

## Parental Incarceration and Well-being among Adolescents in New York City Public High Schools

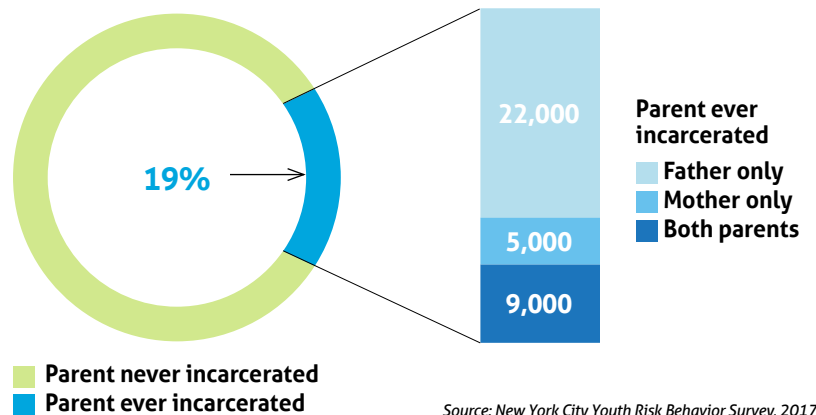
The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world,<sup>1</sup> with disproportionately higher arrest and incarceration rates for Black and Latino people compared with White people, reflecting the institutional and structural racism embedded in the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup> As of October 2020, there were about 36,500 people held in New York State prisons<sup>3</sup> and about 4,400 detained in New York City (NYC) jails.<sup>4</sup> Almost 90% of people held in NYC jails are Latino or Black,<sup>5</sup> in contrast to comprising 50% of the NYC adult population.<sup>A</sup> Criminal justice involvement further exacerbates inequities in educational attainment, housing, health care access and health status.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, parental incarceration places pressure on family resources and resiliency, leaving families at risk of financial hardship and homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

As COVID-19 cases rose throughout NYC and spread through correctional facilities in the spring of 2020, approximately 3,400 people left NYC jail custody and returned to their communities during that time.<sup>7</sup> Once home, these parents with a history of incarceration continue to face important structural challenges, including access to housing and employment, and barriers to education, public assistance and economic security.<sup>8</sup> An adolescent whose parent has a history of incarceration may be at increased risk for depression,<sup>9</sup> smoking cigarettes, misusing prescription drugs or using illicit drugs by adulthood.<sup>10</sup> This report examines the prevalence of parental incarceration and its association with poor mental health, living situation stability, substance use and health behaviors among adolescents in NYC public high schools.

### One in five New York City adolescents reported parental incarceration

- One in five NYC public high school students (an estimated 36,000) reported that at least one parent had served time in jail or prison. Of these students, 25% reported both parents had been incarcerated, 62% reported only their father had been incarcerated and 14% reported only their mother had been incarcerated.
- Among NYC public high school students, twice as many Black (24%) and Latino (23%) adolescents reported having a parent who had been incarcerated compared with their White peers (11%).

Prevalence of parental incarceration and estimated numbers among adolescents



Source: New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017

**Definitions:** Adolescents refer to NYC public high school students in grades 9 through 12.

**Parental incarceration** refers to a mother or father having ever served time in jail or prison. Due to data limitations, this analysis is restricted to youth who have either one mother, one father, or both a mother and a father with a history of being incarcerated.

**Race/ethnicity:** For the purpose of this publication, Latino includes people of Hispanic or Latino origin, as identified by the survey question "Are you Hispanic or Latino?" and regardless of reported race. Black and White race categories exclude those who identified as Latino.

**Data Sources**

<sup>A</sup>NYC DOHMH population estimates, modified from US Census Bureau interpolated intercensal population estimates, 2017. Updated September 2018.

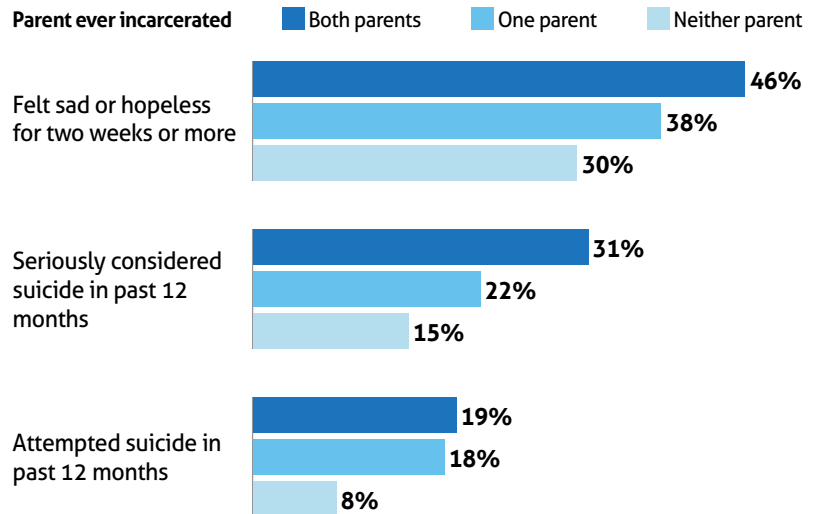
2017 NYC Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a biennial self-administered, anonymous survey conducted in NYC public high schools by the Health Department and the NYC Department of Education. For more survey details, visit <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/data/data-sets/nyc-youth-risk-behavior-survey.page>.

