



Imprisonment & Family Structure

What is the evidence telling us?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Report to Family First New Zealand 2018



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A wealth of research has investigated associations between family structure and adverse outcomes, but surprisingly little has investigated prisoners' childhood family backgrounds.

At September 2017, New Zealand prisons held a total of 10,470 individuals. This is an historic high. The imprisonment rate has grown steeply in the last 40 years.

If people were locked up today for those crimes worthy of imprisonment in the first half of last century (drunkenness and vagrancy for instance) our current rate would be significantly higher. In most respects (a notable exception being family violence) it has become much harder to get into prison but the numbers who do continue to escalate.

Māori make up around half of the current prison population but only 15 percent of the general population. This over-representation is however a relatively recent development influenced by rapid urbanisation and the loss of whanau support systems. Urbanisation also gave rise to gangs, which account for 30 percent of the prison population and whose members have higher recidivism rates.



A sharp increase in unmarried births during the 1960s correlates markedly with a later rise in the imprisonment rate. Ex-nuptial births made up 79 percent of total Māori births in 2017. For non-Maori, the corresponding figure was 34 percent.

Prison over-representation of indigenous and non-indigenous minorities occurs in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. African-American, Canadian native, Afro-Caribbean and Australian Aboriginal populations all feature high rates of one-parent families.

New Zealand does not routinely collect data about the childhood backgrounds of prison inmates. But data from other developed nations shows a majority of prisoners are raised by one parent, one-parent and

step-parent(s), grand-parent(s) or in state care. A minority grew up with both natural parents.

A number of studies have found that growing up with a step-parent (or serial step-parents) is a particular risk factor for later incarceration. Biological parents appear to provide a protective role which replacement parents do not.

The strongest predictor for imprisonment is growing up in state care.

Several researchers have shown that family factors – in particular, family structure – have greater impact on future risk of criminal offending than socio-economic factors, albeit the two are closely intertwined.

New Zealand birth cohort data shows a strong flow from being known to Child, Youth and Family (CYF) as a child to becoming a Department of Corrections 'client' later in life. Analysis of two 1980s birth cohorts found 69 percent of incarcerated adults and 83 percent of teenage prisoners had a CYF record.

One of the strongest correlates for substantiated findings of child abuse or neglect by CYF, second only to having spent more than 80% of time on a welfare benefit, is being born to a single mother. Prison studies repeatedly find high incidence of childhood maltreatment amongst inmates, especially female.

A pronounced risk factor for becoming a prisoner is having a family member who is or has been incarcerated; especially a father. Inter-generational imprisonment has been identified in New Zealand, more strongly among Māori. Coincidental to this is the documented increased likelihood that very young Māori men will also be fathers, anecdotally, to multiple children. Further, female multi partner fertility is also associated with father imprisonment.

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Evidence of bias against Māori in the justice system is not disputed. Māori over-representation in prison is also a facet of ethnic self-identification and/or identification by prison administration.

Institutionalisation, or habituation and dependence on the prison environment, is a surrogate for a properly functioning family that transforms children into adults able to cope in the real world.

The short term outlook for reducing prison numbers is not promising. While there is growing activist and academic clamour for the new government to stop the Waikeria prison build, a 'softening' of policy to ease prisoner numbers as serious, violent crime worsens is politically difficult.



The long term outlook is mixed. If New Zealand does not want to keep building more prisons it needs to look to the children who are potentially tomorrow's offenders, and eventually, inmates. This includes acknowledging the role family plays.

Campaigns are fought against obesity, tobacco, road speed, child poverty – to name a few. But there is no public messaging about the critical importance of parental commitment to each other and their child. The community is a poor substitute for caring, committed parents.

In 2017, no parental relationship details were recorded in 17 percent of registered births. For Māori children, the figure more than doubles to 35 percent.

Government departments such as Treasury, Justice and the Ministry of Social Development have repeatedly pointed to the known trajectory from birth to prison which is commonly characterised by birth to a young, poorly educated, isolated mother; exposure to multiple 'step-parents'; parental substance abuse and protracted benefit dependence.

Even without specific New Zealand data relating to the childhood family structure of prisoners, Corrections has identified that the pathway to prison inevitably involves a mother who is young, has little education, is from a disadvantaged family of origin where she received little care and affection, is, or has been, substance dependent, is socially isolated and without family connections, and finally has a number of male partners in a serial fashion.

Thereafter key risk factors include, "... social isolation of the child, harsh and erratic discipline, changes of father figure, and changes of dwelling place. By primary school entry the child on a trajectory to adult offending will show conduct disorder – which is a pattern of regular breaking of major rules in all settings, school, home and community – and frequent defiance of authority."

The trajectory description grimly continues through the life stages eventually concluding with, "Many serious adult offenders will be supported in institutions or on welfare for the greater part of their adult lives..." though optimistically notes that the prospects of rehabilitation "never reach zero."

There are some positive developments though. The sharply declining Māori and non-Māori teenage birth rates since 2008 offer cause for optimism.

A trend towards permanent child placement as opposed to moving children back and forth between birth whanau and foster care should also yield positive results, though the approach remains controversial.

Home visitation programmes to young mothers show improved outcomes for at-risk children (though this may be too late for babies suffering foetal neurological damage due to maternal substance or alcohol abuse.)

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Internationally, specialised male prison units focused on family and fathering are not only reducing recidivism but producing other positive outcomes such as climbing school attendance rates amongst the children of inmates. There is also New Zealand evidence mother-with-baby prison facilities and Māori Focus Units lower reoffending rates.

This paper draws conclusions from the available evidence, much of it international. Ideally New Zealand would collect actual data regarding inmates' childhood family backgrounds. However, the wealth of statistical information now being assembled by Treasury makes such an undertaking somewhat redundant. Without personal testimony we know that most prisoners, as children, have been abused or neglected, were born to single parents (probably with subsequent partners), were heavily reliant on welfare incomes and had poorly educated mothers. Often little, or nothing, is known about their fathers.

This report is not an attack on single mothers. Strong parental attachment generally mitigates the many disadvantages their children face.

But while too many children continue to be born into high-risk circumstances – to unstable, uneducated and unsupported single parents – there is little prospect, all else being equal, of a diminishing imprisonment rate any time soon.

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