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Addressing the Needs of Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children in Illinois

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Introduction

The number of women in state and federal prisons grew by nearly 800% between 1978 and 2016.¹ This dramatic increase in the number of incarcerated women has led to calls for gender-responsive policies and practice that address incarcerated women's needs and circumstances.² Most notably, over 60 percent of the women in state and federal prison are mothers of minor children,³ and incarcerated mothers are far more likely than incarcerated fathers to have been their children's primary caregiver prior to their incarceration.⁴ Consequently, it is important that policies and practices in women's prisons recognize the central role that motherhood plays in many incarcerated women's lives.⁵

The National Institute of Corrections and the National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women (NRCJIW) provide technical assistance in the form of a Gender Informed Practices Assessment (GIPA) to state departments of corrections interested in moving towards more gender-responsive policies and practices in their correctional facilities. In 2015, a GIPA was conducted at Logan Correctional Center, the largest prison for women in Illinois and one of the largest women's prisons in the U.S. This GIPA, which was funded by the Bureau of Justice and carried out by the Women's Justice Institute, was part of a larger effort to promote the adoption of gender responsive policies and practices by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC).

At the time the GIPA was conducted, 71 percent of the women incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center were mothers, and the assessment highlighted four key challenges to building relationships between these 1,304 mothers and their children: (1) the prison was neither staffed nor designed to support child friendly

visitation; (2) women had limited opportunities to call their children or other family members; (3) the only state-funded program that provided transportation for children to visit their mothers in prison had been eliminated;⁶ and (4) enrollment in the prison nursery had plummeted despite a zero percent recidivism rate among participants.⁷ Based on these findings, the Women's Justice Institute recommended that Illinois develop a comprehensive strategy to address the needs of incarcerated mothers and reduce the harmful impact of incarceration on their children.⁸

Motivated in part by the results of the GIPA, Illinois enacted the Women's Correctional Services Act (Public Act 100-0527) in 2017. This legislation requires the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) to implement "gender responsive policies, practices, programs, and services [that are] considered relational, culturally competent, family-centered, holistic, strength-based, and trauma-informed." More recently, Illinois enacted two additional pieces of legislation that are relevant. First, Public Act 101-0480, created a Children of the Incarcerated Task Force to recommend policies and procedures that would safeguard children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system and laid out a set of guiding principles similar to the rights specified in Oregon's Bill of Rights of Children of Incarcerated Parents. Second, the Children's Best Interest Act (Public Act 101-0471) requires judges to consider the impact parental incarceration will have on child well-being during the sentencing process and allows a "family impact statement" to be presented. (See Appendix A for examples of legislation related to incarcerated parents and their children enacted in other states.)



IMPACT OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN

Parental incarceration is recognized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that can be as traumatic as parental death or divorce.⁹ Children who have experienced the incarceration of a parent are at increased risk for physical health problems;¹⁰ developmental delays; learning difficulties;¹¹ behavioral problems;¹² delinquency;¹³ and mental health concerns.¹⁴ Parental incarceration is also associated with increased risk for educational concerns, such as truancy, suspension, and expulsion;¹⁵ grade retention;¹⁶ fewer years of school completion;¹⁷ and higher rates of dropping out.¹⁸ Due to its negative impact on family income and educational attainment,¹⁹ parental incarceration may adversely affect children's well-being into adulthood.²⁰

800%

increase in the number of women in state and federal prison between 1978 and 2016¹

60%

of the women in state and federal prison are mothers of minor children³

71%

of the women incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center are mothers

CURRENT STUDY

This brief describes the results of a project undertaken by a team of researchers from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. The purpose of the project was to inform the development and implementation of gender responsive policies and practices that will address the needs of incarcerated mothers in the Illinois Department of Corrections and reduce the impact of incarceration on their children.

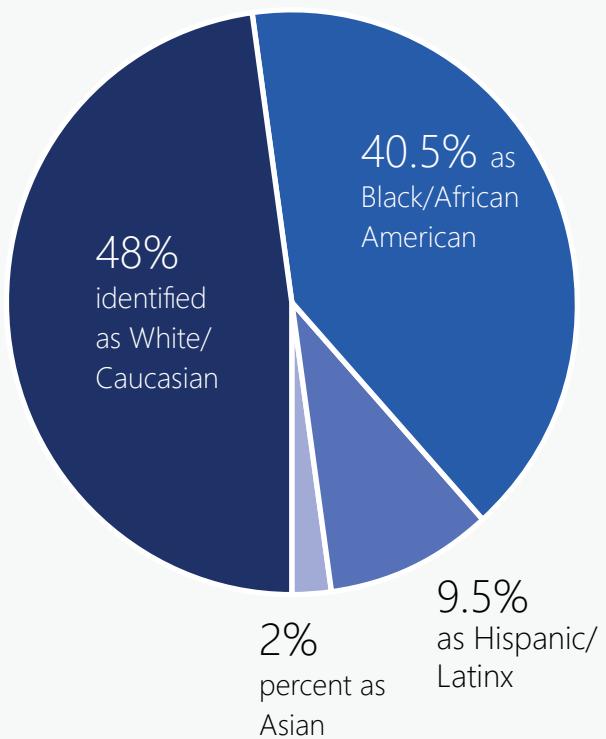
The project included three components: (1) interviews with incarcerated mothers, (2) an environmental scan of programs for incarcerated mothers and their children and (3) key informant interviews with individuals who operate those programs and with researchers who have studied them.

The brief interweaves what we heard from the mothers we interviewed with what we learned about programs for incarcerated mothers from our key informants.

Characteristics of the Mothers of Minor-Age Children



The mothers ranged in age from **23 to 52 years** old; their mean age in years was **32.5**.



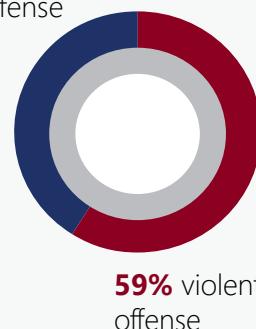


The mothers had served **an average of 4 years in prison** (time served ranged from less than one year to 16 years) and had an average of 8.5 years left to serve before their projected release date (time left to serve ranged from less than one year to over 40 years).

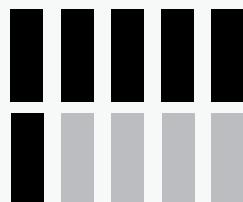


The mothers had **an average of 2 minor-age children**, and the number of minor-age children ranged from 1 to 9.

41%
nonviolent offense



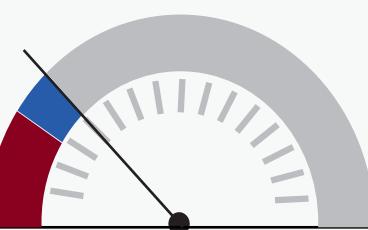
More mothers were serving time for a **violent offense (59%)** than for a **non-violent offense (41%)**.



