



# **Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup**

## **FINAL REPORT TO THE STATE COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SCHSAC)**

December 13, 2019

**Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup:  
Final Report to the State Community Health Services Advisory Committee (SCHSAC)**

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## Executive summary

### Purpose

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup was formed by the State Community Health Services Advisory Committee (SCHSAC) and the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association, to assess the role of counties in preventing and mitigating adverse effects on children of their parents or primary caregivers being incarcerated.

State and local stakeholders had raised concern about the high number of Minnesota children impacted by parental incarceration as well as uncertainty about positive outcomes in their lives. Since efforts to address the issue at the local level were limited to isolated initiatives, the Association of Minnesota Counties asked SCHSAC to partner with the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association, to take a lead role in understanding opportunities to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents. This multidisciplinary workgroup was charged with focusing on the roles of programs, systems, and environments at the county level, paying particular attention to the intersection of local jails and local public health.

### Overview of activities

The workgroup held eight meetings between May 2018 and July 2019. During three of the meetings, the workgroup heard from individuals who were directly impacted by this issue: 1) caregivers of children with incarcerated parents, 2) young adult children with incarcerated parents, and 3) formerly incarcerated parents. Their comments and discussions provided the impetus for the workgroup to identify common themes across each of the panels.

The workgroup acknowledged that multiple research sources describe parental incarceration as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that puts children at high risk for poor social, emotional, educational, and health outcomes. This is especially true because other ACEs tend to be part of these children's lives, raising their ACE score<sup>1</sup> and increasing how susceptible these children are to undesirable outcomes.

The workgroup reviewed a variety of research and emerging practices on the topic of children of incarcerated parents and compared these to current practices occurring in local communities and jails in Minnesota.

The workgroup endorsed a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Health and the University of Minnesota to develop a learning community among four Minnesota counties, and then engaged the National Institute of Corrections to provide technical assistance in implementing model practices for parents in prisons and jails.

From these activities the workgroup synthesized a set of observations, and prioritized actions and future directions for consideration by SCHSAC and the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association.

### Observations

Each of the observations has a variety of nuances and complexities that are summarized in this report (see: [Summary of observations](#)).

- Many Minnesotans are impacted by incarceration, yet children with incarcerated parents are hidden—mostly invisible to systems, programs, and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> A person's ACE score is the cumulative total of ACEs a person experiences. The more ACEs that happen in a person's life, the more likely they are to experience health problems later.

- Minnesota’s youth of color and American Indian youth are disproportionately affected by parental incarceration.
- Children impacted by incarceration need emotional support including immediate support at the time of the arrest.
- Incarceration engages a complex set of county systems, which creates challenges. Systems that may serve children with incarcerated parents rarely coordinate.
- Communication with families from arrest to release is inadequate and often inaccurate.
- Visiting processes are confusing and stressful.
- Physical contact during visits is especially important, but not allowed in most jails.
- Caregivers of children with incarcerated parents struggle with understanding and navigating corrections, social services, public health, and other family support systems—limiting their access to services and hampering their ability to meet the basic needs of the children in their care.
- Involving those with lived experience in developing solutions is imperative. Families experiencing incarceration repeatedly called upon providers not to design services and programs without their engagement: “Nothing about us, without us.”
- Current programs and practices to support children with incarcerated parents in Minnesota’s jails and other systems are limited and fragmented, yet promising practices are emerging. The workgroup noted that raising awareness of this topic has quickly led to changing attitudes and action at the county level.
- Local public health agencies are distinctively positioned to convene stakeholders to create policy, systems, and environmental changes that support improved outcomes and create best practices in Minnesota.

## Priorities for action

The workgroup developed conclusions and recommendations with three overarching priorities that are foundational to improving outcomes for children with incarcerated parents (see: [Conclusions and recommendations](#)):

- Priority 1: **Raise awareness** within county government, among professionals, elected officials and within the public.
- Priority 2: **Change attitudes** to support strengthening the parent-child bond, to build resilience and reduce parental recidivism.
- Priority 3: **Take action** to build resilient children and families.

## Recommended next steps

The workgroup has identified the following next steps:

- SCHSAC and the Minnesota Commissioner of Health approve and accept this report.
- Obtain feedback on this report from those impacted by incarceration to address the following: What concerns does the report raise for you? What’s missing? What’s incorrect? What are realistic next steps?
- Creation of a second phase of the SCHSAC Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup to inform and guide an interdisciplinary collaborative approach across Minnesota that raises awareness, in order to change attitudes and support action to build resilient children and families.

