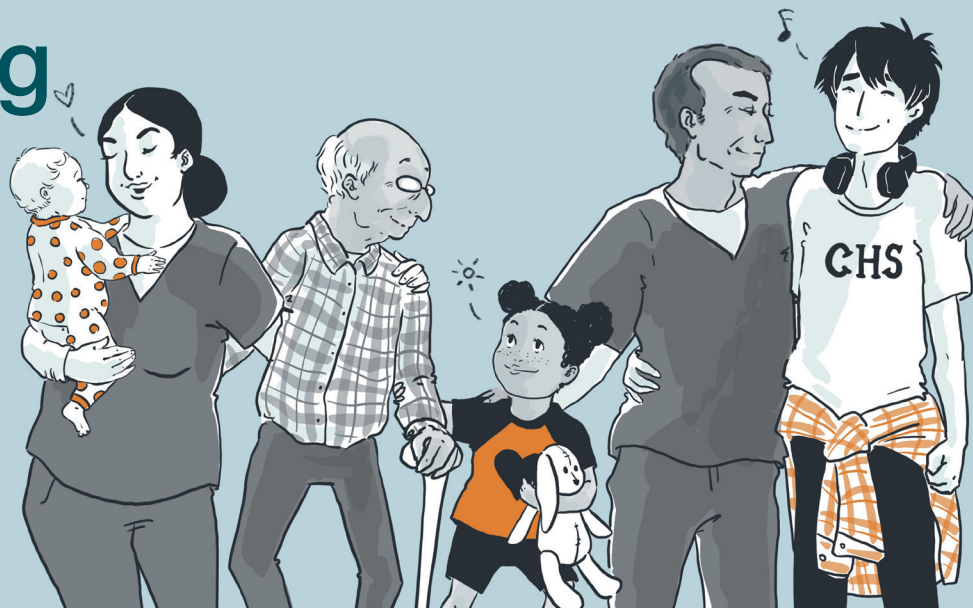


Six Recommendations for Supporting Families Affected by Parental Incarceration

A REVIEW OF THE
LITERATURE



Over five million American children under 18 have had a parent jailed or incarcerated. Due to systematic inequalities rooted in policies and practices that affect the likelihood of being arrested, convicted, and incarcerated, Black and Latino children have been disproportionately affected. Parental incarceration has direct consequences for children and families. Family-strengthening programs seek to maintain and build healthy relationships between parents who are incarcerated and their children. They have the potential to reduce the harmful effects of incarceration on families. This brief describes opportunities to apply six recommendations for designing, developing, and implementing services, taken from a recent investigation of family-strengthening programs.

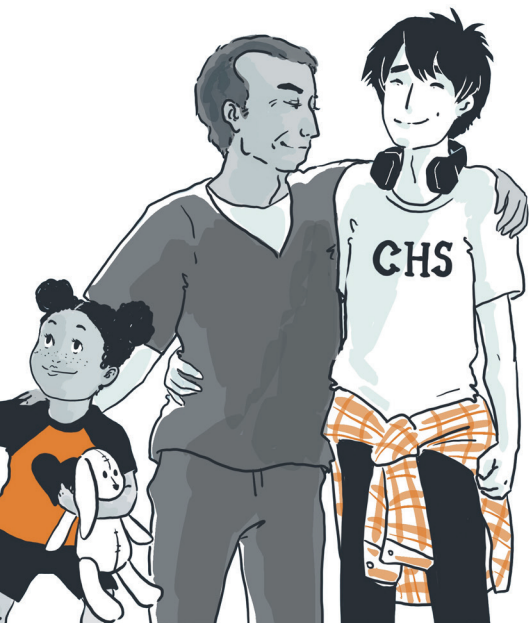
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EMILY BRENNAN
MEGHAN MCCORMICK
BRIGHT SARFO
MICHELLE S. MANNO



These recommendations are meant to help programs address the broad range of needs for families affected by parental incarceration.



