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Through the Eyes of a Child

Life with a Mother in Prison



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Background and Purpose

Volunteers of America is a national, nonprofit, faith-based organization dedicated to helping those in need rebuild their lives and reach their full potential. Since its founding in 1896, the organization has supported and empowered America's most vulnerable populations, including the homeless, the disabled, those recovering from addictions, at-risk youth and families, and men and women returning from prison. Currently, Volunteers of America serves more than 2.5 million people in more than 400 communities across the United States.

Incarcerated Mothers: A Growing Family Problem

Families affected by incarceration are one of the most at-risk populations that Volunteers of America serves. In early 2009, the organization announced plans to launch an innovative new family strengthening initiative called Look Up and Hope (LUH). The purpose of this initiative is to strengthen and support families affected by maternal incarceration. Volunteers of America chose to focus on this particular group because mothers with children under the age of 18 are one of the fastest growing sectors of the incarcerated population.

Between 1991 and midyear 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that the number of mothers in federal and state prisons had increased a staggering 122 percent. During the same period, the number of children with mothers in prison had more than doubled, rising to almost 150,000 children nationwide (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Most children of incarcerated parents are at risk of poverty, instability and problem behaviors, but children with incarcerated mothers are especially vulnerable. Mothers in prison are more likely than fathers to enter incarceration with an identified mental illness. They are also more likely to be drug users, to live in poverty and to be victims of physical or sexual abuse. (Travis and Waul, 2003).





These factors substantially increase the chances that their children will experience their own emotional and psychological difficulties. (Ingram and Price, 2000; U.S. Surgeon General, 1999)

Children whose mothers are incarcerated are also more likely to have witnessed their parents' arrests and to have experienced significant trauma and household disruption as a result of those arrests. When a father goes to prison, his children usually remain in the care of their mother; but when a mother is incarcerated, her children are likely 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 these types of cases, children of incarcerated mothers are placed in the foster care system—often separating them not just from their parents, but also their siblings, other family members and the only homes and communities they have ever known. (BJS, 2008; Mumola, 2000; Travis and Waul, 2003)

Despite the explosive growth in the number of mothers who are in prison—and the potentially devastating effects of this incarceration on future generations—there are, at present, only a handful of prisoner reentry programs in the United States that are specifically designed to support incarcerated mothers and their families.

Emergence of Look Up and Hope

To address this critical gap in services, the innovative, family-strengthening Look Up and Hope initiative was launched with the goal of strengthening and supporting families affected by maternal incarceration.

Three pilot sites with a strong history of service to incarcerated women and their families—Volunteers of America Dakotas, Volunteers of America of Indiana; and Volunteers of America Texas—are currently involved in implementing the initiative. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Volunteers of America national office, and a variety of federal, state and local grants, these sites are attempting to provide comprehensive, coordinated, long-term services for incarcerated mothers, their children and their children's caregivers. Each family enrolled in the program has its own case manager or "family coach" who works to identify the family's needs and strengths, connecting them with necessary services, and providing counseling and support in an effort to build the family's resilience and stability. In its first three years of operation, the program served more than 450 incarcerated women, caregivers and children, representing 131 different families. (Nelson-Dusek, Ryba-Tures, & Atella, 2013)

To look at the impact that LUH has had on participating families, the organization has partnered with Wilder Research (Wilder), an independent nonprofit research group in St. Paul, Minn. Each year since 2010, Wilder has produced an annual evaluation report assessing the results of the program and a qualitative research study examining some specific aspect of the participating families' lives. In 2013, Volunteers of America asked Wilder to take a closer look at how maternal incarceration and living in kinship care impact LUH children, specifically.

To enrich their understanding of what it means to be a young child with a mother in prison, Wilder's staff visited each LUH site to get a better sense of the program on the ground and to interview LUH families. Site visits were conducted in April and May of 2013 at all three sites participating in the Look Up and Hope pilot project, and a total of 25 children were interviewed across the three sites.

This report takes a deeper look into the children's experiences, summarizing and reflecting on what it has been like for these children to live in a kinship family while their mother is in prison. When appropriate, observations from Look Up and Hope participants interviewed in earlier studies have also been included in the narrative to round out the full scope of this ever growing and challenging issue.

