Written by By NM Voices for Children
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Stress of incarceration contributes to child poverty, homelessness, hunger

ALBUQUERQUE —More than 5 million children in the United States have had a parent incarcerated at some point in their lives, including 52,000 kids in New Mexico—10 percent of New Mexico's child population—according to a new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

New Mexico's percentage of children with incarcerated parents is not only higher than the national average of 7 percent, but only two states—Indiana (11 percent) and Kentucky (13 percent)—have higher rates than New Mexico. These data are highlighted in the new KIDS COUNT® report, *A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities,* which offers commonsense steps policy makers can take to help millions of children who struggle with instability as a result of having an incarcerated parent.

"Having a parent incarcerated is devastating for children in a number of ways," said Veronica C. García, Ed.D., executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children, the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT grantee in New Mexico. "Often their families lack the financial resources to cover basic needs such as food and housing. In addition, having a parent in jail or prison is emotionally traumatic. So much so, that parental incarceration is recognized as one of the adverse childhood experiences that can have long-lasting effects on a child's development and well-being."

Besides increasing poverty, homelessness, hunger and emotional pain, parental incarceration also destabilizes children's lives and severs their connection to a parent. Research shows having an incarcerated parent can have as much impact on a child's well-being as abuse or domestic violence.

While many states are moving away from incarceration of non-violent offenders, New Mexico's most recent legislative session saw a heightened focus on bills that would lead to even higher incarceration rates. This trend could disproportionately harm children of color because incarceration rates are higher among blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics in the state.

"Having a parent in prison creates a tremendous vacuum in a child's life," said Amber Wallin, director of New Mexico KIDS COUNT. "Unfortunately, we are a state that offers very few alternatives to incarceration, and children are often not a sentencing consideration even for non-violent offenders. The devastation in recent years to our behavioral health system—a system that helped provide treatment to many who otherwise might have been in the correctional system—could further hurt children and families and increase our already high rate of children who have had a parent incarcerated."

While proposed justice reform in much of the nation is promising, the Casey report stresses the need to offer more support systems to children who are currently being impacted by parental incarceration.

Numerous recommendations are provided that include: having judges consider the impact on children of sentencing decisions; providing family counseling and parenting courses at prisons and community organizations; facilitating access to financial, legal, child-care, and housing assistance;minimizing the effects of a criminal record once a parent has successfully reentered society through "ban the box" policies; and connecting parents who have returned to the community with pathways to employment.

Detailed recommendations can be found in *A Shared Sentence*, which is available at www.aecf.org/sharedsentence. Additional information is available at:
www.aecf.org
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A New Mexico fact sheet is attached separately and is available at http://www.nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NM-incarceration-factsheet.pdf

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