

THE FORGOTTEN FAMILIES:

**A NEEDS ASSESSMENT ON CHILDREN WITH
INCARCERATED PARENTS IN HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS**



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AUTHORS

Nancy P. Correa, MPH

Section of Public Health and Primary Care, Texas Children's Hospital

Avni M. Bhalakia, MD

Section of Community Pediatrics,
Texas Children's Hospital | Baylor College of Medicine

Bethanie Van Horne, DrPH

Section of Public Health and Primary Care,
Texas Children's Hospital | Baylor College of Medicine

Angela Hayes

Section of Public Health and Primary Care,
Texas Children's Hospital | Baylor College of Medicine

Tammy Cupit, PhD, RN-BC

University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston

Veronica KwartengAmaning, RN, PhD, MHA, CCRN, NE-BC

University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston

Kimberly Kay Lopez, DrPH

Section of Public Health and Primary Care,
Texas Children's Hospital | Baylor College of Medicine

Rachael Keefe, MD, MPH

Section of Public Health and Primary Care,
Texas Children's Hospital | Baylor College of Medicine

Christopher S. Greeley, MD, MS

Section of Public Health and Primary Care,
Texas Children's Hospital | Baylor College of Medicine

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Project Partners



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BACKGROUND

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that are known to have a negative impact on the health and well-being of children lasting well into adulthood. Traumatic experiences traditionally considered as ACEs include: child abuse and neglect, living in a home with parental substance abuse, domestic violence, incarceration, separation, and mental illness.¹ Cumulative ACEs or multiple traumatic experiences can further lead to toxic stress, causing neurodevelopmental, social, emotional, and cognitive impairments.^{2,3} Parental incarceration is considered an ACE as it puts the child at risk for social, emotional, and psychological challenges, including acute and chronic psychological stress, parental separation, changes in living arrangements, exposure to domestic violence, traumatic removal of the parent, financial difficulties, and social stigma.^{4,5}

ACEs have been robustly studied and demonstrate that childhood adversities are associated with an increased risk for poor social, emotional, and physical health, morbidity, and early mortality.² However, parental incarceration as an ACE has been largely overlooked and not well-studied. This is significant considering that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world and The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimates 5.1 million American children have a parent in jail or prison during their childhood.⁶

To better understand the impact of parental incarceration in Harris County, the Texas Medical Center's Health Policy Institute provided funding to Texas Children's Hospital, Baylor College of Medicine, the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, and the Harris County Sheriff's Office to conduct a needs assessment on children of incarcerated parents. The purpose of this study is to better understand the needs of children with incarcerated parents in the Harris County Jail, identify opportunities to support these children, and further inform how to improve their short- and long-term outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The needs assessment included five components: a literature review, interviews with inmates, interviews with caregivers of children with incarcerated parents, interviews with key stakeholders, and an analysis of intake data from the Harris County Jail. In addition, we toured the Harris County Jail and hosted two collaborative meetings with community partners to share our findings and to receive feedback from our community partners. Organizations that participated in the collaborative are listed in Appendix A.

Literature review: The literature review consisted of reviewing peer-reviewed literature as well as government reports, news articles, and white papers.

Interviews with key stakeholders: We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the greater Houston area, including organizations that provide services to children with incarcerated parents, local government, and subject-matter experts.

Interviews with inmates: We conducted 26 interviews with inmates at the Harris County Jail who had at least one child under age 18 years. Due to safety and security concerns, a convenience sample of inmates was selected by the deputies at the Harris County Jail. The deputies intentionally recruited a diverse sample in regards to gender, race, ethnicity, age, and types of charges. The interviews were conducted by eight people from the study team. The interviews were conducted in a classroom setting with the female and male inmate interviews being conducted in separate facilities. The interviews were approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

Interviews with caregivers: The inmates that were interviewed at the Harris County Jail were asked if they would provide contact information of the adult who was caring for their child. Of the 26 inmates, 21 provided contact information. The study team made at least two attempts to reach each caregiver, and seven interviews were conducted in person or over the phone. We also attended an Angel Tree meeting in Baytown, Texas, and spoke to 13 women who were caring for children with incarcerated parents.

Analysis of intake data: As part of this study, the Harris County Sheriff's Office added questions regarding the inmate's children to the jail intake form. The questions were asked during classification, which typically occurs 48 to 72 hours after a person is booked into jail. Many people who are booked into jail, are eligible for bail, and can afford bail are released prior to classification. As a result, most of the data captured represents inmates that are not released on bail. We added the following questions to the intake form:

- If the inmate has children under the age of 18
- How many children
- Ages of the children
- If the child lived with the inmate prior to the incarceration
- If the child was financially dependent on the inmate prior to the incarceration
- Who is caring for the child now
- The name of the child's school
- If the inmate has been to jail or prison before
- If the inmate's parents went to jail or prison when they were a child

In addition, these questions were combined with the inmates' age, gender, race, zip code, charges, and date of classification, for the analysis.

RESULTS

OVERVIEW OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Children with incarcerated parents are a vulnerable population who are often overlooked and forgotten. A growing body of research has shown that incarceration of parents can negatively impact the emotional, social, and developmental health and well-being of their children. The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, with a rate of 698 per 100,000 people incarcerated in 2015.⁷

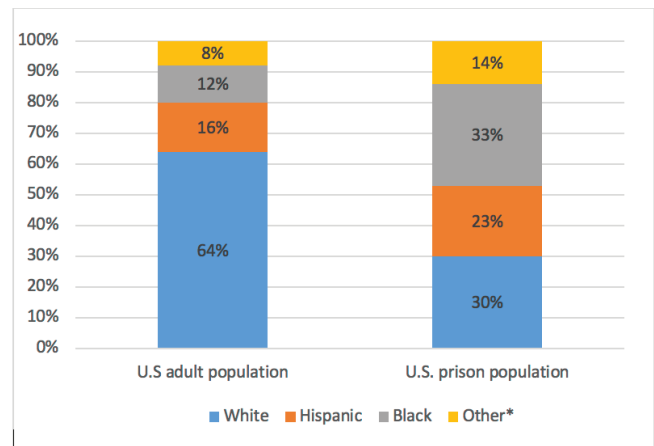
The United States has a complex jail and prison system, which detains approximately 2.3 million people in a variety of correctional facilities, including state and federal prisons, local and Indian Country jails, and juvenile correctional and immigration detention facilities.⁸ Jails are locally operated facilities that hold those awaiting trial, sentencing, or both. Often, persons with a sentence that is less than 1 year, serve their sentence in a jail. Prisons are operated by the state or federal government, and typically hold persons who have been convicted of a serious crime and who have sentences of more than 1 year.⁹

Over the past 30 years, as the incarcerated population has grown in the U.S., so has the number of families and children affected by incarceration. Specifically between 1991 and 2007, the number of parents in state or federal prisons increased by 79%.⁹ Because this information is not uniformly collected across the prison system, it is not known exactly how many incarcerated persons have children. However, multiple estimates have been produced; the Pew Charitable Trust estimates that in 2008 there were 2.7 million children under age 18 years, or 1 in 28 children, who had a parent in prison or jail.¹⁰

It is important to note that despite the rapid increase in incarceration rates in the U.S., the burden of incarceration has disproportionately fallen on communities of color, particularly black and Latino populations (Figure 1).^{9,11} According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2010, more than

4 in every 10 incarcerated fathers are black and incarcerated at 5 times the rate of whites.^{9,11} The impact of this high incarceration rate is that 1 in 9 black children has a parent in jail or prison.¹⁰ A more recent report from 2018 suggests that black incarceration rates have decreased since 2008 but remain persistently higher compared to white populations.¹¹

Figure 1. U.S. and prison population, by race, 2016.