Key Findings

Children affected by maternal incarceration have complex feelings about their mothers

Most people assume that women in prison are unfit mothers, and that their children are simply better off without them. But a growing body of research suggests that children with incarcerated parents may actually achieve better outcomes when they can maintain some type of positive contact with their father or mother. (Poehlmann, 2005)



MISSING MOM

"What I miss about my mom the most," says Bella, "[is that] I don't get to touch her and I don't get to feel her, and I don't get to see her with my own eyes. Yeah, I get to hear her voice, but that's it! I don't get to see her breathe. I don't get to do the things I used to do when she was here. I used to hug my mom and kiss her all the time and now I can't do that. I only see her every four months."

Bella's eyes start to glisten and she clears her throat to keep her voice steady. "Almost every kid at my school has their mom and dad, married. And they have their mom and their dad right by their side when they need them. I'm not like that. I have a mom that's gone."

To help her cope with the separation, Bella developed a special way of feeling close to her mother while they are separated. Every so often, Bella will enclose a traced outline of her hand in a letter to her mother with the instructions, "Put your hand here and send it back to me." Bella's mother will then trace the outline of her own hand, give the picture a kiss, and send it back to Bella.



Bella places her hand upon the outline of her mother's during times when she misses her most.

This is an excerpt from a true story written by a Volunteers of America family coach. The name of the child was changed to protect her identity.

Most of the children enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program clearly love their mothers, miss them very much and want to remain in regular contact with them. A few typical remarks from LUH children include:

When my mom comes home and we visit her it [makes me happy].

*Just getting to see my mom and just getting to talk...
I guess just getting to see her kind of made my day.*

I felt sad and mad [when Mommy was away].

I can't wait for Mommy to get out... Mommy might be coming in a couple of days. I talked to her on the phone last week and she said that she was going to come home this week...at nighttime we talk to her. She sings songs to us to help us get to sleep.

At the same time, some of the children interviewed by Wilder also expressed fear and anxiety about being returned to their mother's care. For example, one child said that she only liked staying with her mom when they stayed at her grandmother's house. Staying alone with her mother made her feel uncomfortable, partly because the place her mother was staying was unfamiliar.

I'm too afraid to [stay with my mom], because I don't really feel comfortable there. When my grandma and mom were there it felt so nice, because I didn't have to go somewhere where I didn't know people.

Older children, who have watched their mothers cycle in and out of prison, appear to have particularly ambivalent feelings—simultaneously wanting their mothers to succeed and fearing the return of a potentially volatile and disruptive force in their lives.

Such mixed emotions were very clearly expressed by two teenagers who were interviewed for another Wilder Research study shortly after their mothers first enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program in 2010.

I'll be happy [when my mom is released], but I really want her to get herself together. [I] think this time...I hope this time—she's going to be better. (Childhood Disrupted, 2010)

I think it will be okay, but something could go wrong. She might start drinking again. (Childhood Disrupted, 2010)

When one considers that more than 90 percent of the women enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program have a history of drug or alcohol addiction, and 71 percent are repeat offenders, the wariness and skepticism of these older children are easy to understand.



Children affected by maternal incarceration also frequently face the loss of their homes, friends and emotional support systems.

At the same time that they are coping with the traumatic loss of their mothers, many of the children in Look Up and Hope are also wrestling with other major social and emotional challenges at home.

While more than 80 percent of the children in the program originally lived with their mothers prior to her incarceration, most now live with one or more or more relatives who have agreed to assume temporary responsibility for the children's care.

Unfortunately, most kinship caregivers have small, fixed incomes; they receive little if any public support for their caregiving; and they can have a difficult time keeping their fragile families intact. More than 25 percent of the children in the program are now separated from their siblings, because they have been taken in by different relative and non-relative caregivers, and many children move constantly between different relatives' households. (Nelson-Dusek, Ryba-Tures, & Atella, 2013)

Several of the children interviewed by Wilder in 2013 talked about the stress of moving all the time and of being shuffled between different caregivers' households.

We moved all the way over here when my grandma was in jail... [It was] sad and depressing [to have my mom and grandma in jail]...we missed our old home.

Some, who had gone to live with their fathers, also complained that they had strained or difficult relationships with their father's partners.

Every girlfriend my daddy gets, they always argue a lot. I can't go to sleep.

If [my dad] would move out of this house and leave his girlfriend, I would love spending time with him...I just hate that he is with her.

Still other children said they felt isolated, rejected and unable to connect with other children in their neighborhoods or schools because of their mother's incarceration.

I don't have any friends in my neighborhood.

They are mean to me in my classroom...they talk about me.

My friends know that [my mother] is gone, but they don't know that she is in prison. If my friends knew that she was in prison, I know that I would get made fun of.

