



# Toolkit for Developing Family-Focused Jail Programs

## Children of Incarcerated Parents Project

*Bryce Peterson, Lindsey Cramer, Emma Kurs, and Jocelyn Fontaine*

*June 2015*

Through no fault of their own, millions of children have been exposed to and affected by the criminal justice system by witnessing their parent being arrested, by seeing their parent in court, or by visiting their parent in jail or prison. Indeed, many of the thousands of adult men and women who are arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated each year leave behind minor children<sup>1</sup> who must grapple with their parent's absence for days, months, or years. Although such exposure does not always result in negative outcomes for children, the extant research does suggest that parental involvement in the criminal justice system can put children at risk of residential instability, economic strain and financial hardship, mental health problems, poor academic performance, and antisocial and delinquent behavior.<sup>2</sup> Parental involvement in the system can be traumatic for children and can hinder the quality of the relationship they have with their parent.

To aid in the field's understanding of the potential for policy and practice to mitigate this trauma and to improve parent-child relationships, the Urban Institute has collaborated with the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) to identify promising practices across the country and to highlight a few of those in three practitioner toolkits and a framework document. This toolkit and the strategies and experiences described herein are intended for people who are interested in developing family-focused jail programs in their own jurisdictions, such as jail practitioners and community-based organizations working with jail administrators and jail detainees. The other two toolkits are focused on [parental arrest policies](#)<sup>3</sup> and [family impact statements](#),<sup>4</sup> while the [framework document](#)<sup>5</sup> offers context for the issue of involvement in parental criminal justice. The framework document also provides information about a broader array of programs and practices for children of justice-involved individuals, and it discusses key challenges and recommendations for the field. Box 1 describes the methodology we used to develop the toolkits and framework document.

---

*Through no fault of their own, millions of children have been exposed to and affected by the criminal justice system by witnessing their parent being arrested, by seeing their parent in court, or by visiting their parent in jail or prison.*

---

---

## BOX 1

### **Methodology**

In collaboration with NIC, Urban’s methodology to determine which practices to highlight included a literature review and a scan of practice by leveraging professional networks,<sup>a</sup> culling publicly available information online, and conducting telephone interviews with program staff members in 40 organizations and agencies. Through this process, we worked with NIC to identify three locations: New York City; Allegheny County and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and San Francisco, California.<sup>b</sup> Those locations had efforts that were focused on children of justice-involved parents and that seemed to be promising and worth disseminating to a larger audience through this project.

The three locations were selected because they had stakeholders from nonprofit organizations and government agencies working together for children of justice-involved individuals. Thus, selecting them offered us the opportunity to gain a diversity of perspectives and to learn about their public-private partnerships. Those jurisdictions also allowed us to gather information about how a single location can target parental involvement across each stage of the criminal justice continuum, including arrest, pretrial detention, and sentencing.

We visited the three locations and met with relevant stakeholders in government agencies and in nonprofit, community-based, and faith-based organizations. This project did not include an independent assessment or evaluation of any of the policies or practices discussed herein, though they appear to hold some promise for reducing trauma and improving the lives of the children who are experiencing parental justice involvement. Those practices also do not represent the full body of programs and services available to children. Remember that this toolkit and the other deliverables stemming from this project are not intended to be an endorsement of any particular practice. Rather, they are illustrative examples to guide your thinking and to help you incorporate the lessons learned in your own jurisdiction.

<sup>a</sup> Networks included those of the Urban Institute, as well as the National Institute of Corrections, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. HHS and the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships are critical stakeholders in this effort and play an advisory role on the project.

<sup>b</sup> We also visited organizations in Oakland, but the majority were in San Francisco.

# Family-Focused Jail Programs

This toolkit summarizes information learned from interviews of key stakeholders in San Francisco and Allegheny County regarding their experiences in designing and implementing family-focused jail programs. The programs include components such as parenting classes, parent–child contact visits, and phone calls during which parents are “coached” by staff members about how to speak with their children. Those components are designed and integrated in such a way that they build on and complement one another in a single, comprehensive program.

Family-focused jail programs were implemented in those two locations to help minimize the trauma that children face when their parents are arrested and detained in jail. The distress includes the feeling of separation that a child feels when a parent is removed from the home and the trauma of seeing a parent behind bars (such as is the case in many visitation rooms in jails around the country). The programs presume that children should not be punished for their parents’ mistakes.

In particular, stakeholders in San Francisco cited the city’s Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights as a reason for implementing family-focused jail programs. The Bill of Rights indicates, among other things, that children have a right to speak with, see, and touch their parents (see box 2 for full Bill of Rights). Thus, it is important to provide children with the opportunity to have contact visits with their parents in jail and to prepare parents to support their children’s emotional needs during those visits.

