

WHAT LITTLE WE KNOW: A SYSTEM-WIDE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS IN TWO U.S. JURISDICTIONS

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There are more than 2.7 million children in the United States who have an incarcerated parent and approximately 10 million children who have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Furthermore, nearly half of all U.S. children have a parent with a criminal record (Vallas, Boteach, West, & Odum, 2015). The story for each child affected by his/her parent's incarceration can vary greatly and depend on diverse factors, including the quality of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration, the degree of household stability both before and following incarceration, and the child's age, developmental level, and individual personality (Osborne Association, 2013).

While many of the risk factors children of incarcerated parents experience may be related to parental substance use, mental health, inadequate education, or other challenges associated with incarceration, having an incarcerated parent increases the risk of children living in poverty or experiencing household instability independent of these other challenges (Phillips, et. al., 2006). In fact, the ACE Study, or Adverse Childhood Experiences, recognises an incarcerated relative as one of the 10 key traumatic childhood experiences that can have an effect on a child's developing brain and body with lasting impacts on a person's health throughout his/her lifespan (Murphey and Cooper, 2015, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). An important note regarding the ACE study is that it examines life issues through the lens of child maltreatment and not by adult risk factors. Thus, as noted by Ann Adalist-Estrin (2014), "when we talk about a child losing a parent to incarceration and we interpret the ACES literature only through a child maltreatment lens, the meaning that gets made (intentionally

or not) is that children of incarcerated parents are maltreated children, harmed by their parents and thus better off without them. If, however, the parents who are in prison or jail are seen as potential supports for their children, as buffers from the toxicity of stress, then a different meaning is made of the loss. It becomes more profound and less dismissible.”

While separation due to a parent’s incarceration can be as painful as other forms of parental loss (such as death or divorce), it can be even more complicated because of the stigma, ambiguity, and lack of social support and compassion that accompanies it (Arditti, 2012). Visits between parents and their children during incarceration can help to heal the pain of the loss and may be beneficial to children’s well-being (Hollihan and Portlock, 2014). There is also a great deal of debate around the risk for incarceration for the children themselves (Raimon, Lee & Gentry, 2009, Adalist-Estrin, 2014). One study (Conway, 2015) has argued that the data used to support the ‘children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to be incarcerated’ thesis were obtained from two small studies, one with a sample size of 20 participants and the other examining a subset of children involved in the juvenile justice system.

Increased Interest in Children of Incarcerated Parents

There has been a significant increased interest in the issues, needs and assets of children of incarcerated parents throughout the U.S. Nationally, the White House under the Obama administration led efforts to bring attention to these children through its “Champions for Change” ceremony in 2012 honouring 12 individuals throughout the country for their efforts to improve the lives of children of incarcerated parents. In addition, in August 2013, the White House, along with the American Bar Foundation and the National Science Foundation, hosted the conference “Parental Incarceration in the United States: Bringing Together Research and Policy to Reduce Collateral Costs to Children” (American Bar Foundation, 2013). Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers across the country came together to review the current research, identify programmes and best practices, and develop recommendations to improve outcomes for children with parental involvement in the criminal justice system. Also of national significance is Sesame Street’s outreach campaign and toolkit, “Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration.” Along with adding a new “puppet” whose father is in prison, the Sesame Street toolkit aims to provide resources and information for families with young children as they

encounter the difficult changes and transitions that come with a parent's incarceration.

While the level of interest at the U.S. national level on the issues and needs of children of incarcerated parents is encouraging and brings much needed attention to this issue, there is still a void in reliable local data on how many children are affected by incarceration and what unique needs, assets and challenges they might have that may vary among communities, especially those communities more disproportionately impacted by high rates of incarceration. Additionally, since this data project was completed, there have been major changes within the U.S. federal administration. Given the unknown and potential likelihood that the current U.S. administration may not hold the same level of interest or commitment of resources for these children, it is important now more than ever that efforts be made to identify, understand and support children with criminal justice involved parents. It is also important to consider if impacts of parental incarceration are different for children when the parent is incarcerated at a local jail versus a state or federal prison. When in jail, the parent's length of stay may be shorter and visits may be more accessible due to the potential closer proximity of the correctional facility, but the incarceration may be more sudden and unpredictable in the eyes of the child. Often, state or federal level data are used to estimate the number of children of incarcerated parents at the local level but rarely have there been efforts to collect this information on a large scale through local criminal justice agencies.

