

Impacts of Incarceration among New York City Adults, 2023

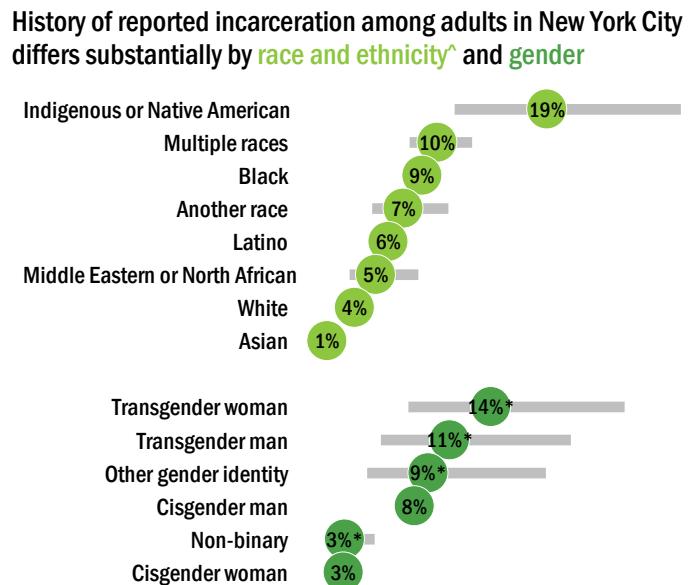
The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (1.8 million) and has an incarceration rate three to six times that of Mexico and Canada, the United States' two closest neighbors.¹ In 2019, the New York City (NYC) jail system was one of the four largest in the country, and currently incarcerates over 7,500 people on any given day, over 80% of whom have not been convicted of a crime.^{2,3} Although the impact of incarceration is felt across all communities, those experiencing structural oppression are incarcerated at much higher rates. Structural oppression is bias that is embedded in the laws, social norms, and economic system of a society and is distinct from individual forms of bias. Black, Indigenous, and other racially marginalized groups as well as people who are transgender are overrepresented in jails and prisons due to historic and present-day structural racism and cissexism, which includes, but is not limited to: land theft, racial residential segregation and exclusion, fewer opportunities to access education and employment,

criminalization of poverty, increased targeting by police and unfair treatment in the court system.

The structures of oppression that lead to increased incarceration of marginalized groups also impact these groups' experiences during and after incarceration, affecting the physical, mental, and financial well-being of individuals, as well as their family, friends, and community.⁴ Incarceration has been shown to be more harmful to the health of Black, Native, Latino, transgender and gender diverse Americans due in part to harsher treatment and higher rates of violence while incarcerated, as well as inequitable access to resources upon release.⁵⁻⁷ Additionally, people who have been incarcerated face extremely high rates of unemployment and low average earnings.⁸ This brief builds upon findings from a previous [Epi Data Brief](#), and aims to examine the racial and gender inequities in incarceration in NYC as well as the prevalence of financial strain, unemployment, and mental health outcomes among those who have been impacted by incarceration.⁹

Incarceration differs by race and ethnicity, and gender identity

- New Yorkers who identified as Indigenous or Native American (19%), multiple races (10%), Black (9%), Latino (6%), or another race (7%) were all more likely to report ever being incarcerated than white New Yorkers (4%).



[^]Data suppressed for Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander due to sample size. Gray bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs). CIs are a measure of estimate precision: the wider the CI bar, the more imprecise the estimate. Latino includes Hispanic or Latino of any race. All other race categories exclude Latino ethnicity.
 *Estimate should be interpreted with caution due to large Relative Standard Error.
 Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

Definitions:

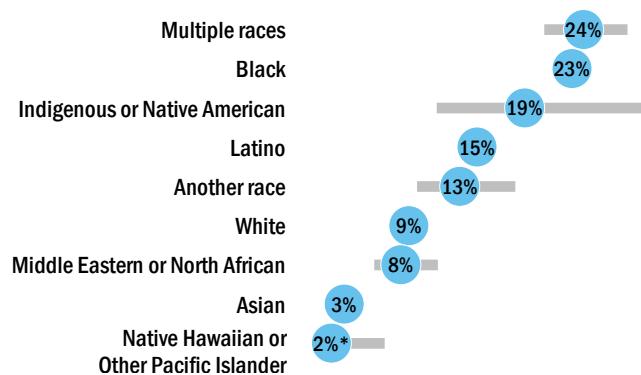
Ever incarceration: refers to adults who responded "yes" to "Have you ever in your life spent any amount of time in a juvenile or adult correctional facility (such as jail, prison, pre-release facility) or other detention center?"