These last comments clearly attest to the shame and loneliness that many children feel as they struggle to deal with their mother's imprisonment. Unfortunately, most families and school communities are still not prepared to talk candidly with children about the problem of parental incarceration—and this “silence” around such a critical developmental issue often serves to deepen children's sense of friendlessness, abandonment, isolation and humiliation.

Children usually draw strength and stability from beloved caregivers, especially their grandmothers.

Despite the instability of their household situations and the many economic, social and emotional challenges they face, most children affected by maternal incarceration appear to have very strong, loving and stable relationships with their relative caregivers. Most of the children currently enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program have now lived with their current caregiver for months or years, and many for the majority of their lives.

Most of the children interviewed by Wilder Research in 2013 expressed strong feelings of love for their caregivers and felt a special attachment to them— especially if the caregiver was their grandmother. Children spoke about how happy they felt when they played games or watched movies with their caregivers; and, if they did not live with their grandmothers, they talked about how excited they were to visit her home. In several cases, grandmothers were present during Wilder's interviews, and it was clear to the interviewers that there was a great deal of love and respect in the child-caregiver relationship.

We like to play with Grandma. Grandma chases us and she goes, 'Snap. Snap.' We run around and she chases us and finds us and tries to get us. It's tricky. We twirl and all that kind of stuff at Grandma's [house].

When we first moved to my grandma's house, we made tents out of pillows.

[Staying with Grandma] is the best!

One more thing that makes me happy [is] when I get to go to my grandma's house and my aunt's. I love my aunt; she is so sweet.

Comments such as these make it clear that the caregivers in the LUH program are beloved friends and family members. In many cases, they also serve as children's main sources of stability and security.

When asked who they would go to for support, most of the children interviewed by Wilder Research listed their kinship caregivers—especially their grandmothers—though a few also mentioned their biological fathers, adult mentors or siblings.

Grandma [helps me when I need something]...staying with my grandma [makes me happy].

I drew a [a picture] of things that could protect me and make me feel safe...my grandma, my Big Brother, and a lock...my grandma is protective of me.

Dad or Grandma [help me when I need something]...Grandma helps us get our bath started.

[If I need help], I would go to my grandma or my dad.

If it weren't for [my grandma] I wouldn't be here.

Several research studies have echoed these sentiments, arguing that nurturing and supportive caregivers are absolutely essential to the health and well-being of children with incarcerated parents. (Poehlmann, 2005)

Unfortunately, most caregivers face significant financial, emotional and physical challenges of their own. Sixty-six percent of the caregivers currently enrolled in Look Up and Hope are single, low-income women over the age of 40, who have suddenly been asked to care for other people's children.



They struggle to make ends meet through a mixture of part-time wages, food stamps, donated clothes and other forms of public assistance. About one-third suffer chronic medical conditions, such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease, and another third report high levels of stress or depression.

I'm not their grandmother anymore. I'm everything but their grandmother, and it is unfair to them and to me. It's gotten to the point where we fight all the time. Not only did they lose a parent, they lost a grandmother since my role now is to be both their mother and grandmother.

(A Saving Grace, 2012)

Before [my granddaughter] came into my life, I had a kidney transplant. I was still trying to get back my life back on track, physically and back to work. Then suddenly I'm a big part of raising someone else's life and trying to get my life in order, too. It was overwhelming.

(A Saving Grace, 2012)

I get frustrated at times. I don't have an outlet for myself and it isn't my family's responsibility to let me have outlet time. I feel like it would be selfish if I asked them for too much help in that area, because I took this responsibility on, not them. (A Saving Grace, 2012)

Obviously, the stress and depression that many caregivers feel can adversely affect family relationships and make it difficult for caregivers to parent effectively. At the present time, only a handful of programs nationwide, including Volunteers of America's Look Up and Hope program, are available to offer any help or assistance.



Children and their families also lean heavily on Volunteers of America family coaches

Most of the families that Wilder Research interviewed reported relying heavily on the Look Up and Hope program for different types of support and services. The family coaches that staff the program appear to have been especially helpful to many children, giving them someone to talk to and rely on when times are challenging.

I like [my family coach] because she's cool and she helps us.

[My family coach] helped me to go see my momma.

We get to talk about how we feel and our mom [with the family coach].

One of the things that I like about [our family coach] is that I get to tell her how I feel, without her making fun of me.

I think that if I was talking to one of my friends, if they were having problems at home or have personal problems about their selves, I would direct them or let them know about [our family coach], because that is what she helps with. If you have any insecurities about yourself or something like that, you can just talk to her.

