



Council on Crime and Justice

# **Children of Incarcerated Parents**

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003 the Council on Crime and Justice (Council) received funding from the U.S. Department of Justice to study racial disparities in the Minnesota justice system. The funding was used to support seven studies under the Council's Racial Disparities Initiative. Some of these studies were aimed at defining the disparities while others examined the collateral effects of such disparities. The Children of Incarcerated Parents Study fell into the latter category. This study is intended to provide insight on the impact of imprisonment on children and caregivers, regardless of whether a prison sentence was seen by the family to be an appropriate response to criminal behavior.

Recognizing the enormously disproportionate confinement among ethnic minorities in Minnesota, particularly African Americans, the Council sought to investigate how the families left behind, the children and their caregivers were coping. The goal was to provide a voice to an often overlooked group of people; especially those children whose feelings, opinions, and personal experiences are rarely explored yet are greatly affected by policies and procedures that were not designed with their needs in mind. Additionally, in recognition that so much of the extant literature on this topic has centered on family deficits and maladjusted outcomes, this study aimed to explore family assets, strengths, and insights as much as their struggles.

In order to fully understand the effects of incarceration on the family, research staff interviewed both children and caregivers. Three qualitative interviews were conducted with each participant in order to fully understand the subtle nuances of their experiences. In general, interview topics included family dynamics, the availability of resources, and any changes that were viewed by the participants as having derived from incarceration. Overall, thirty-four children and twenty-one caregivers were interviewed, representing a total of twenty-one families. Thematic content analysis was used and the following findings emerged:

- All the families face social challenges, such as, lack of financial support, social alienation, and stigma associated with having a parent in prison. Caregivers struggled finding a balance between their concern for the child and coping themselves with the situation.
- The stresses faced by the caregivers, as well as incarcerated parents, did not go unnoticed by these children. Even when the caregivers believed the children were unaware of the caregivers' strains, because they worked to conceal them, most of the children were keenly attuned and conveyed their own efforts to ease the stress, often by taking on adult responsibilities.
- Both the caregiver and children knew the importance of having a role model, yet the caregivers had trouble finding role models for their children.

- For many of the children, they simply needed a place or an outlet to feel “normal,” that is, some place where they fit in and could excel in some skill. Other children needed more direct support such as a person they could talk with, a support group, or some other form of social support.
- Caregivers, whether they choose to or not, became the gatekeeper of the children’s relationship with the incarcerated fathers. The children, not surprisingly, almost uniformly wanted to have a connection and be able to communicate with their fathers.
- Many caregivers, as well as, children understood that the incarcerated parent did the crime and that there should be consequences, but they thought the consequences in many of the cases were too harsh and the impact on the family was not considered.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are offered. The principle recommendation proposes a pilot project which would test a protocol for a family impact assessment. This assessment would:

- Commence when a parent is sentenced to prison (minimum term of one year and a day);
- Focus on children who are under the age of seventeen at the time their parent is imprisoned;
- Provide for the identification of the needs of the children, and the children’s primary caretaker, as soon after the sentencing hearing as practical; and
- Govern the response to the identified needs of each child and do so in the child’s best interests, particularly as it relates to the appropriateness and nature of any continued contact between the child and incarcerated parent, including visitations during imprisonment and contact/custody after the parent’s release from prison.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Starting in the 1970s, the United States embarked on a “grand experiment in mass incarceration” that resulted in a fourfold increase in the rate of imprisonment per capita of the population (Travis, 2004). As a result there are now over 2 million individuals under correctional supervision in both state and federal prisons, as well as jails (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003). The racial composition of the state and federal prison population is grossly disproportionate; 44% of the prison population is African American and 35% Caucasian, while African Americans make up only 12.8 % of the general population and Caucasians comprise 75% (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003; U.S. Census, 2004). In recent years, Minnesota has led the nation in racial disparities of imprisonment between African Americans and Caucasians; African Americans comprise a mere 3.5% of the Minnesota population yet only represent 32% of the prison population (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2001).

### **Parents Behind Bars**

As the U.S. prison population continues to increase, the number of parents behind bars is also increasing. According to the Department of Justice (DOJ), in 1999, state and federal prisons held 721,500 prisoners who were a parent to a minor child as compared to 449,600 in 1991 (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003). DOJ data also indicated that in 1999, over 1,500,000 children had a parent behind bars, as compared to 936,500 children in 1991 (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003). An estimated ten million children have experienced having a parent incarcerated at some point in their lives (Simmons, 2000). It is important to note that all of the available figures are estimates. There is no systematic way of documenting the number of children with a parent in prison, let alone of confirming the accuracy of these figures. It is not required that prisoners release this type of information and as yet, there has been no attempt of direct measurement (Johnston, 1995).

According to DOJ data, 2% of the country’s minor youth have a parent in prison (Mumola, 2000; Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003). However, when racial groupings are considered, 7% of African American children have a parent in prison (Pattillo, Weiman & Western, 2004; Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2003). Once again, the racial demographics of the proportion of incarcerated parents are concerning. According to DOJ data (2003), African Americans are the largest group of incarcerated parents in federal and state prisons, (49% and 44% respectively).

### **Contact between Prisoners and their Children**

More than half of parents in prison, who have a minor child, have not seen their children since they were incarcerated (Hairston, Rollin & Jo, 2004). However, according to the Department of Justice, 83% of state and 93% of federal prisoners have had some form of contact (phone, letter, or visit) with their child while incarcerated. African Americans visited with their children more regularly than any other racial group. Additionally, black prisoners spoke with their children via the phone more than any other racial group, with a little more than half of black inmates (53%) reporting that they speak with their children on the phone at least once a month, as compared to 40% of white inmates, and 36% of Hispanic inmates (Hairston, Rollin, & Jo, 2004).

Simmons (2000) reports that the distance between a child's home and the prison is a key factor in whether or not the child will visit the parent. Sixty-two percent of state and 84% of federal incarcerated parents are held more than 100 miles from their most recent residence (Mumola, 2000). Many children do not have the resources to visit a parent in prison. However, in the event that a child has access to resources to permit visits, families may avoid visiting the incarcerated parent in prison because of "sterile, uncomfortable visiting rooms" or due to a sense that "prison is not the right place for a child" (Slavin, 2000; Scriven, 2000).

Edin, Nelson, & Paranal (2004) observed that for offenders who had consistent contact with their child or their child's mother prior to incarceration, the event of incarceration yielded a pronounced negative effect on the incarcerated parent relationship with the child and the child's mother. The authors noted that among offenders whose lifestyle choices had created a rift between themselves and their child or child's mother, incarceration was sometimes a turning point in the relationship that functions as an opportunity to refocus the incarcerated parent's life.

### **Impact of Incarceration on Children**

The impact of a parent's incarceration on a child has many different consequences. Literature on this issue focuses on many compounding factors that result from a parent's incarceration. These factors include: the loss of a caregiver, a change in caregiver, limited access to a parent after incarceration, and behavior and emotional issues such as school failure, juvenile delinquency, and developmental problems. Reed and Reed (1997) asserted:

Minor children of parents under some form of criminal justice control are among the most at-risk, yet least visible, populations of children. Though rising incarceration rates suggest an increasing number of children who have lost one or both of their parents to incarceration, very little is known about this vulnerable population.

Adalist-Estrin suggests that incarcerated parents are likely to have long histories of trauma and limited coping skills and hence find it difficult to maintain relationships. Prison often

diminishes these skills and creates or enhances estrangement between the child and the parent. Relationships are often put on hold with phone calls that consist of “hi, how are you” but avoidance of painful and difficult issues (1995). Typically, the children have lived in poverty before, during and after their parent’s incarceration and lack the resources to visit their parents (Reed & Reed, 1997).

The research literature also elaborates on the negative impact of losing a parent to incarceration and cites social, emotional and educational difficulties as well as behavioral problems. The children often are coping with a rupture in the child/parent bond, enduring traumatic stress, and inadequate quality of care. These factors can adversely disrupt child development (Johnson, 1995). Without intervention, children’s responses to trauma, like fear, anxiety, sadness and grief, can be manifested in reactive behaviors such as physical and verbal aggression, withdrawal, hyper vigilance, or sexualized behavior. Other patterns of trauma reactive behavior include fighting, substance abuse, gang activity, and antisocial behavior (Phillips & Harm, date unknown). Additionally, recent research has shown that “children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely than their peers to become criminally involved” (Bilchik, Seymour, & Kreisher, 2001, p.109).

Studies indicate that children of incarcerated parents often feel a strong sense of alienation from their parents, caregivers and other children. Caretakers sometimes attempt to protect children by avoiding the truth about their parent’s incarceration. Common stories used to explain a parent’s absence are that the parent is “away at school”, “working far away”, “in the military” or even “in the hospital”. However, this approach to protecting children often has a negative impact on the child’s sense of trust of the caregiver (Adalist-Estin, 2003). It must be noted that this reluctance by the caregiver to disclose the parent’s whereabouts “stems from a legitimate concern about confidentiality, criminal liabilities, child custody matters, and public assistance” (Johnson, 1995).

Weisman and LaRue observed that “deception and secrecy contribute to the difficulty in identifying children of incarcerated parents” (1998). Children whose parents are incarcerated often demonstrate an extreme desire for privacy. In one study, professionals leading a support group for children of incarcerated parents noted that confidentiality was a central desire of the participants and that in casual conversation these children would go out of their way to avoid revealing the nature of their participation in the support group (Weisman & LaRue, 1998).



### **Impact of Incarceration on Caregivers**

Kaumpher relates that children who live with their mother prior to the mother's incarceration are likely to be divided up between fathers, grandparents and other caregivers after her arrest (1995). However, after paternal arrest the majority of children do not change caregivers. Nine out of ten children continue living with their mother after their father's arrest (Kaumpher, 1995).

Caregivers who are immediate relatives often face challenges that non-relative caregivers do not. Unlike non-relative caregivers, they often are compelled to assume the role of a caregiver during a family crisis, and there is a less systemic support for relative caregivers than non-relative caregivers (Phillips & Bloom, 1998). A significant challenge for a relative caregiver is contending with their own emotions while assisting the children in understanding their conflicted feelings regarding their parent (Phillips & Bloom, 1998).

Of the 1.5 million children of state and federal prisoners, 24,000 were in foster care and 155,049 lived with grandparents in 1997 (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). A study conducted by Johnson and Waldfogel found that of children whose parents are incarcerated, those with the highest number of risk factors (such as parental drug use, parental mental health issues, parental reliance on public assistance) were placed in foster care (2004).

Caregivers commonly assume responsibility for children who have an incarcerated parent through an informal arrangement between the parent and the caregiver (Phillips & Brown, 1998). However, when a formal proceeding is pursued, often permanent out of home placement policies fail to account for situations where children and parent have strong attachments to each other but are involuntarily separated due to imprisonment (Gently, 1998).