*Notes: White and Black categories only include single race.
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics*

The process of incarcerating parents

The process of incarceration, from witnessing arrest to re-entry of the incarcerated parent to home life, can have profound impacts on a child.¹²

Components of parental incarceration that can impact children

- Trauma from witnessing the arrest and/or criminal activity that led to the arrest
- Separation from their parent
- Changes in homes, schools, and caregivers
- Confusion, fear, and misunderstanding of the criminal justice process, where their parent is, and when they will be reunited with their parent
- Fear for their parents' safety in jail or prison
- Fear and concern for their younger siblings' safety
- Guilt for their parents' arrest and belief that they could have prevented the incarceration
- Inability for the current caregiver to meet the child's basic needs
- Inability to regularly communicate with the incarcerated parent
- Sterile and chaotic visitation experiences
- Stigma, shame, and isolation
- Lack of appropriate support and services
- Difficult family and neighborhood environments including high crime rates, poverty, violence, and substance abuse

Witnessing arrest

One of the first times the child may experience stress related to parental incarceration is when the parent is arrested in the presence of the child. Witnessing an arrest can cause a child to exhibit post-traumatic stress symptoms, such as depression, difficulty sleeping, and concentration problems.^{3,13} Additionally, the lengths of time between arrest, trial, and sentencing are often uncertain and may cause confusion for children. They may not be able to see their parent consistently if their parent remains incarcerated prior to the trial, and may experience an abrupt separation once the parent is sentenced.¹⁴



Visitation and contact

In the 2010 Bureau of Justice Statistics report, more than 75% of incarcerated parents reported having some contact with their children during their incarceration.⁹ A majority of parents communicated via letters, more than 50% had spoken with their children by phone, and 42% had at least one in-person visit.⁹ Some studies have shown benefit to the parents when the children visit and some studies have shown benefits to children, such as adolescents with more regular contact with their mothers were less likely to drop out of school.³ Younger children have been shown to experience fewer feelings of alienation when they have regular contact with their mothers.³ Prison-nursery programs that allow infants to reside with their mothers have also shown positive developmental and attachment.^{3,15}

Maintaining contact and visitation with the incarcerated parent can be complicated. Roughly half of state and federal prisoners do not see their children during the time of their incarceration, and approximately 20% of parents report having no contact with their child during incarceration.⁹ In the case of prisons, many parents can be confined in facilities over 100 miles away from home, making visitation expensive and difficult to coordinate.¹⁶ Phone calls can also be prohibitively expensive. Some visiting environments make it hard for children to visit, with long wait times and searches, as well as uncomfortable sterile visiting spaces.^{16,17}

Additionally, many visiting environments in jails or prisons do not allow physical contact with the parent.¹⁴ While policies around physical contact vary between facilities, contact is often limited, if at all allowed, to unnatural parent-child contact, such as a brief hug or a kiss on the cheek. Not being able to touch their parent can be confusing and difficult for children.^{17,18} Noncontact barrier visits are stressful for parents too, as they see their child's stress and are not allowed to comfort them with physical reassurances.¹⁸ Research has shown that enhanced visitation programs that allow for longer visit times, physical contact, and structured child-friendly activities have a positive experience and benefit for both mother and children.¹⁷

A review in 2010 by Poehlmann et al. noted that studies have documented parents' concerns about their children visiting them in prison and jail. These concerns often relate to the safety of their children, transportation costs, and worry that the visits are unnatural and would be upsetting to their children.¹⁹

Caregivers

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported in 2010 that mothers (88%) are most commonly the caregiver of children when the father is in prison. However, only 37% of children of incarcerated mothers are cared for by their fathers. Other caregivers for the children of incarcerated mothers included grandparents (45%), other relatives (23%), foster care (11%), and other friends (8%).⁹ Caregivers of incarcerated children face unique challenges and often undergo additional stress as a result of the parental incarceration.^{20,21}

Caregivers often bear financial pressures, especially if the incarcerated parent was the primary income earner in the household. They may also face stigma, increased caregiving pressures if caring for the child alone, and a lack of overall support when caring for an additional child.^{21,22} The child may express anger toward the caregiver as a result of the parental incarceration, and the caregiver may resent a child who rejects their help.²¹ Caregivers may also lack skill in caring for children who are struggling at home and in school, and not know how to communicate in an age-appropriate manner with children regarding parental incarceration.^{21,22} In a small study of caregivers of children whose parents were incarcerated in Hong Kong, Chui found that caregivers' perceived level of stress and depression were related to the children's internalizing or externalizing behaviors.²⁰

It should be noted, though, that caregivers who are able to provide stable and supportive environments can be a protective measure against the negative effects of parental incarceration. One study showed that providing stability in the child's life through access to everyday, conventional activities, support of a daily routine and caregiving, and age-appropriate discussions around incarceration promoted the child's resilience.^{4,22} Another study showed that after a "strengthening families" initiative that aimed to increase protective factors

and reduce risk factors, caregivers reported increased positive parenting skills, increased communication, and decreased symptoms of depression.²¹

Release from jail/prison

After release from jail or prison, formerly incarcerated parents may have difficulty with re-entry into society. Financial barriers, discussed in detail later, make it difficult for incarcerated parents to provide basic needs and stability for their children. They may have difficulty finding a job, housing, and affording healthcare, as well as difficulty in paying off any debts accumulated while imprisoned, including child support and court-related fees.²³ One study showed that stable housing for the parent after release from prison corresponded to increased levels of contact with their children.²⁴

The level of contact parents had with their children and their caregivers while incarcerated can also impact the post-incarceration relationship. Families who are able to stay in regular contact during incarceration often report stronger family relationships.^{23,24}

Incarcerated mothers and fathers

With such a high incarceration rate in the U.S., large numbers of children are affected by parental incarceration during their childhood. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report in 2010, between 1991-2007, the number of children with a mother in prison increased by 131%, while the number of children with fathers in prison increased by 77%.⁹ While more men are imprisoned overall, the incarceration rate of mothers is growing faster than that of fathers.



Studies have looked at similarities and differences in characteristics of incarcerated mothers and incarcerated fathers and how these differences affect their children. Incarcerated mothers and fathers are often similar in that they have low education levels, low income, and a history of adversities in their lives.²⁵ However, incarcerated mothers and fathers differ in important ways. Mothers tend to have higher rates of unemployment and to be living in poverty prior to incarceration.²⁵ Incarcerated mothers also have a history of substance abuse, sexual or physical abuse; and report mental health problems more often than fathers.^{9,25}

Compared to men, women tend to be the primary caregivers of children prior to their incarceration. In 2010, more than half of the mothers (64.2%) reported living with their child prior to incarceration compared to 46.5% of fathers.⁹ Incarcerated mothers were also 2.5-3 times more likely than fathers to be living in a single-parent household in the month prior to their arrest.⁹ As a result, children with incarcerated mothers are less likely to be living with a family member during the incarceration period.^{9,25} Incarcerated mothers more commonly identified the child's grandmother as the current caregiver and were also 5 times more likely than fathers to report their children were in the care of a foster home, agency, or another institution.⁹ As incarcerated mothers were more often the primary caregivers for and the important attachment figure in the child's life, disruption of this attachment often resulted in the child responding with negative emotions and behaviors.³ In 2007, Dallaire et al. found that incarcerated mothers reported that their adult children were 2.5 times more likely to be incarcerated compared to adult children of incarcerated fathers.²⁶