Methods

In Autumn, 2014, the Alameda County Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (ACCIPP) partnered with the Alameda County Sheriff's Office (ACSO) to develop, distribute, collect and analyse a brief survey about issues related to children of incarcerated parents to all individuals incarcerated within their adult county jail system. This wider data collection partnership was largely the result of earlier smaller scale efforts to collect information from currently incarcerated parents within Alameda County's Santa Rita jail and with visitors at the jail. Based on the successful efforts of ACCIPP to gain approval for this ground-breaking data collection, the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (SFCIPP) approached the San Francisco Sheriff's Department (SFSD) and successfully gained approval to conduct the survey throughout this neighbouring adult jail system as well. By gaining permission to

work with two neighbouring jail systems, and given that children of incarcerated parents do not necessarily live in the counties in which their parents are incarcerated, this project was in the unique position to gather more comprehensive information and work across local county government and service systems. It is these local government and service agencies that are best positioned to provide a continuous system of support for children both during and after their parents' incarceration. This extensive data collection effort gathered some of the most comprehensive local level information about children of incarcerated parents ever collected in the United States.

The survey was structured to gather information to inform programme and policy decisions in consideration of the children's well-being when their parents become incarcerated in local jails. Survey methods and content were developed through a collaborative process that included the creation of two project advisory boards, one from each county. The project advisory boards included: (1) members of ACCIPP and SFCIPP; (2) staff from both sheriff departments; (3) other subject matter experts, and (4) formerly incarcerated mothers and fathers from Alameda and San Francisco Counties. The survey focused on the following four key outcomes:

- Identify who within the Alameda and San Francisco County Jail Systems is a parent or caregiver of children 25 years old or younger;
- Gather basic information about locally incarcerated parents and their child(ren);
- Better understand how children are affected by their parents' incarceration;
- Identify what types of resources families might need for children and parents to maintain contact and/or relationships during their parents' incarceration and after release.

Jail Facilities

The survey was administered at all adult county run jail facilities within Alameda and San Francisco Counties. This included jail facilities housing adult men, women, and transgender individuals and at all security levels. Table 1 below provides a brief description of each jail facility.

It is important to note that the survey was conducted in jail and not prison facilities. Incarceration in U.S. jails can be more sudden and have unpredictable and/or shorter lengths of stay than incarceration in U.S. prisons. These variables should be considered when reviewing the data and consideration of effects of parental incarceration on children.

Table 1: Jail Facilities		
Alameda County		
Jail	Population	Av. Daily Population**
Santa Rita	Men, Women, Transgender	2,395
Glen Dyer	Men	430
San Francisco City & County		
Jail	Population*	Av. Daily Population*
County Jail #2	Men, Women, Transgender	243
County Jail #4	Men	293
County Jail #5	Men	651
*Board of State and Community Corrections. Jail Profile Survey Online Querying Database. 25 February 2016. Jail Profile Survey. Data as reported by Sheriff's Departments.		

Recruitment & Consent

Surveys were administered over a series of days in each county jail in October and November 2014. Times for survey distribution were selected based on when most incarcerated individuals would be in their housing units. Individuals housed in solitary confinement, disciplinary housing units and/or housing units for individuals with severe mental illness were not eligible to participate in the survey. All individuals who were present in the approved housing units on the day and time of the survey distribution were eligible to participate.

On the day of survey distribution, the study team and volunteers visited each approved housing unit within the jail. Upon entering the housing unit, a member of the study team made a verbal announcement and provided a brief project overview for everyone in the unit. The

announcement was made in both English and Spanish. All individuals interested in learning more about the survey were invited to meet with the study team in a predetermined area of the housing unit such as a programme room or at the common tables within the housing unit.

All individuals that indicated they wanted to participate in the survey were given a consent information sheet with a survey in either English or Spanish, depending on their preference. Individuals were given the opportunity to review the consent information sheet and ask one-on-one questions with anyone from the study team. The survey was completed anonymously with no identifying information collected from individual participants. The study team and volunteers were available to help participants one-on-one with language and literacy barriers while participants completed the survey. After participants completed the survey, they were instructed to return the survey by placing it in a large envelope to further ensure their anonymity. Any individual who completed and returned a survey received a small snack, a resource list of in-jail and community services, and a “tips for incarcerated parents” information sheet. The study received IRB approval from Ethical and Independent Review Services in July 2014 (Kramer, Principal Investigator) and approval by both Sheriffs prior to its administration.