Race and ethnicity: For this publication, Latino includes people of Hispanic or Latino origin, as identified by the survey question "Are you Hispanic or Latino/a?" and regardless of reported race. All other race categories, including those for another or multiple races, exclude Latino ethnicity.

Family member incarceration differs by race and ethnicity

- Compared with white adults (9%), adults identifying as multiple races (24%), Black (23%), Indigenous or Native American (19%), Latino (15%), or another race (13%) were all more likely to report having ever had a family member incarcerated.

Adults in New York City identifying as multiple races, Black, Native American, Latino, or another race are more likely to experience incarceration in their families than white adults



*Estimate should be interpreted with caution due to large Relative Standard Error. Gray bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs). CIs are a measure of estimate precision: the wider the CI bar, the more imprecise the estimate. Latino includes Hispanic or Latino of any race. All other race categories exclude Latino ethnicity.

Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

New Yorkers impacted by the criminal legal system are more likely to experience high financial strain and unemployment

New Yorkers impacted by incarceration are more likely to report high financial strain than those never or not currently impacted by incarceration



Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

- New Yorkers who were ever incarcerated were twice as likely to be unemployed than New Yorkers never incarcerated (20% vs. 10%), and those that ever had a family member incarcerated were more likely to be unemployed than those that never had a family member incarcerated (15% vs. 10%).
- Adults who were ever incarcerated were almost four times as likely to be unable to work due to disability than adults who were never incarcerated (20% vs. 6%).

Definitions: Family member

incarceration: refers to adults who responded "yes" to "any close family member, such as a spouse or partner, child, sibling, or parent" ever being in a juvenile or adult correctional facility or other detention center. Those who responded "yes" were then asked if any of those close family members were currently incarcerated.

Cisgender: refers to people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

High financial strain: defined as the response "very hard" to "In the past 12 months, how hard was it for you to pay for basic needs, like food, housing, utilities, and medical care?" Those who responded "not hard" were considered to not have financial strain.

High social isolation: defined as the response "a lot" to "in the past 30 days, how much have you been feeling cut off or distant from other people?"

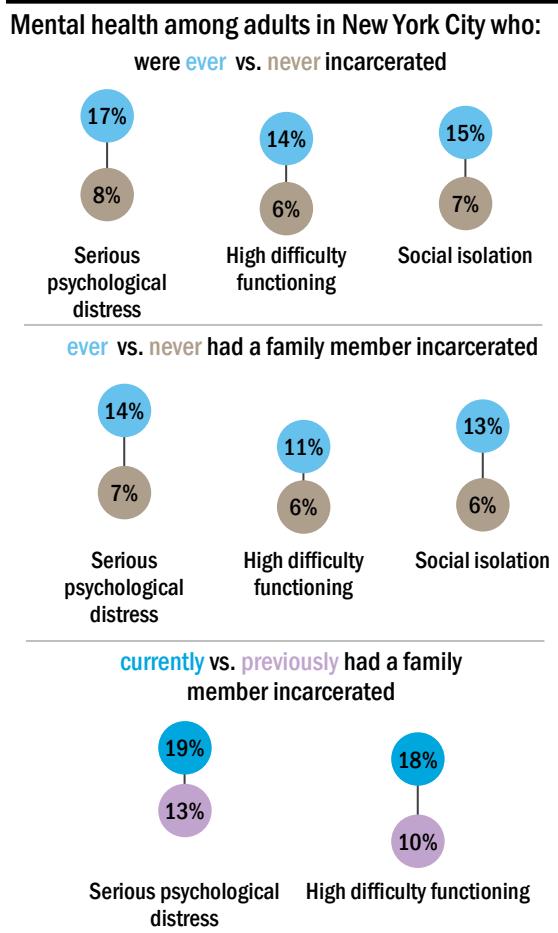
High difficulty functioning: defined as the responses "extremely difficult" or "very difficult" to "In the past 30 days, how difficult have any problems with your emotions, nerves, or mental health made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?"

