Strengthening families impacted by incarceration

A review of current research and practice

There are currently over 800,000 parents incarcerated in America's prisons.

PURPOSE OF THIS REVIEW

In early 2009 the Volunteers of America announced plans to launch a new nationwide Family Strengthening initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to provide coordinated, long-term wraparound support services to families impacted by parental incarceration. It will serve the children of prisoners, their caregivers, and their incarcerated parents.

Volunteers of America selected five pilot sites to design and implement the new initiative: Volunteers of America Dakotas, Volunteers of America Illinois, Volunteers of America Indiana, Volunteers of America Northern New England, and Volunteers of America Texas.

Volunteers of America asked Wilder Research to conduct a thorough literature review to identify any research-based programs or practices that could be incorporated into the new Family Strengthening model.

This review examined all of the leading scholarly and popular research available in the fields of prisoner reentry and supporting families impacted by incarceration. It also considered numerous promising programs in these fields. This research brief contains highlights from Wilder's full literature review.

FINDINGS

Evidence-based programs

Rigorous evaluations of what works in the arenas of prisoner reentry and working with families impacted by incarceration are notoriously scarce. As far as the authors of this report could determine, no well-evaluated evidence-based program currently provides truly comprehensive, long-term supportive services to entire families affected by incarceration.

However, several prisoner reentry programs have successfully incorporated elements of family support into their approach (e.g., Family Justice's La Bodega de Familia program and the Osborne Association's FamilyWorks program). A number of positive youth development programs and child welfare approaches (such as one-on-one mentoring for high-risk youth, and family group conferencing and wraparound services for families in crisis) also appear to hold some promise for prisoners and their families. Finally, several programs (such as Amachi and the U.S. Department of Labor's Ready4Work program) have demonstrated significant success in partnering with the faith-based community to provide support to prisoners and their families.

Each of these programs and approaches could serve as a partial model for organizations seeking to implement more comprehensive, family-centered reentry programs. Additional information about Family Works, La Bodega, and other promising programs is available in Wilder Research's full report.

Research-supported practices

The existing body of research also strongly supports several basic practices that could be used to guide the development and implementation of a comprehensive, long-term support program for families affected by incarceration. These practices are summarized below.

Start by mapping the family system and its potential strengths

When designing a family-focused reentry support strategy, programs are likely to define their target population as prisoners, their children, and their children's caregivers. This definition of "family," however, may not fully capture the complexity of many prisoners' family relationships. Parents in prison are more likely to have children from more than one relationship, or to have children under the care of a grandparent or other family member.

Because prisoner's children may reside in a number of different households, addressing reintegration at the level of the family, rather than the level of the prisoner, can become complex.

Familial relationships are often more complicated and fragile than those found in more traditional families that include two parents engaged in mutual caregiving within a single household. (Travis & Waul, 2003) For example, many prisoners who are estranged from their children and their children's caregivers may still have extended kinship networks or sources of community support that can play a critical role in the success or failure of their reentry process.

To address such complex situations, the Annie E. Casey Foundation advocates addressing "as many different types of family structures as possible" in planning programs for families affected by incarceration. (Bouchet, 2008) By engaging participants in the process of mapping their family structure, key sources of support within the family can be articulated and incorporated into plans for reentry. Calling upon family strengths in this way also offers opportunities to engage families in proactive forms of problem-solving, setting the stage for more productive and mutually supportive family dynamics in the future.

Ensure that the immediate needs of children and caregivers are being addressed

While there is a growing consensus that reentry programs should focus on and nurture family strengths, there is also an urgent and persistent need for programs that meet the immediate needs of newly incarcerated prisoners and their families. The process of incarceration itself can

One in 10 American children have parents in prison or on probation or parole.

produce numerous economic and legal challenges for the children and family members left behind. In many cases the family may experience a sudden loss of income (either in the form of lost wages or lost child support payments). In some cases, caregivers may also be forced to quit their own jobs in order to care for children, and they may be required to go through lengthy legal proceedings and to overcome numerous bureaucratic hurdles before they receive appropriate family benefits and privileges.

Despite the best efforts of law enforcement and child welfare officials, it is not uncommon for children to be left without proper guardians or caregivers following a parent's arrest. The literature on reentry is rife with stories of children who have been left to their own devices for days, and even weeks, following the arrest of their mother or father. Even when children of prisoners are quickly provided with a responsible caregiver, they may still experience severe trauma after witnessing the arrest of their parent, requiring counseling and support services to help them overcome the experience (Bernstein, 2005).

Use the period of incarceration as an opportunity to strengthen family relationships

The importance of family involvement and support while an individual is in prison can help positively steer the offenders' decisions about how they spend their time in prison and mitigate the negative impact that imprisonment has on an inmates' sense of purpose and hope for the future. (Travis & Waul, 2003, diZerega and Shapiro, December 2007, and The Urban Institute) There is also strong evidence that it is extremely important that children maintain parental ties to help them learn how to deal with the separation in a healthy way.