Survey Structure

Every person responding to the survey, whether they were a parent or not, completed the first question: “Are you a parent or primary caregiver for any child(ren) who is 25 years or younger?” If they answered “no,” they were instructed that they had completed the survey. If they answered “yes,” participants were prompted to complete the rest of the survey. The double-sided, one-page survey was structured in four sections. Section 1 asked about participant demographic information and incarceration history. Section 2 asked about child demographic information, current living situation and child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement. Section 3 asked information about the parents’ perceived effects of incarceration on their children including child’s presence at the time of their arrest, impacts of child’s living situation, education and family economics. Finally, Section 4 asked information about the parent’s connectivity level with their children, their intentions to reconnect with their children after release, and recommendations for types of support services for their children.

Results and key findings

Data Analysis

Participant demographic characteristics and survey responses were summarised with frequencies and averages for the two counties combined and for each county separately. All data points were assessed for male and female participants combined and separately to assess differences by participant gender. A special note on gender; participants were asked to self-identify their gender as female, male, transgender male or transgender female. The number of individuals who self-identified as transgender male (N=6) or transgender female (N=7) were too low to be representative or have significance and thus were excluded from gender difference analysis but were included in all other analyses. Specific data points were also assessed both for child age groups combined and separately to assess differences by age. Specific data points were also assessed combined and separately for racial/ethnic groups to assess differences by racial/ethnic group.

Data Results

On the days of survey collection, 2,998 people were present in the housing units at time of survey distribution and offered the opportunity to participate. Of this number, a total of 2,045 individuals, or 68% completed surveys within five Alameda and San Francisco County jails. Of the surveys collected, 2,041 were included in the analysis. Four participants were administratively dropped due to inability to participate. Of those included in the analysis, 95% of the surveys were completed in English and 5% were completed in Spanish. Table 2 (next page) provides an overview of survey collection by county and combined.

Key Findings

Most incarcerated people in San Francisco and Alameda County jails are parents.

The question of “are you a parent or primary caregiver for any child(ren) who is 25 years or younger?” served as the threshold question for the survey and responses varied between the two counties. Overall, 69% of survey participants reported that they were a parent or primary caregiver for at least one child 25 years old or younger. Among all survey participants in Alameda County, over three quarters of participants or 77%

reported that they are a parent or primary caregiver of at least one child 25 years or younger, with an average of 2 children (range: 1-10+). Among all survey participants in San Francisco, over half of participants or 59% reported that they are a parent or primary caregiver of at least one child 25 years or younger, also with an average of 2 children (range: 1-10+). One explanation of the difference in number of incarcerated parents by county may be the variation in opt-out versus opt-in recruitment procedures. That is, in Alameda County, where participants had to actively volunteer to participate, being a parent may have been a motivator toward participation and thus an explanation for the higher prevalence of parents among those surveyed. Or, there might be a higher percentage of incarcerated parents in Alameda County.

Table 2: Summary of Survey Collection by County

	Alameda County		San Francisco		TOTAL
Total Number of People Offered Survey*	2,007		991		2,997
Total Number of People Completed Survey	1,134		907		2,045
Survey Completion Rate**	57%		91%		68%
Distribution of Surveys Per Jail	Santa Rita Jail	88%	County Jail #2	18%	
	Glen Dyer Jail	12%	County Jail #4	32%	
			County Jail #5	50%	
Total Number of Parents/Primary Caregivers for Children ≤ 25 years	878		536		1,414
Percent (%) of Individuals Surveyed Who are Parents for Children ≤ 25 Years	77%		59%		69%
Total Number of Children Identified Age ≤ 25 Years	1,781		1,110		2,891

*Total number of people in housing units on day and time of survey distribution.

**In Alameda County, survey participation was 'opt-in' where individuals had to actively choose to take the survey. In San Francisco, survey participation was 'opt-out' where individuals had to actively choose to not take survey.

Parents and caregivers are disproportionately people of colour.

A substantial majority or 88% of all parents, reported identity with a racial or ethnic minority group. There were no significant differences in racial and ethnic identities reported by the parent participants compared to non-parent participants. In addition, the average age of parents or caregivers was 32 years and 88% were male. A summary of demographic information for parents and caregivers participating in the study is presented in Table 3 on the next page.