## Background

Based on the 2016 Minnesota Student Survey, one in six youth reported a history of parental incarceration—making it the most prevalent adverse childhood experience (ACE) among youth in Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> Parental incarceration often co-occurs with other traumatic experiences, such as parental substance abuse, poverty, violence, parental mental illness, and housing insecurity or homelessness. ACEs are well established sources of childhood trauma that can, in the absence of supportive relationships and environments, significantly increase a child’s risk for poor health and social outcomes throughout their life.

With so many Minnesota children impacted by parental incarceration, state and local stakeholders have expressed increasing concern about challenges in achieving resilience and positive outcomes in those children’s lives. The needed resources are local—in counties.

Noting the precedent of previous state level multi-sector efforts, including the Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Collaboration, it was apparent the state needed an interdisciplinary workgroup with a local perspective. An Association of Minnesota Counties workgroup requested that SCHSAC partner with the Minnesota Sheriffs’ Association. The relationships between SCHSAC and local public health, and between the Minnesota Sheriffs’ Association and its members who operate county jails, made this partnership an obvious starting point.

The Association of Minnesota Counties asked the workgroup to take a lead role in understanding opportunities to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents and to examine the county’s role in preventing and mitigating the adverse effects on children of their parents or primary caregivers being jailed.

It is key to focus on jails, because nearly all who are arrested go to a jail as the next step in resolving their alleged offenses. Regardless of where a parent serves their sentence, the initial trauma and its lasting impact on their children do not differ greatly whether incarceration occurs in prison or jail.

## Summary of observations

The workgroup heard from individuals with lived experience: 1) caregivers of children with incarcerated parents, 2) young adult children with incarcerated parents, and 3) formerly incarcerated parents. Their comments and discussions provided the impetus for the workgroup to identify common themes across each of the panels.

The workgroup observed the following:

### Children of incarcerated parents are hidden—mostly invisible to systems, programs, and communities

There is significant shame and social stigma associated with incarceration. Many children who experience parental incarceration do not tell anyone for fear of disgrace or being shamed in school or community settings. Even adults who experienced the incarceration of a parent during their childhood may have never told others about their parent’s incarceration.

A 2016 survey of 65 Minnesota county jails and correctional facilities revealed that most people in county jails are parents; most parents in jail lived with their child prior to arrest; and most fathers were employed prior to arrest.<sup>2</sup> Most law enforcement and corrections systems do not consider parental responsibilities and the impact of incarceration on children and families. County human services, public health, and school systems generally do not have established practices or structures in place to identify

children impacted by incarceration. This impedes early intervention strategies or provision of supportive environments to mitigate the trauma that incarceration creates.

## Youth of color and American Indian youth are disproportionately affected by parental incarceration

Data from the 2016 Minnesota Student Survey shows that Minnesota African-American youth are four times more likely to report past parental incarceration than white youth, while American Indian youth are three times more likely, and Hispanic youth two times more likely. Minnesota's incarceration rate is low compared to other states. However, rates are rising, and these racial disparities are among the highest in the nation. According to Nellis (2016), Minnesota is one of only five states in the country in which African-Americans are incarcerated at a rate of 10 to 1 in state prisons compared to whites, while the incarceration rate for African-Americans in all state prisons in the country is 5.1 times that of whites.<sup>3</sup>

## Children impacted by incarceration need emotional support, including immediate support at the time of the arrest

Parental incarceration disrupts the parent-child relationship, which is foundational for healthy child development. Members of each of the three panels convened by the workgroup emphasized the importance of the parent maintaining a parenting role and for the child and parent to stay connected during incarceration. As one parent stated, "Our children still need us."

## Incarceration engages a complex set of county systems and creates challenges; systems that may serve children of incarcerated parents rarely coordinate

The systems that may serve children include, but are not limited to public health, education and social services. These systems rarely communicate or coordinate with each other at the time of incarceration which leads to a siloed approach to supporting children of incarcerated parents. For example, most jails do not ask those incarcerated if they have minor children, county agencies don't regularly collect data regarding incarceration impacts to families when assessing eligibility for services, caregivers of children with incarcerated parents have limited access to childcare assistance or other supports, and housing service providers lack awareness and systems to adequately support family reunification after incarceration.