Impact of parental incarceration on children

The experience of parental incarceration is often traumatic for the child, primarily because of the child's attachment to their parent. Attachment is the primary emotional bond between a child and caregiver that is the foundation for future relationships.²⁷ A child's sense of security is rooted in relationships with familiar caregivers that allow the child to confidently explore the world and develop important cognitive and social skills.²⁷

These attachment bonds also allow a child to have a safe haven and feel secure in times of stress. Disruption in the attachment relationship may lead to later adversity for the child, especially if the incarcerated parent was the primary caregiver.²⁷

Health and behavior

Parental incarceration can affect a child's health, educational attainment, and behavior. These children can experience internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, withdrawal, hypervigilance, depression, shame, and guilt.²⁸ Children of incarcerated parents may also have externalizing behaviors, such as anger, aggression, and hostility towards others.²⁸ They may also exhibit antisocial behaviors, such as lying and criminal acts that go against social norms. Children with incarcerated parents are 3 or 4 times more likely to have antisocial or delinquent behaviors, and twice as likely to have mental health problems such as depression.²⁷ Parental incarceration has also been independently associated with learning disabilities, ADD or ADHD, behavior problems, developmental delays, and speech problems.²⁹

Stigma

Many children experience shame and stigma associated with parental incarceration. Some children internalize their feelings and experience low self-esteem, especially when bonded to the parent.¹⁶ Children are often teased more in school because of the parental incarceration.¹⁶ Additionally, because of the stigma, caregivers and family members may not be honest in talking with the child about the parent's whereabouts. Not only do children not want to share the incarceration with anyone for fear of being bullied, they may not have anyone they feel safe to talk to about their feelings.¹⁴

Education

There is conflicting research on parental incarceration and the impact on educational outcomes. Smaller studies have shown that children with incarcerated parents have higher rates of failure and dropout, as well as poorer academic achievement.³⁰ However, larger studies, including a large meta-analysis, have shown an association but no clear causal links between incarceration and academic failure.^{12,31}

Future criminal justice involvement

It is commonly reported that 7 out of 10 children of incarcerated parents will become involved in the criminal justice system, and these youth are 6 times more likely than other children to become involved in the criminal justice system. However, experts in the field have challenged these claims as not supported by data and research. In 2015, Conway and Jones conducted a systematic review on the link between parental incarceration and criminal justice involvement and concluded that children of incarcerated parents do have an increased risk of future involvement with the criminal justice system, but the risk is not as high as previously reported. They found that children who had experienced parental incarceration were 3 times more likely than their peers to become involved in the criminal justice system.³²

Community and family factors

In many instances, parental incarceration is an added adversity to hardships that children already face.²⁸ Difficulties such as poverty and mental health problems are associated with parental incarceration, but cannot explain or predict children's outcomes alone.¹² In a recent analysis by Turney, children exposed to parental incarceration had more ACEs than those not exposed to parental incarceration; specifically, they were 9 times more likely to experience household member abuse and violence exposure, 8 times more likely to experience household substance abuse, 5 times more likely to experience parental death, and 4 times more likely to experience household mental illness and parental divorce/separation.³³ It is important to note, however, that not every child experiences a negative outcome from parental incarceration.³⁴ In some cases the separation may be beneficial to the child, such as if the parent was abusive towards the child, or if the parent's untreated mental illness or substance abuse was creating an unsafe home environment for the child.¹⁴

Although it is difficult to differentiate causal effect of additional ACEs (i.e. confounders) associated with parental incarceration on the child, and more longitudinal studies are needed, it is clear that parental incarceration threatens the child's well-

being in various ways.³

Protective factors for children with incarcerated parents

While children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk of negative outcomes, there are protective factors that mitigate the risk and there are many well-adjusted, thriving children with incarcerated parents. Protective factors include stable social support, positive child-adult (including caregiver or parent) relationships, supportive networks and environments, stable housing, religion, and a positive sense of self.^{4, 15, 35} In a small qualitative study about children of incarcerated parents, many children were able to find healthy coping mechanisms to get them through the difficulties associated with parental incarceration. For example, children became involved in a sport, activity, or organization that built their confidence, could be used as an outlet for their frustration or anger, provided a different focus from their home lives, and opened the door to making new friends.³⁵

Economic costs associated with incarceration

In addition to the psychosocial toll on children, significant financial costs are associated with parental incarceration that have a lasting impact on families. Prior to incarceration, more than half of parents in state prison were the primary financial support to their children.⁹ Families lose income when a parent is incarcerated and then often struggle to meet basic household needs such as food, housing, utilities, transportation, and clothing.²³ According to a 2015 survey, 2 in 3 families had difficulty meeting basic needs due to a family member's incarceration and 70% of these families were caring for at least one child under 18 years old.²³

Additionally, legal fees and court fines associated with the incarceration disproportionately burden the family. In a survey by the Ella Baker Center, families often pay \$13,607 in court-related costs and 1 in 5 families reporting taking out a loan to cover these costs.²³ The financial burden of incarceration most heavily falls on women, many of who are also mothers.²³ Often, the family adjusts to make ends meet, but this can lead to disruptions for the child, such as food insecurity or unstable

housing for the child, leading to different caregivers or adults in the home, and changes in schools or childcare facilities.^{23,36} Additionally, inflated costs for phone calls to family members, and some required background check fees for visiting family members, are all shouldered by the families.²³ Many families incur large sums of financial debt related to a loved-one's incarceration.

There are other economic considerations once the formerly incarcerated parents have served their sentence and re-enter society. Employment policies such as not hiring persons with arrest or felony records, make it challenging to find work. This makes it difficult to support themselves and their families. Additionally, formerly incarcerated parents who are required to pay child support often cannot afford to do so without a job, and face difficult choices such as paying child support or meeting other basic needs.²³ They also risk re-incarceration due to their inability to pay child support.

Stable housing has been shown to reduce the risk of recidivism; however, formerly incarcerated persons face difficult barriers in obtaining secure housing. Public housing often denies applications based on a conviction history, and for some families, they may be evicted once the family member with a history of being jailed moves back into the home.

“Poverty, in particular, perpetuates the cycle of incarceration, while incarceration itself leads to greater poverty.”

Formerly incarcerated people and their families often face restrictions to traditional safety net programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps).²³ In fact three states, West Virginia, South Carolina, and Mississippi, still enforce a federal lifetime ban on SNAP for people who commit drug-related felonies, which can set them up for re-incarceration as they try to find ways to provide food for themselves and families.³⁷

Restrictions on employment, housing, and federal assistance for food programs make the transition after release from prison extremely difficult for incarcerated persons. The financial costs and economic stress have long-lasting effects on families experiencing incarceration. This makes upward mobility for incarcerated parents and their children difficult and often insurmountable. As stated in a 2015 report by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and its partners, “Poverty, in particular, perpetuates the cycle of incarceration, while incarceration itself leads to greater poverty.”²³

HARRIS COUNTY JAIL

Harris County is the third most populated county in the country with an estimated population of 4.5 million. The Harris County Jail is located in downtown Houston and includes 9,434 beds.

The process of incarceration begins when a person is arrested or turns himself or herself in. Next, the officer begins the booking process and collects basic information about the person and the alleged crime. The arrested person is taken to jail and placed in a holding cell. Within 24 hours of the arrest, the person has a bail hearing. At this time a judge or magistrate evaluates the alleged crime, the accused's criminal background, connections with the community, financial resources, and length of residence to decide if the accused would pose a threat to the community and if the suspect is likely to appear at future hearings. At this point, the judge sets the bail. The accused either pays the bail and is able to go home, or is ineligible for bail, unable to pay the bail, or chooses not to pay the bail, in which case the person returns to jail. Approximately 75% of the inmates in the Harris County Jail have not been sentenced and are currently awaiting trial.³⁸

In a 1-year period, between December 1, 2017, and November 30, 2018, 74,473 individuals were booked and released in the Harris County Jail prior to December 19, 2018. A booking is defined as when a person arrives at the jail and a deputy records the alleged crime. A release is defined as when the person leaves the Jail and is able to go home. Of the 74,473 releases, 78.9% (n=58,770) were

booked and released once during the year and 21.1% (n=15,703) were booked and released at least two times during the year. A total of 332 people had 6 or more bookings and releases in the 1-year period. See Table 1.

