

Comparing Vermont State and National Data on Parental Incarceration



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Introduction

Evidence has shown that parent-child communication during parental incarceration mitigates childhood trauma and grief while strengthening attachment security.¹ In response, Vermont policymakers have started a conversation aimed towards making these connections positive and accessible. Statisticians have an unique opportunity to contribute third-party data analyzes to inform future policies. The 2021-2024 Vermont Prison Research and Innovation Network study (PRIN) followed a community engaged approach to measure prison climate and culture, including parental incarceration within a local state prison.² However, to provide a complete understanding of parental incarceration, these local measurements must be contextualized further with national data. The aim of this project is to compare national parental incarceration data with state measures to understand the data availability and gaps of current parental incarceration measurement systems. This analysis hopes to provide insights for future survey collection and to aid future policymaking.

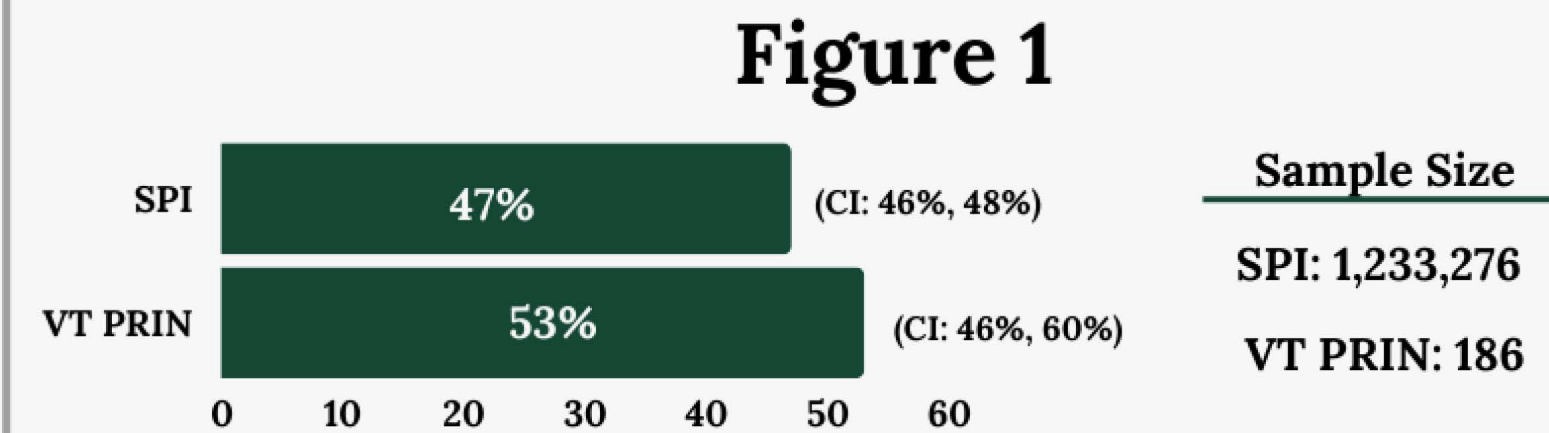
Methods

This analysis compared the Bureau of Justice Statistics' (BJS) 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI) and the 2021 Vermont PRIN survey data. The SPI contained the most comparable and comprehensive national list of questions related to parental incarceration. Both datasets were cleaned by removing missing values, creating new variables based on conditions, and re-coding factors for clarity, all using R.

Pre-specified jackknife weights were applied to the SPI data as recommended by the SPI user guide. The SPI contained binary and categorical variables whereas the VT PRIN survey used a 4-point Likert Scale.