However, many children of incarcerated parents face serious obstacles to regular visitation. Support programs may subsidize the cost of phone calls between home and prison; assist with transportation to and from correctional facilities to enable children, partners and other supportive family members one-on-one visits; help families advocate for visitation conditions that are respectful and accessible; and provide counseling to families before and after visits to help them work through relationship struggles with the incarcerated family member and the traumatic effects of separation.

Incarceration provides prisoners and their families with a unique opportunity to improve their general relationship skills and social competencies. For example, there is significant evidence that research-based parenting programs can have a positive impact on incarcerated prisoners' parenting knowledge and skills. There is also extremely strong evidence to support the use of cognitive behavioral treatment (a type of psychotherapy) to change prisoners' negative behaviors and improve family functioning. In the words of one researcher, "The importance of using cognitive-behavioral programs cannot be overstated." (Listwan et al., 2006)

How does parental incarceration affect young children?

When parents are incarcerated, their arrest and imprisonment often has a profound, negative impact on their minor children. Generally impoverished to begin with, most children of prisoners become even poorer upon their parents' arrest. (Travis and Waul, 2003) They exhibit high rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and attention disorders. They are also at increased risk of homelessness, household disruption, school failure, and delinquency.

Children with mothers in prison are especially vulnerable, since they frequently witness their mother's arrest and have to be transferred to the care of a non-parental caregiver. Most often this caregiver is a grandparent or relative, but, in about 11 percent of cases, children of incarcerated mothers are placed in the foster care system—separating them, in many cases, not just from their parents, but also their siblings, other family members, and the only homes and communities they have ever known. (Glaze and Maruschak, 2009; Mumola, 2000; Travis and Waul, 2003)

What are some of the common challenges facing formerly incarcerated parents?

Some of the most common obstacles to successful reintegration include:

- Shortage of public housing
- Limited access to substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, and other types of healthcare
- Inability to make child-support payments
- Gang activity
- Social characteristics of neighborhoods
- Restrictions on where ex-offenders can work and limited job prospects
- No savings and no immediate entitlement to unemployment benefits

The challenges and service needs of many prisoners are also influenced by their gender. Even today, most research on prisoner reentry and the impact of incarceration on children has relied on male inmate data. Yet female inmates often face very different psychological and physical challenges than male prisoners. They are more likely to have been the primary caregivers to their children (prior to incarceration) than male offenders, and may find separation from them extremely traumatic. They are also more likely to have histories of sexual abuse, domestic violence, posttraumatic stress disorder and other mental illnesses than male offenders. (Travis & Waul, 2003) The need for more gender-responsive programming and services for female offenders is one of the biggest challenges currently confronting the reentry field.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that cognitive behavioral treatments can reduce prisoners' recidivism rates, reduce illegal substance use, and improve individual problem solving skills and social competencies.

Engage family members and community services in the release planning process

Throughout the literature on reentry there is a consistently strong insistence that planning for reentry begins at the very start of an offender's incarceration. However, a recent survey of release planning protocols across the country conducted by the Urban Institute found that most correctional agencies do not begin planning for reentry until shortly before the prisoner's release, and they seldom involve family members.

By engaging families of prisoners in discussing and planning for reentry very early on in the sentence, offenders may be better positioned to access whatever services are available, and to identify realistic alternatives in the absence of desired training. Further, developing a family-focused transition plan can coordinate communication and understanding among family members regarding what to expect upon reentry. Roles can be clarified and planning that is based on a family's unique needs and assets can begin early, allowing for the identification of additional needed services and resources prior to release. (Mullins and Toner, 2008)

Use mentoring to broaden the family's circle of social support

Research-based mentoring programs have been shown to have a positive impact on both the children of prisoners and prisoners themselves. The research in support of mentoring at-risk children is especially strong. A large body of research indicates that mentoring slows the onset of risky behaviors among youth. Mentored youth also demonstrate better attitudes toward positive behaviors and activities, such as school, college, and avoidance of substance use and aggressive behavior. Thus, a mentoring approach for youth with parents in prison or parents reentering family life after a period of incarceration, holds particular promise. (Bilchik, 2007)

Preliminary studies of mentoring programs for adult prisoners also suggest that mentors or lifecoaches can play a valuable role in the offender reentry process—offering formerly incarcerated individuals critical emotional support and access to new resources, professional networks, and social capital. (Bauldry et al., 2009) However, it is critical that mentoring programs for both prisoners and their children use stringent screening and matching procedures, to avoid potentially damaging "match failures." It is also important that such programs offer adequate incentives, support, and services for all participants, since many mentoring programs for high-risk populations have extremely high dropout rates.

Upon release, be prepared to provide prisoners and families with comprehensive "wraparound" support services.

Following incarceration, families often face immense challenges stemming from poverty, stigmatization, and a lack of access to key resources. For offenders in particular, research shows that accessing housing, emotional support and employment are the most immediate needs upon release from prison. While many families of offenders try to provide these resources, the addition of a household member often puts significant strain on already inadequate supplies of money, emotional support, and social ties. Over time, prisoners and family members may also struggle with complex substance abuse issues, healthcare issues, and family conflicts generated by the prisoner's return.