Table 1: Number of times individuals were booked and released from the Harris County Jail in 1 year*

	Number of individuals	Percent
1 time	58,770	(78.9%)
2-5 times	15,371	(20.6%)
6 or more times	332	(0.4%)
6-11 times	307	
12-24 times	20	
More than 24 times	5	

*One time includes 1 booking and 1 release

Over half of the bookings were released from jail within 2 days after booking. The average length of incarceration was 25 days. However, for individuals that are not released by day 3, the average length of incarceration more than doubles to 56.3 days. See Table 2.

Table 2: Length of incarceration in the Harris County Jail

Mean length of incarceration	25.5	days
Mean if not released by day 3	56.3	days
Mean if not released in 1 week	69.1	days
Mean if not released in 2 weeks	82.1	days
Minimum-maximum	0-382	days
Standard deviation	51.8	days
By time period*	Number	Percent
Under a week	62,662	(64.3%)
Same-day release	15,085	(15.5%)
1-2 days	39,115	(40.2%)
1 week to 1 month	12,365	(12.7%)
1-2 months	8,248	(8.5%)
2-3 months	4,756	(4.9%)
3-4 months	3,297	(3.4%)
4-5 months	1,973	(2.0%)
5-6 months	1,350	(1.4%)
>6 months	2,666	(2.7%)
Greater than 1 year	77	(0.1%)

*This is not the actual count and duration for all individuals booked within the 1-year period, as we did not have data on those NOT released within the 382-day period

As described in the methods section, the Harris County Sheriff's Office added nine questions to the Harris County Jail intake form about the inmate's children and criminal history. Data was collected for 15.5 weeks between August 14 and November

30, 2018. Of the 12,694 people booked during this period who likely went through classification, 1,404 (11.1%) people answered the question. Of those who responded, 699 (49.8%) reported being the parent or caregiver of at least 1 child under the age of 18.

Demographics

The demographics of the 699 individuals that reported being a caregiver or parent to at least one child under the age of 18 are described in Table 3. Of note, a large majority of the respondents are male (82.3%) and over half are black (52.9%). Data on ethnicity of the inmates was not available for analysis.

Table 3. Demographics of inmates with at least one child under 18 years of age at the Harris County Jail (n=699)

Demographics	Count	Percent
Gender		
Female	124	(17.7%)
Male	575	(82.3%)
Race		
Asian	5	(0.7%)
Black	370	(52.9%)
Pacific Islander	4	(0.6%)
White	314	(44.9%)
Unknown	6	(0.9%)
Age		
Average age	34.82	years
Range	17-75	years

The 699 individuals reported caring for 1,736 children, with an average of 2.5 children per adult. The vast majority (93.9%) reported being the parent of the child. Other responses included stepparent, grandparent, sibling, other family member, and friend.

For male parents/caregivers, the mother was most likely (85.6%) the person taking care of the child(ren) while the father was incarcerated. However, the children of incarcerated mothers were cared for by the father (38.7%), grandparent (30.6%), and other family members (14.5%). The majority of both male (59.1%) and female (70.2%) responders said they provided all or most of the financial support to care for their child(ren). Similarly, most the of parents/caregivers were living with their child(ren) prior to this encounter at the Harris County Jail. See Table 4.

Table 4. Parent and child characteristics for incarcerated parents and caregivers in the Harris County Jail, by gender

	All parents/ caregivers (n=699)	Female parent/caregiver (n=124)	Male parent/caregiver (n=575)
Number of children			
Average number of children	2.48 children	2.67 children	2.44 children
Total number of children	1,736 children	331 children	1,405 children
1	219 (31.3%)	34 (27.4%)	185 (32.2%)
2	214 (30.6%)	38 (30.6%)	176 (30.6%)
3	119 (17.0%)	20 (16.1%)	99 (17.2%)
4	71 (10.2%)	13 (10.5%)	58 (10.1%)
5	35 (5.0%)	11 (8.9%)	24 (4.2%)
6+	41 (5.8%)	8 (6.4%)	33 (5.7%)
Relationship to child(ren) that were under their care prior to arrest			
Parent	656 (93.8%)	115 (92.7%)	541 (94.1%)
Stepparent	25 (3.6%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (4.3%)
Grandparent	9 (1.3%)	4 (3.2%)	5 (0.9%)
Other (sibling, family, friend)	9 (1.3%)	5 (4.0%)	4 (0.7%)
Caregiver for child(ren) while parent is incarcerated			
Parent	540 (77.3%)	48 (38.7%)	492 (85.6%)
Grandparent	59 (8.4%)	38 (30.6%)	21 (3.7%)
Stepparent	4 (0.6%)	3 (2.4%)	1 (0.2%)
Sibling	9 (1.3%)	7 (5.6%)	2 (0.3%)
Other family member	24 (3.4%)	8 (6.5%)	16 (2.8%)
Friend, neighbor, other	48 (6.8%)	17 (13.7%)	31 (5.4%)
I don't know	15 (2.1%)	3 (2.4%)	12 (2.1%)
Financial contribution to support children prior to incarceration			
Yes, I provided most or all of the money	427 (61.1%)	87 (70.2%)	340 (59.1%)
Yes, I provided some of the money	169 (24.2%)	20 (16.1%)	152 (26.4%)
No, I did not provide money	103 (14.7%)	17 (13.7%)	83 (14.4%)
Living arrangement prior to incarceration			
With children	435 (62.2%)	98 (79.0%)	337 (58.6%)
Sometimes with children	32 (4.6%)	3 (2.4%)	29 (5.0%)
Not living with children	232 (33.2%)	23 (18.5%)	209 (36.3%)

As described in Table 5, almost all (91.7%) of the parents / caregivers reported having been to jail or prison before and 23.0% reported growing up with an incarcerated parent.

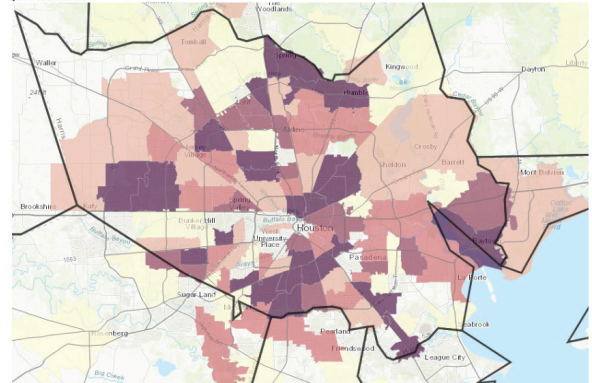
Table 5. History with incarceration for incarcerated parents at the Harris County Jail

Personal experience with jail or prison (has been to jail or prison prior to this encounter)		
Yes	641	(91.7%)
No	55	(7.9%)
Unsure	3	(0.4%)
Experience with parental incarceration as a child		
Yes	161	(23.0%)
No	503	(72.0%)
Unsure	35	(5.0%)

As shown in Figure 2, there is vast geographical diversity in the home zip codes for incarcerated parents. The neighborhoods with the largest number of children with a parent incarcerated during our study period included: Champions-Willowbrook

(6.2%), Sunnyside-Greater Hobby (6.0%), East Houston-Settegast (5.7%), Third Ward-MacGregor-Gulfgate (5.7%) and Spring-Humble-IAH (5.5%).