Results

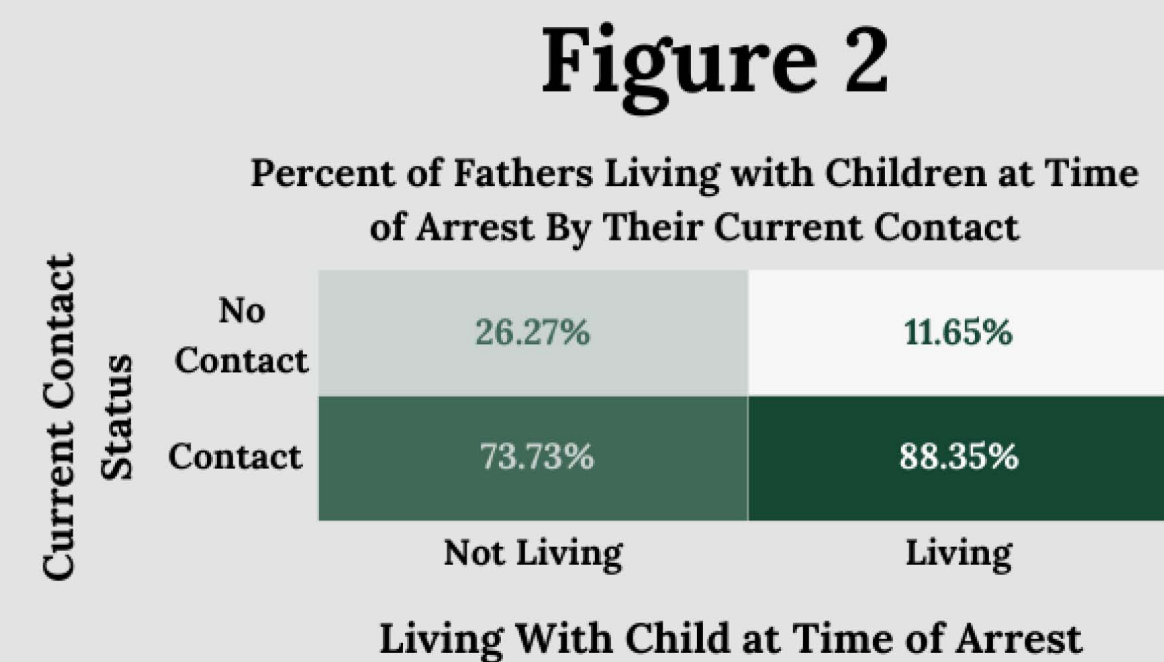
How many incarcerated individuals are fathers of minor children?



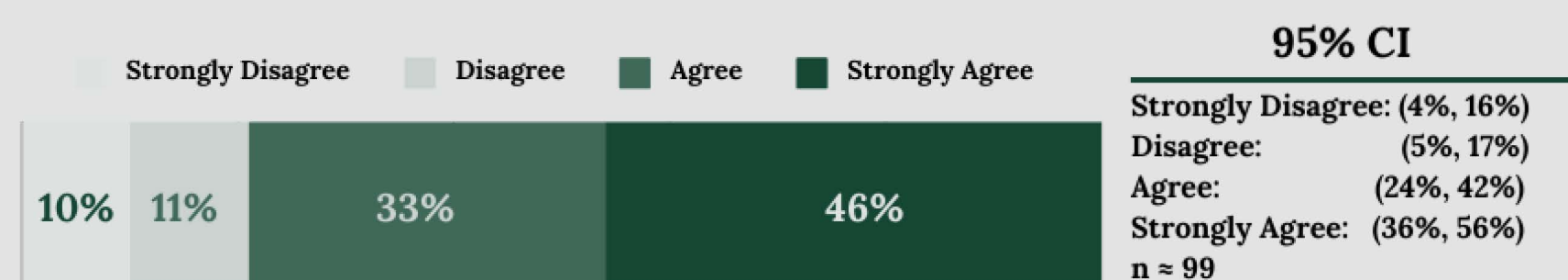
Comparison 1

SPI: Were you living with [your child /children] just before your arrest?

Results : 43% (CI: 42%, 45%) of fathers were living with their child before arrest.



VT PRIN: Before entering prison, I was an active part of my children's lives.



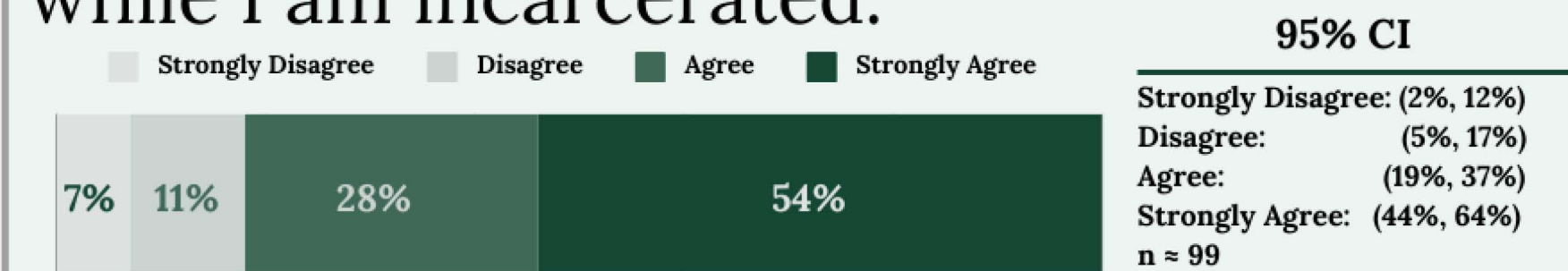
Comparison 2

SPI: Who [is] your [child/children] that you were living with just before your arrest [arrest date] living with now?



