

Easing Reentry by Supporting Fathers and Families

By Christine Lindquist, Tassell McKay, Hope Smiley McDonald, Mindy Herman-Stahl and Anupa Bir

More than half of inmates — 52 percent of state inmates and 63 percent of federal inmates — are parents of minor children. Subsequently, many children are affected by a parent's incarceration, with estimates indicating that 1.7 million minor children, representing 2.3 percent of all minor children in the U.S. resident population, have a parent in prison.¹ Despite the large number of families that are impacted by incarceration, very little programming designed to support and strengthen families during incarceration and reentry has been offered in correctional settings.

Due to the greater awareness of the increasing number of imprisoned parents and the lack of focus on family relationships in existing reentry programs and policies,² the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) funded the Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated Fathers and their Partners (MFS-IP) as a priority area under the "Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood" provisions of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (P.L. 109-171). A national evaluation was also funded by HHS to document the implementation of MFS-IP programs and assess the impact of the programming on key outcomes such as relationship quality, child well-being, family economic stability and recidivism.

This article describes programming under way among the MFS-IP grantees to facilitate successful reentry by providing family support services to incarcerated fathers and their families. Based on data gathered from the implementation component of the MFS-IP evaluation, this article highlights approaches to teaching skills, facilitating contact and providing support to families.

Why Are Family Support Services Necessary?

Previous research has documented the extent of family ties among incarcerated fathers. Although less than one-half

of incarcerated parents are married (36 percent of federal prisoners and 23 percent of state prisoners who are fathers³), larger proportions of men are in intimate relationships. Data from the Multi-site Evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, indicate that three-quarters of the incarcerated fathers in the study reported being currently married or in a steady relationship, with most of these men reporting that they lived with their romantic partner prior to incarceration.⁴ Many incarcerated fathers were also closely involved in their children's lives prior to incarceration. According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, just less than one-half (46.5 percent) of fathers in state prison and just more than one-half (55 percent) of fathers in federal prison lived with their minor children either in the month before arrest or just prior to incarceration. More than one-half, 54 percent of fathers in state prison and 67 percent of fathers in federal prison, reported that they were the primary source of financial support for their children prior to their incarceration.⁵

Most incarcerated fathers report having some contact with their children during incarceration. According to a 2008 BJS special report, 30 percent of fathers incarcerated in state prisons had some form of weekly contact with their children, and another 23 percent had some form of contact at least monthly.⁶ However, numerous barriers to maintaining family relationships during incarceration are evident. Often, inmates are housed far away from their families. The cost of visitation and the inhospitable prison environment may further inhibit efforts to maintain contact. Limited visiting hours, lack of privacy, and restrictions on movement and physical contact diminish the efforts families make to stay connected.⁷ In addition, children may be prevented from contact with their parents because the custodial parents or other relatives do not want the children to know that one of their parents is incarcerated; do not want to expose them to the prison visitation environment; or cannot afford to maintain contact.⁸

Upon release, returning inmates typically look first to their families to meet their immediate needs for money, housing and emotional support.⁹ Yet they and their families face numerous challenges in re-establishing relationships,¹⁰ including renegotiation of roles, dealing with resentment and negative emotions, navigating unrealistic expectations, facing interference from their children's mother or other family members, and dealing with their children's new father figures.

It is important to address the challenges of strengthening families during incarceration and re-establishing family relationships upon release. Recent data from the Returning Home study found that men who were married or in a committed, cohabiting relationship were half as likely to report engaging in drug use and/or committing a new crime at eight months post-release, compared with those who were uninvolved or in noncommitted relationships. The association remained even after controlling analytically for factors associated with self-selection into intimate relationships. The study also indicated that the quality of the relationship was a factor — among partnered inmates, higher quality relationships were associated with lower odds of drug use.¹¹ In addition to the influence of marriage and romantic relationships, relationships with children may also play an important role in successful reentry. The Returning Home study found that fathers' attachment to their children was negatively related to fathers' substance use (but unrelated to employment, rearrest or reincarceration outcomes) one year after release.¹² Another study showed that fathers who had contact with their children while in prison and those who had better relationships with their children upon release were less likely to return to prison.¹³ Together, these findings clearly highlight the importance of programs designed to support families during incarceration and reentry.