It was suggested that having a staff liaison for families would help families navigate and process, especially the emotional response to visiting the incarcerated parent and providing for the needs of the children. Caregivers suggested that parental incarceration be added to benefit eligibility and assessment questions. Youth panelists shared that key trusted adults were important to their ability to adjust—including coaches, teachers and others who were not part of any formal services.

## Communication with families from arrest to release is inadequate and often inaccurate

Family members who shared their experiences with the workgroup described numerous communication gaps in all phases of the incarceration process from arrest to release. They explained that jail websites are often not up to date, communication about the location of a loved one after arrest or when moved within or between facilities is lacking, and it's not clear what to expect when visiting. Family members

suggested the need for a visiting “liaison” to help families navigate visiting as well as to help process the emotional response to visiting.

## Visiting processes are confusing and stressful

Panelists expressed the need for up-to-date information about the location of their loved one prior to the visit, easily accessible information about what is or is not permitted at visits, space for children to play, a secure place for their belongings, the opportunity to bring more than one child during a visit, for more than one child at a time to visit with the incarcerated parent, and assistance with transportation. Video visits have been successful when allowed and are an important option when the technology reduces the need for visitors to travel to the facility to make contact, and when it allows all family members to participate in the visit.

Panelists discussed the need for children to have emotional support before, during, and after visiting their parent. They suggested the following could be helpful in alleviating stress associated with visiting: tips to make the most out of a visit; an on-site visitation liaison to help navigate rules, processes, emotions; access to family home visiting programs; and providing practical tools to help parents describe the situation to their children.

## Physical contact during visits is especially important but not allowed in most jails

In-person family visits are particularly important to sustaining the parent-child relationship during incarceration. “Decades of research indicate that visits from family improve institutional behavior and lower the likelihood of recidivism for inmates.”<sup>4</sup>

Panelists expressed concern about limited opportunities for contact visits in jails. Currently there is no comprehensive list of visiting practices in Minnesota jails. In fact, some contracts with video visitation companies require that jails eliminate in-person visits, which makes video the only option. There can also be time limits on free video visits, meaning using additional time is an added expense for families who are often already experiencing economic hardships.

## In developing solutions, it is imperative to involve those with lived experience

Creating change requires understanding the voices and experiences of caregivers, formerly and currently incarcerated parents, and children impacted by incarceration. “Nothing about us, without us” is a sentiment that many adult children of incarcerated parents strongly advocate. Listening to those with lived experience throughout the process of making changes will improve the policies and practices that emerge. Particular emphasis needs to be made to include people from communities who are disproportionately affected by incarceration including African-Americans and American Indians.

## Current programs and practices to support children of incarcerated parents by Minnesota’s Jails and other systems are limited and fragmented, yet promising practices are emerging

Jail programs and staffing are managed at the county level and jails often have more restrictive visiting environments with fewer programs and supports than Minnesota’s state prisons. While jail practices vary by county, the workgroup was able to inventory practices that are being implemented at some jails such as creating family/children friendly visiting spaces, allowing in-person visits, extended visiting

hours, transportation support, and parenting classes for incarcerated parents. It is evident that there hasn't been a deliberate effort to spread specific practices consistently across the state.

However, the workgroup noted that raising awareness of this topic has quickly led to changing attitudes and action at the county level. For example, a small number of county jails in Minnesota are making referrals to their local public health agencies to provide evidence-based family home visiting to families impacted by incarceration. These programs are an effective early intervention strategy to improve the health and well-being of children and parents. Additionally, four Minnesota counties have formed a learning community to share evaluation and learning about the *Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails* developed by the National Institute of Corrections. The National Institute of Corrections has offered technical assistance to Minnesota for this work.

## Local public health agencies are distinctively positioned to convene stakeholders to create policy, systems and environmental changes that support improved outcomes and create best practices in Minnesota

A number of factors contribute to Minnesota's ability to cultivate best practices in support of children of incarcerated parents. Minnesota's understanding of this topic is substantially supported by research conducted by the University of Minnesota. Minnesota's Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Collaboration began work to examine incarceration's impact on Minnesota youth and to improve practices and policies that address the needs of families impacted by incarceration. Collecting and tracking information in the Minnesota Student Survey can serve as an ongoing data source to monitor change over time. Support from the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association constitutes a significant avenue for statewide collaboration, which can be further bolstered by technical assistance from the National Institute of Corrections regarding implementation of model practices in urban and rural jails.