On average, the mothers responded affirmatively to **6 of the 10 items** on the ACEs questionnaire.

8% said their **father** had been incarcerated

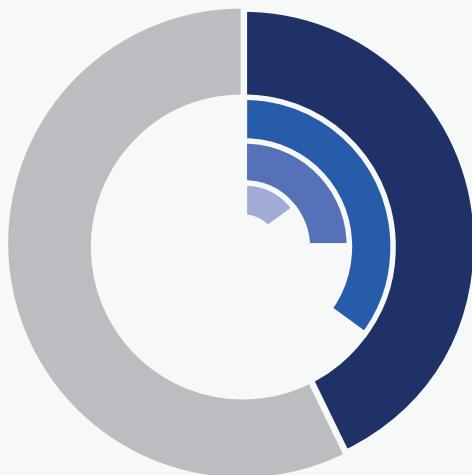
18% said their **mother** had been incarcerated



26%
had experienced the incarceration of a parent



Almost half (48%) the mothers had at least one child who had been involved with the child welfare system.



43% had spent time in foster care

82% of those mothers had been placed with kin

59% of those mothers had been placed with a foster family

35% of those mothers had been placed in a group home

METHODOLOGY

Interviews with incarcerated mothers

We invited 50 incarcerated mothers of minor-age children to participate in semi-structured interviews. The women were selected from a sample of 390 women incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center who had recently completed a survey and identified themselves as mothers of at least one minor-age child. We purposefully selected mothers whose children did and did not have a history of child welfare system involvement. Forty-two of the 50 women consented to be interviewed; four were paroled before the interviews were conducted and four declined to participate. A life history calendar was used to structure the interviews and capture information about a range of topics, including parenting, contact with children, relationships with caregivers, housing placements, mental health, major events, and prison programs, policies and practices. The women also completed several standardized measures, including the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire, a 10-item measure of traumatic events occurring before age 18.²¹ The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants received \$10 for their participation and the payment was electronically deposited into their accounts.

Environmental scan

We conducted an environmental scan of peer-reviewed journals, published reports, and the websites of correctional departments, nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, and think tanks to learn how the needs of incarcerated mothers and children are being addressed in other states.

Key informant interviews

We interviewed individuals who administer programs for incarcerated mothers and their children as well as researchers and advocates who have relevant expertise to learn more about how the needs of incarcerated mothers and their children are being addressed and the barriers to addressing those needs. (See Appendix B for a list of the programs that are represented.)

PARENTING PRIOR TO PRISON

The mothers we interviewed commonly described their role as parent prior to coming to prison in one of three ways:

- Provider and nurturer: A majority of mothers described themselves as tending to both the material and socioemotional needs of their children. These mothers often talked with pride not only about providing their children with food, clothing, and shelter but also about preparing their meals, helping them with homework, and trying to keep them safe.
- Provider only: A few mothers described themselves as tending to primarily to their children's material needs. Although these mothers ensured that their children had food, clothing, and shelter, their children's socioemotional needs were met by other caregivers--usually grandparents.
- Neither provider nor nurturer: Some mothers characterized themselves as having been more focused on other activities, such as obtaining and using drugs, than on meeting their children's needs. These mothers emphasized their parenting deficits and what they had not done for their children. Many of these mothers were serving time for drug-related offenses and number of them had been incarcerated at least once before. Their children were often being cared for by a grandparent or other primary caregiver prior to the mother's current prison sentence.





PARENTING FROM PRISON

All the mothers we interviewed described how being in prison constrains their ability to parent. Some spoke about being unable to perform basic parenting tasks such as taking their children to the doctor, helping their children with homework, shopping for their children's clothes, or preparing their children's meals. Not being able to perform these basic parenting tasks contributes to a sense of helplessness and powerlessness.

I thought I could still control like everything that was going on in my children's lives from here and then I realized I can't.

In addition to feeling helpless and powerless, mothers experienced anxiety knowing about the difficulties their children were facing but not being able to help them. One mother called the Child Abuse Hotline to report that her son was living in a home with someone who had sexually abused her when she was a child. When the Department of Children and Family Services failed to act upon this information, the mother became even more anxious about her son's well-being and her feelings of powerlessness over her inability to protect him intensified.

Most of the mothers we interviewed feel guilty about missing out on so much of their children's lives. One mother described wanting "just being there for [my daughter]...so she can talk to me about whatever." Another talked about the key events in her child's life that she would miss.

I'll miss eighth grade graduation. You think about all of that. You think about dances that they're going to go to that you're gonna miss, that they need their mom for.

This guilt seems to be particularly acute among mothers who had experienced the incarceration of a parent or foster care placement while they were growing up.

Some of the mothers we interviewed believe that their children no longer respect their parenting authority because they are in prison. One mother who shared this belief decided to be her child's friend rather than her parent. Other mothers had been told by their children that they are no longer in a position to give their children guidance or offer them advice.

I couldn't say 'don't use drugs' or – even though I still said it – but I have that feeling of... They're looking at me like 'how you gonna tell me this and you in prison.'

Mothers receive a \$10 per month stipend from IDOC. Some mothers talked about using this money to pay for things for their children (e.g., to pay for phone calls, stamps, or gifts) or sending it to their caregivers.



And it was a struggle financially. It was a struggle when I first got in here... And I think I wanted things to go to my children...Just put it for their college. Or you know, my daughter got a trip coming up. When I started getting money, I started sending things home for my kids' birthdays, Christmas. I still do that now. Whatever I get, I try to send them something.

However, many mothers spend most, if not all, of their stipend on necessities for themselves (e.g., toiletries, hygiene products) and hence, have little or nothing to spend on their children. For mothers who have traditionally provided for their children's material needs, this is yet another way in which being in prison circumscribes their parenting role.

Despite all the constraints that prison imposes on their ability to parent, the mothers we interviewed didn't stop being mothers just because they were incarcerated.

I don't think that committing a crime or getting caught up in a situation... It doesn't stop you from being a parent. Going to prison doesn't...mean that you're no longer a mother....I may be guilty of a crime...but I'm not guilty of not being a mother

MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

Being incarcerated creates both physical and emotional distance between mothers and their children. This idea was best captured by one mother who described prison as a "barrier, like the wall between us." This "wall" limits both the type and amount of contact mothers are able to have with their children. In theory, incarcerated mothers at Logan Correctional Center can correspond with their children by mail, talk to them on the phone, or visit with them in-person or via video. However, none of these options makes it easy for mothers to maintain relationships with their children.