Figure 2. Harris County areas with the most children with incarcerated parents during a 15 week period, 2018



There was also variation in the types of charges of incarcerated parents. The 699 parents had a total of 962 charges. Of those charges, 61.2% were felony charges and 37.4% were classified as misdemeanors.

Seventy-two percent of parents had at least one felony charge, 37.9% had at least one misdemeanor charge. Note, this does not equal to 100% as cases could include both levels of offense.

The most common charges are assault, drug and narcotic offenses, and driving under the influence. See Table 6. The number of charges per parent ranged from 1 to 8, but the vast majority of parents had 1 (74.4%) or 2 (18.6%) charges. See Table 7.

Table 6: Types of charges of incarcerated parents in the Harris County Jail

Category of charge	Individuals with charge		Number of charges	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Assault offenses	170	(24.3%)	181	(18.8%)
Drug / Narcotic offenses	130	(18.6%)	147	(15.3%)
Driving under the influence	83	(11.9%)	87	(9.0%)
Larceny / Theft offenses	62	(8.9%)	67	(7.0%)
Warrant / Parole / Violation of orders	51	(7.3%)	51	(5.3%)
Motor vehicle / Driving violations*	49	(7.0%)	85	(8.8%)
Trespassing	32	(4.6%)	33	(3.4%)
Evading / Resisting arrest	29	(4.1%)	29	(3.0%)
Burglary / Breaking and entering	28	(4.0%)	30	(3.1%)
Child support related*	27	(3.9%)	27	(2.8%)
Robbery	26	(3.7%)	28	(2.9%)
Weapon possession / Carry	26	(3.7%)	26	(2.7%)
Sex offenses	20	(2.9%)	22	(2.3%)
Extortion / blackmail	19	(2.7%)	19	(2.0%)
Failure to identify or false identification*	19	(2.7%)	19	(2.0%)
Destruction / Damage / Vandalism of property	14	(2.0%)	15	(1.6%)
Fraud offenses	13	(1.9%)	13	(1.4%)
Motor vehicle theft	13	(1.9%)	13	(1.4%)
Interference with emergency request of public servant work*	10	(1.4%)	12	(1.2%)
Involving injury*	10	(1.4%)	10	(1.0%)
Prostitution offenses	7	(1.0%)	8	(0.8%)
Counterfeiting / Forgery	6	(0.9%)	8	(0.8%)
Other*	6	(0.9%)	6	(0.6%)
Retaliation / Attempted retaliation*	5	(0.7%)	5	(0.5%)
Tampering*	5	(0.7%)	6	(0.6%)
Disorderly conduct	4	(0.6%)	4	(0.4%)
Kidnapping / Abduction	3	(0.4%)	3	(0.3%)
Murder	2	(0.3%)	3	(0.3%)
Arson	1	(0.1%)	1	(0.1%)
Gang related*	1	(0.1%)	1	(0.1%)
Harassment	1	(0.1%)	1	(0.1%)
Human trafficking	1	(0.1%)	1	(0.1%)
Pornography / Obscene material	1	(0.1%)	1	(0.1%)

*Category generated by study staff. Note: Using the National Incident Based Reporting categories, we were able to categorize about 75% of the charges. For the remaining 25% we created categories based on the description of the charges provided.

Note: Using the National Incident Based Reporting categories, we were able to categorize about 75% of the charges. For the remaining 25% we created categories based on the description of the charges provided.

Table 7: Total charges per person/case for incarcerated parents in the Harris County Jail

Number of charges in case	Number	Percent
1	520	(74.4%)
2	130	(18.6%)
3	27	(3.9%)
4	16	(2.3%)
5	2	(0.3%)
6	2	(0.3%)
7	1	(0.1%)
8	1	(0.1%)

PREVALENCE OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION IN HARRIS COUNTY

In a 1-year period, 74,473 people were booked into and released from Harris County Jail a total of 97,394 times. Our data shows that 49.8% of inmates have at least one child under the age of 18 and the average number of children per parent is 2.5 children. As a result, we estimate that each year 92,718 children have a parent in Harris County Jail, which is 7% of children in the county. This grossly underestimates the total number of children with an incarcerated parent as it only accounts for Harris County Jail and does not account for children with parents in prison or other area jails.

INMATE INTERVIEWS

In July 2018, the study team conducted 26 interviews with inmates at the Harris County Jail. These 26 parents represent 79 biological children and many more stepchildren, nieces, nephews, and other friends and family over whose lives they held great influence. On average, each inmate had 3 biological children. The average age of the inmates was 38 years old and 31% were single, 27% were married, 23% lived with a partner prior to incarceration, and 18% were divorced or separated. The inmates were racially and ethnically diverse with 50% black, 27% Hispanic, and 23% white. The charges of the inmates ranged from misdemeanors to murder. The demographic breakdown of the participants can be found in Table 8 and their children in Table 9.

Table 8. Demographics of interviewed inmates at the Harris County Jail

Demographics	Number	Percent
Age		
Average age	38 years	
Gender*		
Males	13	(50%)
Females	12	(46%)
Transgender	1	(4%)
Race / Ethnicity		
Black	13	(50%)
Hispanic	7	(27%)
White	6	(23%)
Relationship status prior to incarceration		
Single	8	(31%)
Married	7	(27%)
Living with partner	6	(23%)
Divorced / separated	5	(19%)

* Gender labels reflect the terminology used by the interviewees

Table 9. Demographics and characteristics of the children of interviewed inmates at the Harris County Jail

Demographics	Number	Percent
Biological children	79	
Average number of children per inmate	3	
Total children impacted including stepchildren, nieces, nephews that the inmate cared for prior to the arrest	101	
Gender		
Female	44	(43.6%)
Male	57	(56.4%)
Living arrangement prior to parents' incarceration		
Lived with incarcerated parent before arrest	37	(36.6%)
Lived with incarcerated parent before arrest sometimes	10	(9.9%)
Did not live with incarcerated parent before arrest	54	(53.5%)
Financial impact		
Financially dependent on incarcerated parent	50	(49.5%)
Partially financially dependent on incarcerated parent	14	(13.9%)
Not financially dependent on incarcerated parent	37	(36.6%)
Children's current living arrangement*		
Biological parent	48	(41.7%)
Living on their own**	28	(24.3%)
Grandparents	18	(15.7%)
Stepparent	13	(11.3%)
Child's aunt/uncle	6	(5.2%)
Child's sibling	1	(0.9%)
Juvenile detention center	1	(0.9%)
Prior Child Protective Services involvement		
Yes	11	(42.3%)
No	13	(50.0%)
No answer	1	(3.8%)
Unsure	1	(3.8%)

*Some inmates listed multiple caregivers so the total listed is greater than the total number of children; ** Many of the inmates had children under the age of 18 and over the age of 18

The data from the interviews revealed 6 major themes:

1. Incarceration impacts families differently, but incarceration puts a significant strain on most children and family members of inmates.

Families: Many incarcerated parents work prior to incarceration, so the lack of income from the inmate provides a financial strain on families. There are also additional costs of incarceration such as legal fees, commissary, parking, and phone calls. In addition, some families struggle with childcare as they balanced working and caring for the children.

Children: The majority of the inmates report that their children are negatively impacted by the incarceration. Parents report children experiencing a wide range of emotional responses including

abandonment, resentment, depression, anger, and hurt. While some parents report their children are doing fine, others report serious troubling behavior. Other parents report minor behavior problems, a decline in academic performance, and having to drop out of extracurricular activities.