---

*The distress includes the feeling of separation that a child feels when a parent is removed from the home and the trauma of seeing a parent behind bars (such as is the case in many visitation rooms in jails around the country).*

---

---

## BOX 2

### Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent’s arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent’s absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I face my parent’s incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

**Source:** San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (2003).

---

The family-focused jail program in San Francisco is called One Family and is operated by Community Works, a local community-based organization. In Allegheny County, services are provided by the Family Services of Western Pennsylvania under the Family Support Program. The two programs each offer parents in jail a range of services that are intended to improve the relationships they have with their children and families. Both programs are innovative in the way they integrate multiple services into a single, comprehensive, family-focused program.

We identified several key considerations when developing and implementing family-focused jail programs:

- **Identify goals.** When one develops a comprehensive, family-focused jail program, it is important to identify the goals of the program. In this section, we describe the main goals of the programs in Allegheny County and San Francisco to guide you in defining your own objectives for implementing a family-focused jail program.
- **Ensure that the process is collaborative.** Consider which agencies, organizations, and individuals would be helpful in developing and implementing family-focused jail programs. In the section, we discuss the importance of garnering buy-in and building relationships with (1) jail administrators and staff, (2) government agencies such as child welfare organizations, (3) family members of the incarcerated parent, and (4) the child's caregiver.
- **Determine what components should be in the program.** Think through the services you would like to offer the parents and children whom you hope to serve under the family-focused jail program. In this section, we describe the components of the programs in Allegheny County and San Francisco, which include parenting classes, coached phone calls, contact visits, relationship classes, family circles, and therapy.
- **Implement the program.** Once you have identified goals, collaborated with necessary partners, and decided which components to include in the program, it is time to implement the program. In this section, we discuss possible ways to develop the family-focused jail program, what eligibility requirements to consider for program participants, and how to think about training program staff members.

# Considerations for Developing a Comprehensive Family-Focused Jail Program

## Identify Goals

The first consideration when developing a comprehensive, family-focused jail program is to identify the goals for the program, a step that will help in effectively designing the program's components. Think about what you aim to accomplish when creating a family-focused jail program. Who should the program benefit? How might those benefits be realized? Are the goals in line with current practices?

Identifying goals not only helps improve understanding of what services to provide, but also helps determine how to provide them. Some of the goals identified by stakeholders include the following:

- Strengthen the bond between parent and child
- Ensure that parent-child interactions are as beneficial as possible for the child
- Allow individuals to make parenting decisions
- Use evidence-supported practices and evaluated curricula

One important goal is to *strengthen the bond between parent and child*, thereby striving to minimize the trauma and feelings of separation that children face when their parents are detained in jail. Beyond allowing children to see and touch their parents, a goal might be to *ensure that parent-child interactions are as beneficial as possible for the child*. Because many of the parents detained in jail are not in the best emotional state to talk to their children and to interact with them in an appropriate, socially supportive manner, the family-focused jail programs in Allegheny County and San Francisco aimed to provide services that help prepare parents to interact with their children. For example, parents may learn parenting skills through parenting classes, while phone calls and visits enable program staff members to work on communication issues with parents.

---

*The family-focused jail programs in Allegheny County and San Francisco aimed to provide services that help prepare parents to interact with their children.*

---

It is also important to *allow individuals to make parenting decisions* even though they are in jail. People may be in jail for several reasons, and those reasons often do not mean that an individual is unfit to be a parent. Your goal, then, may be to provide parents an opportunity to play an active role in the decisions that affect their children and to help resolve issues with coparents and caregivers. Family-

focused programs may even improve the way parents are involved in their children's lives because the programs teach parenting skills and provide a structured environment in which parents, children, and caregivers can interact with one another.

Another goal is to *use evidence-supported practices and evaluated curricula*. This goal can be accomplished by following best practice guidelines for selecting and delivering services to parents and children. For instance, the program administrators in San Francisco and Allegheny County used parenting curricula that had been evaluated in other settings. Doing so can provide some level of assurance that program components will be effective, or at least that they will be rooted in findings from prior research and evidence.

## Ensure That the Process Is Collaborative

The second consideration is to ensure that the process of developing the program and providing services is collaborative. Specifically, stakeholders recommended these steps:

- Clarify roles
- Build trust and strive for a mutually beneficial relationship
- Think broadly about partners
- Involve families in the process

The programs in both locations began as part of broader collaborative efforts. In Allegheny County, the Family Support Program was built on existing collaborative efforts and developed by an entity named the Allegheny County Jail Collaboration, which is a partnership among several agencies in Allegheny County (including probation, human and health services, program providers, and jail administration). The stakeholders in the Jail Collaboration realized they were serving many of the same individuals across their agencies and aimed to improve the services to this shared population. In response, they worked together to develop the Family Support Program. Similarly, San Francisco's One Family program was created in part as a result of the collaborative efforts of several government agencies and community-based organizations that met under the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, or SFCIPP.