Most children are surprisingly resilient—enjoying school, sports and other normal childhood activities

Many people assume that children of incarcerated parents are doomed to follow in their parents' footsteps. Studies and politicians frequently cite alarming statistics that indicate that children of incarcerated parents are much more likely than other children to end up in prison themselves, or to achieve other poor outcomes.

But most children affected by maternal incarceration are surprisingly resilient. In 2013, most families enrolled in the Look Up and Hope program reported that their children enjoyed school, were doing well academically and had few behavioral problems. (Nelson-Dusek, Ryba-Tures, & Atella, 2013)

The children interviewed by Wilder also reported having many different hobbies and interests, including reading, science, math, drawing, coloring, dancing, singing, swimming, football, basketball, soccer, golf, video games, puzzles, music and chess.

Although some children said they couldn't afford organized sports, the Look Up and Hope program has endeavored to subsidize children's after-school activities and to connect children with adult mentors and other role models. (Nelson-Dusek, Ryba-Tures, & Atella, 2013) These efforts have made it possible for most children in the program to nurture their interests, develop their talents and simply enjoy themselves like millions of other American children.

We had a field trip today and we went to the Indianapolis orchestra downtown. [There] was dancing there. It was fun.

[My Big Brother and I] go fishing, bike to the park, play soccer and play football. We go to Chuck E. Cheese. We go to the movies.

A bunch of people say I have a really good voice, so I think I want to sing.

[I like] baseball, riding my bike and playing basketball.

I was in a play. I was the lead character.

Most children in the program also remain hopeful and optimistic about their long-term futures; and they continue to dream of a day when they will be reunified with their mother and their families will be made stable and whole.

In the words of one child, who poignantly described her hopes and aspirations to her family coach, her future life with her mother and family would be just "Wonderful! A shining sun! No more tears and no more unhappiness!"



Conclusions and Next Steps

If there is one thing that interviews with children in the Look Up and Hope program make clear, it is that children with mothers in prison must struggle every day to overcome a myriad of circumstances beyond their control. They must deal with grief, loss, shame, family instability, grinding poverty and society's low expectations, and they must often do so alone or with only the support of an aging grandmother. In continuing to support the children of incarcerated mothers, it is important for advocates and policymakers to keep in mind the following:

- **Caregiver well-being is clearly linked to the well-being of the child.** Supporting the children of incarcerated mothers means also providing support for their caregivers. Particular attention must be paid to a caregiver's mental health. If a caregiver is depressed or overwhelmed, she cannot provide the quality care and nurturing that a child needs, which can, in turn, affect the child's emotional and behavioral well-being. In addition to a healthy caregiver, children also need to have a stable living environment. As one study illustrates, children who lived with a continuous caregiver after their mother's incarceration were more likely to have secure relationships than children who faced multiple housing placements. Forming strong, stable relationships with adults is important for a child's mental health.
- **Children need the ability to visit their mothers in a safe, non-hostile environment.** Currently, the visiting areas at prisons vary widely from spaces where children can play and interact with their parents to austere rooms with barbed wire and the inability for any physical contact. While it may be emotionally difficult for children to visit a parent in prison, they need the opportunity to interact with their incarcerated mother in a safe, non-threatening place. This is especially true for younger children, who have a harder time processing the situation and dealing with their emotions.
- **Children need strong emotional support, especially those who already exhibit serious emotional or behavioral problems.** The children of incarcerated mothers may have difficulty expressing or controlling their emotions because of their traumatic situation, and studies show that children who are less able to regulate their emotions are significantly more likely to engage in problem behaviors (Lotze, Ravindran, & Myers, 2010). Therefore, it is important for policymakers and advocates to fight for more children's mental health services to get children the emotional support they need to cope.

Again, providing support to a caregiver, as well as the incarcerated mother, is one way to help children with their emotional health. Research shows that positive co-parenting relationships between a mother and caregiver, as well as open and honest dialogue with children about their mother's situation, can help with positive emotional and behavioral health.

- **It is important to try to support families before incarceration occurs.** As mentioned previously, many of the children who experience maternal incarceration are already at a high risk of emotional, behavioral and intellectual problems; therefore, it is important to reach out to high-risk youth even before a parent may be incarcerated.

Volunteers of America has provided many important and desperately needed services to the children of incarcerated mothers and their families, but more work has to be done. Children are the innocent, and sometimes invisible, victims of maternal incarceration. They, along with their caregivers, need the strength and support of family coaches, advocates and more programs like Look Up and Hope.

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