"It is devastating because when they come to visit, they can't hug you or touch you and they don't understand why I can't come home. It causes depression for me and they act out in school. It's hard to explain."

2. The inmates want to be able to communicate with their children, but there are many barriers for inmates to maintain relationships and communicate with their children and families. Contact visitation and more affordable phone calls were the most cited suggestions by the inmates. Other barriers include: visits are limited to 15 minutes, parents can only see 2 children at a time,

ID requirements for teenagers and family members, parking fees, transportation, inaccessibility for disabled family members and children with complex medical needs, and children are unable to accept collect calls.

"I don't want my son to come here. I don't want him to see me in jail, not through the glass. I'm okay with this orange jumpsuit, but seeing me and not being able to touch me... It might crush him. I don't want him to come. I would have him come if it was a face-to-face visit."

"I talk to him once every 1-2 weeks by phone call. I don't call more often because of the cost. If they can't accept the call, then I just call three times in a row and hang up. We sometimes use code. That means 'I love you and I miss you.'"



3. The inmates care deeply for their children, and most of the inmates are concerned about the well-being and perceived unmet needs of their children. Concerns include: medication management, mistreatment by caregiver, abuse by caregiver's boyfriend, children ending up incarcerated, child's safety, child is provided for, child learns, not losing custody in family court while in jail, basic needs, burden on family, kids need a safe place to hang out, medical needs, medical insurance coverage, emotional support for child, and role models.

"When I got to jail, I remember the kids saying, 'All I want for Christmas is clothes.' I thought they must be really hurting because most kids want toys."

"Being in jail is like we're frozen. Everything else is going on out there and we don't know about it and can't take care of our kids."

4. There are a lot of challenges and uncertainty in navigating the criminal justice system, resulting in additional distress for inmates, children, and family members. Some inmates have a good understanding of the legal system and their case, but other inmates report challenges in navigating the legal system, perceived lack of effective

counsel, and unfair bail practices. Additionally, a few inmates report being uninformed of the proceedings of family court cases and custody battles, which puts significant emotional stress on these inmates.

"The system forces you to just plead so you can stop spending money and get out of the system."

5. The cycle of incarceration is pervasive with the majority of parents cycling in and out of jail. Factors contributing to the recidivism and making it a challenge for inmates to break the cycle of incarceration include: addiction, unmet mental health needs, poverty, dysfunctional and complex families, abuse, homelessness, and an inability to find work due to the criminal record.

"You just get broke and exhausted... People with no money get it worst."

"Make sure people with children and addiction have somewhere to go when they walk out the door."

6. There is a need for increased capacity of programming, services, and partnerships for inmates, children, and families. Inmates most frequently requested opportunities and programs to interact with their children such as contact visitation, longer visits, less expensive phone calls, videoconferencing, and programs for parents and children to do together. Other requests included mental health and counseling, parenting classes, and programs to help with addiction. Inmates also requested community programs to help their children, such as counseling and helping their children understand parental incarceration.

"They should have family-based programs here in jail. Classes for how to be a better father and how to communicate better."

"I also want to have counseling available for kids of incarcerated parents. Kids can be cruel to each other at school, such as teasing them for their clothes or shoes."

CAREGIVER INTERVIEWS

From July to October 2018, the study team conducted 7 interviews with the caregivers and children of inmates at the Harris County Jail. Six caregivers and 1 adult child consented to be interviewed after their incarcerated biological parent provided contact information and initial consent. On average, each caregiver had 3.2 children they were providing care for. The average age of the caregiver was 43 and 83% were a parent of the child, 17% were a grandparent, and 83% lived with the incarcerated parent prior to incarceration. Eighty percent of caregivers were minorities with 40% Black, 40% Hispanic, and 20% white.

In addition to the caregiver interviews, we attended an Angel Tree meeting in Baytown, Texas, and spoke with 13 women caring for children with incarcerated parents.

The data from the caregiver interviews supports and further defines the 6 major themes from the inmate interviews:

1. Incarceration impacts families negatively. “Working double” was a theme mentioned across the interviews. All of the caregivers mentioned that the lack of income from the inmate provides a financial strain related to caring for the children. Caregivers frequently cited the costs of childcare as especially burdensome.

“I have to work double to maintain...jail presence. Food and phone calls are expensive.”

“Everything was lost, every dime I had has been used to help these cases...during the last incarceration we were evicted...”

“They (incarcerated parents) are eating 3 times a day while the kids are missing meals.”

“I remember being homeless for a little while... we walked down the streets in the dark with my brothers and sisters. We were on the streets for about 2 days and then in a shelter for 3-4 months... around Christmas. I remember one time we had no groceries in the apartment, we had to eat those vanilla cookies for dinner.” – Grew up with an incarcerated parent

2. Communication was a pervasive theme. Caregivers and children want to be able to both give and get better communication about and with the incarcerated parent, and there are many barriers to maintaining relationships, getting accurate, timely information, and communicating respectfully with children and caregivers.

Some caregivers suggested making visitation easier and more “human.” Suggestions included “contact visits where we could have a meal together... ability to send pictures of the children with letters... nicer staff...visits longer than 20 minutes...more accommodations for handicapped because they get full.”

“The guards are rude and it makes you not want to go...it makes you feel incarcerated so we stopped visiting.”

3. The inmates’ concerns about the well-being and perceived unmet needs of their children bear out in the caregiver and child interviews. Emotional instability and unpredictability emerged as themes across the interviews. Several caregivers noted that the children reported missing their incarcerated parent very much, being confused, and not understanding the circumstances. They also noted feeling uncertain about how, when, and what to tell the children about the incarceration as well as how to deal with the emotional instability.

“[The children] are very sad and depressed...they don’t understand why.”

“I remember it being a confusing and scary time...I just thought that was how life was supposed to be...as I got older, fear came.” – Grew up with an incarcerated parent

4. Caregiver and child interview data support that there are a lot of challenges and uncertainty in navigating the criminal justice system, resulting in additional distress for children and caregivers. None of the caregivers or the children had a good understanding of the legal system and their case, and all reported challenges in navigating the legal system. Almost all reported being uninformed of the court proceedings, dates, or the length of time the inmate would remain incarcerated, which put significant emotional stress on everyone.

Several caregivers noted difficulties in trying to visit with the incarcerated such as driving long distances to the jail with the children, paying for parking, and “getting over there and being told the floor is closed, come back another day.” As a result, most of the caregivers noted being unable to take the children to visit in person. Phone calls were also limited due to expense. Some had not seen or talked to their parent in months. One caregiver noted that the child “doesn’t want to go anymore...she doesn’t like that she’s in there.”

5. The caregiver and child interviews noted the pervasive cycle of incarceration and the impact

on families. Factors mentioned that contribute to the recidivism that make it challenging for families to break free of the consequences of parental incarceration included poverty, dysfunctional and complex families, abuse, and homelessness.

6. Caregiver and child interviews indicated a need for increased capacity of programming, services, and partnerships for inmates, children, and families. Caregivers most frequently requested financial support, mental health counseling, mentors for the children, parenting classes, and programs that provide educational, role-model support, and peer support. Every caregiver and the child noted financial assistance as necessary to support children and families impacted by incarceration.

“You get on all of these waitlists for programs, but you never hear anything back. It would be nice to hear back every once in a while even if it is just to give you an update on the waitlist.”

“Access to better food for the families...and transportation.”

“Biggest help would be a van and light bill...our light bill would make you cry.”

“Car seats, help with utilities...not more toys.”

Almost all of the caregivers noted a need for counseling and help with how, when and what to communicate to the children. None of those interviewed were aware of existing services currently available to meet these needs.

