

What's behind the arrest of mothers for leaving their children unattended?^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Mothers arrested in Florida and South Carolina in recent weeks are the latest in an ongoing trend of parents seeing legal punishment for letting their children play or travel in public unsupervised. The former was charged with child neglect by local authorities for letting her 7-year-old son walk to a park half a mile from their home by himself (the mother later told WPTV that a Florida Department of Children and Families official informed her the charges would likely be dropped). In South Carolina, the woman - a single mom who let her 9-year-old daughter play in a nearby park unattended while she worked her shift at McDonald's - served 17 days in jail and, if convicted of felony child neglect, could face 10 years in prison.

Both cases sparked debates on mommy blogs as well as daytime TV shows, but many agree there has been a generational shift in terms of what children are allowed to do by themselves. As the Florida mom put it to WPTV, "My own bondsman said, 'My parents would have been in jail every day.'"

According to Kristin Smith, a family demographer at University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy, the issue of parents leaving their children alone is nothing new.

"What may be new is that they're arrested - that was kind of a new thing for me is that the mothers are being arrested," she says.

It's likely no coincidence that both incidences arose when school was out, but previous arrests in Ohio and Arizona prove the issue is not limited to summertime. Smith says there is little research on how the rate of self-care - the term for children being left unsupervised - differs during the summer.

A 2011 Census report finds that 2 percent of children 5 to 8 years old, 8 percent of 9- to 11-year-olds and 27 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds are left in self-care. In general, the percentage of school-age children in self-care has ticked down during the last 10 or so years, but when those numbers are broken down by a family's marital status, employment and parental presence, that decline is less consistent.

A study conducted by Smith and co-author Lynne Casper in 2004 showed that a number of factors came into play when parents decide to let their children care for themselves, including the availability of the parents to take care of them, the age and maturity level of the child, and the context of the neighborhood where they are being left.

"The media picks up on the kids who are in the low-income neighborhoods or in the areas that seem less safe," Smith says. "Kids from more affluent neighbors are more likely to be in self-care."

A common reaction to these stories is that the world is a more dangerous place than it was generations ago when children were allowed to roam freely. However, as Lenore Skenazy, the author of "Free Range Kids," has argued in The Huffington Post and elsewhere, crime is at its lowest levels since World War II.

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