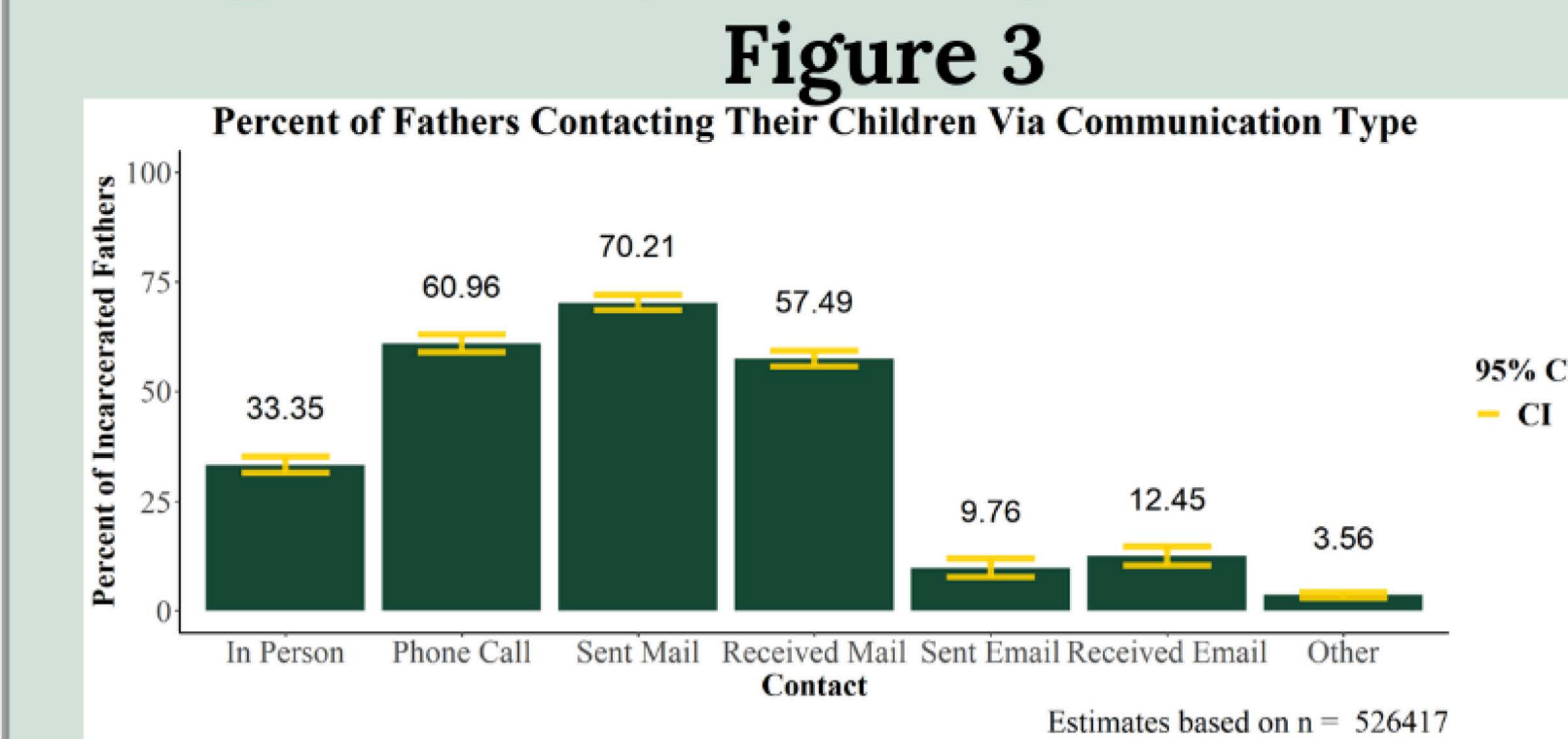
Note: "Other" category includes all other living situations with response rate less than 3%

VT PRIN: My children are well cared for while I am incarcerated.