### **Gaps in the Extant Literature**

The impact of a parent's incarceration on a child has a wide array of known consequences. Literature on the topic focuses on the negative consequences for children and the adults caring for them. The vast majority of available information about the children arrives filtered through the perspectives of parents, caregivers, prison officials, therapists, and researchers. The notable omission is the voice of the children themselves; when children are discussed in the research and practice literature, it is from the position of a professional or of a caregiver.

While it is likely true that the professionals, who work closely with children as well as the caregivers, know the children quite well, there may be areas in which the children's perspectives differ from those of observing adults. For example, it is possible that sometimes what a caregiver believes is most important to a child is not what the child would name, particularly when the caregiver is personally and emotionally involved in the situation.

Another area we know little about is the assets of families with an incarcerated parent, their strengths, support systems, coping mechanisms, and resiliency. Therefore, this study was an attempt to tell a story that is not told elsewhere: how imprisonment of a parent affects the children left behind as understood through the voices and perspectives of the children themselves, how the impressions of the children differ from the view of their caregivers, and to examine not simply what is failing in the children's lives, but how they survive and even thrive at times.

### **III. METHODS**

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Study was designed to address three questions: 1) How is parenting affected by incarceration?, 2) How are children and youth affected by a parent's incarceration?, and 3) How do parents and youth perceptions differ as to the effects of imprisonment? This study is pivotal for several reasons. First, little is known about the effects on caregivers and children in families with an incarcerated parent. Second, studies that have been done focus mostly on the parents' perceptions. Few studies have endeavored to learn the impact on youth from the perspective of the youth themselves. Third, as imprisonment disproportionately and pervasively affects families of color, information is needed to understand these families as well as their communities and the providers that serve them to truly build on their strengths and assets.

#### **Design**

A research team was formed to conduct the research that consisted of a Principal Investigator and two research assistants. Additionally, to assist the Council in conducting this research a Project Advisory Board was formed. The Board was comprised of key stakeholders regarding the issue of children with incarcerated parents. Members included representatives from criminal justice agencies, academic institutions, community organizations, and members from the community who have been directly impacted in some manner by this issue.

In the initial meetings, the Advisory Board was involved in planning the implementation of the project. The Board was instrumental in making the research team aware of potential issues and problem-solved with the research team as obstacles or issues rose. They assisted with the recruitment of the interviewers and interviewees and provided feedback on the interview guides that were created by the research team. As the project progressed, the research team presented preliminary findings to the Advisory Board. Lastly, the Advisory Board helped plan a community forum to discuss the preliminary findings of this report.

The Council also worked closely with a local program called Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program. The purpose of this program is to provide mentoring to children and youth with an incarcerated parent. The mentoring program is a collaborative effort between the Council on Crime and Justice, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Greater Twin Cities, and the Search Institute.

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Study used qualitative methods to capture the depth and breadth of each family's experience. The interview guides were created using an ethnographic interviewing method. Interview guides were open-ended, topical guides, rather than structured interview questions. The interviews were conducted in a way that allowed for a conversational

flow. Interviewees were asked to share their stories and experiences on the impact of having a parent incarcerated.

### **Interview Guides**

Three rounds of interviews were conducted with each family. Each round of interviews included the same topics for caregivers and children, but the actual wording or approach to the questions were different between adult and child interviews. The interview guides were created first by brainstorming with the Advisory Board, and then further refined by the research team in a collaborative group format. The first interview topics focused on areas not well developed by existing research. In the first interview, caregivers and children were asked about the timing and duration of the incarceration, the caregiver's relationship to the incarcerated parent (e.g., sister, wife, girlfriend), and about changes in their lives that they viewed were caused by incarceration. The first interviews explored what the natures of the changes were, if any, in the areas of family, school, and child behavior and affect. It also explored where the participants turned for help and how they got support, if at all.

The second interview guide expanded on themes that were present during the first interviews. Interview topics that did not generate any themes in the first interview were omitted in the second interview. The second interview also expanded on information that was not clear from the first guide. In the second interview, the interviewers also asked about family dynamics. The caregiver and children were both asked to identify members of their family using a family map that they were asked to complete. Using this map, the interviewers explored the nature of the relationships between the interviewee and individuals named on the map, as well as the frequency, type, and quality of contact. The purpose of this was to gauge family relationships and family interactions as well as better understand the level and quality of involvement with the incarcerated parents' side of the family as compared with the caregiver's side when relevant. It also offered the opportunity to examine the differences between child and caregiver perceptions.

The third interview guide was a short survey focused on collecting more demographic information. While the first and second round interviews yielded an abundance of information about their personal experiences and stories, basic demographic information was at times ambiguous. For example, there was sometimes vague or conflicting information regarding the age of the child and the race of the family members. The research team had intentionally not asked about the specific crimes of the incarcerated parents in the earlier interviews to emphasize the focus on the participants themselves, as well as to not bias the early thematic analysis based

on those crimes. However, it was still meaningful to learn the nature of the offenses, so this was explicitly asked of the caregivers in the final interview.

As part of closure, after meeting with these families over the course of a year, the final interview asked both the child and caregiver what this interviewing process was like for them and if there were any thing they wished had been done differently.

### **Sampling**

To be eligible, participants had to be currently caring for a child who had a parent in prison and the child had to be between the ages of 7 and 17 when the study started. Convenience sampling was used to obtain participants. Advertisements were delivered to a wide variety of community organizations, including but not limited to the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, the Urban League, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. These organizations posted and distributed the flyers to families that might be interested in the study. Flyers were also posted throughout Minneapolis, St Paul, and other surrounding metro areas in public places families frequent, such as grocery stores, laundromats, restaurants, and libraries. Neighborhoods were targeted based on mapping that identified concentrations of incarceration.

In recognition that their time and information was valuable, participants were compensated for their time, with increasing amounts over the course of the study to encourage retention. The caregivers received a \$20 cash payment for the first interview, \$30 for the second interview, and \$60 for third interview. Child participants were compensated for their time with Target gift cards worth \$20 for each of the first two interviews and \$40 for the third interview.

The goal was to locate twenty families to participate. That goal was met with twenty-one eligible families who participated in the first round of interviews. Seventeen (81%) families were retained for the second interview and fifteen (71%) families participated in the third and final interview. Several caregivers called the research coordinator repeatedly to set up the second and third interviews because they were so eager to talk more. At the time of the first interview, the caregivers provided the names and numbers of individuals they would permit us to contact in the event that they moved or their phones were disconnected. For families that were more difficult to maintain contact with, the interviewers tried calling at least three times, both the caregiver and contacts they provided in the event that they moved or their number changed. If that yielded no results, a letter was sent reminding the caregiver of the study and requesting an interview. If there was still no response, it was considered a passive decline to continue participation. Attrition was largely due to disconnected phone numbers and participants moving between interview

times. In one family, the incarcerated father was released and returned home, and the caregiver indicated that she did not feel comfortable continuing the study with him in the home.

While the research team sought families in which either the father or the mother was in prison, all the responding families had a father in prison. There were explicit efforts to find families with a mother in prison, including contacting organizations known to serve mothers in prison (e.g. Federal Forum). There were two children in the study who had both a mother and a father in prison at some point in their lives, though not necessarily simultaneously or at the time of our study.

### **Data Collection**

Each caregiver and child was interviewed three times over a period of 12 months, allowing for time to review and analyze each interview round before developing the subsequent interview guide. The interviews were conducted wherever the family felt most comfortable. For example, interviews were conducted in homes, a library, or at the Council on Crime and Justice. Interviewers went in pairs to each interview; in separate rooms one interviewer would interview the caregiver while the other would interview the child. This was to make it difficult for either the caregiver or the child to overhear the other. Interviewers brought ‘art boxes’ for the child interviews that contained coloring supplies, Silly Putty, and other activities. The purpose was twofold, 1) to allow children to have something to do with their hands and release a little energy in a way that permitted the interview to continue, and 2) to give the children a relief from direct eye contact as they shared personal stories. Children were also offered a choice of treats to eat during the interview, upon prior permission of their caregivers.

At the end of each interview, caregivers were provided with a current list of resources that covered a wide array of services, support, and aid that were family-friendly, offender-friendly, and local to them. All interviews were tape recorded using digital recorders. Once the interviews were completed, they were downloaded, assigned a confidential ID, and transcribed.

### **Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted using a group process among the three primary researchers on the research team. Emerging themes were identified and discussed, then retained only with group agreement. After this, the researchers sought supporting evidence for the themes within the interviews. If a proposed theme only surfaced in a couple of interviews, it was not pursued as a theme. Once a theme was agreed upon and there was demonstrated evidence that it existed in multiple interviews, it was retained and all the interviews were reviewed to locate the array of

“takes” on the theme. Lastly, the themes were presented and discussed with the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board helped sort through the plethora of themes to discern which offered information that expanded on the existing knowledge on the topic.

## **IV. PARTICIPANTS**

### **Children**

Thirty-four children participated: 21 boys and 13 girls. Their ages ranged from 7 to 18. As many children in the family as were interested were permitted to participate. Families had from one to three children participate in the study. All the children had a father currently in prison at the time of the first interview and two of them also had a mother in prison at some point during the study.

### **Caregivers**

There were 21 caregiver participants, representing 21 families. All the participating caregivers were women and most of the caregivers were mothers, but not all. Two were aunts and one was a grandmother. Thirteen were African American, four were Native American, and four were Caucasian.

### **Incarcerated Parents**

The incarcerated parents included 21 fathers and 2 mothers. In the two instances where the mother was incarcerated, neither mother had ever been involved in their children's lives in a significant way. Those children mostly spoke of their incarcerated fathers rather than their mothers. Therefore, the vast majority of the following discussion of themes focuses on the fathers.

We waited until the end of the study to inquire about the incarcerated parent as we had emphasized to the participants that this was a study about their experiences, not that of the incarcerated parent. This means however, that we learned such details only from the subset of families who participated in the final interview.

According to the caregivers' reports, the majority of the incarcerated parents were incarcerated for drug charges. The next largest group was incarcerated for violent crimes including murder, assault with a weapon, and sexual assault. The remaining participants were incarcerated for burglary charges. Thirteen of the fathers had a history of substance abuse. More than half the caregivers indicated that they were aware of the incarcerated father's involvement in illegal activities prior to their arrest while few (3) caregivers believed their children had any idea of these activities. However, more than half of the children indicated that they knew the true reason why the father was in prison.



## **V. THEMES**

One component of the analysis process was narrowing our focus to the emerging themes that shed new light on the subject, either by offering a new perspective or because it was such a powerful and compelling theme that it could not be ignored. There was such richness to the stories that this was a daunting task. However, the following themes were determined to be the most critical and will be discussed in greater detail in this section:

- A. Social Challenges
- B. Child's Awareness of Adult Needs
- C. Caregiver as Gatekeeper
- D. Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System
- E. Resiliency & Coping

## A. Social Challenges

As used here, social challenges refer to circumstances or factors that inhibit or interfere with the child and caregiver's i) connection to those outside their families, ii) sense of belonging to the neighborhood and community, iii) finding others like themselves or iv) acceptance. All the families faced social challenges arising from having a parent in prison. For caregivers it sometimes revolved around concern for the child, but other times they found they needed help coping as well.