Communication by mail. Many of the mothers we interviewed talked about the difficulties that communicating with their children by mail presents. First, mothers cannot send their children self-addressed stamped envelopes because those letters will be rejected as mail from another inmate when they are sent back.²³ Second, mothers cannot receive packages or envelopes from their children with crayon or other markings. And third, some mothers cannot afford to purchase envelopes, stamps, or other supplies needed to maintain contact with their children by mail. One mother described how prison policies affect the ability of mothers to communicate by mail with their children.

You can't get any mail with crayons on it...so your child couldn't even draw you a picture. No markers, no crayon...When you're trying to correspond with your kids and you try to send an envelope out so that they can write back. Except the address with the envelope are stamped...A lot of that is going back like it's coming from another inmate...But you trying to make means for your kids to write... You just sent a stamped envelope so your kid doesn't have to buy an envelope. Some of their guardians are not going to currency exchange to buy a stamped envelope for them. And your kid wants to correspond with you...How about I send an envelope and it's self-addressed back to me. And they write and just put it in the envelope. Drop it in the mailbox...Sometimes it'll get through...I guess it depends on who is in the mail room.

Additionally, some mothers are unable to communicate with their children by mail because they are not informed of their children's new address when their children move. One mother we interviewed struggled to maintain contact with her child whose foster care placement changed six times in just one year.

Communication by Phone. All the mothers we interviewed identified several challenges to communicating with their children by phone. First, each housing unit has a limited number of phones (e.g., four phones for over 100 women) and several of those phones are often broken. Second, because the number of phones is limited, mothers often need to wait in line for as long as two hours to use the phones and are not guaranteed that they will be able to talk to their children despite waiting. One mother we interviewed chose not to move to a different housing unit with more programming because phone availability on that unit was limited and she did not want to risk losing contact with her child. Another mother described how various efforts to address the long lines had been unsuccessful.

I've been here almost...15 months, and there's no way you can do that phone line. Like we've tried by rooms. We've tried by letting two from each side come out a few hours early, earlier than day room, and it...just never works out.

Third, rules about phone use vary from one housing unit to another. In some housing units, mothers may be allowed to call their children during specific hours of the day. However, those hours may not align with the hours during which their children are available or they may conflict with a mother's work responsibilities.

Finally, mothers are required to pay for phone calls to their children, and those phone calls are costly. Although caregivers will sometime pay (or try to pay) for those phone calls, some mothers cannot communicate (or cannot communicate as frequently) with caregivers and their children when their caregivers could not afford to pay for phone calls. One mother noted that after the cost of phone calls was reduced she was able to be in more frequent contact with her children.

Phone calls are one way mothers keep in contact with their children, but they can also lead to conflict. Several mothers described trying to minimize conflicts between themselves and their children. However, they are not always successful, and this can reinforce feelings of powerlessness.

My daughter and I will fight sometimes on the phone when I get upset for something she did or something. She likes to hang up on me. It's not like I can do anything because if she doesn't accept the call, she doesn't accept the call.

In-Person Visits: The mothers we interviewed identified several factors that make in-person visits difficult for themselves and their children. One of those factors is the prison's geographic isolation. Logan Correctional Center is located in Lincoln, Illinois, approximately 30 miles north of the state capital, Springfield, and 175 miles southwest of Chicago. Many of the children whose mothers are incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center live far away; only one-third of the mothers reported that their children live within two hours of the prison. Children who live far from the prison are often cared for by aging relatives who are unable to make such a long trip.

Many of the mothers reported that their children would not be able to visit were it not for the Reunification Ride program which is operated by three Chicago-based nonprofit organizations: Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers/

Cabrini Green Legal Aid; Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration, and Nehemiah Trinity Rising. The program brings children living in the Chicago area to the prison to visit their mothers. However, there are no comparable programs for children living elsewhere in the state. It is not uncommon for mothers to have some children living in the Chicago area who are eligible for the Reunification Ride program and some children living elsewhere who are not.

A second factor that mothers identified as having an adverse impact on in-person visits with their children is the prison environment in which those visits take place. According to the mothers we interviewed, the visiting room is not stocked with a range of quality toys, games, or books that would allow mothers to engage in age-appropriate activities with their children (who range in age from infants to older adolescents). Additionally, mothers are required to remain seated during visits but are expected to make their children settle down if they start running around. One mother wished for more freedom during visits.

Just to be with your kid, feel human for that little time you have with your kids. Be able to feel like a mother.

Mothers expressed concerns not only about the space in which visits take place but about prison conditions more generally. Among the conditions they mentioned were lead paint, pervasive mold, broken toilets and other plumbing problems, raccoon and other pest invasions, overcrowding, and sections of the building that are condemned. Mothers do not want their children to see the conditions in which they are living and worry about the impact that exposing their children to these conditions might have. A few mothers reported that their children have stopped coming to visit them in prison because of conditions under which their visits take place. This includes one mother who noted that her oldest child will not visit her anymore because seeing her in the prison environment is too emotionally upsetting.

Only 1/3

of the mothers

reported that their children live within two hours of the prison.

Mothers expressed
concerns about the

adverse impacts

the prison environment has on
their children when they visit.

Only 3

children may visit at one time.



Prison policies and procedures can also have a negative effect on visits between incarcerated mothers and their children. First, all visitors, including children and their caregivers, are subjected to pat downs and other security measures that some mothers consider unnecessarily invasive. Second, all visitors must abide by the prison's dress code.²⁴ A few mothers reported that their children were prevented from visiting because of the clothes they were wearing.

Third, mothers are allowed to visit with a maximum of three children at one time.²⁵ Mothers with more than three children must obtain special permission for more than three of their children to visit simultaneously. Finally, because any items in a mother's possession after a visit that were not in her possession before the visit are considered contraband, mothers cannot bring pictures their children draw for them or any gifts their children may give them back to their housing unit.

Mothers also described instances of existing policies being ignored. For example, the visitation policy clearly states that asthma pumps prescribed by a physician may be brought into the visiting room. However, one mother reported that her children have stopped coming to visit because they were told by correctional staff their inhalers were not allowed. Mothers also described instances where existing policies were unclear. For example, adult visitors are required to "produce photo identification (ID) and verification of [their] date of birth," but the policy says nothing about children. Nevertheless, one mother reported being told that she had to provide birth certificates for her children before they could visit. She didn't know if this was true or not.

I don't know if it's new [policy] or if it's just the person that was up there that day. But I know that that was what was told to me.

Even when mothers are able to visit with their children, those visits can evoke strong emotions that mothers may not know how to cope with.

We try to stay strong because you would not want your kids to see you leaving in tears. Or you don't want them to feel like you're weak.