“Programs and awareness for children...so they feel like they are not alone. I used to see whole families together and think ‘are we the only screwed up family?’ ”

“Father figure or mother figure mentors”



PROGRAMS AND SERVICES IN HARRIS COUNTY

There are programs in Harris County that specifically address the emotional, social, academic, and physical needs of children with incarcerated parents. Available programs include these:



No More Victims is a program of Cherish our Children International that addresses the physical, emotional, and scholastic needs of children experiencing the trauma of parental incarceration. No More Victims uses a peer support model and is integrated into 3 Houston Independent School District high schools. Students experiencing parental incarceration are able to enroll in the No More Victims program and receive school credit for participation.

<https://cherishourchildren.org/>

PACE Youth Academy (PYA) is a bilingual program serving youth with one or multiple disparities that put them at-risk of delinquent behavior. PYA is a family-inclusive year-long program that provides services to youth ages 10-17 years old who have a parent incarcerated. It is designed to help improve the lives of at-risk youth, restore family bonding, prevent youth incarceration, and provide skills to become productive and proactive in every aspect of their lives. This is done through life-skills training, counseling, and educational and familial support that encourages positive attitudes. It also stimulates critical thinking and enhances communication to help make appropriate choices. The organization provides meals, field trips, family bonding experiences, and other character-building activities.

<https://paceyouth.org/>

Project HOPE is an initiative to address the social and emotional needs of the children of incarcerated parents. The long-term goal of the initiative is to prevent engagement of those children into the justice system later. The short-term goals of the initiative are to reduce social and emotional impacts that are experienced by the children of incarcerated parents. The program receives referrals from the Harris County Jail re-entry inmate population. The program conducts intake and

assesses the socioemotional needs of the children from the parents themselves, the children, and/or the guardian as appropriate. Based on the identified needs, tailored interventions are implemented. Examples of such interventions include counseling, mentoring, access to care, and social support.

BAMBI (Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative) at Santa Maria Hostel: In partnership with UTMB, the BAMBI program works with new mothers referred through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Mothers deliver at the Carole Young Unit with medical care through UTMB, and then mother and baby come to Santa Maria Hostel to finish out the rest of their sentence. The program provides intensive parenting education and coaching, case management, access to substance-use-disorder treatment services, education and employment preparation, and recovery support services. Families may be in the program up to 18 months.

<http://www.santamariahospital.org/>

WHO (Women Helping Ourselves) at Santa Maria Hostel: A treatment alternative to incarceration located at Santa Maria Hostel, the WHO program works with pregnant and postpartum women referred through the Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department (HCCSCD). Women who are referred to the program typically have charges related to their substance use, and most enter the program via the Harris County Jail. The majority of women enter pregnant and deliver while at Santa Maria, and their infant is able to stay with them during the duration of their program. While in the program, women receive substance-use-disorder treatment, mental health services, parenting education and coaching, recovery support services, education and employment preparation, and case management services. Women and their infants are typically in the program for 6 to 12 months.

<http://www.santamariahospital.org/>

Angel Tree Year Round at Second Baytown Church brings together the caregivers and children of incarcerated parents each month and provides a meal, emotional support, and a safe place to share stories, ask advice, and process the trauma associated with parental incarceration. Angel Tree Year Round also offers parenting education and social and sport activities.

Angel Tree by Prison Fellowship is a national nonprofit that partners with local churches and other organizations to provide Christmas gifts for the children of incarcerated parents.

<https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/angel-tree>

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

There are innovative programs and policies across the nation that support children of incarcerated parents. A few examples include:

In July 2018, New York City passed a bill to make phone calls free for the 10,000 inmates in New York City jails. The following month the Texas Board of Criminal Justice approved a decrease in the cost of phone calls for inmates in Texas prisons from 26 cents a minute to 6 cents a minute.³⁹ The change went into effect on September 1, 2018. Inmates at the Harris County Jail pay 20 cents a minute.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Allegheny County Jail added a family support program that includes 6 weeks of gender-specific parenting classes, coaching for phone calls to their children and families, and hour-long contact visits in a child-friendly room with books, toys, and games. The Jail also offers re-entry programs for the parent after they are released from jail which include drug and alcohol treatment, housing assistance, job placement, job training, mentoring, mental health counseling, and transportation.⁴⁰



The Osborne Association has established Children's Centers in several New York state prisons. Incarcerated parents attend parenting classes and then are able to participate in skill-building exercises with their children at the Children's Centers.⁴¹



In New Hampshire, incarcerated fathers who complete a parenting course are able to participate in video visits with their children. In addition, fathers were able to create storybook audiotapes for their children. The fathers record stories and messages for their children, and the tapes are sent home to their children.⁴²

In Ohio, the RIDGE project offers parenting and relationship classes to inmates, and the families of the participants are offered up to \$50 to cover the transportation and food expense associated with visiting the prison. The RIDGE project provides letter-writing supplies and subsidized phone calls to encourage communication during the incarceration.⁴²

Across the nation, nearly 20 prisons participate in Girl Scouts Beyond Bars. Once a month a van transports a troop of Girl Scouts to the prison, and the girls spend an afternoon with their incarcerated mothers catching up, cuddling, eating lunch, playing games, and participating in troop activities.⁴³

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parental incarceration impacts over 92,000 children in Harris County each year, and the large majority of these children are not receiving needed services despite the trauma, loss, and financial hardship that often accompanies parental incarceration. To better support children of incarcerated parents, we recommend the following:

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

- **Address basic needs of families**

There needs to be a system to connect families with an incarcerated parent to social services including food, financial assistance, subsidized daycare, housing, and transportation.

Oftentimes the incarcerated parent had worked prior to the incarceration but now is no longer bringing in income. Sixty-one percent of inmates at the Harris County Jail reported that they provided all or most of the financial support for their family prior to their arrest. The family may qualify and desperately need services that they were ineligible for or didn't need in the past. Similarly, caregivers are often financially unprepared to care and provide for an additional child.

- **Make programs and services available to caregivers, children, and parents experiencing incarceration, in order to effectively address their needs during and after the incarceration**

- Children—mentoring, counseling, safe places, developmentally appropriate information on incarceration

- Incarcerated parents--- parenting classes, re-entry programs that address underlying causes including mental health, substance use disorders, housing, employment, violent relationships, and psychosocial needs
- Caregivers—information on how to talk to children about incarceration, enrolling and connection to social services, parenting classes, emotional support

Incarceration of a parent is rarely planned for, and caregivers and family often are unprepared for caring for the child if they were not caring for the child prior to the incarceration. Caregivers need resources on how to talk to the children about their parent being incarcerated, enrolling in social services, parenting classes, and counseling and emotional support. Caregivers often have complicated or strained relationship with the incarcerated adult and may benefit from counseling or emotional support on how to manage their relationship with the incarcerated person and how to best support the child(ren) they are caring for.

- **Expand current programs that serve children of incarcerated parents, but also integrate programming into larger systems that are able to routinely reach more children**

The current programs that serve children of incarcerated parents are only reaching a small percentage of these children. Given the prevalence of parental incarceration, programs and services must be integrated into larger systems such as schools, libraries, clinics, churches, the criminal justice system, and daycares to reach more families.

- **Address barriers of parental consent**

Children whose parents are incarcerated have difficulty enrolling in programs and services that require parental consent due to lack of clarity on who can give parental consent or an inability to reach the parent to get consent. Parental consent needs to be addressed so these children can access the programs designed to support them.



SCREENING, IDENTIFICATION, AND REFERRALS

- **Explore opportunities to screen and identify children with incarcerated parents and connect them with appropriate services**

There are many missed opportunities to identify children of incarcerated parents and connect them with services through the criminal justice system, schools, daycares, and pediatric practices. However, if an institution is considering screening for parental incarceration, careful consideration must be given to who has access to the data and if the institution is adequately prepared to respond to positive screens.