### Child Isolation & Stigma

For children who face peer pressure regularly, the stigma or fear of stigma around having a parent in prison sometimes was difficult or stressful, but the children also demonstrated their resiliency in navigating the social dynamics in school and their neighborhoods.

#### *Social Stigma Associated with Having a Parent in Prison*

The children we interviewed evidenced much awareness of the social stigma that is associated with having a parent in prison. Contrary to the assertion that in some socioeconomic and racial groups having a parent in prison has become normalized and a status symbol, (Hairston, 2002), our study did not find a single family where this was the case. In fact, children in our study seemed very aware of assumptions that might be made about them due to the fact that they had a parent in prison. One 9 year old boy, shared that it is hard to talk about his dad:

Well, because you know how kids are? They like, oh where's your dad? We don't hardly seem his as often. It's always mom picking you up. And then it starts...then I tell them well, he's in prison. And then they start being smarty pants, and then it turns into a whole conversation, and for like, it takes me awhile to get the darn thing out of my head.

A seven year old boy when asked if there was anyone with whom he did not talk to about his dad, but wished he could, replied that he wished he could share with his friends, but was conflicted about it, "I just want to, but I just don't want them to know, so I don't tell them about my dad." Sometimes reservations about sharing were justified, as once the secret was out, it was difficult to control, as pre-teen girl explained,

I wasn't sure what was going on at first. Like my mom didn't tell me. So I was trying to figure it out, and I was all stressed out and stuff. My best friend...promised she wouldn't tell anyone but then she told the other three girls in our group, and their parents and then, like it got out of control and just ,like everyone knew about it all of a sudden. But, the other girls in the little group they didn't say anything. Like they wouldn't even tell me that they knew....I didn't really know until a year later. [Then] I just stopped caring. I was like, oh you know, cool.

However, some youth found that as their peers matured, they handled it better,

I guess in high school people understand a little more. In middle school and everywhere else, there are more people that have gone through stuff. In middle school people are like, oh my gosh! And they treat you like you are fragile or depressed. Or that they can't say anything.

A common theme that was culturally supported among the African American children, according to them and their caregivers, was that it was important to keep one's family business private. A 12 year old boy, when asked if he shared about his father's imprisonment with one of his close friends,

No, because I like to keep my business private. Sometimes I talk to her, sometimes I don't. I don't like to talk about my business because it's private to me.

When asked what he did share with his friends he replied, "I'll tell them when I'm mad. I'll tell them I'm mad a little. And sometimes we talk about [it with] each other." Another boy said that he never shared about his father's whereabouts because that was the family expectation. He said he would tell his friends his dad was, "at work. Because my mom said I'm supposed to keep everything that she tells me and that my dad tells me to myself."

Some children experienced the discomfort of realizing that their secret was discovered and their privacy violated by others, outside of their control. One teen shared some of the negative consequences of her school counselor learning about her father's imprisonment. She was called into a staff member's office for an unrelated issue,

Then I went down to her office, and I was like I heard you've been talking about me. And she was like, 'I know everything about your situation that's going on with your family.' And I was like 'yeah, you can't know everything. You're not me.' But she was being a jerk so, I was like 'what is your job anyway?'...She's like, 'I'm a Counselor.' I'm like 'no, you're a Coordinator. You have no right to talk to me about this. I know you don't.' And then she just kind of shut up. But she's like 'I don't want mess with your dad', blah, blah, blah. And my friends are all trying to look through the cracks through the door. And then she just started talking to me about it. And then I just started crying and I was really angry. And yeah. Then I stormed out of her office and I just went and cried in the bathroom. And all my friends were like what's wrong, oh my gosh. Yeah, but then this lady, she's does have a lot of power over the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders because guess she's right after the Vice Principal as far as those grades are. So she would see everyone in the halls and be like get to class, get to class the bell rang. If I was standing in the hall she would come up to me and ask 'so M...how is you feeling today? How is everything going?' Right in front of everyone.

Though another girl developed a close rapport with her school counselor,

I talk to the school counselor the most. She's a really close friend. It helps a lot, by well it gets the...she's a really sweet lady. She talks in a sweet voice, so you know it's not like she's grumpy all the time. And it makes you just want to talk to her.

What was striking was that nearly all the children and youth understood the simultaneous need to reveal their secret with others and risks associated with doing so. Some paid a price for

opening up to others while some found relief in it, but most discovered that once they made that decision, the information could not be retrieved into secrecy again.

### *Finding Other Children with a Parent in Prison*

A particularly compelling indicator of the child's degree of isolation was revealed in their responses to being asked who else they knew who had a parent in prison. Five of the children indicated they knew of other children or youth with a parent in prison and had spoken with them about it. For most of these, having that in common was important. However, the majority indicated they did not know others outside their own family with a parent in prison. Often when they did not know others in their situation, they felt uncomfortable talking about it or revealing it to others, as described earlier.

Of those who had found another child in a situation like theirs, they often referred to that as a catalyst for the developing friendship. One child remarked, "Well, my friend S, his dad is in prison. That's why we're such good friends...everything is so similar about us." Another 13 year old girl remarked, "my best friend, me and her talk about everything and we talk about our parents...and my friend's uncle is in prison...we talk about everything."

One teenage girl described it much like finding another family member. In middle school she had met a girl who was moody and expressed anger about her dad. Finally when asked directly why she was so angry at her dad, the friend explained her father was in prison. This broke the tension and the two girls then shared their experiences and the friend expressed her relief at finding another person in her situation, "oh my gosh, you're my sister."

Not everyone of course found this sort of connection and companionship. One child even learned that another child she knew had a father sharing a cell with her own father. However, those two did not get to know each other or talk more of it, but rather seemed uncomfortable with that knowledge.

Finding out about other children in their situation was a delicate matter because it required that one person be the first to reveal the sensitive information and sometimes it yielded negative results. Some children felt embarrassed. Still others knew individuals with a parent in prison but they were all family members, mostly cousins. These children and youth did not describe it as something that drew them closer. Rather, with some, it appeared to increase the sense of their family being different from others.

## **Caregiver Isolation & Stigma**

Many caregivers faced stigma from others who questioned their choice in becoming involved with the incarcerated parent or who made assumptions about the caregivers values based on the incarcerated parent's actions. It became especially difficult when they saw their children being assigned these same characteristics by others.

Lots of people think that when you have somebody that's in jail, whether it be husband, or boyfriend, or brother, or whatever, that you're bad too. But it's not true, you know? Just because that person did that, doesn't mean that you would. I've like met people and then it comes out after maybe a two month relationship and then they think that you accepted or condone that and that's not true. And it doesn't mean that the kid is bad too. It just means that that happened. A lot of people assume.

Faced with either hiding the information or accepting the possibility of being blamed or ostracized, several caregivers expressed a desire to find others in similar situations, with whom they could talk openly without fear of judgment.

I want to be in a support group. I want to be in some type of group with adults that are in the same predicament as me. Maybe I need to get other feedback from other parents that's going through the same problems as me, having like a family, you know, a parent in prison that, you know, what are they doing to make it? And I guess I don't have no one to talk to about that.

Most of the caregivers who wanted a support group were unsuccessful in locating one, often not knowing where to even begin looking for such a thing. However, one caregiver was fortunate enough to have access to a computer and located an internet support group. The key element of the support group was that it made her feel less alone,

I joined a support group on the internet for women who have sons, husbands, boyfriends, anything, incarcerated and to hear the other stories that you're not, it's not just you.

While several of the women wished for a way to connect with others, most were not aware of such opportunities and did not have the spare time, resources, access, or awareness of venues to locate this kind of support.

## **Absence of Role Models**

It is generally understood that having a positive relationship with someone to look up to, a role model or mentor, is important for children to help them see a viable healthy path to adulthood (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Both the caregivers and the children understood this as well. We asked the children directly who they looked up to or saw as a role model. Many children did not have difficulty identifying someone. Of these children, most of the children cited one or more people proximal to them in their daily lives, particularly family members, and even the parent in prison was mentioned occasionally.

Others however, struggled with this question and concluded they could not think of anyone they looked up to in their families, neighborhood, or elsewhere in their lives. One child thought a long time and finally said, “I don’t really have anybody to look up to...I have nobody to follow in their footsteps.” Another child who shared that he knew no one else with a parent in prison other than cousins simply answered, “A role model? No one.”

Caregivers also sought role models for their children, particularly for their boys, often in vain. One caregiver described trying to serve as a proxy for a male role model her son,

He won’t talk to me. I don’t know, he’ll talk to my brother. And I be like I keep telling him, you can tell me anything. If you like a girl or you get this urge, you can tell me. But mama, I need a male. I don’t need a female. I’m like, well, some things a male might not answer that you need a female to go to.

Nearly all the caregivers for boys said they wanted to locate a role model for the children. They did not feel nearly as strong about the girls, often expressing that at least they (the caregivers) could fill that position for them. Several families had turned to Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) for a mentor for their children. While they were relieved the children in their care had such a mentor, several said that their girls were matched quickly while the boys remained on a waiting list. Additionally, the “Bigs” as Big Brothers Big Sisters refers to them, were often not the same race as the family, leaving the caregiver still wanting for a same-race role model that would allow the child to see a minority male who made good life choices.

### **Key Findings**

Both the children and the caregivers suffered from social stigma and isolation. At times they were able to locate some supportive resources, but on the whole, the families were unable to connect to other families like themselves or programs, people and events that would help them feel less marginalized in general. Furthermore, it is difficult for children to find motivation to make good decisions when they do not have adults in their lives who are similar to them, setting examples and demonstrating the path to a healthy and fulfilling adulthood. While many children viewed their female caregivers as role models, the boys in particular experienced a void.

### **Recommendations**

One avenue to address social stigma is expanded community education. The more aware the community is the more likely families with an incarcerated parent will be supported. For example, articles, stories, or workshops on the needs of these families could both inform and bring together key players including schools, churches, and local service providers. Public

education may also spark movement toward legislative advocacy to change policies, specifically those that concern prison visitation, in order to improve the experiences of these families.

Support groups could be tremendously helpful in bringing together caregivers and/or children in a safe environment where they can be honest and open. These groups would additionally provide parents with an opportunity to network (i.e. locate agencies that may help with material and counseling needs). Such a group does not consume much in the way of resources and expense, especially if it is caregiver-led; it requires a person or agency to initiate it, some advertising, and a space to meet.