Novel Approaches to Fostering Successful Reentry

MFS-IP grants support the provision of services to promote or sustain healthy relationships for couples with children when one parent is incarcerated or otherwise involved with the criminal justice system. In addition to relationship-strengthening activities, grantees may deliver services that improve parenting and promote economic stability. No one program model is required for grantees, and the grantee sites vary widely in terms of program components delivered and service delivery approach.¹⁴ The grantees have chosen different "intervention moments," with some enrolling participants at the point of incarceration and others focusing primarily on the months preceding release. All grantees deliver services in at least one correctional facility, including state prisons, county prisons and county jails, and many grantees have a community-based component for nonincarcerated partners. Specific eligibility criteria are established by individual grantees. Some grantees focus on reentry populations, whereas others feel that all inmates, regardless of how close they are to release, can benefit from family strengthening programming. Participation in programming must be voluntary on the part of both members of the couple. As reported elsewhere, recruitment, particularly for partners, has been a substantial challenge for the grantees.¹⁵

Both public and private agencies are represented among MFS-IP grantees, with public agencies including both correctional and human service agencies and private agencies including community and faith-based organizations. Agency type may have implications for the extent of control over corrections-based programming. Correctional agencies generally have better access to program components that aid in implementation, such as venue and time, and are better able to obtain clearance for program staff. However, such agencies may face a disadvantage with respect to participant recruitment and retention, as inmates and their families may be less likely to trust service providers who are part of the criminal justice system. The evaluation will continue to document the implementation experiences of both correctional and community-based agencies, exploring the challenges and solutions facing each as they enroll families and deliver services in facility and community settings.

The sections that follow describe current approaches under way by MFS-IP grantees to provide family support services to incarcerated fathers and their families, including teaching skills, facilitating contact and providing support to families. In addition, these sections highlight implementation challenges experienced by grantees as they break new ground in providing family services in correctional settings.

Teaching skills. Because one of the primary objectives of the MFS-IP initiative is to teach couples the skills necessary to maintain healthy relationships, all of the grantees are implementing a curriculum-based component on this topic to incarcerated men and their partners. Grantees either offer joint programming, in which the partner comes to the correctional facility to participate in classes (typically offered weekly for 10 weeks) or workshops (typically offered during a two-day weekend course) with the incarcerated father, or "parallel" programming, in which the men take the courses in the correctional facility and the partners take the courses in a community setting. Although a few grantees deliver in-house marriage/relationship education curricula specifically designed for their target populations, most grantees use an "off the shelf" curriculum. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is the most common curriculum in use, employed by seven grantees; other curricula include Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS), Married and Loving It!, Exploring Healthy Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families, and Couple Communication.

Due to a host of constraints associated with programming in correctional settings, including correctional officer shortages, lack of adequate space for programming, frequent transferring of inmates, and programming time being cut short due to lockdowns and population counts, several grantees have had to condense their healthy relationship curriculum, either shortening the overall length or combining multiple sessions. In addition, because the curricula employed have generally not been designed for couples separated by incarceration, many grantees have needed to modify the topics to reflect the conditions experienced by

their participants, particularly the physical separation of the couple. Finally, in order to increase attendance among partners, many grantees pay for transportation and/or lodging costs for partners who travel to the facility for courses, or they offer other incentives for participation such as increased visitation time. Sites that do not provide this type of assistance to partners tend to have substantial difficulty getting partners to participate in the programming, due to both motivational and logistical barriers.

Skills taught in healthy relationships classes typically include:

- o Defining healthy relationships
- o Recognizing destructive relationship patterns
- o Communication
- o Conflict resolution
- o Bonding and intimacy
- o Commitment

Skills taught in parenting classes typically include:

- o Communication
- o Discipline techniques
- o Anger management
- o Co-parenting
- o Rebuilding trust

In addition to relationship strengthening skills, almost all grantees are teaching parenting skills to program participants. Such classes are typically offered only to incarcerated men, rather than both men and their partners. Parenting classes often serve as a gateway or prerequisite for relationship classes or other program components. Although healthy relationships and parenting are clearly the skills that receive the most emphasis, some grantees also build skills by offering GED/higher education courses, employment readiness training, vocational training and financial literacy courses. For example, the Council on Crime and Justice of Minneapolis offers extensive employment services to both women and (upon release) men, through its partnership with Goodwill/Easter Seals. Such broad-based skills offered by MFS-IP grantees complement family strengthening approaches by improving the reentry experiences of the men and promoting the economic stability of the family.