Thousands of Bay Area children on any given day have a parent incarcerated in an Alameda County or San Francisco County jail.

Alameda County participants reported being a parent or primary caregiver for a total of 1,781 children aged 25 years or younger. San Francisco participants reported being a parent or primary caregiver to a total of 1,110 children aged 25 years or younger. Considering the individuals who were not surveyed in these jails for various reasons (not present in the housing unit during survey due to court appearance, medical appointment, lawyer visit, family visit or in units not offered the survey), it can be conservatively estimated that, on any given day, there are more than 3,000 children aged 25 years or younger with parents in Alameda or San Francisco County Jails.

Table 3: Parent Participant Demographics (N=1,414)*

Median age of parents and caregivers		32 years	
Gender	%	Languages Spoken	%
Male	88%	English	93%
Female	11%	Spanish	16%
Transgender	1%	Mandarin/Cantonese	1%
		Other	5%
Ethnicity	%	Education Level	%
African American	50%	Some high school or less	27%
Latino	19%	High school graduate/GED	47%
Caucasian	12%	Some college or more	26%
Asian or Pacific Islander	7%		
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%		
Multi-racial/Other	10%		
*percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding			

A summary of demographic information for children identified in the survey is presented in Table 4.

Children experience multiple cycles of parental incarceration.

Of all the parents surveyed, 36% reporting being incarcerated 6 or more times since becoming a parent. Older children were more heavily affected by multiple parental incarcerations with 49% of parents to children 11-18 years old and 58% of parents to children 19-25 years old reported being incarcerated 6 or more times. Yet younger children also experienced multiple parental incarcerations; 32% of parents with children 6-10 years old, and 13% of parents with children 0-5 years old reported being incarcerated 6 or more times. These multiple cycles of parental incarceration that may exacerbate isolation, stigma and disruptions in the lives of their children.

Table 4: Demographics for Children ≤ 25 Years Old*

	Alameda County (N=1,781)	San Francisco (N=1,110)	Total (N=2,891)
Average age of children [range]	8 years [0-25 years]	9 years [0-25 years]	8 years [0-25 years]
0-5 years old	39%	32%	36%
6-10 years old	23%	24%	23%
11-18 years old	25%	28%	26%
19-25 years old	13%	15%	14%
Gender			
Male	51%	52%	51%
Female	49%	48%	49%
Transgender	0%	0%	0%
Ethnicity			
African American	45%	47%	46%

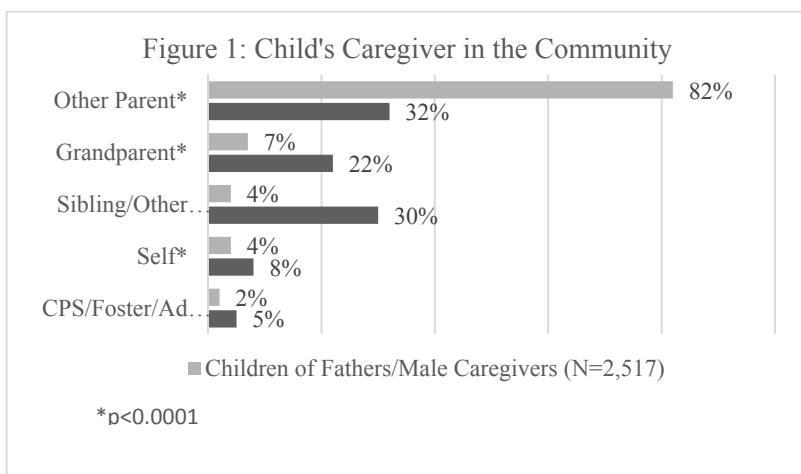
Latino	20%	12%	17%
Caucasian	10%	10%	10%
Asian or Pacific Islander	4%	8%	6%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.8%	0.2%	0.6%
Multi-racial/Other	21%	22%	21%
*percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding			

Children live in or near the communities where their parents are incarcerated.