- **Promote programs and services that support children of incarcerated parents**

In addition to screening families, information should be available at locations that families impacted by parental incarceration commonly frequent so families can choose to access programs and services when they want to. The messages should be normalizing and provide contact information on where families can go to be connected with programs and resources.

- **Include parental incarceration as part of screening for social determinants of health**

Many healthcare practices have begun screening their patients for social determinants of health such as food insecurity, intimate partner violence, housing needs, utility assistance, and transportation. Healthcare practices should consider incorporating screening for parental incarceration into their efforts to screen and respond to social determinants of health.

- **Offer training for professionals that are screening and working with children and families impacted by parental incarceration**

Given the stigma, shame, and trauma associated with parental incarceration, it is imperative that professionals who are screening, responding, and working with this population are knowledgeable in how to respond in a sensitive manner.

- **Develop referral systems.**

Identify programs and resources that would

support children of incarcerated parents. Develop a resource list, partnerships, and referral systems between organizations to connect families in need with these programs and resources.

EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

- **Offer more education for children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents**

There are many uncertainties and challenges related to navigating the criminal justice system and parental incarceration. This causes significant distress on the children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents. We need to identify opportunities to keep children, parents, and caregivers more informed on the criminal justice process, the parent's individual case, and available resources.



- **Update the Harris County Jail website to include resources for the caregivers and children**

Resources may include:

- What to expect when your parent is incarcerated
- How the criminal justice system works
- How to talk to children about parental incarceration
- Directory of social services and programs to address basic needs, how to enroll, and eligibility
- Directory of programs for families and children with parents who are incarcerated
- How to prepare for a parent being released from jail

CHILD-SENSITIVE PRACTICES IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

- **Reduce barriers for children to stay in contact and connected with their parent during the incarceration**

Opportunities include:

- Do not require a government-issued ID for 17-year-olds who want to visit their parents
- More affordable phone calls
- Make noncontact visitation more child friendly
- Transition to contact visitation
- Create a child-friendly visitor lobby
- Have options for families to sign up for visitation times to reduce the wait time
- Explore opportunities for affordable video calls and emails
- Offer special programming for parents and children to do together

- **Train deputies on the impact of parental incarceration on children and how to interact with children visiting the jail**



- **Adopt new policies and practices for arrests that consider children**

Witnessing the arrest of a parent can be traumatizing for a child, and there are best practices and programs available to make the arrest less traumatic for the child.

PARTNERSHIPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- **Establish a community-wide task force to implement coordinated strategies and strengthen partnerships between the Harris County justice system and social services**

Many children in our community are experiencing parental incarceration, and to adequately support these families there must be a coordinated community-wide effort with the Harris County Jail, social service agencies, courts and judges, schools, churches, mentoring programs, etc.

- **Address systemic issues that prevent families and children of incarcerated parents from accessing needed services**

There are many systemic issues, such as a lack of affordable housing and long waits for subsidized daycare, that prevent families and children of incarcerated parents from readily accessing needed services. In addition to expanding resources and services that are specific to families and children of incarcerated families, we also need to address these system barriers in our community.

- **Evaluate existing programs and expand research on parental incarceration**

While research has demonstrated that parental incarceration negatively impacts children, research is still emerging on what policies, programs, and strategies are most effective in improving the short- and long-term outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. More evaluation and research are needed to identify best practices and effective programs.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to the recommendations that directly resulted from our assessment, we identified that to decrease the overall impact of parental incarceration, we must look at opportunities to make the criminal justice system more effective. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and more attention is needed towards identifying alternatives to incarceration and the implications and unintended consequences of mass incarceration, especially for nonviolent offenses. Opportunities for exploration include:

- Bail reform
- Increase alternatives to incarceration and removal of barriers to participate
- Identify opportunities to designate minor non-violent offenses as non-arrestable offenses
- Expand eligibility and funding for programs that keep incarcerated mothers serving short sentences with their children
- Address root causes that lead to inequitable rates of incarceration
- Optimize systems from pretrial services through probation to identify and connect children and families with services

Furthermore, more research and evaluation is needed to understand how parental incarceration impacts children differently depending on the neighborhood they live in, the resources available to them, their relationship with the incarcerated parent, and their relationship with their caregiver.



LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to our needs assessment on children of incarcerated parents. First of all, there is limited high-quality research on children of incarcerated parents and some of the best data available is somewhat dated from 2010. While many of the studies establish a correlation between parental incarceration and outcomes, causal pathways are less understood. In addition, much of the available literature is focused on prisons, and may or may not apply to children with parents in jail. Further, our sampling for the interviews and jail data was a convenience sample due to safety and security concerns, along with the logistical challenges of adding additional intake questions to a busy department that processes close to 100,000 bookings each year. Finally, the scope of this assessment was limited to the Harris County Jail. There are many children in Harris County with parents in prison, as well as children in the Harris County Juvenile Detention Center who also have children, who have unmet needs that were outside of the scope of this project.

CONCLUSION

In Harris County, 1 out of every 14 children have a parent in the Harris County Jail each year, and parental incarceration negatively impacts the emotional, social, and developmental health and well-being of these children. Parental incarceration typically is not an isolated event, and children with incarcerated parents are often exposed to additional adversities including poverty, violence, substance abuse, and household mental illness.

In Harris County, children of incarcerated parents have overwhelmingly been overlooked, and very few programs are available to address the unique needs of this population as well as to connect these families with traditional social services. Children of incarcerated parents commonly experience stigma, shame, and isolation, so our community must be proactive in supporting these children and their families. Key stakeholders, inmates, and caregivers most frequently cited the need for programs and policies that address basic needs, emotional support and mental health, and more child-friendly policies and practices in the criminal justice system. To address the varying needs of children with incarcerated parents, we need a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, identification, and intervention.

Prevention: Safeguarding children so parental incarceration is less traumatizing. Solutions may include adopting new arrest practices when making arrests in front of children and making visitation more child friendly.



Identification: Identifying families experiencing parental incarceration and connecting them with needed programs, resources, and services. We also must make information on programs, resources, and services more readily available to families and children with incarcerated parents as some children and families may be hesitant to disclose family members' involvement in the criminal justice system.

Intervention: Expanding existing programs and breaking the cycle of incarceration. Programs and services are needed for the children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents and should address mental health, basic needs, mentoring, substance use, financial assistance, job skills and training, housing, and parenting skills.



While children of incarcerated parents have been overwhelmingly overlooked in the past, this needs assessment revealed a great interest by cross-sector community partners to collaborate to identify and implement strategies and programs to support these children and families. Moving forward, policy makers, the criminal justice system, schools, health care providers, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and local governments must work together to create a sustainable and comprehensive support system so these children can thrive.

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APPENDIX A

Individuals from the following organizations participated in collaborative meetings and/or provided input to this assessment: Baylor College of Medicine, Caring for Offender Families, Cherish our Children / No More Victims, Coalition for the Homeless, Correctional Management Institute of Texas, First3Years, Harris County Library, Harris County Public Health, Harris County Sheriff's Office, Houston Food Bank, Houston Health Department / Project Hope, Houston Independent School District, Houston Justice, National Institute of Corrections, One Heart Project, PACE Youth Programs, Rice University, Santa Maria Hostel, Second Baytown Church / Angel Tree, Texas Children's Hospital, Texas Inmate Families Association, Texas Jail Project, Texas Southern University's Center for Justice Research, University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, and WELLSPRING Family & Community Institute.