Additionally, schools have access to children on a daily basis and are also often the setting where children experience stigma or take out their frustrations. Schools are a key place to establish a support system for children of incarcerated parents both directly through support groups or school counselors, and indirectly by educating other students about the realities of having a parent in prison.

Lastly, one possibility to provide role models is through established mentoring programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) or by creating new programs that will provide them. BBBS was part of our Advisory Board and shared that they are well aware of the need for both male and African American role models or “Bigs,” suggesting that the real focus may need to be on public education to both make others aware of what these children face and open up opportunities for new volunteers who otherwise might not consider serving as a mentor. Ideally, mentors would be sought in the same or similar communities and have enough in common with the child to be a realistic role model for them.

## **B. Child's Awareness of Adult Needs**

The stresses faced by the caregivers as well as the incarcerated parents did not go unnoticed by most of the children. Even when the caregivers believed the children were unaware of the caregivers' strains because they worked to conceal them, most of the children were keenly attuned and conveyed their own efforts to ease the stress, often by taking on adult responsibilities. These ideas surfaced when we asked the children to share what they appreciated the most about their caregivers and what they would change, if anything. The children expressed a great deal of appreciation and gratitude for the caregiver's efforts in raising them in the face of challenges. The children were observant of their caregiver's human side, reflecting their perceptions with clarity and empathy that seemed unusual for their young age. For instance, one seven year old boy shared that the best thing about his mom was,

That we give love to her, and we watch movies with her sometimes. And she's very nice to us. But when we talk back to her, it's not that very nice, but when we give her kisses and stuff, it's very nice. So we decided to live here forever, then the bad thing happened.

Usually the children were brimming with positive things to share about their caregivers. A ten year old girl expressed her appreciation for her mother,

She's the motivator, where she gets the kids up and playing. . . she likes to read comic books. She's pretty. She likes to go out on walks. She likes to go to OIC to try to find a job. Sometimes she likes to go to the Projects, sometimes she don't. She cares for us.

A teenage girl explained that throughout the trauma of seeing her father go to trial and then to prison, she learned to appreciate her mother differently, that her mother's strength was revealed through the ordeal. This is partly because she saw the tremendous toll that her father's presence took on her mother's mental state and then saw her mother rise from her depression and carry on. When asked what she appreciated most about her mother, she responded,

I guess how strong she is. She went through, really before all this happened she was all depressed all the time, all these medicines and just seemed like she wasn't alive. She wasn't there. Just an inanimate object, like a robot that just cleans, and cooks, drives you to doctor's appointments....When all this happened and all the pressure got put on her. We thought, oh my god she's going to die. This will just make everything worse, and then we thought yeah she doesn't notice we exist any more and we thought okay. And now she can laugh and be herself.

A seventeen year old boy demonstrated remarkable awareness of what it takes to parent two children with full schedules and recognized his mother's perseverance by sharing what he most admired,

Her ability to keep going. I mean, she has to take care of two kids that are trying to be really active. I do football, then shot-put and disc and a lot of times she has to give me rides during track season and my sister was doing theater so, she had to try



and work both of us in there. And then she had to deal with all the money situations and trying to keep our house up and everything....[I wish that] Mom could get a good job. Because we are always kind of behind on our payments. We have to find ways each month to get extra money so, maybe if she could get a good job that could at least pay the bills pretty well.

While most of the children were very connected to their caregiver's emotions, there was variation in how vulnerable they felt. One nine year old boy expressed considerable concern for the welfare of his mother. When asked what, if anything, he would change about his family, he replied, "Well, you know, I wish that she could, you know, she breaks herself a lot, ... I wish she wasn't as fragile." Similarly, an adolescent boy was able to see past his mother's angry behavior and understand from where it stemmed,

My mom kind of got more aggravated and she started yelling more because she's so stressed out. I think [she is stressed out due to] finding out that my dad did all that stuff and that she wasn't able to stop it or do anything about it.

Some of the children fell into adult-like caregiving roles for the caregiver, the incarcerated parent, or both. Some children explicitly saw the lack of father in the home as a role that required filling in while others took on responsibilities in a more subtle way. An eight year old told us,

I really don't really like to snuggle with my mom anymore, but I still love her a LOT and if anything happened, like robbers came in the house, they would have to go through me first to get to her.

One mother gave in to her children's drive to care for their father. Her own mother, the children's grandmother, also supported allowing the children to care for their father for short periods of time as it was perhaps the only way the children could spend time with their father. In other words, this caregiver allowed her children to visit with their father even though he was strung out on cocaine, in order to let them have time with him.

I didn't have no problem with that. Let the kids take care of him [dad]. At least they'd be able to spend time with him, so I was like fine...so I had him go over there. They washed him up, as much as they could...fed him, cooked him noodles, you know stuff like that. Washed his clothes for him. Yeah, they enjoyed it.

Another mother of 10 year old girl shared how her daughter felt compelled to care for her father between his prison sentences,

He's been on the street for a long time and like my daughters went to Chicago for the summer to stay with my aunt. It was kind of like a little vacation. They were gone for a month and they still talk to him, buying calling cards. Their friends were saying, 'I saw your dad on the street and he looks real bad, his clothes are dirty and they are inside out and he needs a coat' and how they arrested him. You know, so they are calling me when it started getting cold and it was right before school so it was kind of chilly outside and my daughter she's crying and saying, 'you need to go get my daddy a coat and bring him some clothes' or the friends would say he was really really skinny, you know, my daughter's like you please need to go see about my daddy.

Numerous times, caregivers described their children worrying for their incarcerated father's wellbeing, wanting to send socks, food, and other basic needs to prison to ensure their basic needs were met.

### **Key Findings**

Children were uniquely aware of the effect that having a parent in prison had on their family members, most particularly their primary caregiver. These children were acutely aware of their caregiver's feelings and struggles, to the point that some assumed more adult like roles in order to alleviate stresses and challenges that their caregivers faced.

### **Recommendations**

While we cannot expect, nor would it be desirable to stop children from being aware of their caregiver's and parent's struggles, actions can be taken to alleviate that stress and worry. First, a key to supporting children is supporting their parents. Providing tools to help parents emotionally, mentally, and financially handle themselves may make these burdens less visible to the children. In this way, a balance is created in which the child is informed of the situation but not overwhelmed by feeling responsible for the consequences. In addition, caregivers specifically need access to information about helping their child cope with a parent in prison. Second, when a child does not have adequate information about his or her parent, the child is left with their imagination to fill in the missing information. A child who has more access to their incarcerated parent may have the opportunity to feel more connected and perhaps less worried about the parent (as discussed further in the *Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System* topic section).

## C. Caregiver as Orchestrator of Child-Father Relationship

### Caregiver Gatekeeping

Caregivers, whether they choose to or not, become gatekeepers of the child's relationship with their incarcerated fathers. The children, not surprisingly, almost uniformly wanted to have a connection and be able to communicate with their fathers. The caregivers first had to determine if they wanted the child to have any information about or contact with the father, given the nature of the crime and/or strains on the caregiver-father relationship. If not, they had to find ways to prevent communication. If they did want to encourage a relationship, they found they needed to orchestrate it. Much like divorced parents, the primary care provider has a great deal of influence over the child's perception of the non-custodial parent as well as the nature of the contact. However, this group of families differs in that there is a stigmatizing event(s) that must be explained, and distance has been forced upon them, regardless of whether they find it appropriate or not. Contact, even when desired by all parties, was difficult at best because of physical distance, visitation/phone regulations, and the discomfort of the visiting space and rules.

Some caregivers felt the dichotomy of both wanting the children to have a relationship with their father, yet not trusting him with their children.

*[Interviewer: When he was out of prison, what kind of things does he do with D.?] Well, I would never let him take him from my house because he sold drugs and I was nervous that my son would be in the car and something would happen, because he had gotten shot before.*

For fathers who were in prison for a prolonged period, the caregivers found they needed to help the father understand developmental changes in the child over time. Similarly, fathers who had been out of close contact with their children sometimes needed the caregiver to help them understand child behavior and what the child needed in order to feel connected to the father. One caregiver reflected on the shallow telephone conversations her son had with his father,

*He doesn't understand how to talk to him. When he did talk to him it was about stupid stuff, instead of saying, you know, do you know what happened? And I'm going to be here for a long time, but I still love you, or something like that that D. wants to hear, instead of just saying what cartoon are you watching or something like that. That would make a difference and that would help, because I would feel better about him communicating with him.*

Another caregiver described her distress when her six year old daughter's recently released father did not understand why the child was not immediately warm with him at her birthday party and why she was angry he was on the phone during that party,

*The recent birthday I had invited him, forget what the courts say and we talking about wanting to see your daughter, okay, I will give you a chance. He was late to the birthday party, he got a phone call from a female and he told [daughter] if you*

don't come out of this room and talk to your dad, I'll leave. So me, I got upset. She took his phone, threw his phone in the wall and she told him that she hated him and she was crying and he was saying to me, 'how can you let my daughter talk to me like that?' and I just told him you know what? That's how she feels, you know, she hear your phone call and you tell her if you don't come out of this room and spend time with your dad, you're leaving but he was cussing as he was saying it and she got upset and ...his friend that he was there with on her birthday was like man,...I'd really been in my daughter's life. This is my opportunity to try to be in my daughter's life. And so as they was going out, S. ran behind them and she was like "dad, don't go! Dad, don't go!" and he just looked at her and started cussing and walked off. So I immediately called him on his phone...and I just told him, I said, "all this that you was hollering about your daughter then you had the opportunity to spend time with your daughter and this is how you treat her?" So after that I haven't heard from him.

Several caregivers discussed how they coped with feeling that the father was not in a good position to be a good parent to the child while recognizing the child's powerful need to have that relationship. One woman noted that while she knew contact would result in her son being hurt, she had to give him the option of contact,

[Interviewer: *did they have any visits?*] Nope. No, I didn't want to do that. [Interviewer: *Why?*] because I want to just protect my son. And I felt guilty then after awhile like I didn't want to let him not have contact because of my feelings. I wanted him to be able to choose. So then I let him choose, my son choose. And my son chose to talk to him, but then he got hurt in the end anyway.

Another expressed frustration about her children's need to have a relationship with their father and his lack of effort,

I think in some kind of way, every kid should know their father but then I think it's best that right now his dad don't come around until he gets his life together. The last time I saw him it was like in court...I don't never understand why you have kids and you don't want to take responsibility for them. I don't understand that. Because every day I have to wake up and tell my kids why their father is not in their life, you know? But they've talked about him...S. every time she does or used to see him or talk to him, she starts crying, so I'm not going to push her or you know what I'm saying, force her to have a relationship with him, but I don't never talk bad about their father. Never.

One difficulty was that many children became unrealistically dreamy about their father. Most caregivers tried to gently inform their children of the truth, but recognized they needed this imaginary view.