The United States currently incarcerates over one million parents of children who are minors.¹ More than five million American children have experienced parental incarceration. Due to systemic inequalities rooted in policies and practices that affect the likelihood of being arrested, convicted, and incarcerated, Black and Latino

children have been disproportionately affected.² Parental incarceration has direct consequences for children and families, creating significant economic, social, and emotional hardship for them.³ Programs supporting families affected by parental incarceration may promote more equitable outcomes for children.

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AUTHORS: Emily Brennan, Meghan McCormick, Bright Sarfo, Michelle S. Manno

SUBMITTED TO: Nicole Constance and Megan Reid, Project Officers, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Dina A.R. Israel, MDRC, 200 Vesey Street, 23rd Floor, New York, NY 10281

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BOX 1. PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT FAMILIES WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

ENGAGE caregivers who are not incarcerated.

CONSIDER children's ages in program design.

CONSIDER the parent's role in the child's life.

COLLABORATE across systems.

ADDRESS barriers to program engagement.

PROMOTE families' financial stability.

Family-strengthening programs seek to maintain and build healthy relationships between parents who are incarcerated and their children.⁴ They have the potential to reduce the harmful effects of incarceration on families. A recent investigation of family-strengthening programs (involving a literature review, site visits, and interviews with experts) identified six recommendations, listed in Box 1, for programs working with families affected by incarceration. These recommendations are meant to help programs address the broad range of families' needs.⁵ This brief describes opportunities to apply these six recommendations for designing, developing, and implementing high-quality services.

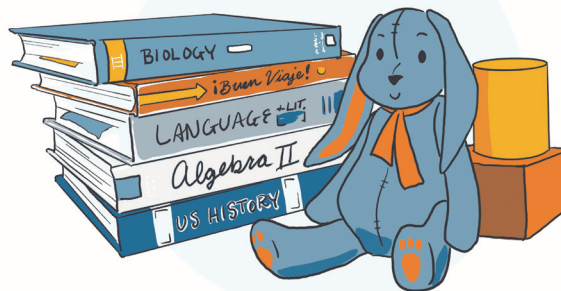
1. Engage caregivers who are not incarcerated.

Most programs engage the parent who is incarcerated or the child. However, during the recent investigation of family-strengthening programs, providers, stakeholders, and researchers noted that the adults who are caring for children while a parent is incarcerated are an essential part of the family system as well.⁶ Programs working directly with children should engage care-

givers and tailor services to them from the beginning of the program, and should consider incentives and support specifically designed to promote their participation in services.⁷ For example, the Oregon Social Learning Center adapted the Parenting Inside Out curriculum, which is typically administered when parents are incarcerated, to include caregivers and to be administered outside of correctional settings.⁸

2. Consider children's ages in program design.

Programs should consider activities that are developmentally appropriate and tailored to support the spe-



cific ages and developmental stages of the children they serve.⁹ For example, a program could provide a prison nursery during infancy and toddlerhood, and support parent-child visitation and remote interactions across childhood and adolescence. Visitation periods may need to last longer for older children since parents may take longer to reconnect with adolescent children they have not seen recently. Some components of a prison visitation program are not appropriate for younger children (such as invasive security checks or interac-

Families with incarcerated parents must navigate multiple systems.

tions with prison guards). Physical visitation spaces should be inviting and nonthreatening if they will be used with young children.¹⁰

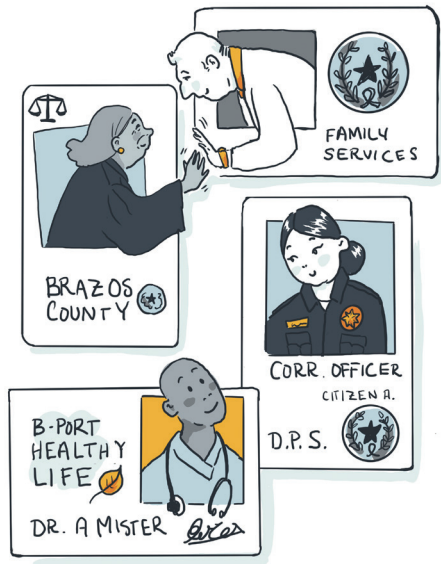
3. Consider the parent's role in the child's life.