ENHANCED VISITATION PROGRAMS

Visits between incarcerated mothers and their children can help maintain parent-child relationships and mitigate some of the adverse impacts of incarceration on mother and child well-being.²⁶ However, visiting is not always a positive experience for children or their mothers.²⁷ Security procedures can be perceived as invasive and scary, visiting areas can be noisy and sterile, and physical contact may be forbidden or restricted.²⁸ Consequently, incarcerated mothers often report mixed feelings about visits with their children and visits can leave children feeling more rather than less distressed.²⁹

To promote more positive experiences for children and their mothers, some prisons offer enhanced visitation programs that typically allow for visits of longer duration, with physical contact, in child-friendly environments with toys, games and books. Mothers may receive coaching or guidance on interacting with their children. To be eligible for these programs, mothers may need to participate in parenting classes or support groups, but most have relatively few eligibility requirements or exclusion criteria.

These programs are often run by nonprofit organizations. Three notable examples are the visiting program run by PATCH (Parents and Their Children) at Missouri's Chillicothe Correctional Center, the supervised visitation program run by YMCA of Portland, Oregon at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, and a program run by Hour Children at Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facilities in New York State.

Because prisons are often located far away from where children whose mothers are incarcerated live, transportation is a major barrier to visiting. Some enhanced visitation programs provide transportation. Hour Children goes one step farther. It places children with host families that drive the children to the Bedford Hills or Taconic Correctional Facility every day over a long weekend, or for a week during the summer, so they can have more frequent visits with their mothers.

Video Visits: At the time the mothers were interviewed, the Department of Corrections had just begun to provide video visitation services. Video visitation guidelines specify that only one visitor at a time can appear on screen, although exceptions can be made for children who need assistance sitting for the visit. One mother noted how difficult this rule can be for children to follow.

You can only have one person in the video visit. So, say you're trying to video visit and you have six kids, they cannot be running in the background, they cannot be kids. They have to be sitting there without moving, nothing, or else they cut your visit off. We're human, we're female, they're kids.

Some of the mothers we interviewed consider every contact they have with their children to be an opportunity for "quality time." Mothers whose descriptions of their pre-incarceration parenting roles focused on their deficits viewed this "quality time" as a way to make up for previous gaps in their parenting.

RESTRICTED OR NONEXISTENT CONTACT

Maintaining relationships with children is especially challenging for mothers placed in segregation. While some of the mothers we interviewed were in segregated housing, their receipt of mail was less frequent; phone calls and in-person visits were restricted. One mother described being placed in segregation for 30 days as "very depressing" because she was not allowed to have any contact with her children.

Still other mothers reported having no contact at all with their children (or their children's caregivers) even when they were not in segregation. These mothers knew very little about their children's lives and many described themselves as having failed at motherhood.

I'm a bad parent. Because, I mean, I don't even know my kids' address.

I feel like I don't see [my daughter], I don't know her. I don't know if her favorite color is still purple. I know she doesn't watch Dora the Explorer anymore. I don't know her shoe size. I don't know how long her hair is. I don't know how she talks. I don't know her stature. I don't know how she walks.

Often, mothers whose parental rights had been terminated did not want talk about their children because of the pain this caused; they repressed any thoughts about their children as a way of coping with this loss.

Because I'm about to go home I'm just more emotional again. I've got to think about how I'm going to handle this thing, situation, when I go home with no child.

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH SUPPORT

Although Logan Correctional Center is the largest women's prison in Illinois, programming for pregnant women or mothers who just gave birth was limited until a new pregnancy wing was opened in 2019. Pregnant women on this wing are offered prenatal education classes and resources to support healthy pregnancies. Mothers in this wing are allowed to pump breast milk that is securely stored and delivered to their infants and to breastfeed their infants when they visit.

None of the mothers we interviewed was currently pregnant, but two had been at Logan Correctional Center when their children were born. Both mothers, including one who had a cesarean section, had been shackled while giving birth. One mother had to wait three months to see her infant, who had been taken away by a DCFS caseworker. Both mothers described the pain they felt when they were taken away from their newborn.

I was a mother then but it hurt when I had my baby and BAM he was left at the hospital. That really hurt. I had to go away from him.... He must have known I was leaving because



There are **no**
mandatory
standards

for prenatal care or nutrition for pregnant
women in prison.

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH SUPPORT PROGRAMS

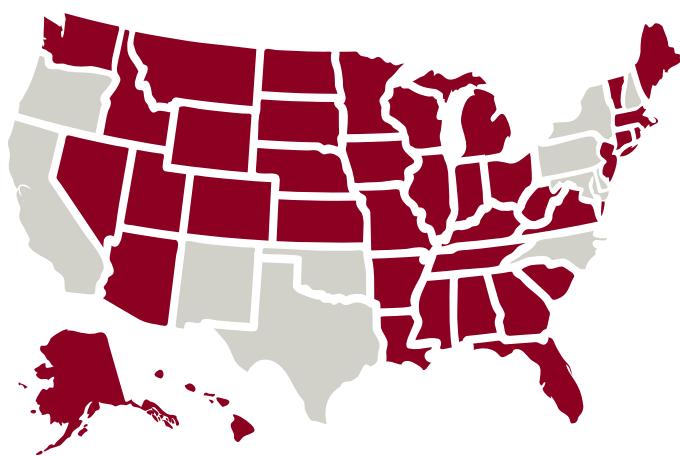
Although three-quarters of incarcerated women are of childbearing age, data on the number of pregnant women in prison are scarce. Bureau of Justice Statistics data from 2004 showed that 4% of women admitted to state prisons and 3% of women admitted to federal prisons were pregnant.³⁰ A more recent study that analyzed data from 13 states found a nearly 4% pregnancy rate among women newly admitted to prison in 2016.³¹

Moreover, despite the importance of proper prenatal care and nutrition to a healthy pregnancy, there are no mandatory standards for prenatal care or nutrition for pregnant women in prison. In fact, one study found that 38 states had no policies requiring that incarcerated pregnant women receive basic prenatal care and 41 states did not require the provision of adequate prenatal diets.³²

Despite the lack of standards, a small, but growing number of pregnant women in prison do have access to pregnancy and birth support programs. Programs like the Minnesota Prison Doula Project, the Alabama Prison Birth Project and MOMobile at Riverside Correctional Facility in Philadelphia offer pregnant women some combination of doula services, group-based pregnancy and childbirth education, and individual counseling and case management. Both the Alabama Prison Birth Project and MOMobile deliver incarcerated mothers' breast milk to their infants' caregivers; MOMobile also provides voluntary home visiting services to mothers and their babies once the mothers are released.

Research on the impacts of these programs on the health and well-being of incarcerated women who are pregnant or their infants is scarce, although an evaluation of the Minnesota Prison Doula Project is ongoing.³³ Anecdotal evidence suggests correctional officers also benefit from pregnancy and birth support programs because they are no longer required to perform jobs they are not trained or prepared to perform, such as assisting women during labor and delivery.