[referring to son talking with cousins] my nephew was like J's dad is in jail? I was like, yeah. But J has this imagination that's like, okay, well my dad, I'm going to go see my dad and he's going to do this for me. He's going to do that for me and me as a mom, I don't want to try to kill his, you know what I'm saying, his dreams because that's how he feels...he feels that one day he will be in his dad's life and his dad is going to do this and his dad's going to do that, you know, and I don't want to be like...well you know your dad ain't going to be, you know I don't want to be like that to them because if I do that it's going to make me kill his whole dream.

When J was like what, 2 weeks, 2 months, and 6 months, I used to take my son to go see his dad in prison until I just got tired of doing that, you know, I didn't want to have my son keep seeing his dad behind bars.

Another way that caregivers monitored the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent was in controlling when and how they learned about the incarceration. As discussed previously, many children found out about their father's incarceration because they witnessed it, but others had to be told. Some caregivers chose to hold off telling their very young children about it. One parent decided to delay telling her two year old boy,

He didn't [find out] because at that time he was too little. I just told him daddy's on vacation because at that age, children don't really understand. [*Interviewer: How old was he when he learned where his dad was?*] He was seven because he was going to school and they had a father and son activity and he was like 'mom is dad going to be here for it?' and I was like, 'no there is something I need to tell you.' So, I took him to the library, got on the internet and showed him and he was just like, 'how long he been in there?' He been in there for awhile T. He asking when he's going to get out. I said I don't know. It had the address on there where you can write, so he wrote him.

Underlying most of these shared experiences were the caregivers lack of a clear social norm to guide them in how to navigate these responsibilities with the children in their care. They used their best judgment based on their own feelings and their understanding of the needs of the child before them, and hoped they would not regret their decisions.

### **Children's Reactions to Caregiver Gatekeeping**

When we turned to the children and asked them about their contact and communication with their fathers, we saw the caregiver's gatekeeping decisions reflected in their answers. Some children were highly aware of their caregiver's feelings about their father and internalized those feelings themselves. Others expressed knowledge of their caregiver's feelings but did not fully understand where they came from.

One of the youngest children in the study did not know where his dad was or even know what his dad's name was, but maintained that he missed his father. When asked why he does not see his father, he answered simply, "my mom don't like my dad." Another child shared,

"I would like to see my mom more but my auntie don't like me seeing her...she's clean, but I don't know why my auntie don't want me seeing her."

One girl told us about siblings on her father's side that she rarely was able to see because of her mother's reluctance to sustain those relationships. She was planning a way to use an older sister on that side to slip her phone number to her father so that she could have contact with him,

I have a baby brother and baby sister on my dad's side. [*Interviewer: Do you ever talk to family on your dad's side about your dad?*] My mom doesn't want me to give

them my number. But I want to give it to them because they will give it to my dad and he can call me. Because my step-sister, she like give my number out to people so that's why.

In several instances, the father had been violent or aggressive to the caregiver, particularly if she was an ex-girlfriend or ex-wife. These caregivers expressed a great deal of fear and anxiety about the incarcerated parent, especially regarding his impending release. In these families, we saw the children's reaction to this fear and anxiety. One nine year old boy described a time when his father had been released from prison for a short period,

Mom knew but she wouldn't talk to us because I think it scared her more. Because she is was scared. ...sometimes she like shakes or she has tears in her eye, so we don't talk about it as much because it hurts her...he did really bad stuff to her.

When asked if he had seen his dad recently, he replied "Mom's too scared to even let us see him....Mom tells us that he's close to getting out."

Some children responded to their caregiver's fears by internalizing it themselves, even when they had very few of their own memories of their father. Often these children vacillated between feeling afraid and feeling the urge to be the protector of their caregivers, the latter most often among boys. One child who had shared that he was afraid of his father, was only a toddler when his father was incarcerated, but his choice of words regarding his own fear were remarkably similar to his mother's language. When asked what he remembered about his father, he described his own protective behavior through his mother's stories,

I would try to protect my mom by pushing [dad] away [when they fought]. I didn't remember that. My mom told me I was always pushing him away.

This child continued to express anxiety about his father's impending release and fantasies of protecting his mother throughout the interview. In his mother's interview, she had expressed a fear that the police would provide their address to the father upon release and the boy observed this as well,

...I knew I was going to be scared when I grew up. And actually it scares me to even remember these things...I just feel scared because, you know, I know the cops wouldn't do this, you know, like tell him where we were, but if he were to find out then that would be bad because I think he would try to hurt mom again.

Another child who was our youngest participant devoted a great deal of his interviews to this topic. In some of his stories, there were hints of his ambivalence between alliance with his mother, that led him to feel protective, and a softer side of feelings toward his father where he admitted to missing him,

I don't know when he's going come out, but I know he's going get us. He probably...I think he's going to get a new house, and we don't see his house though, but my mom wants us to have a person around, like my grandma [maternal grandmother] and

stuff...because she doesn't want us to...want us to like let him steal us. My grandma [paternal grandmother] thinks he wasn't bad...but he was bad....she says, don't worry and stuff like that. But, my mom says he's going come out in a few weeks. Deep in my heart I miss him, but outside of my heart I don't. He's mean, mean, mean and my brother protects, protects my mom when he was in the protecting position. Well, least we got a picture of him. I really want to show you him.

Wanting to share a photo of the incarcerated parent with the interviewer was not unusual. In fact some of the children brought in the photo and kept it at their side or on their lap throughout the duration of the interview.

### **Key Findings**

Caregivers are in a powerful position as they alone chose to either facilitate a relationship between the children and their father, or prohibit it. In some cases limited contact is healthy in that it serves to protect the family from further abuse and/or damaging consequences of various criminal activities. However, for those cases where contact is appropriate, efforts to encourage the development and continuation of a relationship may be beneficial. When the child-father relationship is appropriate the caregiver often finds themselves in a delicate mediator position. They must often inform the incarcerated father of a child's developmental changes while also counseling the child through this emotional separation.

### **Recommendations**

Caregivers who do not feel alone, who have connections to either other caregivers, like themselves, or professionals who can guide them in making decisions, may be able to make more informed decisions about the children and be better able to negotiate a meaningful relationship. This knowledge and support will filter down to the child who is affected by those caregiver decisions. When a child has consistent access to prison visits, it allows the child and incarcerated parent to have a direct relationship rather than one filtered through the caregiver. This of course means the child needs a way to get to the prisons. A regular, free bus service that transports families to prisons for visits could accomplish two goals at once: allow for parent-child visits, and provide an opportunity for families with parents in the same prisons to meet and communicate with each other. This service did exist for a time in Minneapolis, with bus services provided by the Council on Crime and Justice, but this program ended due to funding cuts.

As caregivers are in a position of power over incarcerated parents, it seems appropriate that two additional interventions take place. First, while many caregivers prohibit the father-child relationship due to reasonable concerns and firsthand knowledge, this decision may also be

unfairly effected by personal feelings and relationship problems. Therefore, it may be helpful to create an assessment tool that provides general guidance on how to appropriately make decisions regarding the amount of contact that children are allowed with their incarcerated parent. This assessment tool may take into consideration the children's wants, caregiver needs, the nature of the crimes committed, the extent of the father-child relationship prior to arrest and so forth. Based on this assessment caregivers may then be recommended to either facilitate a relationship or minimize contact. Secondly, it may also be beneficial to establish an incarcerated parent's bill of rights. This bill may include basic rights, such as visitation with children, child friendly visitation facilities, the ability to show basic physical affection during visitation (such as hugging), and so forth. These rights would be established with the hope of protecting the incarcerated parent and their child from unwarranted gatekeeping.

Additionally, a social worker for children and caregivers should be made available at prison visitation facilities. In this way a trained social worker may be able to intervene should continued contact by an inmate with his/her children seem unwise, to advocate within the prison for visitation rights, and to ensure that visitation facilities are adequate. This social worker would serve as a sort of liaison between the prison, inmates, and visitors. Furthermore, this position may be able to assist caregivers in identifying much needed resources, support groups, and so forth (as discussed in the *Social Challenges* topic section).



### **D. Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System**

The Advisory Board, which as noted earlier, included several community service providers as well as individuals who had a child with a parent in prison, suggested that the experiences with, and perceptions of, the criminal justice system was an important dynamic in families' stories. We deliberated how to address this without biasing the answer in one direction or another, particularly among the children who might feel compelled to give us the response they thought we wanted. Additionally, while we could ask the caregivers about some of the more detailed or complicated aspects of the criminal justice system such as their views on the court proceedings, we felt we needed a simpler approach with the children. We eventually decided to ask the children two questions: When you think of "police" what comes to mind? When you hear the word "prison" what do you think of? These questions proved to open the door to a wide array of responses, ranging from very negative, to very positive, to very creative. Most of the children answered immediately and assuredly as if this was a question they had pondered many times before. Generally speaking the reaction to the question of police was mixed, though more leaned toward a positive view, in particular perceiving police as protectors.

#### **Children's Perceptions of Prison**

Perhaps the most revealing information came from our question about prison. We learned quickly that the children, notably those who had never visited one, had only their imaginations, their father's stories, and television or movie images to help them create an understanding of what prison life was like. The children arrived at decidedly different conclusion from each other on what they thought prison was and what their parent's daily life was like in prison. Many of the children thought prison was a scary place filled with scary people while others perceived it as a place to bide the time until release.

Some children drew from their real-life observations during prison visits and spoke of feeling afraid on the drive to the prison. Others were afraid of the other prisoners. One boy shared that he did not feel safe during his visits,

It wasn't safe there because there were a lot of people that just looked like, just looked real bad and this and that. There was a lot of arguing with other people.

Another boy described the restrictions during visits,

It's got a lot of doors. You can't open...there's this desk with two guards they call us over. And you can hug him and go and sit down...you can't get up, but if say you had to go to the bathroom, you can't go back in there.

A girl noted the physical appearance and how it must influence the mood of the place,

Well, you could tell nobody's happy there, because there's a lot more iron bars...when you're driving up you can see the windows cover the bars...

Many children, however, had never seen a prison and were left to their imaginations. A nine year old child shared with us an image that arrived from a combination of his imagination and nuggets of information from phone calls with his father,

You have to stay in a cave. Metal doors and they kind of like a stick, but it's metal and hum...they have no bathroom. In their rooms, they just have toilet. And they don't have no clothes to wear. They only have that orange stuff that they wear everyday. And they eat bad foods. And that's it.

Other remarks from children reflected the tension and feelings they associated with prison,

"not fun because they are fighting over stupid stuff. And they be doing little stuff to people."

"Bad because I think he screams and yells so that he can get out."

"You really got nothing to do and you can't you aren't really free. You don't have freedom in there".

Some children considered the possibility that their fathers might escape or find another way out,

"He got into jail with all those bars and stuff...I hope he didn't break out".

"He'll sneak out jail, like he said that he could, if they said that he could go on vacation then he'll just stay out."