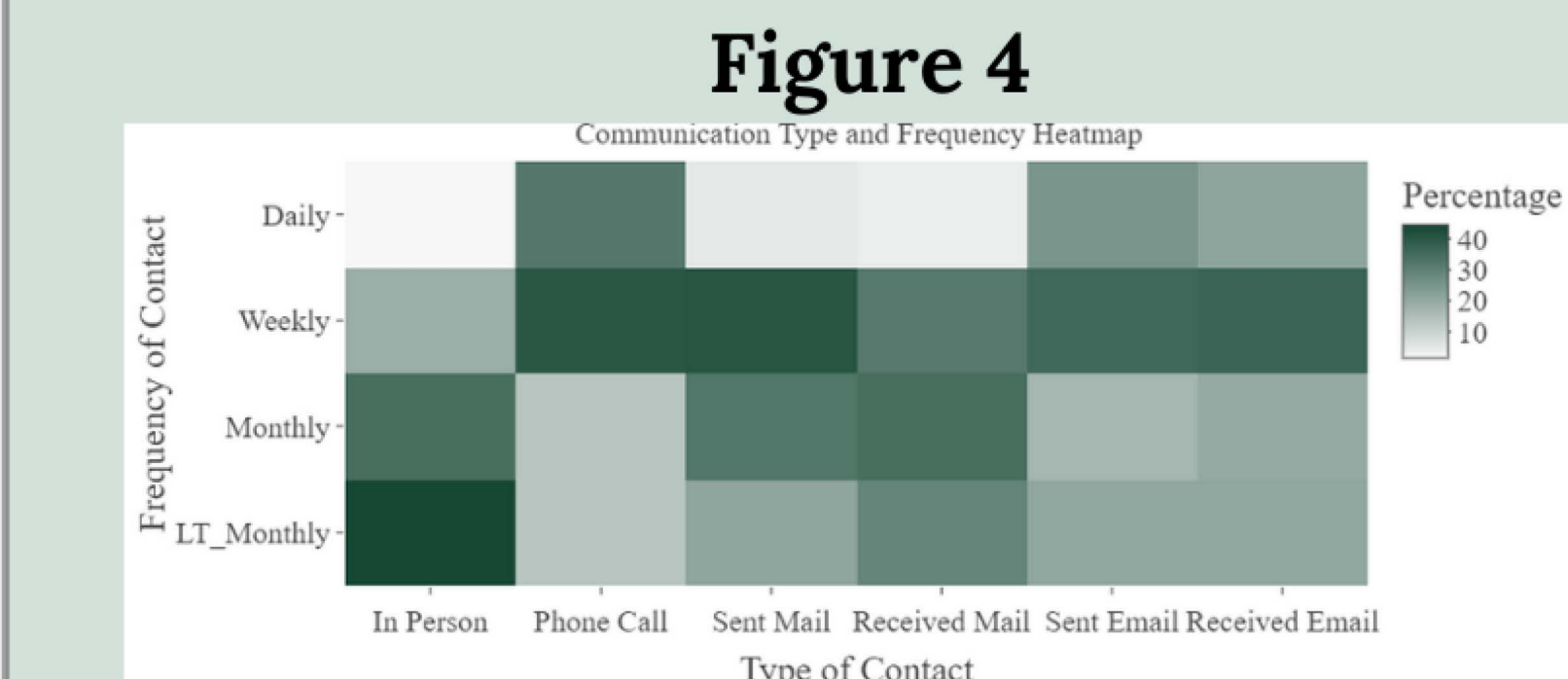


Comparison 3

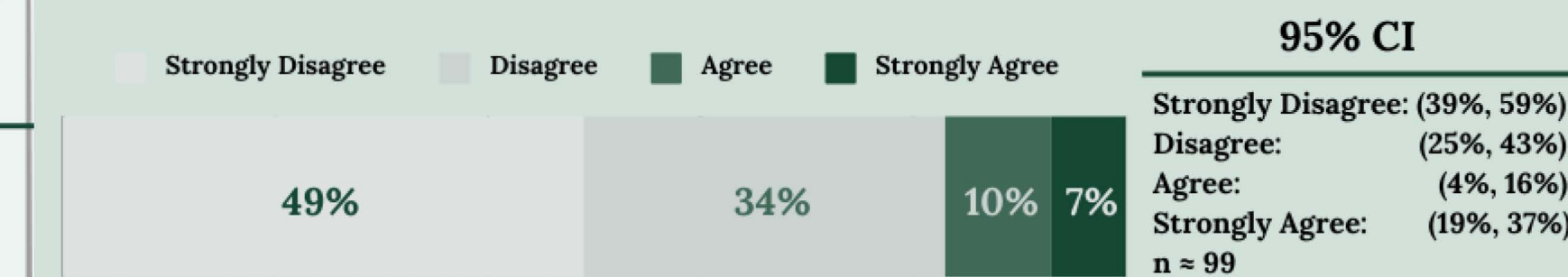
SPI: What type of contact have you had with [your child/children]?



SPI: About how often have you had in-person visits with [type of contact]?



VT PRIN: This facility makes it possible for me to play a meaningful role in my children's lives.



Discussion

Both surveys ask similar questions about the pre and post- arrest parent-child relationship and living situations, but the SPI survey emphasizes the quantity of interactions, while the VT PRIN focuses on quality. Comparison 3, which shows the types and frequency of parent-child contact, highlights which methods work best for families. These findings give context to the VT PRIN question on how parents feel about the quality of interactions in Vermont prisons. However, there are limitations: the surveys were conducted in different years, with varying methods, and assumptions about 'close' relationships were made in interpreting the SPI data. Still, this project is a starting point for understanding parental incarceration.

References

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- Crocker, A. M., & Fox, K. J. 2024. "Using a Community-Engaged Survey to Describe Prison Environments and Measure the Mental Health Status of Correctional Staff and Incarcerated Individuals." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10439862241272311>

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