length of prison terms.

Regardless of the length of a parent’s time in prison, incarceration acts as a “shared sentence,” weighing heavily on both incarcerated and non-incarcerated family members.<sup>11</sup> Since other adult relatives often shoulder more responsibilities during the time the inmate is behind bars, the inmate’s relationships may become strained.

Incarceration increases the chance of parents losing their custodial rights, which disrupts the lives of children when they must transition to foster care or live with relatives.<sup>12</sup> Nationally, about 45% of children in non-parental care have experienced

their biological parent incarcerated at some point in their lives.<sup>13</sup>

### Early Impacts on Young Children

Children witnessing arrests and violent incidents involving their parents experience significant trauma and complex emotional challenges later in life, resulting in poor health, mental health, and social outcomes. Safe, quality interaction with a parent or caregiver leads to healthy development and lower chances of elevated stress for a child.

### Research on Disrupting Cycles of Incarceration<sup>14</sup>

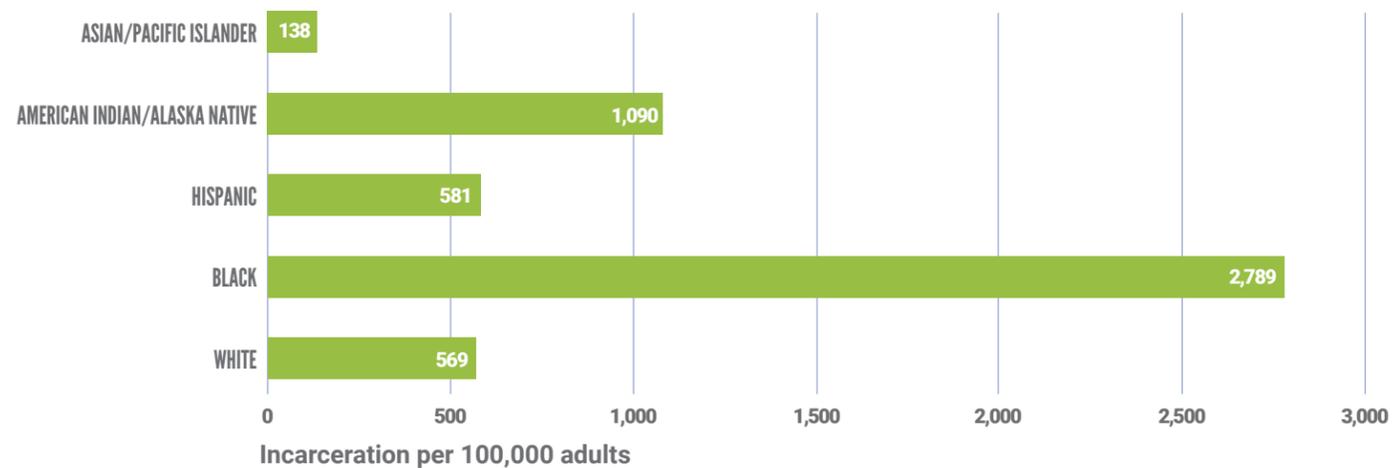
Local researchers have advanced the knowledge base on how exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) threatens child well-being.<sup>15</sup> Current research on the concepts of hope and resilience are broadening understanding of how to help protect young people from the generational harms of incarceration.

- **Resilience:** being able to manage stress and maintain functioning even when faced with adversity.
- **Hope:** the belief that a better future pathway is possible, and that an individual has the power to shape their pathway.

## BUILDING RESILIENCE AND HOPE FOR CHILDREN

Meaningful social connections and bonds with others are protective factors to build resilience for children of incarcerated parents. Mentoring and positive youth development programs improve children’s resilience and are linked to reduced rates of juvenile delinquency. Children with incarcerated parents tend to score higher on measures of social exclusion and have nearly 10% fewer friendships compared to their peers.<sup>16</sup> Counteracting the effects of this social exclusion requires tailored approaches that embrace children of all backgrounds.<sup>17</sup>

Oklahoma Adult Incarceration Rates by Race<sup>6</sup>



- In 2019, Oklahoma had the second highest rate of female imprisonment of all states.<sup>7</sup>
- The children of female prisoners are moved to foster care at **five times the rate** of children of male prisoners.<sup>8</sup>
- In 2019, Oklahoma had the third highest rate of male imprisonment of all states.<sup>9</sup>
- Incarceration for men reduces annual earnings by about 40%.<sup>10</sup>

## PARTNER AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: BIG BROTHERS, BIG SISTERS OF OKLAHOMA

### Overview

**Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma (BBBSOK)** provides professionally supported one-to-one mentoring services to children facing adversity in the Oklahoma City area. As a United Way Partner Agency, BBBSOK’s core strength is matching caring, stable role models with children. Children experience the consistency and positive influence of a one-to-one relationship with a “**Big**” (**volunteer**) who spends quality time with their “**Little**” (**child**) on a regular basis.

- **By the Numbers:** 257 Matches between Bigs and Littles were made in 2020, and 91 children had a parent currently or previously incarcerated.<sup>18</sup>
- 82% of Littles report higher self-esteem when they are at school.
- 99% avoided gang participation in a three-month period.
- 91% of Littles reported cultivating friendships

## SUCCESS STORY: SUMMER

Summer was first matched in 2010. She joined BBBSOK’s Amachi Program for children of incarcerated parents and was matched with Lauren, her Big. They were matched for seven and a half years. Lauren would do every activity imaginable with her Little during that time, focusing on growth and instilling determination, purpose and intent in Summer. Through Lauren’s involvement and mentorship, Summer graduated high school on time and became the first in her family to attend college. She avoided adversities such as teenage pregnancy and incarceration because Lauren was a stable adult mentor in her life.

## BUILDING RESILIENCE AND HOPE FOR PARENTS

For parents, one of the strongest factors to build resilience from the experience of incarceration is strong family support. Correctional facilities

encourage family connections through consistent and low-barrier visitation policies. Each facility differs in their policies, but the Oklahoma Department of Corrections (ODOC) is working to offer more uniform guidance and tools to make family contact easier. In 2021, ODOC initiated a partnership to allow inmates to access free tablets to make outbound phone calls and access reentry resources at no cost to the family.<sup>19</sup>

## DISRUPTING ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY FOR FAMILIES

Oklahoma is making policy changes to improve the economic prospects for the formerly incarcerated. In 2021, Oklahoma’s legislature passed HB1679, the Sarah Stitt Act, to help prepare inmates for community reentry. United Way Partner Agencies are also working with formerly incarcerated people to boost employment and job skills that can lead to brighter economic

prospects for entire families. ODOC is working with community partners to help provide IDs, resumes and work history summaries that can jumpstart successful community reentry. Assisting adults to prepare for successful reentry improves chances for job opportunities, which then can benefit family income.

## CONCLUSION

Disrupting poverty for children includes comprehensive approaches that respond to a child’s unique experiences. The experience of having a parent incarcerated does not have to diminish hope for children when proactive, prevention-oriented supports are implemented and the family is connected to social and community resources. United Way Partner Agencies are fully engaged in providing youth with the tools to disrupt generational cycles of incarceration, so all children can be successful.

Interested in printed copies of our research publications or a presentation?

Contact United Way of Central Oklahoma's Community Impact Department at [research@unitedwayokc.org](mailto:research@unitedwayokc.org) or 405-236-8441



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An enduring community analysis of the health and human service needs in Central Oklahoma

United Way of Central Oklahoma  
1444 NW 28th Street  
Oklahoma City, OK 73106  
405.236.8441 · [unitedwayokc.org](http://unitedwayokc.org)