Facilitating family contact. Few grantees focus exclusively on the skills-building components discussed above. Many also play an active role in facilitating contact among the families they serve. A number of sites provide some form of visitation support or special child visitation. Among MFS-IP grantees, visitation supports provided by staff may include help with obtaining bureaucratic permissions for prison visitation, coordinating with a child's caregivers in the community to help arrange visits to the facility, subsidizing phone calls, assisting men in mailing letters to their children, and negotiating approval with facility staff to allow physical contact visits. Special visitation typically consists of providing a child-friendly visitation center at participating facilities, such as the children's centers offered by the Osborne Association at three New

York State Department of Correctional Services facilities, but may include other innovative visitation opportunities. For example, Child and Family Services of New Hampshire has set up a remote visitation infrastructure that allows incarcerated participants to connect via video feed from the prison with their children at local program offices in the community.

Services designed to facilitate contact among the families are very well-received among the population served. Ten additional hours of family visitation time provided to participants by one grantee was a selling point when recruiting potential participants. The opportunity for increased communication with partners and children is also a significant incentive to retention in the program.

Providing support. In addition to teaching skills and facilitating family contact during incarceration, the programs funded by the MFS-IP initiative support families through case management, family counseling and support groups. Case management is employed in many sites, with substantial variability in the intensity and focus of this service. For example, the Council on Crime and Justice provides intense, broad-based case management to both members of the couple beginning with the man's entry into the state correctional system and extending one year after his release. Case advocates meet with the men and women throughout this time period (with particularly intense case management during the time of release) and assist with a variety of needs such as food, clothing, housing, employment, etc. Several other sites offer case management services that are focused on the reentry period. For example, the grantees Centerforce in California, Child and Family Services of New Hampshire, and the Oakland Livingston Human Services Agency in Michigan provide case management in the months prior to and after release that focuses on family reunification, with referrals provided for a variety of services. The New Jersey Department of Corrections, Shelby County (Tenn.) Division of Corrections, and Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota each conduct a small number of post-release case management follow-up visits with all program participants to assist with ongoing service needs and to help address any issues that emerge during the reunification process.

Family supports can also include couples counseling and support groups. For example, the Oakland Livingston Human Services Agency program supplements its family strengthening classes with support groups that immediately follow the classes and cover some of the same topics. These support groups are also available in the community so that men who are released can continue participating in the groups along with their partners.

Summary

The programming delivered under the MFS-IP funding is a new approach involving the integration of the criminal justice and human service fields, which traditionally have not worked together. The couple-oriented work is new

within the prison environment, and grantees have encountered numerous challenges as they have attempted to recruit and retain couples in their programs and deliver a variety of family strengthening services. This is true for correctional institutions, which place many restrictions on such services due to their primary focus on safety and order, and in community settings due to the time constraints, competing problems, and needs of the partners and released men who are served on the outside. MFS-IP grantees have adapted to frequently changing environments, experienced the “culture clash” between the safety/custody versus rehabilitation/programming mentality, and learned the importance of correctional staff buy-in and support, as well as the need for close partnerships with other agencies.

The National Evaluation of MFS-IP will document the evolution of these programs as they mature, including challenges they may face due to current economic conditions and lessons learned as programs gain more experience serving participants and their families after release. In addition, the evaluation will examine the impact of various types of programming on recidivism and other outcomes. Through an impact study of approximately 2,000 couples from five MFS-IP sites, the impact of family strengthening programming on relationship quality and stability, parenting and child well-being, employment and economic stability, and criminal behavior and substance use will be determined. These findings will assist federal, state and community policymakers and funding agencies in identifying effective approaches to the provision of support to families affected by incarceration. More information on the grantee programs and the evaluation is available at <https://mfs.rti.org>.

ENDNOTES

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Christine Lindquist, Ph.D., is senior research sociologist; Tasseli McKay, MPH, is public health analyst; and Hope Smiley McDonald, Ph.D., is research sociologist for the RTI International Crime, Violence, and Justice Research Program. Mindy Herman-Stahl, Ph.D., is research psychologist for the Behavioral Health Research Division of RTI International. Anupa Bir, Sc.D., MPH, is director of the RTI International Research Program on Women, Children, and Families.

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