## Parental incarceration was associated with poor mental health

- Parental incarceration in adolescence is associated with poor mental health among young adults, such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.<sup>8</sup>
- NYC adolescents with either both parents or one parent ever incarcerated were more likely to report feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks (46% and 38%, respectively), compared with their peers whose parents were never incarcerated (30%).
- Adolescents with either both parents or one parent ever incarcerated were more likely to have seriously considered suicide (31% and 22%, respectively) and attempted suicide (19% and 18%, respectively) compared with peers whose parents were never incarcerated (15% and 8%, respectively).

### Poor mental health was more likely among adolescents whose parent had ever been incarcerated

Prevalence of poor mental health among adolescents

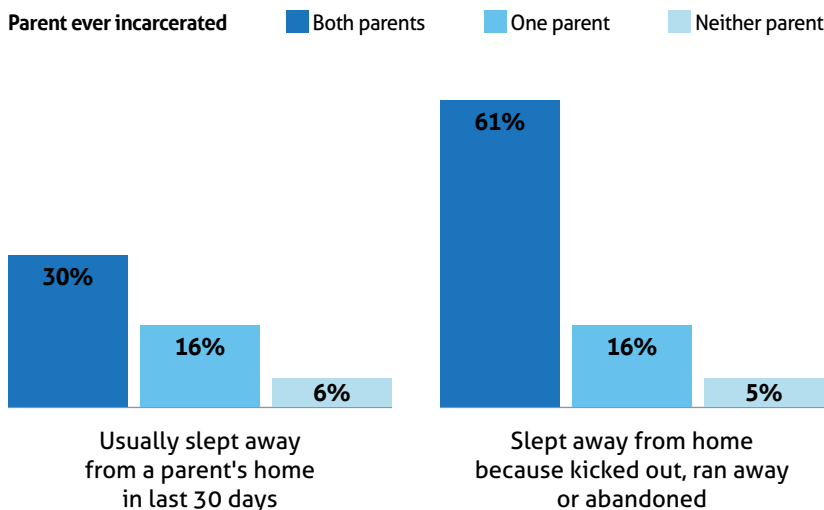


Source: New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017

## Parental incarceration was associated with experiencing unstable living situations

### Unstable living situations were more likely among adolescents whose parent had ever been incarcerated

Prevalence of unstable housing among adolescents



Source: New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017

- Compared with NYC adolescents whose parents were never incarcerated (6%), those with both parents ever incarcerated were five times as likely to report having usually slept away from a parent or guardian's home (30%); adolescents with one parent who had been incarcerated were two times as likely (16%).
- NYC adolescents with both parents ever incarcerated (61%) were 12 times as likely to sleep away from home in the past year because they were kicked out, ran away or were abandoned, compared with their peers whose parents had never been incarcerated (5%); adolescents with one parent ever incarcerated (16%) were three times as likely.

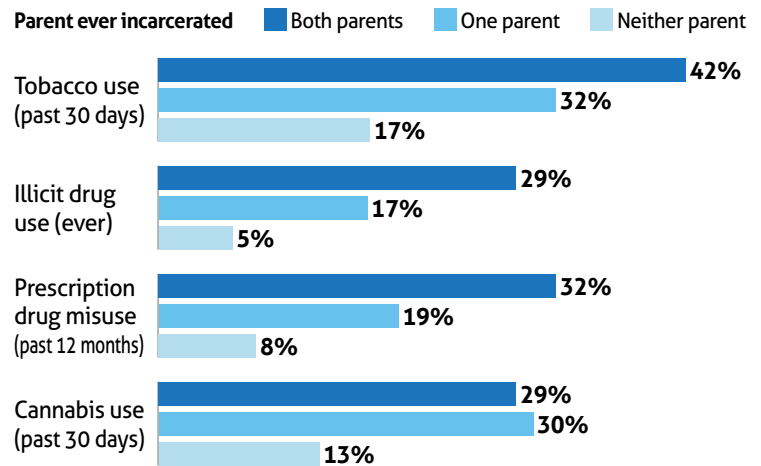
**Definitions:** Adolescents were asked where they usually slept in the past 30 days. Those who slept away from their parents' home reported sleeping in one of the following: another person's home because parents could not afford housing, a foster or group home, a shelter, emergency housing, a hotel or motel, a park, a car, a campground or another public space.