Data Source:

NYC Neighborhood Wellness Survey (NWS), 2023 was conducted from June 2023 to September 2023 through a collaboration between the Health Department and CUNY Graduate School of Policy and Public Health. The NWS used a probability-based approach using address-based sampling methods to mail surveys to randomly selected households in NYC, and within households, to randomly sample among non-institutionalized adults (aged 18 and older); the adult with an upcoming birthday was asked to take the survey. Most surveys were completed by mail, with some online completion. Estimates are age-adjusted to the U.S. 2000 standard population and weighted to the adult residential population per the American Community Survey, 2021.

People impacted by incarceration are more likely to experience serious psychological distress, difficulty functioning, and social isolation

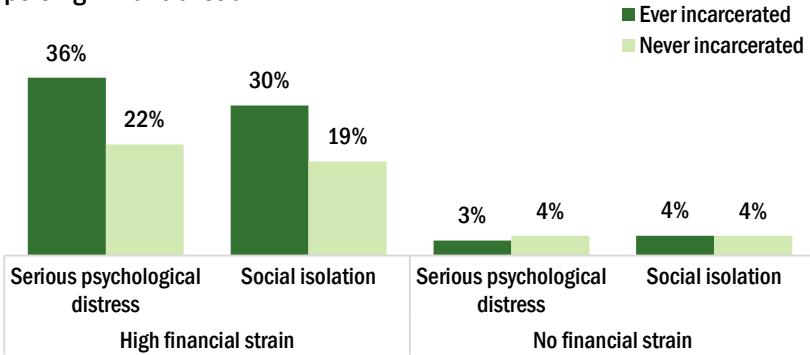
- New Yorkers who were ever incarcerated were more than twice as likely to have serious psychological distress (SPD) and to report high difficulty functioning due to their mental health in the past month than those never incarcerated (17% vs. 8% and 14% vs. 6%, respectively).
- The prevalence of feeling socially isolated in the past month was more than twice as high among those ever incarcerated compared with those never incarcerated (15% vs. 7%).
- Poor mental health outcomes were similarly higher among adults who ever had a family member incarcerated. Compared with those who never had a family member incarcerated, those who ever had a family member incarcerated were more likely to have SPD (7% vs. 14%) and to report high difficulty functioning (6% vs. 11%) and high social isolation (6% vs. 13%).
- New Yorkers who currently had a family member incarcerated reported higher SPD (19% vs. 13%) and high difficulty functioning in the past 30 days (18% vs. 10%) compared with New Yorkers who previously had a family member ever incarcerated.



Definition:
Serious psychological distress (SPD) is defined as having a score greater than or equal to 13 on the Kessler 6 (K6) scale, a six-item scale developed to identify people highly likely to have a diagnosable mental illness and associated functional limitations. Using a five-point scale from “all of the time” to “none of the time,” survey respondents were asked to rate the frequency of six symptoms of mental illness or nonspecific psychological distress: “During the PAST 30 DAYS, how often did you feel ...
1. So sad or depressed that nothing could cheer you up;
2. Nervous;
3. Hopeless;
4. Restless or fidgety;
5. That everything was an effort;
6. Worthless.

Previously incarcerated New Yorkers experiencing financial strain are more likely to experience serious psychological distress and social isolation

Among adults in New York City, the relationship between incarceration, serious psychological distress, and social isolation differs for those who did and did not report high financial strain



- Among New Yorkers who did not have financial strain in the past year there was no difference in likelihood of having SPD and social isolation between those ever and never incarcerated. However, among New Yorkers who had high financial strain, those with a history of incarceration were more likely to have SPD and social isolation than those never incarcerated.

Implications

These data highlight the racial and gender inequities of the carceral system's reach and its impact on the mental health of incarcerated New Yorkers and their families. The survey methodology used to collect these data excluded New Yorkers who were unhoused or institutionalized – those likely to be the most severely impacted by incarceration. This means the true inequities may be starker than what is described in this brief.