Children with incarcerated parents can have different experiences depending on whether their mothers or fathers are incarcerated.¹¹ Their experiences may also differ depending on their relationships with their parents before incarceration. If programs are working with parents who were primary caregivers before incarceration, they could consider integrating counseling into their services, as the parents' incarceration may be par-



ticularly traumatic for children.¹² If a parent was not the primary caregiver before incarceration, a program might need to connect with the child's current caregiver and develop a range of options for communication and visitation.

4. Collaborate across systems. Families with incarcerated parents must navigate multiple systems, such



as the child welfare, correctional, and child support systems.¹³ The lack of coordination across these systems can impose significant burdens on families before parents are sentenced, and during and after incarceration. Programs can help strengthen families, therefore, by collaborating with these systems and increasing the coordination across them. For example, programs could consider inviting a child support representative to ensure parents have a complete understanding of their rights within the child support system during incarceration and after release.

5. Address barriers to program engagement. Programs encounter significant challenges engaging parents who are incarcerated, particularly when a parent is transferred to another facility, has a violation that leads to placement in a segregated unit or prevents participation in any program for some time, or is released from incarceration before completing the program.¹⁴ Therefore, when programs design and structure services, it is important to consider prison policies regarding transfers, lockdowns, or other procedures that

The incarceration of parents negatively affects all family members.



The incarceration of parents negatively affects all family members. Family-strengthening programs have the potential to reduce the harm of incarceration for families that participate. In turn, these programs may promote more equitable outcomes for children. The six recommendations presented in this brief offer considerations for programs designing and implementing such program models. To learn more about program models and the research supporting these recommendations, please see [the full literature review](#).

may affect participation. If a program is seeking to implement services in a jail setting, for example, where most people are awaiting trial or have been convicted of minor crimes, a short-duration program may be appropriate.

6. Promote families' financial stability. When parents are incarcerated, families often struggle to make ends meet, making it difficult to find the resources needed to make visits and expensive phone calls to prison or jail.¹⁵ After being released, people must find places to live and work while also facing expenses imposed by the justice system, such as court costs, postrelease monitoring fees, restitution fees, and child support debt payments.¹⁶ Most programs that aim to support families' financial stability focus exclusively on the employment and income of the parent who is incarcerated. Programs could consider other ways to promote financial stability, such as reducing the cost of visitation by providing transportation support or stipends to families. When the parent is released from incarceration, programs could extend financial support or other services to a child's nonincarcerated caregiver, in addition to serving the parent being released.



Notes

- 1 The term “incarceration” refers to any situation in which a person spends time in a local jail or in a state or federal correctional institution. Given the wide variety of implementation contexts for family-strengthening programs, this review uses a broad definition of incarceration to include the largest number of possible approaches. See Pew Charitable Trusts, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration’s Effect on Economic Mobility* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2010/collateralcosts1pdf.pdf.

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- 4 The authors use the term "family strengthening" throughout this document to align with the terminology in the literature. The term conveys that *all* family and parent-child relationships can be strengthened with support, regardless of a parent's involvement with the criminal justice system.
- 5 The recommendations presented in this brief are the culmination of a recent literature review of 59 programs, interviews with 10 experts from a range of disciplines including child development and criminology, visits to 6 organizations representing diverse intervention types and locations, and a meeting of 14 federal staff members and 6 program experts. For more information on specific programs and their level of evidence, as well as the literature review methods, see Meghan McCormick, Bright Sarfo, and Emily Brennan, *Promising Practices for Strengthening Families Affected by Parental Incarceration: A Review of the Literature*, OPRE Report 2021-25 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021), www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/2021_B3_Literature_Review_508_MDRC.pdf.

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- 13 The child welfare system can include public and private agencies and courts charged with promoting the well-being of children by ensuring their safety, achieving permanent homes for them, and strengthening families. Families often become involved with the child welfare system because of a report of suspected child abuse or neglect. The child support system is made up of states, territories, and tribes that administer the child support program under the oversight of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement. These entities are empowered to establish and enforce orders for one parent (who generally does not live with the child) to pay child support to the parent who does live with the child.
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