The local perspective also strengthens this work, because Minnesota counties administer and oversee county jails, corrections, and most health and human services for their jurisdictions. This positions counties to drive innovative practices with an interdisciplinary approach in supporting children of incarcerated parents. Counties can create opportunities for their jails to connect children and families to local resources. Local health and human service agencies often collaborate with schools and other community partners in a community network of support.

Because of its focus on understanding and addressing how inequities harm the health of populations with prevention at the forefront, public health is an ideal convener and partner. As public health in Minnesota continues to transform, local agencies will build upon and further enhance their capacity to contribute to their community's health by collecting and disseminating data; convening partners across multiple sectors; implementing preventative measures; evaluating programs; and tracking progress to address social, environmental, and economic conditions that create disparities.

## Priorities for action

The workgroup recommended three overarching priorities as foundational to improving outcomes for children with incarcerated parents:

### Priority 1: Raise awareness within county government, among professionals, elected officials and within the public

The first step in changing outcomes is increasing the awareness of the needs of children with incarcerated parents and the opportunities to intervene. Repeatedly, the workgroup observed that

small shifts in awareness about the impact of parental incarceration on children, families, communities, and systems, leads to improved understanding regarding the needs of children.

## Priority 2: **Change attitudes** to support strengthening the parent-child bond, to build resilience and reduce parental recidivism

The workgroup recognized and heard from stakeholders that improved awareness and understanding leads to motivation and willingness to make improvements in processes and systems.

## Priority 3: **Take action** to build resilient children and families

Experience has demonstrated that increased awareness increases understanding and supports a change in attitude which creates opportunities to act. County jails administrators who have championed this work report that once they understood the traumatic nature of parental incarceration and its impacts on child development, they started to appreciate the value of the parent-child relationship. These shifts in understanding and attitude created the opportunity for practice changes. For example, creating a family-friendly environment is no longer perceived as making incarceration comfortable for a person in jail, but rather is appreciated as a community support and an opportunity to strengthen the next generation. Jail administrators also report that family-friendly visiting practices positively impact detainee behavior and jail management.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The workgroup's discussions echoed an overarching theme from research: A collaborative, interdisciplinary response is needed to fully address the needs of and improve outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. The workgroup recognized that specific solutions will come from within each county based on what's each county and community needs to create its own healthy future.

Suggested next steps include:

- Considering the needs of children at all stages of incarceration from arrest to reentry
- Convening local stakeholders in order to develop an integrated, intergenerational approach with coordinated systems
- Assessing and addressing inequities
- Developing a network of community support for children and families impacted by incarceration

The workgroup recommends that SCHSAC sponsor a second phase of the Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup, to inform and guide an interdisciplinary collaborative approach across Minnesota.

Specific recommendations for Phase Two of the workgroup include:

- Workgroup representation from multiple sectors and from individuals with lived experience
- Articulating a vision for the ongoing work and creation of an actionable blueprint for change (short and long-term)
- Initiating collaboration with the State Department of Corrections and determine opportunities for partnership
- Partnering with the University of Minnesota Department of Pediatrics to share ongoing research about children of incarcerated parents
- Reviewing and assessing findings relevant to children of incarcerated parents in the 2019 Minnesota Student Survey
- Developing materials, identifying opportunities, and delivering of multidisciplinary professional education

- Continuing the learning community with an emphasis on piloting the National Institute of Corrections Model Practices and documentation of key learnings
- Supporting the development of training sessions on emerging best practices
- Informing and requesting consideration by the Minnesota Children’s Cabinet to host a summit on Children of Incarcerated Parents
- Participating and presenting about Minnesota’s experience at the National Conference on the Children of Incarcerated Parents

## Appendix A: Workgroup membership and charge

Building on previous multi-sector efforts in Minnesota, including the Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration Collaboration and an Association of Minnesota Counties workgroup, the State Community Health Services Advisory Committee identified the need for a workgroup to examine the county's role in preventing and mitigating the adverse effects of parental incarceration on children.