Some of the caregivers, as well as some of our Advisory Board members, shared that the incarcerated fathers often felt they did not want their children to worry about them. To quell their children's fears about them, they tried to share only small positive snippets of information. We saw this in the responses among a few of the children. They described their fathers as happy and engaged in fun activities,

"There is a gym there, and that there is a basketball hoop there. And fun stuff there. And yeah, they used to have a college."

"They have to do everything they ask you to do. They have cable there. And they get letters from people and Christmas presents."

One consistent element was that there is little opportunity for children to learn accurate and balanced information about what prison is like and what it is about. It was clear that in the absence of information, children will turn to their imaginations.

### **Children's Feelings of Fairness**

We waited until the final interview, to limit the affect it might have on future questions, to explicitly ask how fair the children felt it was that their father was in prison. Many, though not all, of the children understood that their father committed some type of crime and as a

consequence had to go to prison while simultaneously sharing that they missed and loved their parent and did not want them in prison. Children who thought it was fair told us that their father committed a crime and understood he had to go to prison,

“Yeah because he broke the law....I love him but it’s fair.”

Others were clear that it was not fair because their dad, they argued, only committed a minor crime or because their father was being taken away from their home,

I don’t think it’s fair, but he had to do it so. [*Interviewer: Why do think it is not fair?*]  
Because they take him away from his family...he’s not around his family and he just can’t be able to walk out of the house and just be able to talk to his friends.

It was evident that this presented a moral dilemma for many of the children at a time when they were starting to internalize that there should be consequences to illegal behavior, yet those consequences also punished them by denying them access to the father they love.

### **Caregiver Feelings about the Criminal Justice System**

We asked the caregivers to share with us what their experiences were with the criminal justice system and how they felt about them, including police encounters, court processes, and the prisons in the context of both their own encounters and their observations about the experiences of the incarcerated parent. Many of the caregivers interviewed expressed strong feelings and unpleasant experiences, though not all. All of the caregivers had some form contact with the criminal justice system that they could reflect on, either through police interaction, watching the trial, or visiting the incarcerated parent in prison. Some caregivers had minimal contact while others had rather extensive contact. There were mixed views on how the families were treated by members of the criminal justice system. Some felt that throughout the criminal process they were treated fairly while others felt the opposite.

Those that felt they were treated unfairly felt that way for a couple of different reasons. Some caregivers felt that they and their children were treated like they were criminals. They were treated by people in the system as if they had done something wrong just because they were associated with the person in prison. One woman expressed how she felt they were treating like a criminal,

I feel like I was a criminal and I didn’t do anything. Even if I was there with my son...you feel like you did something wrong, and you didn’t do anything wrong. You know so; I didn’t feel like I was treated like a person, more like a criminal.

#### *Caregivers Perceptions of the Police*

Some families had negative interactions with the criminal justice system early on in their dealings with the police officers. Some of the families expressed having been treated unfairly by

police officers who were trying to find or arrest the now incarcerated parent. One caregiver shared her experience,

I always pick her up from school. One time I got pulled over and then there was a warrant. So they just took him [dad] out of the car and they towed our car and we had to get out and walk. [Interviewer: *They left you to walk home?*] Yeah. Put us out, towed the car, gave me a card and said this was where you can get your car back and I didn't have my purse because it was like real simple, just run to the school and come right back, so I didn't have any ID. I didn't have anything on me, so that's why they said we can't let you take the car, which they technically could do because I didn't have no ID on me. He said they were supposed to take me down to book me, to see if I'm the person that I says I am. He said he felt like he was doing me a favor by not taking me to jail in front of my daughter, so I mean I couldn't argue with that. I didn't want to go to jail in front of my daughter, you know. So we walked home.

A couple of the families had experienced raids. The police officers would come into the home looking for the now incarcerated parent. This would be a traumatic event for the family because often times they were unaware of why the raid was happening and their questions were not getting answered by the police. When the raid was over, the family would be left to pick up the pieces.

Then they come banging on my door, then I open the door and they ask for him. I thought about it and I said, 'he was here, what did he do?' I was real curious why. They didn't talk to me about it, they just wanted to know where he was. And that was the time we lived in Dakota County, I said 'ok he took off through the back room.' That is when they told me I could go to jail for hiding him. I said I am not hiding him, I just wanted to know what he was doing. He didn't tell me and you guys didn't tell me, so I am still cooperating so I wanted to know...

Another caregiver described in detail a frightening raid in the middle of the night when she was alone with her teenage daughter,

They came to the house in the middle of the night. They came here and it was actually while we were asleep and they showed up here at 2:30 in the morning with a warrant. They flashed the lights and came through the back door. And my kid was here. She was, we were both shocked because they had their guns drawn and all kinds of stuff. There were six of them. They had people around the house and they came in the back door. I never come down and just open the door. I always go to the window because when it's 2:30 in the morning you know it's something or it's somebody and we don't live in the best neighborhood. There is always something going on and I'm not going to come down and open my door and look out there and have somebody shoot me. You never know. So I went to the window and was like who is it and they were like 'it's the police, open up.' And I'm like oh my God, and it was really crazy because I came downstairs and I grabbed the phone and I called my cousin because I thought they were arresting me for something. I called my cousin to say you need to come now and something is going on and then when I opened the door and, one snatched the phone from me and pushed me down on the couch and said, 'who are you calling?' Well I'm calling somebody to come and get my kids so that was my initial thought because aren't you here to arrest me? And then you know I think maybe they could be doing it differently and not at 2:30 in the morning, you know, be sensitive to the other family members. I mean because they could have just as well gotten him walking down the sidewalk during the day as they could have done at 2:30 in the morning. Then all he could say to me at the end was

‘well we just want to thank you for your honesty and we appreciate you cooperating with us.’ That was the best that you can do? You run through my house with guns and me and my daughter are here and that is the best that you can do? The weirdest thing is that any other time there would have been a house full of teenagers in here, spending the night on the floor watching TV you know and maybe at 2:30 in the morning, they would have gone to the window first or listened at the door. A house full of kids and things could have gotten really chaotic, somebody could have run up the stairs and they could have shot up the place.

There were some who thought that the incarcerated parent had been treated unfairly by the police officers. There seemed to be this fear of police officers by some of the caregivers of color in the sample. They felt they had been treated unfairly because they were people of color. One American Indian woman had this to say about the police,

I know how racist they can be. You just have to watch yourself around. I don’t do things, drugs, or carry guns, knives with me but I still feel they can do whatever they want to me whenever.

A few of the interview participants thought the police were fair and were just doing their job. They feel that the police have been helpful in their situations. One woman stated,

Police is helpful to me. I have, anytime I need them they have helped me and I have been in a lot of domestic relationships so the police knows me. Not to where if they see me on the street, they call me by name. But it’s like I trust the police for everything because they have me and my children. And I know that if I need some help, even if my family ain’t there, I know them are the people I can call.

Another caregiver stated the following when asked about feelings of the police,

I think that they are supposed to be somebody who is there to protect you. You should be able to trust them, I used to look at them in a whole different way but now I feel like we really do need them, especially in this neighborhood. Pretty much everywhere, I feel like you can trust them if you are honest and be, let them know what is going to get anywhere with them. If they don’t know how to help, if you are not communicating with them then you are not going to get anywhere with them.

### *Caregiver Perceptions of Court Proceedings*

There was a mixture in the number of caregivers that attend parts of the court process. Those that did attend, for the most part, felt that they or the now incarcerated parent had been treated unfairly during some aspect of the court proceedings. Those that felt that incarcerated parent was treated unfairly believed that they did not get a fair trial. They also believe that since the person was a person of color that this also impacted negatively how they were treated. One caregiver shared her experience viewing the court proceedings,

I went to a couple of cases and it’s a really small town, and when they were on break everyone would go to lunch and there were only two places. There was a Pizza Hut and a Subway, so I was at the Pizza Hut with a couple members of his family and jury members were there. And the prosecuting attorney was there, three of them, sat with the jury members and had lunch. And I thought that was really

inappropriate...and the whole jury was white and I thought that was kind of bad too. All white, and out of 12 there were 11 men.

Another caregiver had this to say about the whole court processes and the way her family was treated,

I feel it could have been handled a lot better, and that um, the way I see it on TV and read it in the newspaper that they do people's cases a lot different than they do certain people. It depends on the type of people it is and their background and stuff, but his case could have been handled a lot better than what it was, because in spirit...I was there for the jury selection and it's like okay, it's like it's going to be a jury of his peers, okay true indeed I understand because it's 18-25 years old. The youngest person in that jury box was 28. So I felt that was a discrimination right there.

Some caregivers thought that the evidence against the now incarcerated parent was used unfairly. They either thought some of the evidence should not have been used in the trial or they thought it was irrelevant to the current trial. One caregiver noted,

I think that they are unfair. I think that they use all old evidence, you know things that have happened in the past and it should not be that. It should just be right at that moment. Not all this other stuff. They use it all against him. So they don't get a fair trial, it's not being fair. It's like using everything against him. You know, instead of saying you broke the law maybe in the past, but he did that time. So when you do that time, why does that have to go with it...I don't think that it's fair, the way the court system is handled.

Others took issue with the sentencing decisions,

I don't think he..he should not having to do a lot of years in prison, but to do more community instead...and he ended up doing all this prison time instead. Not that it didn't do him any good, it did do some good, you know...yes, my son broke the law, you know I understand that, but I think that maybe he should have had a fair chance at.

Not all felt the process was unfair. There were a small number of caregivers who believed the case was handled appropriately,

I felt like justice was served. And they are grown, they should know by now that what they have done, the crime they committed, they should have known it was wrong, and yet they thought they were going to get a way with it. Now a days you ain't going to get away with much crimes. So now they have to do the time that is the way life is. You have to pay for your crime.

### *Caregiver Perceptions of Prison Visitation*

Visitation proved to present many obstacles for the families, including transportation to the prisons, visitation rules, and the overall atmosphere of the setting. It was a minority of the families who visited at all and an even smaller proportion who visited with any regularity.

Lack of transportation was the most common reason cited for not visiting. Caregivers often did not have a car or a reliable car. Sometimes they held jobs that would not give them time off. Sometimes the issue was the expense of the visit; that is, the prison was four or more hours away and required not only a way to get there but a place to spend the night. It is likely that the expense has become even more formidable in the months pursuant to this study with a sharp rise in gas prices nationwide. For those children with fathers placed out of state, visitation was impossible. Several caregivers noted a time when there was a bus service to take them to visit prisons.

Even when logistics did not prevent visitation, some caregivers elected not to visit or continue visiting with the children because they believed prison was not a good place for children or a context in which they wanted the children to see their father. Many discussed mixed feelings about the way they were treated at the prison.