These findings highlight the importance of facilitating access to material resources and meaningful employment to reduce financial strain post-release. Currently, individuals reentering society from New York prisons receive \$200 to address all their needs, including food, housing, court-related debts, and preparation for employment; however, these funds are only furnished by the state if incarcerated individuals do not have \$200 available. Coupled with access to health and social services, reduced financial strain may support incarcerated individuals and their families' mental and physical health. Given the many ways that poverty is criminalized in the United States, reduced financial strain may also decrease the number of people impacted by the criminal legal system.¹⁰ The NYC Health Department provides health and social services to adults impacted by incarceration through programs including the [NYC Health Justice Network](#). However, greater investments are needed to support those directly impacted by the carceral system and their families.

In 2021, the NYC Board of Health declared racism a public health crisis. The racial inequities presented here make it clear that providing services to those already impacted by incarceration is not enough. Reducing the size and scope of the criminal legal system is a main pillar of an anti-racist public health approach. To address these widespread health inequities, reliance on the criminal legal system must be replaced by universal access to physical and mental health care, alternative responses to harm that center victims and do not perpetuate cycles of violence, such as restorative justice, and practices that reduce poverty instead of criminalizing it, such as community-level investments in safe and affordable housing and jobs that pay a living wage. The findings of this report also support city and state legislation that propose to reduce court-related fines to address financial strain, and to provide cash assistance for individuals re-integrating into communities.

Health equity is attainment of the highest level of health and well-being for all people. Not all New Yorkers have the same opportunities to live a healthy life. Achieving health equity requires focused and ongoing societal efforts to address historical and contemporary injustices such as discrimination based on race/ethnicity, and other identities. For more information, visit the World Health Organization's [Health Equity](#) webpage.

Definition: **Restorative Justice** is an alternative response to wrongdoing that focuses on repairing harm and ensuring the needs of those harmed are addressed. This process promotes healing and accountability instead of punishment by including individuals and community members in the process. Additional info can be found on [zehr-institute.org](#) and examples of anti-violence projects can be found at [Common Justice's website](#).

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Epi Data Tables

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Table 2. Prevalence of financial strain and employment among New York City adults by personal and family incarceration, 2023

Table 3. Prevalence of social isolation, difficulty functioning, and serious psychological distress among New York City adults by personal and family incarceration, 2023

Table 4. Prevalence of social isolation and serious psychological distress among New York City adults by financial strain and personal and family incarceration, 2023

Data Sources

NYC Neighborhood Wellness Survey (NWS), 2023 was conducted from June 2023 to September 2023 through a collaboration between the Health Department and CUNY Graduate School of Policy and Public Health. The NWS used a probability-based approach using address-based sampling methods to mail surveys to randomly selected households in NYC, and within households, to randomly sample among non-institutionalized adults (aged 18 and older); the adult with an upcoming birthday was asked to take the survey. Most surveys were completed by mail, with some online completion. Estimates are age-adjusted to the U.S. 2000 standard population and weighted to the adult residential population per the American Community Survey, 2021.



Table 1. Prevalence of personal and family incarceration among New York City adults by race and ethnicity and gender identity, 2023

Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

Data are weighted to adult residential population per American Community Survey, 2021

Data are age-adjusted the US 2000 Standard Population

	Ever incarcerated				Prevalence (%)	Family member ever incarcerated			
	Prevalence (%)	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value		Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value	
Race and ethnicity¹									
American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples									
Nations, Indigenous Peoples	18.9	11.5 D	29.6	0.001	18.7	11.1	29.8	0.035	
Asian	1.3	1.0	1.7	<0.001	3.1	2.7	3.7	<0.001	
Black	8.9	8.0	9.8	<0.001	22.8	21.5 D	24.2	<0.001	
Latino	6.2	5.6	6.8	<0.001	14.6	13.7	15.4	<0.001	
Middle Eastern or North African	5.2	3.1	8.6	0.226	8.0	5.7	11.2	0.657	
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	^				2.0 *	0.6	6.6	<0.001	
White	3.5 U	3.2	4.0	ref	8.7	8.1	9.3	ref	
Multiple Races	10.1	7.9	12.9	<0.001	23.8	20.4	27.6	<0.001	
Something else	7.4	4.9	11.0	0.012	13.1	9.4	17.9	0.042	
Gender									
Cisgender man	8.3	7.8	8.9	<0.001					
Cisgender woman	2.6	2.3	2.8	ref					
Non-binary	2.7 *	1.4	5.1	0.898					
Other gender identity	9.4 *	4.5 D	18.8	0.049					
Transgender man	11.1 *	5.6	20.8	0.022					
Transgender woman	14.4 *	7.8	25.1	0.006					

¹ Latina/o includes individuals of Hispanic or Spanish origin, regardless of race, and is excluded from other race/ethnicity groups.