Co-chaired by Bill Hutton, Executive Director of the Minnesota Sheriff's Association, and Sheila Kiscaden, Olmsted County Commissioner, the multidisciplinary membership had representation from counties, state agencies, community non-profits, researchers, and people with lived-experience as a caregiver and as a child of an incarcerated parent. The workgroup focused on county level programs, systems, and environments, particularly the intersections between local jails, local public health, and local human services. Criminal justice reform topics that include the judicial system, such as sentencing guidelines, were outside the scope of this workgroup charge.

### Membership

Sheila Kiscaden, Co-Chair, Olmsted County  
 Bill Hutton, Co-Chair, Minnesota Sheriffs' Association  
 Tracine Asberry, St. Paul Youth Services  
 Jeanne Ayers, Minnesota Department of Health  
 Anne Barry, Ramsey County  
 Dawn Beck, Olmsted County  
 Guy Bowling, Fatherhood Project  
 Joan Brandt, Minnesota Department of Health  
 Lee Buckley, Ujamaa Place  
 Toni Carter, Ramsey County  
 Jackie Dionne, Minnesota Department of Health  
 Charles Dixon, Minnesota Department of Human Services  
 Ryan Erdman, Minnesota Association of Community Corrections Act Counties  
 Renee Frauendienst, Stearns County  
 Devon Gilchrist, Minnesota Department of Human Services  
 Roger Heinen, Washington County  
 Brian Howard, Olmsted County  
 Vina Kay, Voices for Racial Justice  
 Brian Kopperud, Dakota County  
 Harlan Madsen, Kandiyohi County  
 Susan Morris, Isanti County  
 Kay Nastrom, Mille Lacs County  
 John Poupart, tribal health leader  
 Rebecca Shlafer, University of Minnesota  
 John Soghigian, caregiver representative  
 Aaron Sojourner, University of Minnesota  
 Tim Sumner, Beltrami County  
 Tim Thompson, Minnesota Department of Corrections  
 Tyler Winkelman, Hennepin County Medical Center

### MDH staff

Anna Lynn, Becky Sechrist, Megan Waltz

## Appendix B: Additional resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation

[A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities \(PDF\)](#)

CANTASD, U.S. Administration for Children and Families

[Supporting Families Impacted by Incarceration: A Dialogue with Experts \(PDF\)](#)

[Supporting Families Impacted by Incarceration \(PDF\)](#)

[Promoting Family Resilience in the Face of Parental Incarceration \(PDF\)](#)

[Strengthening Families, Saving Money \(PDF\)](#)

Connect Network

[7 Helpful Programs for Children of Incarcerated Parents](#)

Michigan Breastfeeding Network

[System Changer's Guide to Incarceration \(PDF\)](#)

Portland Community College

[Family Preservation Project: Coffee Creek Correctional Facility 2010-2013 Evaluation Report \(PDF\)](#)

Princeton University: The Future of Children

Parental Incarceration and Children's Wellbeing; from pp. 147-160 of [Reducing Justice System Inequality](#)

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership

[The Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights](#)

University of Minnesota Children, Youth, and Family Consortium

[Children with Incarcerated Parents – Considering Children's Outcomes in the Context of Complex Family Experiences \(PDF\)](#)

Urban Institute

[Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails](#)

Urban Institute

[Toolkit for Developing Parental Arrest Policies: Children of Incarcerated Parents Project](#)

Urban Institute, National Institute of Corrections

[Promising and Innovative Practices for Children of Incarcerated Parents: Arrest through Pre-Adjudication \(4:32:22\)](#)

U.S. Administration for Children and Families

[An Unlikely Partnership: Strengthening Families Touched by Incarceration \(9:18\)](#)

[An Unlikely Partnership: Engagement Toolkit \(PDF\)](#)

## End notes and references

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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Department of Health. (2016). *Minnesota Student Survey*. Online:  
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/data/mchs/surveys/mss/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Shlafer, R. & Saunders, J.B. (2017). *Parents in Minnesota jails and their minor children*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

<sup>3</sup> Nellis, A. (2016). *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons*. Online:  
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>

<sup>4</sup> Minnesota Department of Corrections. (2011). *The effects of prison visitation on offender recidivism*. Online:  
[https://mn.gov/doc/assets/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy\\_tcm1089-272781.pdf](https://mn.gov/doc/assets/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy_tcm1089-272781.pdf)