To address these needs, a successful family support program should be prepared to provide ex-offenders with a truly comprehensive and well-coordinated continuum of support services. Corrections officials and other service providers have traditionally struggled to create such a continuum because of funding silos, the rigid bureaucratic and legal requirements of many public agencies, and competing organizational agendas. However, it is essential to develop a genuinely collaborative framework for service delivery if programs are to succeed in providing families with the support they need. One potentially useful model for coordinating multiple services and agencies may be found within the family court and mental health systems, where officials are increasingly using a wraparound services model to meet the complex service needs of especially high-risk populations. In the wraparound model, formal interagency collaboratives employ dedicated care coordinators, to help at-risk families create a unified service plan that will guide them through the available system of care.

Draw from the localized resources of faith-based and community organizations.

Faith-based and community organizations can serve as valuable partners in reentry initiatives. But it is important to recognize their strengths and limitations. It is not realistic to expect congregations and congregational volunteers to play the same roles that have traditionally been played by trained human-service professionals. Instead, most of the evidence-based reentry interventions that have successfully employed faith partners have used them in more informal capacities (e.g., as mentors or life coaches).

In many cases, involving faith and community organizations can offer valuable opportunities to shape and localize programming by tapping into the unique assets and opportunities of each community. (VanDeCarr, March 2007) For example, the Department of Labor's national Ready4Work program was inspired by the work of one small Florida-based community development corporation that decided to hire newly-released offenders to rehabilitate dilapidated houses in local neighborhoods. As in this case, faith and community partnerships for reentry work best when the role of the faith-based or community partner is closely tied to their original mission and existing strengths. By drawing on the local skills and expertise of such organizations, correctional programs and other human service agencies can capitalize on the passion and commitment of their staff and volunteers, while successfully augmenting the range of services they offer to prisoners and their families.

Between 1991 and 2007, the number of incarcerated women with minor children increased 122%.

What can programs do to help the caregivers who are left behind?

Caregivers of children of prisoners may experience increased financial and social pressure, resentment of the offender, and shame related to the implications of incarceration. (Bilchik, 2007)

Unfortunately, considering caregivers when designing programs and services can be especially difficult, given the often-changing nature of this role. Children of incarcerated parents may be under the care of more than one adult in more than one household during incarceration, and the identification of primary caregiving responsibilities may not be clear. In theory, roles and responsibilities should become clearer upon a prisoner's release, when formal guardianship often transfers from the caregiver back to the newly released parent. In practice, however, caregiving responsibilities often remain shared post-release, with extended family and friends continuing to play an important role. Helping families clarify, identify, and plan for caregiving roles and responsibilities can help alleviate some of the stress of reentry for families. (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001)

CONCLUSION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation identifies two key recommendations related to planning programming for families affected by incarceration: 1) It is important to directly involve those affected by this issue, especially children, youth, parents, family members and caregivers, representing as many different types of family structures as possible, and 2) a critical need exists for better collaboration and communication among organizations serving this population. (Bouchet, 2008) The practices and models presented here reinforce the importance of focusing on partnerships and integration at the family and organizational levels.

While the literature reveals a large body of emerging interest in and programming for families facing reentry, the resources available remain insufficient to meet families' needs. Above all, an approach to reducing recidivism and lessening the impact of incarceration for families should focus on the family and build on strengths. In order to effectively meet this standard, programs should work to develop strong models that incorporate many partners from a variety of settings.

In moving forward with new models programs should avoid the trap of trying to serve the entire universe of individuals who are in need of support. Instead, as VanDeCarr (March, 2007) and Wilson Goode, Sr. & Smith (2005) explain, emergent programs should be diligent about assessing their capacity and defining their target population. Services should be focused, localized, adaptive, and accessible.

Together, families, corrections, faith-based and community organizations and their intermediaries can thoughtfully identify goals and strategies that are meaningful and effective.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The literature reviewed by Wilder Research includes:

- Research-based analyses and scholarly articles by leaders in the reentry field (e.g. Petersilia, 2004 and Travis & Waul, 2003).
- Studies commissioned by governmental agencies (e.g. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Justice, etc.).
- Reports by leading organizations committed to the issue of reentry, child well-being, or crime reduction (e.g. Public/Private Ventures, the Urban Institute, Family Justice, National Crime Prevention Council, Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Family Corrections Network, etc.).
- Well-established "best practices" and "evidence-based programs" directories and compendia (e.g., SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, OJJDP's Model Programs Guide, the Children Bureau's Child Information Gateway, etc.)

A complete bibliography is included in the full report.

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Funding for this project was provided by Volunteers of America.

Learn more about this report:

This research brief contains highlights from Wilder Research's 2009 report, *Strengthening families impacted by incarceration: A review of current research and practice*. The full report includes

- A brief review of the service needs of families affected by incarceration
- A review of the most widely agreed upon research-based "practices" related to families affected by incarceration.
- An inventory of specific evidence-based programs, service models, and curricula that have been used to provide supportive services to incarcerated parents, their children, and their children's caregivers.

Copies of the full report are available online at www.wilderresearch.org and www.volunteersofamerica.org

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Learn more about Volunteers of America:

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