The clear majority of children, or 74%, live in either the same county where their parents are in jail, or in a close neighbouring county and nearly three quarters of parents reported having some type of current contact with their children. Thus, there are important opportunities to preserve family relationships while parents are in jail. Yet many parents reported barriers to maintaining contact including the high cost of phone calls and the high costs of visiting. Only 35% of incarcerated parents or caregivers reported having jail visits with at least one of their children, and 81% of these visits were “non-contact” meaning they were held behind glass windows where the parents and children had no physical contact with each other. When asked what can be done to improve visits in Alameda County, the overwhelming recommended improvement was an increase in contact visits. For both counties, additional requests included longer visits or more visiting days and times, help with transportation, help navigating the visiting system, and ‘other’ desires such as improving the visiting environment (friendlier environment, quieter rooms or single booths, etc.), child/parent classes or counselling, and new toys and activities.

There are differences in children's experiences when their father goes to jail versus when their mother goes to jail.

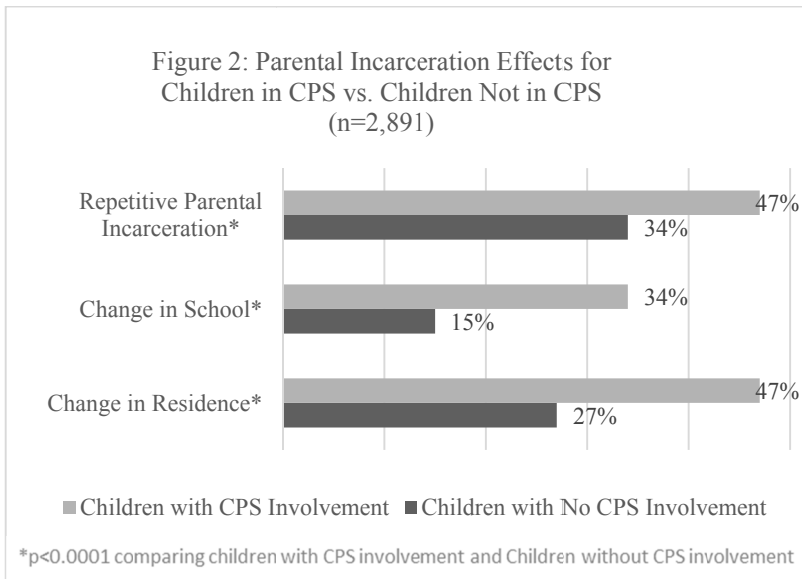
There was a significant difference regarding the person whom the children lived with depending on whether they had an incarcerated father or incarcerated mother ($p < 0.0001$). The vast majority of children of incarcerated fathers, or 85%, lived with their other parent while children with incarcerated mothers were likely to live either with their other parent, grandparent or sibling/other family member. Differences in child's caregiver in the community by gender of incarcerated parent are shown in Figure 1. In addition, children with incarcerated mothers were four times more likely to also have a currently incarcerated father. Finally, there significant differences ($p < 0.0001$) regarding who brought child(ren) to visit. A higher percentage of incarcerated fathers reported that the child(ren)'s other parent brought them to visit compared to incarcerated mothers. On the contrary, children with incarcerated mothers were more likely brought to visit by a grandparent, sibling, or other relative.



Children feel the burden of significant disruptions when their parents become incarcerated.

Children may experience many disruptions in their lives as a result of their parent's incarceration as demonstrated by the 27% of parents who reported that their children had to change their residence because of their parent's incarceration. In addition, 17% of parents reported that their children had to change schools and 63% of parents reported that their family had lost income because of their incarceration.