Several expressed exasperation with the prison visitation rules that they felt were unaccommodating to children and families, and sometimes irrational. One caregiver tried to put forth a great deal of effort to maintain regular contact between the children and the father and was frustrated with the lack of flexibility in the visitation rules,

We go to see him at least every two weeks. We were seeing him once a week. That's before he got in the Hole, and got no contact visits. We don't like to go see him there because it's like back to square one where you see him through the glass and stuff. They only allow two people at the window, and I'm like 'well, he asked the kids' and they're like 'well, no more than two people. And I'm like, 'well, what about his baby? Can his baby sit on my lap?' And they're like 'no'. So I said, 'actually, basically, you're just telling me that I have to make two trips out here a week?' and they're like 'yeah'.

One caregiver who visited wanted to bring her child with her but she was unsure if that was a good idea. She asked the staff at the prison and they discouraged her bringing her child,

They treat you fine. They didn't be degrading or anything, but I called a couple times to talk with his case worker about whether or not I should bring him to visit, and he was pretty much cut and dry. He was like no. I wouldn't bring my kid here. Which I appreciated his opinion. But he was not all pro-prisoner rights. He was like keep your kid away.

## **Key Findings**

Many of the children interviewed had never seen their parent while the parent was in prison and were left with their imagination to form concepts of what prison was like. This lack of exposure to what prison was like for their fathers was often detrimental in that they were left to worry about the unknown. Overall, the caregivers had mixed feelings about how they were treated throughout the various points of the criminal justice process. Many caregivers, as well as, children understood that the incarcerated parent did the crime and should be punished. However,

they felt that the consequences in many cases were too harsh in that they were often detrimental to the entire family, as the effects of imprisonment on the family were not seen to be considered by the court systems. Of all the areas that families had to try to cope with, the criminal justice system was the most challenging, as these families had no one to advocate for them.

### **Recommendations**

In order to address the needs of children whose parents are incarcerated, criminal justice practices must recognize an offender's status as a parent. Law enforcement officials need to develop official policies about how to address arrest situations as often children are left in inappropriate placements (Simmons, 2000). Additionally, sentencing options and guidelines must be responsive to the needs of children of incarcerated parents (Krisberg & Temin, 2001). One way to accomplish this might be to institute a family impact assessment as part of the protocol at sentencing or shortly thereafter. This assessment would evaluate the constellation of the offender's immediate family, the impact on the family, and what steps might be taken to reduce the negative impact particularly when children are involved. The assessment may also be part of the family contact assessment (as discussed in the *Caregiver as Orchestrator* section). Reinstating the prison visitation bus service is also recommended as a way of helping the children see their parents in prison and continue or build on their relationship with them while they are incarcerated

The child welfare system also must recognize the significant challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents and take responsibility for them (Krisberg & Temin, 2001). Coordination of the services of the correctional system and child welfare system would help them address the needs of both parents and children more effectively. Often child welfare systems do not know which children have parents who are incarcerated, and the prison system is often unaware of how many of their prisoners are parents (Slavin, 2000). Within correctional institutions, there is a demonstrated need for policies and procedures to be implemented that will promote positive contact between incarcerated parents and their children (Krisberg & Temin, 2001).

In situations where contact is appropriate it appears that facilitating the father-child relationship is beneficial and increased access to incarcerated parents should be encouraged by the criminal justice system. By access, we mean not only seeing a parent through Plexiglas but time to interact in as normal a way as possible. For children, the comfort of direct eye contact, interactions, and touch are powerful in relieving stress. These children have the right to "speak with, see, and touch their parent" and can feel fulfilled by something as simple as a reassuring hug or an opportunity to sit on a lap (San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents, 2003).



This of course would require amending visitation rules and settings to be more child-friendly and conducive to family-like interactions. However, a starting place may be incorporating consideration of the impact on children into the sentencing procedures. This could entail permitting the child or caregiver to speak, or perhaps an evaluation to address the needs and proximity of the children and, where choices can be made, selecting a prison that will better allow the child to have quality contact with the parents.

## **E. Resiliency & Coping**

All the children and youth in the study experienced stress in one way or another as a result of having a parent in prison. Many of them struggled with isolation, anger, disappointment, and worry. This is the side of the story that is most often anticipated and consequently heard. However, there is another, less noted, side to the complex story of their lives. Some of the children had strong supportive people and resources to help them through it, an asset that is well-documented as important in later-life resiliency (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Even children who did not have another adult to turn to often sought or found creative venues to help them cope. The concern, naturally, is that if the resiliency of the children and their caregivers is emphasized too much, then the hard-won sympathy for these families will be at risk. This study aims to present as honest a depiction of the families as possible, both those elements that support conventional views as well as those that contrast with them. If only family deficits are examined and highlighted, then we risk missing important opportunities to capitalize on existing family and individual strengths and resources that could improve the experiences and lives of families coping with an incarcerated parent.

### **Children's Resiliency & Coping**

It was striking how many of the children found healthy outlets for their feelings or creative coping mechanisms to get them through hard times. Some of their strategies included turning to sports activities, finding a single close friend, church, or distraction as a short-term relief.

The most common way of coping was getting involved in activities like sports, theatre and church. This turned out to serve three purposes for the youth; 1) they were able to engage in something that made them feel good about themselves, 2) it gave them a focus away from their struggles at home, and 3) often it opened them to new opportunities for friendship. One youth explained it succinctly,

...I've been caught up in basketball and boxing. So, I haven't had no free time. ...it gives me something to do. It's a way to get out my anger.

Another turned to theatre and found herself a whole new group of friends who accepted and even appreciated her for what she'd experienced,

I have a lot of good friends. And theater is fun. And a lot of people talk to me now. Like at first, everything with my dad, someone found out and told everyone...and I was like ok, I don't care any more. But then, everyone started finding about that, [and said] 'oh well if you went through all that how are you so normal?'

Another child, after sharing the struggles of dad's destructiveness on the family, was asked what kind of things he did to make it better. He answered,

Well, I tried football last year. I did really well so I came back this year. That has really gotten me a lot of friends, gives me something to do. I have mentors and stuff. I just got more involved in church and I think that helped a lot.

A middle school child also found a new source of friendship and described the importance of at least one good friend,

...Until then, I didn't really have a lot of friends, really close friends. And in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my best friend and I, we skipped 6<sup>th</sup> grade together. We didn't know too many other kids. We made different friends.

Church and faith was as important to many of the children as it was to the caregivers. Church offered an immediate support group while faith gave them something to turn to and a way of explaining for them that their struggles were not all for naught. One boy presented a particularly poignant parallel as he related his life to that of the Biblical character Job:

One that I kind of remember is the story of Job. Where God let Satan take things from Job...but Job never curses God. Job gives everything back tenfold. I'm kind of hoping that will fall through a little bit. I mean my dad being gone is something that's really good. And football is something that is really good. And I have a lot of fun at church and I have friends from there.

A teenager shared how he looked to the future and an emerging sense of his own independence and power to help him cope,

I think I have learned to think for myself a little bit more. Because I did that [when dad was around] he would get mad if I didn't do what he told me to do. I don't think I am as afraid to do what I feel I need to do. Like college is coming up. I don't just want to do something because somebody else thinks it's good for me. I want to be able to do a job that I would want or something like that.

Others turned to prayer,

I pray. It helps me calm down, because I have to talk sometimes and I say a prayer. And it just goes away or I start laughing. Laughing and laughing and I don't stop laughing, and then I forget about it. Or I talk to my mom.

Sometimes the coping mechanism was not one that was well-calculated or intended to be long-term. Some children sought a way to get them temporarily through stressful times. A teenage girl also found her temporary relief from stress through her imagination,

I wander off. If I'm not at home, I walk around the block or if I'm at school I will walk around all the schools. The school said I can do that. And then I can go back to the classroom and I can sit down. I think about my room. I wish I was in it.

Still others used avoidance or outbursts,

I just go to sleep if I get mad. Or I yell or I break something. [interviewer: do you feel better after that?] After I break something I do. [then] I feel better until somebody brings it up.

Although not all the children found healthy avenues for handling their feelings, overall, they were remarkably creative, resourceful, and resilient.

### **Caregiver's Resiliency & Coping**

We also asked the caregivers what got them through the hard times, particularly in dealing with the child having a parent in prison. An overwhelming number of caregivers stated that it was their children who got them through the challenging times and who motivated them to push forward when they felt in despair,

I look at my kids, especially my baby, because I was carrying him when I going through everything so, long as I look at him and he's just happy. I get the strength to do what I have to do to take care of him....

Another caregiver reflected a very similar sentiment,

My children, I think if I didn't have my children, I don't know where I'd be today. When I look at my children, I know something needs to be done. And they pull me forward and say this is what needs to be done...my children make me a stronger woman .

Parallel to what many of the children and youth shared, the large majority of the caregivers also remarked on their belief in God or their spirituality as a source of strength and support. While many of the children talked about turning to church, most of the caregivers did not mention church specifically, but rather spoke of their faith in God and their beliefs allowed them to get through the challenging times and allow them to be able to be there for their children. Prayer seemed to be the key for many caregivers,

"On my worst days...it's God. I have to pray...its God"

"I have my faith. Believing in Jesus and God help me to get through it."

"I start reading my Bible and I just pray because some days can be really down".

Some of the caregivers noted that other support systems, such as counseling or parenting support groups also helped.

There were parent support networks that I used to go to but I haven't gone for awhile. I've been think about going back to that just so I could talk to other people you know...raising a kid...that's got the dad's in prison, I don't know but there's a lot of people in that situation.

Others found their families provided meaningful support. In particular, many caregivers had very close relationships with their own mothers,

My mom...she'll just tell me you can't quit, and she'll usually come over here to do something, like clean my bathroom...sometimes she'll take D...for awhile, keeps him overnight so I can go do something with my girlfriends. Those are the most important ways she helps.

There were also some caregivers who expressed feelings of isolation and a general lack of support or connectedness. These were very much the minority of the participants, however. Nonetheless even those who did find support in family, faith, or support groups still indicated that while these supports got them through, by and large they still felt a need for more powerful and consistent support that went beyond crisis-based help.

### **Key Findings**

The children within this study were often left alone to find coping mechanism in order to handle the extreme difficulties and social stigma that they faced. For the most part, children were able find healthy coping strategies and were often rather creative in doing so. For many of the children, they simply needed a place or an outlet to feel ‘normal,’ that is some place where they fit in and could excel in a skill. Most caregivers were also able to find outlets that allowed them to cope with caring for a child that had a parent in prison.

### **Recommendations**

Children who do not have coping mechanism need more direct support such as a person they can talk with, a support group, or some other form of social support. A mentoring program is perhaps what is needed. In addition, those children that have found a healthy outlet need support and encouragement to continue. This needs to be facilitated by the caregiver, incarcerated parent, school personnel, and other members of the community. As noted earlier, a caring supportive adult who believes in the child’s strengths can go a long way in sustaining a child’s self esteem and encouraging them to make good choices. Children may also cope better when they have more contact with their imprisoned parent so they do not lose that connection. Once again, this is where the court’s sentencing decision plays a direct role in the child’s life and an evaluation of that child’s needs ahead of time may produce more family-oriented sentencing decisions.