*Estimate should be interpreted with caution due to large Relative Standard Error.

95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are a measure of estimate precision: the wider the CI, the more imprecise the estimate.

Bold p-values indicate statistically significant difference from the reference group

Table 2. Prevalence of financial strain and employment among New York City adults by personal and family incarceration, 2023

Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

Data are weighted to adult residential population per American Community Survey, 2021

Data are age-adjusted the US 2000 Standard Population

Prevalence (%)	High financial strain			Prevalence (%)	Unemployed			Prevalence (%)	Unable to work due to disability				
	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value		Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value		Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value		
Ever incarcerated													
No	11.3	10.9	11.8	ref	10.1	9.6	10.5	U	ref	5.7	5.4	6.0	ref
Yes	26.2	22.9	29.9	<0.001	19.9	17.0	23.1	<0.001		20.1	17.3	23.3	<0.001
Family member ever incarcerated													
No	10.9	10.5	D	ref	9.9	9.4	10.4	ref					
Yes	19.8	18.3		<0.001	14.9	13.6	16.4	<0.001					
Family member currently incarcerated¹													
No	18.2	16.5	U	ref									
Yes	29.1	24.6		<0.001	34.1								

¹Family member currently incarcerated: 'no' response are those who had a family member previously incarcerated, but not currently.

95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are a measure of estimate precision: the wider the CI, the more imprecise the estimate.

Bold p-values indicate statistically significant difference from the reference group

Table 3. Prevalence of social isolation, difficulty functioning, and serious psychological distress among New York City adults by personal and family incarceration, 2023

Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

Data are weighted to adult residential population per American Community Survey, 2021

Data are age-adjusted the US 2000 Standard Population

	SPD				High difficulty functioning				High social isolation			
	Prevalence (%)	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value	Prevalence (%)	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value	Prevalence (%)	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Ever incarcerated												
No	7.6	7.2	8.0	ref	6.0	5.7	6.3	ref	6.6	6.2	6.9	ref
Yes	16.6	13.7	20.0	<0.001	14.2	11.6	17.4	<0.001	14.7	12.5 U	17.3	<0.001
Family member ever incarcerated												
No	7.2	6.8	7.6	ref	5.7	5.3	6.0	ref	6.2	5.9	6.6	ref
Yes	14.0	12.7	15.5 D	<0.001	11.4	10.2	12.7	<0.001	12.7	11.5 D	14.1	<0.001
Family member currently incarcerated, among family member ever incarcerated												
No	13.0	11.6	14.6	ref	10.3	9.1	11.7	ref	11.4	10.2	12.9	ref
Yes	19.1	15.1	23.7	0.009	17.6	14.0	22.0	0.001	19.2	15.5 U	23.6	<0.001

¹Family member currently incarcerated: 'no' response are those who had a family member previously incarcerated, but not currently.

95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are a measure of estimate precision: the wider the CI, the more imprecise the estimate.

Bold p-values indicate statistically significant difference from the reference group

Table 4. Prevalence of social isolation and serious psychological distress among New York City adults by financial strain and personal and family incarceration, 2023

Source: Neighborhood Wellness Survey, 2023

Data are weighted to adult residential population per American Community Survey, 2021

Data are age-adjusted the US 2000 Standard Population

	Serious psychological distress				Social isolation			
	Prevalence (%)	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value	Prevalence (%)	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	p-value
No financial strain								
Never incarcerated	3.5	U	3.2	3.9	ref	3.7	3.3	4.1
Ever incarcerated	2.9		1.8	4.8	0.414	4.0	2.7	5.9
High financial strain								
Never incarcerated	22.3		20.5	24.1	ref	18.9	17.3	20.6
Ever incarcerated	35.7		29.4	42.6	<0.001	30.1	24.4	36.6

95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are a measure of estimate precision: the wider the CI, the more imprecise the estimate.

Bold p-values indicate statistically significant difference from the reference group