A few of the mothers we interviewed talked about the Mom and Babies unit at the Decatur Correctional Center, a minimum security women's prison in Decatur, Illinois. Only mothers of infants who have short sentences (i.e., less than two years) and who have been convicted of nonviolent offenses are eligible for the unit. A number of the mothers we interviewed reported that they were not eligible for the Mom and Babies unit because they had been convicted of a violent offense.



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PRISON NURSERIES

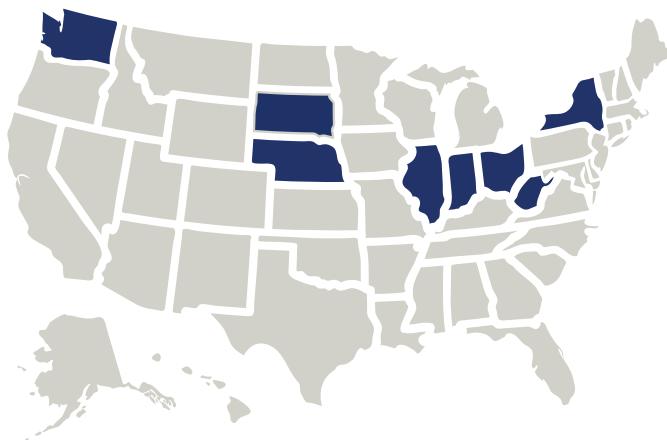
Most pregnant women who give birth while in prison are separated from their infants who are typically placed with relatives or in foster care soon after they are born. As of January 2016, eight states operated prison nursery programs that allow incarcerated mothers and their babies to remain together. Programs in seven states (i.e., Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Washington, and West Virginia) allow mothers and babies to remain together for between 12 and 36 months. South Dakota allows mothers and babies to remain together for 30 days.³⁴

Prison nurseries are located in special units apart from the general prison population--although not necessarily in a separate building. Each mother shares a private room with her baby and is responsible for her baby's care. Most prison nurseries are managed by the state's Department of Corrections, but at least one (i.e., Bedford Hills Correctional Center in New York) is managed by nonprofit organizations.

In addition to providing an opportunity for mothers and their infants to bond, prison nurseries offer instruction on infant care, child development education, life skills training and childcare while their mothers participate in school, work, or other activities. Some programs, such as the nurseries at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women, the Indiana Women's Prison (i.e., Wee Ones), and the Decatur Correctional Center (i.e., Moms and Babies) in Illinois bring in outside specialists to work one-on-one with mothers and their babies, while the nursery at the Corrections Center for Women in Washington State has an on-site Early Head Start program. Most programs refer mothers to community-based services before they are released, including one program that makes monthly post-release home visits.

Prison nurseries tend to have very stringent eligibility criteria. Generally speaking, only "low-level" offenders with no history of committing violent crimes are eligible. Additionally, because most programs require mothers to leave the prison with their babies, pregnant women are usually not eligible if they have more than 24 to 30 months remaining on their sentence.³⁵ As a result, nurseries often have empty cribs and waiting lists are rare.

The most widely reported positive outcome of prison nursery programs is lower recidivism rates.³⁶ However, a recent review of these studies concluded that the evidence is inconclusive due to methodologically weak research designs and statistical analyses.³⁷ Although one study found evidence that prison nurseries promote secure attachment,³⁸ additional research on both the short- and long-term developmental outcomes of children who were cared for by their incarcerated mothers is needed.



8 states

currently operate prison nurseries that allow mothers and their infants to remain together.³⁴



PARENTING PROGRAMS

Two parenting programs are currently offered at Logan Correctional Center: Mommy and Me Camp and Operation Storybook.

Both programs were generally praised by the mothers who had participated in them. However, a few mothers noted that problems can arise when not all of their children are eligible to participate because they are of different ages. One mother explained that her daughters' caregiver "didn't want to send one and not be able to send the other, it wouldn't have been right."

More problematic were the availability of parenting programs and their eligibility criteria. According to the mothers we interviewed, parenting programs have not been consistently available at Logan Correctional Center. Some mothers reported that they have been on the waitlist for a parenting program for years and some were unaware that groups existed. Other mothers were aware of these programs but not eligible to participate. Mothers were ineligible for a variety of reasons: their projected release date was not within 23 months; they had committed a violent offense or an offense against a child; or their parental rights had been terminated.

Consequently, some mothers felt that the prison was not preparing them to resume their parenting role.

When I go home, like I said, I'm getting my kids back. [My mother] has temporary guardianship right now. But this place offered me no help, no support, no counseling, nothing.

One concern mothers raised about the parenting programs that are currently available is that they are geared towards mothers of young children. Many of the mothers we interviewed need help parenting adolescents. These mothers want to learn how to communicate and bond with older children, how to discuss developmentally appropriate topics (e.g., menstruation with daughter) and how to engage in common parenting tasks (e.g., providing homework help). One mother described treating her children as if their development had stopped the day she entered prison.

I do find myself sometimes still talking to [my children] at like the age they were when I left...I keep on finding myself talking to them like they were four and three years old.

Mothers at Logan Correctional Center can also participate in parenting groups. However, many of the mothers we interviewed were either unable to get into a group or not aware of their existence. Additionally, mothers who had participated in these groups expressed concern that the groups are often run by other incarcerated mothers rather than by trained professionals with expertise in parenting or child development. They also raised the lack of respect for confidentiality among some group participants as another concern.

A number of mothers pointed out that some of the other groups the prison offers can help improve their parenting. For example, groups that focus on developing life skills, forming healthy relationships, or regulating emotions may also help with parenting adolescents.

PARENTING PROGRAMS AT LOGAN CORRECTIONAL CENTER

Mommy and Me Camp

is a faith-based camp for children ages 7 to 12 whose mothers are incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center. Children are transported from Chicago to East Bay Camp, where they participate in traditional camping activities such as swimming, hiking, and fishing and spend the night. They also participate in activities aimed at enhancing communication skills, encouraging teamwork, and boosting self-esteem. During the day, they spend time at the prison with their mothers engaging in crafts, playing games, creating a picture book, and sharing meals. Mothers and children enjoy a "send-off" meal before the children are transported back to Chicago. Like many programs for incarcerated mothers and their children, the camp is heavily dependent on volunteers.

Operation Storybook

is a program for incarcerated mothers and grandmothers at Logan Correctional Center that is administered by Lutheran Social Services and run entirely by volunteers. Approximately 30 mothers and grandmothers are selected through a lottery to participate each month. Participants record themselves reading a book to their children or grandchildren. A CD of the recording, along with the book, are then mailed to the children.

PARENTING PROGRAMS

Some incarcerated mothers plan to regain custody of their children following their release; others simply want to be part of their children's lives.³⁹ In either case, parenting programs can help incarcerated mothers maintain relationships with their children while they are in prison and prepare for whatever their post-incarceration parenting role will be.⁴⁰

Some parenting programs develop their own curriculum; others implement a curriculum that already exists.⁴¹ Common topics covered include child development, parenting techniques, parenting effectively from prison, and being the parent of a teen. Programs typically use some combination of large group discussions, small group activities, and/or one-on-one meetings between mothers and staff to deliver the curriculum.