## VI. SUMMARY

From past research, both at the Council and within the academic literature, it is known that incarceration disproportionately affects families of color; however, this study went beyond identifying these disparities and instead examined *how* these families were affected by incarceration. Overall, the children in this study felt alone when coping with their situations, even though many lived in neighborhoods with high concentrations of incarceration. This is contrary to other literature on this topic that suggests children learn to view imprisonment as a badge of honor. All of these children wished they could see their fathers, but few of them had the means to do so, and when they did they found visitation facilities to be unfriendly. Caregivers reflected that they believed no one cared about their plight and wished there was a way for the criminal justice system and social service agencies to consider the impact of imprisonment on families.

The lack of consideration of the impact on, and needs of the families was evidenced repeatedly in the stories shared by these children and their caregivers. We saw this in many of the police encounters that these families had, in court proceedings, and perhaps most importantly, in the prison visitation situations that were often neither inviting to families with children nor conducive to children's needs. The end result is that the child and caregiver are punished in tandem with the incarcerated parent. Uniquely, a third party has entered these families' constellation and that is a criminal justice system that fails to consider the needs of families left behind. Lasting effects on children can also easily extend into their adulthoods.

Despite many difficulties and hardships some families with access to resources, such as extended family support, fared well, as opposed to those families with fewer resources. Maintaining an active and healthy relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent was fraught with obstacles and was often left to the skills of the caregivers to orchestrate. Additionally, the caregivers were under extraordinary social and financial strain. Children proved to observe and understand much more than they were given credit for. They often worked to compensate for the stress that they observed in their caregivers and struggled with keeping the family secret versus finding avenues to share their stories. They sought, and some found, outlets for their anger, their sadness, and their need for friendship; however, some continue to struggle.

## VII. OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations, as discussed within each theme, speak specifically to the strengths and concerns shared by the participants in this study. To arrive at the most appropriate and viable recommendations, we considered the experiences of the participating families, the existing research literature, the forum proposals<sup>1</sup> and suggestions from community representatives who have a vested interest in this topic. Therefore, the recommendations presented here are distilled from the vast compilation of ideas from as many relevant sources as we could explore. We have further selected a core set of recommendations that we believe to be the most valuable and outlined some key action steps toward these ends.

### Recommendations and Action Steps

Recommendation	Action Steps	Study Themes Addressed
Expanded Public Education: Increase public awareness of the prevalence of children with incarcerated parents, their strengths, and their needs.	Hold topical public forums Invite media attention, e.g., MPR to conduct a report on CIP's.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Challenges</li> </ul>
CCJ Demonstration Project: Build on Big Brothers Big Sisters existing mentoring project that is aimed at CIP's. Provide supportive services to CIP's through existing resources.	Expand CCJ's current role with BBBS Establish a Support Group for caregivers Establish a support/activity group for the children that build confidence and self-esteem. Informational groups or services that provide caregivers with helpful parenting guidance regarding parental imprisonment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Challenges</li> <li>• Caregiver as Orchestrator</li> <li>• Resiliency &amp; Coping</li> </ul>
Family Impact Assessment in Judicial Hearings: Establish a protocol for assessing family impact at sentencing and what can be done to alleviate undue stress on the children.	Convene key judges to promote judicial buy-in Explore other examples of such a protocol in other regions. Draft and pilot a demonstration assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child's Awareness of Adult Needs</li> <li>• Resiliency &amp; Coping</li> <li>• Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System</li> </ul>
Transportation for Prison Visits: Regular free bus service to transport children and caregivers to prisons during visitation times.	Seek funding to re-instate the bus service Meet with key stakeholders who may support such services. Advertise the service to reach CIP families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Challenges</li> <li>• Child's Awareness of Adult Needs</li> <li>• Caregiver as Orchestrator</li> <li>• Perceptions of Criminal Justice</li> </ul>
Social Worker: Located at prison visitation facilities serving as an advocate for families and inmates. Additionally, this position could prevent unfair prohibiting of the father-child relationship.	Advocate for this position to be implemented by the DOC. This position could at first be experimentally adopted by a minimum security prison.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Challenges</li> <li>• Caregiver as Orchestrator</li> <li>• Perceptions of Criminal Justice</li> </ul>
Incarcerated Parent's Bill of Rights: Formed in order to protect parent's rights during their incarceration with the hopes of facilitating relationships with their children.	Lobby state legislature and advocate for correctional facilities to adopt policies that are more sensitive to parental rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregiver as Orchestrator</li> <li>• Perceptions of Criminal Justice</li> </ul>
Research: A similar qualitative study to examine the effects of imprisoning mothers on their children. A quantitative study that increases generalizability of the results.	Meet with community leaders and prisons to establish links that will help refine research questions and assist with sampling and data collection. Prepare a proposal for funding.	Potentially all the themes

<sup>1</sup> A complete list of forum recommendations can be found in Appendix A.

We have already taken a first step toward one of the recommendations by fulfilling the promise we made to the participating families; that we would disseminate the findings of the study and give volume to their voices. We held a community forum open to families, community programs and leaders, public schools, and legislators where we shared our results and invited interactive dialogue to discuss what can be done. We have spoken with the press and had the results presented on Minnesota Public Radio, and we have posted our results on the internet. It is our hope that this study will serve as a springboard for further action within the community, among service providers, in the justice system, and among policy-makers to address the needs of the families left behind: the needs these children and their caregivers expressed so articulately and eloquently to us.



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## **Appendix A:**

### **Forum Recommendations**

The forum participants included community leaders, community service providers, representatives from public schools, members of the Minnesota legislature, members of the Hennepin County judicial system, researchers, and finally, some of the actual participants in the study attended and even spoke of their experiences. In honor of our commitment to give a voice to the children who have parents in prison, we began by listening to some excerpts of interviews with the children and caregivers.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a Power Point presentation outlining the study methods and thematic findings.

Invited to speak at the forum was Ted Thompson, an African American psychologist who works with families who have a member in prison, as well as conducting work with individuals who are being released from prison and potentially returning to their families. In Dr. Thompson's talk, he placed the plight of these families in the context of public policy, poverty, racism, and popular youth culture.

The heart of the forum was a small and large-group discussion among all the participants on where we can go from here. The recommendations are organized here into five categories: education, criminal justice system policies and procedures, collaboration, mentoring, and services.

#### **1. Education.**

Forum participants saw education as a core goal toward a path of change. Recommendations were provided for educating the public as well as family and other individuals who have contact with children of incarcerated parents.

##### *Educating the public*

- Greater public education and advocacy of restorative justice into the current justice system to reduce incarceration and build better system to reduce incarceration and build better relationships between offenders and their community, which reduces recidivism.
- Get the word out so that the greater community understands what the needs are of these children and their caregivers.
- Community leaders & service providers who work with this population can communicate with other service providers
- Inform policy-makers.
- Active networking
- Raise awareness of isolation children of incarcerated parents feel. Overcomes group of Parenting with Purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> Recordings used child and adult actors with similar ethnic & racial backgrounds as the participants. No identifying information was included in recordings.

### *Educating families (including extended family)*

- Locate or create a resource that educates families on how to navigate visitations.
- Work with Department of Corrections to establish a curriculum for incarcerated fathers.
- Develop a mandatory family plan that establishes plan for working with families, Use college students for service, public service announcements.
- Teach skills to adults who know kids with parents in prison, about how talk to them.
- Create a “Tip Sheet” that has some Do’s and Don’ts for people who know or work with the children.

## **2. Judicial Procedures, Legislation, Prison Policies**

It was well-recognized that the public alone cannot make the necessary changes. Changes in policies and procedures within the criminal justice system are imperative to become more sensitive to the needs of the families.

- Expansion of pre-sentence investigation to look at the family unit, what will the impact be on the children and caregivers.
- Set process in court/prison to review visitation/parents rights upon sentencing or arrival to DOC.
- Legislation to equalize sentencing for powder and crack cocaine.
- Develop tools for incarcerated parents to process feelings upon release or while in prison.
- Offer better mental health care in the Department of Corrections, Child Protection, and the overall criminal justice system
- Push for family-friendly visitation spaces. Redecorate to make child-friendly
- Facilitate visits by using technology such as video visits.
- Work on better coordination criminal court and child protection issues and with victim issues
- Provide training for the Bench, lawyers, social workers, and system on visitation issues.

## **3. Collaborating, Organizing, and Channeling Existing Resources**

Nearly everyone in attendance spoke of collaboration. It was acknowledged, however, that collaboration is sometimes easier to discuss than to actualize. The participants spent some time considering what it would take to make collaborations truly effective and what kind of collaborations would be the most powerful.

- Engage the faith community, e.g., prison ministries,
- Set up a Web Log to enable broader cross-communication
- Centralize resources
- Engage extended family
- Get neighborhoods to come together to pool their resources. Focused block party/events.
- First day of kindergarten is a way for families to meet each other and connect.
- Funding is imperative.
- For children in the child welfare system, train workers to reduce bias and help children connect with their incarcerated parents.
- Child Protection has significant resources that are used to address symptoms of children vs. diverting through resources towards incarcerated parents

#### **4. Mentoring & Volunteering**

Because Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) played a significant role in the advisory board and other aspects of this study, there was a great deal of discussion about mentoring. While everyone agreed that mentoring was a good idea, BBBS noted that they have half as many male mentors as females and that most of their mentors are Caucasian. The groups brainstormed ways to engage more people, particularly men of color, to serve as mentors.

- Help get more men of color to participate in the existing Big Brothers Big Sisters program for mentoring children of incarcerated parents.
- Seek mentors from YMCA, Corporate, Church, Database, websites, Pro bono ad opportunities.
- Million Mrs. March...get attendee list as mentor potential,
- Electric billboard to build awareness of need for mentors
- Retired community of business people
- Senior citizens, AARP
- Grandparents
- Extended family members
- Good teachers
- Colleges, perhaps course credit

#### **5. Services**

It was clear that a gap in services existed for these families, especially given how few were connected to services and how isolated many of them expressed feeling. The forum participants discussed both what kind of services are needed as well as how to go about acquiring those services.

- Family group conferencing/family group decision making which is a specific restorative justice model to assist inmates and their families in the inmate's transition back into the community.
- Use the existing Children and Family Services to start a family project for this subset of families.
- Establish a bus service to transport to prison visits
  - Pull together for a bus-picking up in all metro areas. Use communication systems, radio, T.V., PSA. To do so
  - Get a bus company to take kids and families to prison
  - Churches can write great proposals to secure

Class for incarcerated men "Being A Dad." There must be better ways for men to engage with kids in appropriate healthy ways, Deal with the whole masculinity thing, Deal with relationships especially with child's mom.