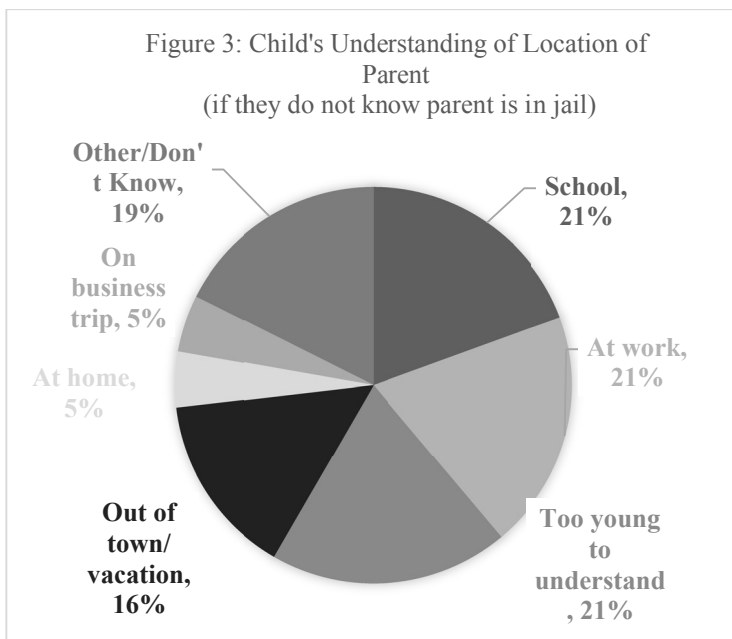
For children who are involved in both the Child Protective Services System and have an incarcerated parent, the disruptions in their lives can be more complicated. Children with involvement in Child Protective Services (CPS) were significantly more likely to have a change in their living arrangement and have to change schools compared to children not involved in CPS. Children with CPS involvement also experienced significantly higher rates of repetitive parental incarceration. Furthermore, children of parents or caregivers whose other parent was (also) currently incarcerated were three times more likely to be involved with CPS compared to those whose other parent was not incarcerated. The differences in the effects of parental incarceration for children with CPS involvement vs. children without CPS involvement are shown in Figure 2.



Many children do not know their parent is in jail.

Some families believe it is better for children to know the truth about their parent's incarceration. While other incarcerated parents and/or children's caregivers may decide it is in the best interest of the child not to tell them about their parent's current incarceration. Most parents or 60% reported that their children knew they were incarcerated, yet 30% of parents reported that their children did not know. The distribution of the child's

understanding of the parent's current location, if they do not know their parent was currently in jail is presented in Figure 3. The 'other' locations included living in another city, time out/school for misbehaviour, hospital/doctor, on the streets/running around, with family, camping or at war.



Parents intend to be a part of their children's lives after incarceration.

The vast majority, or 95% of incarcerated parents and caregivers reported that they plan to reconnect with at least one child after their release from jail. When asked what additional supports incarcerated parents and caregivers thought their children would benefit from both while they were incarcerated and after they were released, the most common answers were positive family activities, recreational activities, support for basic life needs, counselling/ therapy, and homework/tutoring.

Recommendations

This study was a major step in gathering local system-wide information about the number and nature of children with locally incarcerated parents,

and the effects of parental incarceration. Yet without action, gathering information does nothing to improve the lives of children when their parents go to jail. The following are data driven recommendations of changes in policies and practices to strengthen the level of support and connectivity for children of incarcerated parents that help to ensure healthy family systems after release.

- Include the voice of children and youth of all ages, including youth involved in the criminal justice system, when gathering information and making policy and programmatic decisions related to the effects of parental involvement in the criminal justice system;
- Examine strategies and opportunities to increase contact visiting between children and their parents at local jails that give children the opportunity to touch and hug their parents;
- Decrease the cost of phone calls between incarcerated parents and their children;
- Provide transportation support or public transportation vouchers (if applicable) for children and community caregivers to decrease the financial burden on the families associated with jail visits;
- Provide more support for community caregivers within the children's homes so they can better support their children;
- Ensure that family issues are assessed and addressed during jail or prison intake and during re-entry planning processes throughout a parent's involvement in the criminal justice system;
- Develop more re-entry programmes and/or integrate strategies into existing re-entry programmes that specifically address healthy reconnection strategies for both parents and their children as parents return to the community and into the lives of their children after incarceration;
- Recognise the differential effects of incarceration for children with incarcerated mothers vs. incarcerated fathers and develop policies and practices that address their unique needs;
- Develop age appropriate programmes to provide psycho-social support for children at different development ages while parents are involved in the criminal justice system;
- Provide support and education for incarcerated parents to help them parent their children while incarcerated and prepare for reunification after their release including the distribution of family-focused community resources;

- Work with local child protective service (CPS) departments to improve their understanding of the compounding effects of both parental incarceration and CPS involvement.

Conclusion

The information collected in this study can help to promote data driven culture change and justify the need for increased resources within local government services systems. These additional resources can lead to improved programmes and policies for children and their families to strengthen connections during their parent’s incarceration and ensure healthy family systems after release. Other local criminal justice jurisdictions and/or service systems that support children, such as school districts or health departments, may benefit from collecting and utilizing similar information.

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