## Parental incarceration was associated with tobacco and drug use

- NYC adolescents with both parents ever incarcerated (29%) were about six times as likely to have ever used illicit drugs compared with their peers whose parents had never been incarcerated (5%); adolescents with one parent ever incarcerated were about three times as likely (17%).
- Compared with NYC adolescents whose parents were never incarcerated (8%), those with both parents ever incarcerated were about four times as likely to have misused prescription drugs in the past 12 months (32%); adolescents with one parent ever incarcerated (19%) were twice as likely.
- Adolescents with either both parents or one parent ever incarcerated were more likely to have used tobacco (42% and 32%, respectively) or cannabis (29% and 30%, respectively) in the past 30 days, compared with peers whose parents were never incarcerated (17% and 13%, respectively).

### Substance use was more likely among adolescents whose parent had ever been incarcerated

Prevalence of substance use among adolescents



Tobacco use: smoked cigarettes or cigars or used smokeless tobacco or electronic vapor products in the past 30 days. Illicit drug use: ever used cocaine (any form), heroin, ecstasy or synthetic cannabinoids (e.g., K2). Prescription drug misuse: taking without a doctor's prescription in the past 12 months.

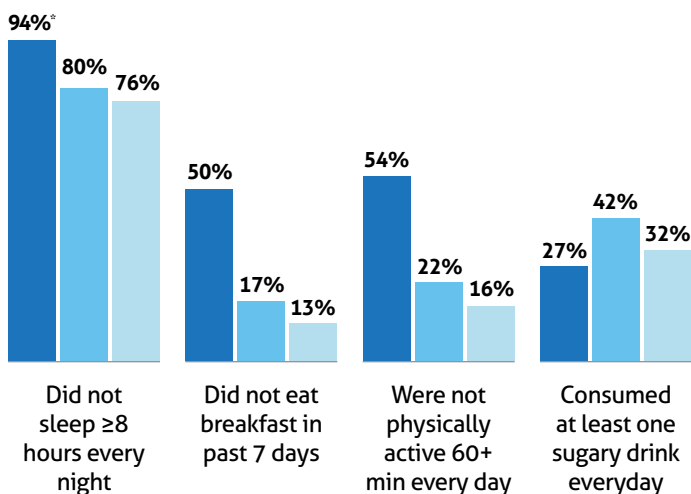
Source: New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017

## Parental incarceration was associated with unhealthy behaviors

### Unhealthy behaviors were more likely among adolescents whose parent had ever been incarcerated

Prevalence of unhealthy behaviors among adolescents

Parent ever incarcerated ■ Both parents ■ One parent ■ Neither parent



Source: New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017

- Poor diet and low levels of physical activity during adolescence can lead to long-term health problems.<sup>6</sup> Parental incarceration in adolescence has been linked to sugary drink consumption and inactivity among young adults.<sup>9</sup>
- NYC adolescents with either both parents or one parent ever incarcerated were less likely to get adequate sleep (6%\* and 20%, respectively), eat breakfast (50% and 83%, respectively) and get physical activity every day (46% and 78%, respectively) compared with their peers whose parents were never incarcerated (inadequate sleep: 24%; breakfast: 87%; physical activity: 84%).
- NYC adolescents with one parent who had been incarcerated were more likely to consume sugary drinks daily than peers without a history of parental incarceration (42% vs. 32%); the prevalence among youth with both parents ever incarcerated was similar to those with parents never incarcerated (27% and 32%).

\*Estimate should be interpreted with caution due to small sample size.

**Definitions:** **Illicit drug use** refers to any lifetime use of cocaine (any form), heroin, ecstasy or synthetic cannabinoids (e.g., K2). **Tobacco use** refers to using any of the following products in the past 30 days: smoking cigarettes or cigars, smokeless tobacco or electronic vapor products. **Prescription drug misuse** refers to taking prescription drugs (e.g., opioid analgesics, benzodiazepines, stimulants) without a doctor's prescription during the past 12 months. **Sugary drinks** include sports drinks, energy drinks, fruit punch, fruit-flavored drinks, sugar-sweetened teas or soda, excluding diet soda or diet pop. **Adequate sleep** refers to sleeping eight or more hours every night.