Most parenting programs use a 12- to 16-week curriculum and are offered three to four times a year. Newly incarcerated mothers learn about programs from current or former participants or from correctional counselors. Interested mothers must apply to participate and applicants are typically prioritized based on release date, child welfare system involvement, risk for termination of parental rights, or other criteria. Some programs maintain a waitlist for eligible mothers who cannot be served due to enrollment caps.

Parenting programs often offer incarcerated mothers other types of supports in addition to parenting education. For example, the Osborne Association's Family Ties program provides discharge planning, reentry case management, and referrals to local resources to incarcerated mothers at the Albion Correctional Facility in upstate New York. It is also common for programs to include an enhanced visitation component as an incentive. Program participants may be eligible for extended visits with their children and receive coaching before and after visits occur.

Studies of the effects of parenting programs on incarcerated parents' attitudes, knowledge, behaviors and well-being have yielded mixed results.⁴² One of the only evidence-based programs is Parenting Inside Out. Participation in the program, which uses adult learning theory to teach parent management skills, has been shown to reduce parent stress and symptoms of depression and increase positive parent-child interactions.⁴³



TREATMENT BY CORRECTIONAL STAFF

Mothers stressed their need for assistance from correctional staff to keep in contact with their children, especially children who are living out-of-state or in foster care. Mothers may ask correctional staff to call their children's caregiver and conduct a "wellness check" on their children after not hearing from the caregiver for a long period of time. However, some of the mothers we interviewed noted that correctional staff are not always responsive to these requests. In fact, a few mothers were told that they would have to pay for the calls.

The mothers we interviewed perceived this lack of responsiveness on the part of correctional staff as part of larger pattern. Some described being told by correctional staff that not being able to make decisions for or about their children is part of their prison sentence. One mother was admonished by staff that "If you're so worried about your kid, you wouldn't have done what you did." Another mother expressed concern that she could be placed in segregation, and hence not be able to see her children, if she protested the way she was treated by correctional staff.

They treat us like we're caged up and it's horrible...I don't want that to affect me not being able to see my kids. I don't want to go to segregation over cussing a CO out and not be able to see my kids.

A few of the mothers we interviewed were wary of requesting help from correctional staff out of fear that this request would be used in a manipulative way. In particular, they described how some correctional staff would only provide mothers with

the help they needed in exchange for sex. As a result, any request for help could leave mothers vulnerable to being sexually preyed upon.

Although receiving help with parenting from correctional staff was not the norm, several mothers recounted instances in which correctional staff were helpful. For example, one mother had heard that her daughter had attempted suicide, but her daughter's caregiver was not keeping her informed. A correctional officer noticed that she appeared distressed and took the time to find out about what was happening with her daughter. Another mother described a correctional officer on her housing unit who she could always turn to for assistance.

If you need him to call somebody or to find something out, he'll do it, where a lot of officers won't. But he's willing to help at all times.

Logan Correctional Center's Department of Women and Family Services offers a range of services to incarcerated mothers. Generally speaking, mothers found the Department's staff to be helpful, particularly when they needed assistance establishing temporary guardianship for their children. One mother described how a counselor had helped her keep in contact with her children soon after she arrived.

When I first got here, I didn't talk to my kids for a month because my phone list at that time wasn't cleared, whatever. If it wasn't for my counselor at that time, I wouldn't have gotten to talk to my kids.



MENTAL HEALTH

The impact of incarceration on parenting and mental health was a theme consistently raised by the mothers we interviewed. Mothers reported feeling a mixture of sadness, depression, hopelessness, anxiety, and grief. As one mother put it:

[Prison] make[s] you feel loss, depression, stress. That's what all prisons do anyways. That's what makes you feel that way... Make you feel like a lost mother.

Mothers whose parental rights had been terminated also reported experiencing feelings of guilt and shame.

For the beginning of my bit, it was all about my son; like, my wall was covered with my son, all I talked about was my son. The longer you're locked up, you learn to block all of that out of your heart... Eventually you're no longer talking about your child, no longer thinking about your child and you feel guilty about it but, really it's like a coping method... What do I have to look forward to anymore? I haven't heard from any of these caseworkers, I haven't sent my son anything in a year and a half. Because I don't know where to send it to and they won't give no address, so I've almost accepted that he's gone out of my life. But I'm going to still try when I come home.

Mothers pointed to several factors that contribute to these feelings. Holidays and anniversaries (e.g., the date of their arrest) can act as triggers as can children's anger and disappointment over their incarceration.

I would have killed myself, because there- at least at that point- there's no point in staying alive. But my kid reminds me how much she needs me.

That first visit with them was just... It was emotional but it was uplifting. It was... words can't even explain it. It put the fight back in me... It reminded me how much my kids needed me. How much I needed them. It reminded me that they haven't forgot about me and they still love me and look at me as mother. And they always will. Another time, my daughter, for Mother's Day, she made this thing for me from the pictures we actually get from the bus visit with Cabrini Green. And it was called "20 Reasons Why I Love You." And there's so many things she said in there. That was uplifting. It made me see that I am being a mother.

Not having regular contact with their children is also a major source of distress. In fact, mothers identified regular contact with their children as vital to their mental health. A number of mothers talked about how contact with their children gave them a reason to live.

The mothers we interviewed told us that the only mental health services currently available to them are monthly 15 to 30 minute telehealth appointments for medication management. Mothers described these services as inadequate and expressed a need for access to mental health professionals who could help them cope with the range of feelings they experience as a parent in prison. In fact, many mothers noted that being interviewed as part of this study was the only opportunity they have had to talk about the experience of being a parent in prison.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE NEEDS

Being separated from their children is a significant source of stress for incarcerated mothers.⁴⁴ Concerns about their children and the care they are receiving can exacerbate this stress, which often manifests itself in symptoms of anxiety or depression. On top of the pain associated with being separated from their children, many incarcerated mothers have preexisting mental health or substance use problems coupled with histories of trauma.⁴⁵ Contact between mothers and children can improve maternal well-being, but not if the conditions under which visits take place cause additional distress.⁴⁶

Several of the experts and program administrators we interviewed spoke about the importance of providing mental health services to incarcerated mothers. Trauma can adversely impact the ability to parent and mothers need help coping with the pain of being separated from their children.⁴⁷ Because prisons are not equipped to meet the mental health service needs of incarcerated mothers, parenting programs and pregnancy support programs often attempt to fill this gap by providing therapy or counseling or referring them to services they need.

MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CAREGIVERS

One of the major challenges faced by the mothers we interviewed is managing relationships with their children's caregivers. Managing these relationships can be especially difficult when mothers have more than one child and multiple caregivers are involved or when the only available caregiver is a maternal grandparent who had been abusive to the mother when she was growing up. Although most of the mothers we interviewed reported that their children were being cared for by the children's grandparents (maternal and paternal) and extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles), children were also living with the women's romantic partners, friends, adoptive parents, and in foster care placements.

Mothers struggle with feeling powerless when it comes to how their children are being cared for. Being too assertive and objecting to a caregiver's decisions can lead to conflict and to being cut off. One mother whose children were being cared for by their maternal grandmother seemed resigned to the situation.

Arguing with my mom, and then I just finally realized that I'm powerless over that situation right now. So, whatever she's doing for them, I have to kind of be okay with that because I can't- there's nothing I can do and then she's the only one that takes care of me here so if I get mad at her and then she cuts me off, then I'm just screwed.

In some cases, conflict can lead to coercion by caregivers. One mother was told by her children's caregiver that she would not be allowed to see her children unless she signed over her parental rights. This caregiver was already encouraging the children to call their mother by her first name. Another mother reported that her children were living with their father who "knows that the kids are all I truly love in this world, so he uses that against me." The father refuses to let the mother speak with her children on the phone or connect with them in other ways.

Mothers also struggle with what to do when caregivers fail to communicate or provide information about where their children are living. One mother, who did not see her children for two and a half years because their caregiver was ill, wished that more was being done to help her stay connected with her children:

I mean, making sure I have pictures, making sure I see the events that are happening in their lives. Kind of help them to sit down and write a letter and encouraging them to be part of the relationship, you know?



CAREGIVER SUPPORTS

A potential protective factor against the poor developmental outcomes experienced by many children with an incarcerated parent is in the quality of care the children receive while their parent is incarcerated.⁴⁸ Caregivers can influence children's perceptions of their incarcerated mother, the relationship they are able to maintain during her incarceration, and the way they process the experience of having a mother in prison. For example, if caregivers have negative attitudes about children visiting their mother in prison, those attitudes can adversely affect the quality of the visit. In addition to dealing with their own feelings about the incarcerated mother, caregivers must cope with increased stress related to the combination of new caretaking role and limited resources.⁴⁹

Some programs for incarcerated mothers and their children also provide caregiver supports including counseling, peer support groups, respite, financial assistance or help with transportation. The Osborne Association's Family Ties program at Albion Correctional Facility facilitates family meetings to strengthen relationships between incarcerated mothers and caregivers and addresses caregiver needs by providing guidance to navigate the correctional system, offer resources on how to support children during incarceration, and provide relaxation opportunities like spa services and painting sessions. The program also provides caregivers with a three-volume guidebook called Stronger Together around Parental Incarceration; the third volume is Information for Non-Parent Caregivers of Children with Incarcerated Parents, because the caregiver "has to be OK for the children to be OK."⁵⁰ The importance of supporting the caregivers of children with incarcerated mothers was highlighted in a recent report from the Urban Institute and by the experts we interviewed.⁵¹

Many of the mothers we interviewed chose to appoint a temporary guardian for their children in

NAVIGATING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

order to prevent their children from being placed under the care and supervision of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Some of these mothers had negative experiences with DCFS in the past. For example, one mother's children had been removed from her care because she was being beaten by her boyfriend.

I had a DCFS case because the boyfriend I had back in 2012-2013, he was beating me severely and they did nothing but want to take my kids from me. They didn't want to help me. They took my kids from me. They looked at me and said he's going to kill you—you can't protect yourself, how are you going to protect them?

Other mothers we interviewed had at least one child who was in DCFS care (or who had been in DCFS care until the child was adopted). A few of these mothers described positive experiences with their children's caseworker. However, a majority described mainly negative experiences including lack of communication and receipt of incorrect paperwork or contradictory information from caseworkers and correctional staff.

Some mothers feel that caseworkers are not invested in helping them maintain connections with their children. For example, one mother noted that her children's caseworker failed to bring them to visit her as promised. Another mother believes her children's caseworker was "there for the foster parents" and not for her.

Lack of transparency was another concern raised by some of the mothers whose children had been in DCFS care. One mother, whose parental rights had been terminated, described feeling deceived by her son's caseworker.

I'm catching on to my caseworker acting like she's supportive of me, saying that I am a great mother and saying that...the court don't want my son to get adopted. But then my lawyer's telling me otherwise, that they're talking crap about me. So I was basically tricked and that's what my lawyer told me.

Mothers whose children are in DCFS care must comply with multiple requirements to prevent the termination of their parental rights. However, the mothers we interviewed pointed out that the prison does not offer the services they need to meet these requirements.

A lot of people do have DCFS cases...They have these like requirements that...Logan doesn't even provide for. So definitely have programs here with a licensed social worker so that they can be able to satisfy some of their case needs for their cases.

One mother was given a service plan that requires her to participate in substance abuse treatment, counseling, and a parenting class. This mother, whose projected release date was not for two years, doubted that she would be able to comply with these requirements while she was in prison and feared that she would lose her parental rights prior to leaving prison.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Our interviews revealed the many ways in which incarceration creates barriers to parenting and limits contact between incarcerated mothers and their children. Throughout the interviews, mothers offered recommendations for changes in policies and practices that could help them maintain relationships with their children and enhance their ability to parent from inside prison. We summarize their recommendations below.



FACILITATE COMMUNICATION BY MAIL OR PHONE

Mothers suggested a variety of changes that would facilitate mail and phone communication with their children. These suggestions included providing free envelopes and stamps for mailing letters; increasing the number of working phones in each housing unit to meet the demand; allowing mothers to make at least one free or reduced-price phone call to their children each week; and permitting mothers to call their children during evening and weekend hours.



IMPROVE THE EXPERIENCE OF IN-PERSON VISITS

Mothers recommended several changes in visitation policies and procedures. These include instituting less invasive security procedures for children and caregivers (e.g., no or limited pat downs); creating more child-friendly visiting spaces--both indoors and outdoors--for children to play and engage in developmentally-appropriate activities with their mothers; allowing mothers with more than three children to visit at once; and facilitating visits with children who live out of state.



ENHANCE PARENTING PROGRAMS

Mothers offered suggestions for enhancing the parenting programs that are currently available. These include increasing the maximum age of eligibility for programs so that older children can be served and providing more parenting resources for the mothers of adolescents and children with disabilities or other special needs.



INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY OF OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES

Mothers made recommendations for various supportive services related to being a parent. These include resources to make adoptions and temporary guardianship processes more transparent; mental health services provided by trained professionals to help mothers deal with the challenges associated with parenting inside prison; help with coping with the grief experienced by mothers whose parental rights have been terminated; and a focus on family reunification so that mothers are more likely to succeed in their parenting role upon release.



PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION

Mothers suggested community-based alternatives to incarceration--including substance abuse treatment--that would allow them to maintain contact with their children and continue to play an active parenting role in their children's lives. They also suggested that mothers could receive program sentence credit for participating in parenting programs. Completing these programs would lead to an earlier release date and hence allow them to reunite with their children sooner.⁵²

COMMON THEMES

Across our interviews with representatives from different types of programs for incarcerated mothers and their children, a number of common themes emerged. We describe each of these themes briefly below.

Both internal and external support are critical to program implementation, and this requires relationship building with prison administrators and correctional staff.

Changes in security or other policies are frequently needed for programs to be implemented and support from the warden or other prison administrators is essential to effecting those changes. Some of the most common policy changes include changes around visitation and changes around what can be brought into the prison for a class or other event. Equally important is gaining support from correctional officers who may be engaged with the program in some way (e.g., overseeing visits, providing security). If prison staff are not “on board” programs will not succeed, and staff turnover among correctional officers means that efforts to gain support for the program must be sustained.

Support from outside the prison can be as important as support from inside. The vast majority of programs for incarcerated mothers and their children are run by nonprofit organizations that rely heavily on volunteers.

Programs depend on a patchwork of funding from multiple sources.

Some programs for incarcerated mothers and their children receive funding from the Department of Corrections, other state entities, or private foundations. However, most rely heavily on support from individual donors for their operating budget. This makes sustainability a challenge.

Many programs are part of a holistic approach to address the needs of incarcerated mothers and/or their children.

Programs for incarcerated mothers and/or their children often include multiple components or are embedded in organizations with multiple programs for incarcerated mothers and/or their children. Parenting education programs often include enhanced visitation as an incentive and visitation programs often require incarcerated mothers to complete a parenting education program to be eligible. Children who participate in an organization’s summer camp or visitation program may also be eligible for its mentoring or afterschool program.

Few programs are evidence-based and resources for evaluation are limited

Programs for incarcerated mothers and/or their children have generally not been rigorously evaluated, although some programs have partnered with researchers from local universities. Lack of funding for evaluations continues to be a major barrier as is how to follow mothers who have been released. When programs are evaluated, the primary outcome of interest is frequently the recidivism rate even when the focus of the program is on developing parenting skills or strengthening parent-child relationships. Although evaluations of some programs have found lower rates of recidivism among incarcerated mothers who participate than among incarcerated mothers who do not, their methodologies tend to be weak and attrition tends to be high.

Many programs collect data from participants to inform implementation.

Despite a lack of funding for evaluation, some programs gather data from participants. Programs administer surveys to incarcerated mothers before and after they complete a parenting education class or ask mothers to complete a question after each visit with their children. Programs also elicit informal feedback from incarcerated mothers and their children’s caregivers.

CONCLUSION

We undertook this project to inform the development and implementation of gender responsive policies and practices that will address the needs of incarcerated mothers in Illinois and reduce the impact of incarceration on their children. We talked with 42 women at Logan Correctional Center who were the parent of at least one minor child. We heard about their experiences being a parent behind bars, about the challenges to maintaining relationships with their children, about their unmet needs for parenting and mental health services, and about their recommendations for improvement.

We also spoke with professionals who operate programs for incarcerated mothers and their children, and with experts who study those programs. We learned about the type of programs being implemented for incarcerated mothers in women's prisons across the country, about the range of services and supports those programs provide, and about the need for more research to examine their effect on both mother and child outcomes.

Taken together, our findings point to changes the Illinois Department of Corrections and correctional systems in other states could make to address the needs that were highlighted by the mothers at Logan Correctional Center. These changes could include implementing new programs, increasing access to existing programs, and adopting policies and practices that promote, rather than impede, relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children. This is important because, as one of the mothers we interviewed noted, when "a mother is sentenced, [her] child is sentenced too."



APPENDIX A. SELECTED STATE STATUES

Oklahoma	Authorized the creation of a pilot to provide community-based diversion program for nonviolent offenders who are the primary caregiver of minor children and evidence-based reentry services for incarcerated parents of minor-age children	57 OK Stat § 57-510.8b
California	Established a community treatment program for mothers of children under age 6 sentenced to state prison	Penal Code 3411
Kentucky	Made some pregnant women who have a substance use disorder and who have been convicted of a non-violent offense eligible to be released from custody if certain conditions are met	SB 133
New Mexico	Established a presumption in favor of release for women who are pregnant or lactating for up to eighteen months after the birth of the child	SB 192
Tennessee	Authorized the Department of Corrections to grant furloughs to pregnant women up to six months to permit giving birth and bonding between mother and child	Code Ann 41-21-227
Oregon	Established the Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Program for some parents or legal guardians of minor age children	HB 3503
	Created a Bill of Rights for children of incarcerated parents	SB 241

APPENDIX B. PROGRAMS FOR INCARCERATED MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

We conducted interviews with representatives of the following programs for incarcerated mothers.

Program Name	Facility	State
Prison Nurseries		
Bedford Hills Nursery	Bedford Hills Correctional Facility	New York
Moms and Babies Program	Decatur Correctional Center	Illinois
Parenting Program Nursery	Nebraska Correctional Center for Women	Nebraska
Residential Parenting Program	Washington Corrections Center for Women	Washington
Wee Ones Nursery	Indiana Women's Prison	Indiana
Enhanced Visitation Programs		
Children's Center Visitation Programs	Bedford Hills Correctional Facility	New York
Madison-Area Urban Ministry's Family Connections	Taycheedah Correctional Institution	Wisconsin
Family Preservation Project	Coffee Creek Correctional Facility	Oregon
PATCH (Parents and Their Children)	Chillicothe Correctional Facility	Missouri
Mom and Me Camp	Decatur Correctional Center	Illinois
Parenting Programs		
Parenting Inside Out	Coffee Creek Correctional Facility	Oregon
Family Ties	Albion Correctional Facility	New York
Pregnancy and Birth Support Programs		
Minnesota Prison Doula Project	Minnesota Correctional Facility – Shakopee	Minnesota
MOMobile® at Riverside	Riverside Correctional Facility	Pennsylvania

We also conducted interviews with representatives from programs for children with an incarcerated parent but the results of those interviews are not included in this brief.

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23. It is against Department of Corrections policy for incarcerated adults to send mail to one another.
24. The dress code calls for visitors to "be dressed appropriately for a prison environment or the visit will not be permitted. Clothing must be in good taste and not advertise or suggest any items in such a manner to signify a Security Threat Group or other illegal activity. Visitors should not wear clothing that is sexually explicit, offensive, or degrading." It also prohibits wearing short (i.e., above the knee) skirts or dresses, wrap around skirts, see through clothing, low-cut blouses, halter, tube or tank tops, swimsuits, leggings or clothing with "cutouts."
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