For more New York City health data and publications, visit [nyc.gov/health/data](http://nyc.gov/health/data)

## Recommendations



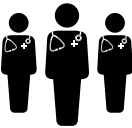
### Educators and professionals working with adolescents should:

- Be knowledgeable of the additional supports that adolescents with a history of parental incarceration may need. Information from [youth.gov](https://www.youth.gov) and the [Osborne Association](https://www.osborneassociation.org/) can assist in learning more about how to support adolescents experiencing parental incarceration.
- Reduce stigma around incarceration by using [humanizing language](#). Be aware that you may have biases around incarceration and be prepared to reflect on and confront these views.
- Provide [safer spaces](#) that give adolescents with incarcerated parents the opportunity to communicate about their experiences. [Be prepared](#) to talk and serve as a source of nonjudgmental support.
- Recognize risk factors for mental health problems. Get trained in [Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aid](#).



### Community-based organizations should:

- Support entire families with behavioral health services and social support programs instead of exclusively focusing on justice-involved adults.
- Use [trauma- and resilience-informed approaches](#) when working with justice-involved families to prevent further trauma.
- Provide mentoring, tutoring and community leadership and advocacy opportunities to adolescents who have experienced parental incarceration.
- Encourage visiting and contact with an incarcerated parent and provide emotional support before and after.
- Offer [community resources](#) to support families who have a justice-involved loved one.



### Pediatricians and primary care providers should:

- Promote coordinated care within their practice by using the medical home model. According to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (AAP) definition, a medical home should be accessible, comprehensive, family-centered, compassionate, and culturally effective for children and adolescents affected by trauma, including experiencing parental incarceration.
- Be prepared if you learn that a child or adolescent has experienced trauma by following AAP guidance. Follow AAP guidance, including: maintaining a supportive environment in your practice that encourages discussing trauma; making referrals to community resources; and following up with families to help them use support services.

### REFERENCES

1. National Research Council. The growth of incarceration in the United States: Exploring causes and consequences. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2014.
2. Bailey ZD, Krieger N, Agénor M, et al. Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions. *Lancet*. 2017;389(10077):1453-1463.
3. DOCCS Fact Sheet: November 1, 2020. New York State Corrections and Community Supervision. <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2020/11/doccs-fact-sheet-november-2020.pdf>. Accessed November 17, 2020.
4. NYC Department of Correction. Daily Inmates in Custody. [https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Public-Safety/Daily-Inmates-In-Custody/7479-ugqb?category=Public-Safety&view\\_name=Daily-Inmates-In-Custody](https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Public-Safety/Daily-Inmates-In-Custody/7479-ugqb?category=Public-Safety&view_name=Daily-Inmates-In-Custody). Accessed October 9, 2020.
5. NYC Department of Correction. NYC Department of Correction at a Glance Information for the first 9 months of FY 2020. [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doc/downloads/press-release/DOC\\_At%20a%20Glance-9\\_Months\\_FY2020\\_051920.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doc/downloads/press-release/DOC_At%20a%20Glance-9_Months_FY2020_051920.pdf). Accessed October 9, 2020.
6. Wildeman C, Wang EA. Mass incarceration, public health, and widening inequality in the USA. *Lancet*. 2017;389(10077):1464-1474.
7. NYC Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. New York City jail population reduction in the time of COVID-19 – Through May 25, 2020. <https://criminaljustice.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-factsheet-MAY-25-2020.pdf>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
8. Vallas R, Dietrich S. One Strike and You're Out. Center for American Progress. December 2014. Accessed January 8, 2020.
9. Lee RD, Fang X. The impact of parental incarceration on the physical and mental health of young adults. *Pediatrics*. 2013;131(4):1188-1195.
10. Heard-Garris N, Winkelman TN, Choi H, et al. Health care use and health behaviors among young adults with history of parental incarceration. *Pediatrics*. 2018;142(3):e20174314.



**Authors:** Sana Khan, Maria Baquero, Marivel Davila

**Acknowledgments:** Sophia Greer, Kinjia Hinterland, Shadi Chamany, Allison Hollihan, John Volpe, Jordan Margolis, Hillary Kunins, Marnie Davidoff, Katherine Bartley, Wen Qin Deng, Sharon Meropol

**Suggested citation:** Khan S, Baquero M, Davila, M. Parental Incarceration and Well-Being among Adolescents in New York City Public High Schools. *NYC Vital Signs*, 2021, 19(3); 1-4.