When one thinks about collaboration, it is important to *clarify roles*. In San Francisco and Allegheny County, community-based organizations (Community Works and Family Services of Western Pennsylvania) provide and facilitate most of the program components. Those organizations have a long history of providing services to justice-involved individuals and their families. However, many stakeholders attributed the success of their family-focused jail programs to significant coordination and collaboration with jail administration and staff. For example, program staff members must rely on the jail staff to get clearances for visitors, to adjust visiting and class schedules, and to secure spaces for program delivery. Thus, when developing a family-focused jail program, you will need to determine

everyone's role in program delivery, including who will oversee program administration and who will provide specific services.

Because a good working relationship between service providers and jail staff members is critical to the success of such programs, it is also important to *build trust and to strive for a mutually beneficial relationship*. Some family-focused services, such as contact visits, could create opportunities for family members to sneak contraband into the facility. Close collaboration with jail administrators can help program staff members implement measures to make the programs effective and still ensure that they do not compromise the safety and security of the jail or disrupt other jail proceedings. In Allegheny County and San Francisco, program staff members and jail administrators negotiated to ensure that service providers would follow jail policies by adequately searching family members before contact visits or by monitoring parents during visits and phone calls with their children.

As you determine roles and build mutually beneficial relationships, consider *thinking broadly about partners* and including stakeholders who are not directly involved in service delivery or program administration. For example, try to work with child protective services (CPS) and other child welfare agencies in your community. Parents who want to participate in the family-focused jail programs may have an open CPS case. It is essential, then, that program staff members work with CPS to make sure the contact visit is not in violation of an open case. One of the program staff members in San Francisco was hired specifically to work with the San Francisco Sheriff's Department and CPS to improve the chances that the parents are united with their children upon their release. The staff member investigates whether a parent has an open CPS case, verifies the criminal charges with the sheriff's department, determines whether the parent would be a good fit for the contact visits and other family-focused services offered in the jail, and updates CPS on the client's progress. Thus, you should strive to receive buy-in from multiple types of policymakers and stakeholders, an effort that may help the program achieve long-term stability and success.

Finally, it is important to *involve family members in the process*. Neither of the studied family-focused programs would work—or would be as effective—without active participation from the nonincarcerated coparents and caregivers. Coparents and caregivers are responsible for bringing the child to the jail on the day of the contact visits, a duty that can be challenging and expensive. The visits can be quite burdensome for some caregivers because they might have to travel long distances, take time off work, and invest their own resources to arrive on time for the visits. Caregivers are sometimes uncomfortable or even afraid of coming to a jail, and those feelings may exacerbate the other challenges they face.

Thus, you will need to work to make sure family members see the importance of the program. Program staff members may need to contact family members directly to explain the benefits of the program for jailed parents and their children. In addition, providing support to coparents and caregivers, such as help with transportation, could make it easier for them to get to visitation appointments and participate in the family-focused programs. Finally, you may want to solicit feedback from family members on program components, including how burdensome they are and how effective or useful family members perceive them to be.

## Determine What Components Should Be in the Program

A third consideration to keep in mind when implementing comprehensive, family-focused jail programs is what components to include. Both the One Family and the Family Support programs are made up of several components, including the following:

- Parenting classes
- Coached phone calls
- Contact visits
- Other components (such as relationship classes, family circles, one-on-one meetings, and post-release check-ins)

What follows is a description of those program components. While considering the components for your own jurisdiction, keep in mind the first two considerations: to ensure their success, program components should address the identified goals and should be selected through collaboration with the right people.

### PARENTING CLASSES

Program staff members in San Francisco and Allegheny County facilitate classes with the jailed parents, and those classes provide parenting skills training to help parents understand child development and to identify and prevent problem child behaviors, such as acting out and fighting. Parenting classes help to achieve the goals of ensuring that parent–child interactions are beneficial for the child and of allowing parents to be involved in making decisions that affect their children.

Several parenting curricula are available. One Family staff members use the Parenting Inside Out (PIO) curriculum for all of their participants. The program staff members in Allegheny County use PIO only for the mothers in their jail and use another curriculum—Inside Out Dads—for the fathers. Both staffs chose those curricula because they consider them to be evidence based, but other established parenting curricula are being used in jails and prisons across the country.

Class facilitators shared that the parenting curricula they use does have limitations. For example, parenting classes can be too focused on traditional family structures (i.e., marriage and biological children), a focus that is not always appropriate for class participants who have less traditional family structures. Program staff members may need to augment or adapt curricula to meet the particular needs of their class participants. The curricula often provide a framework for class discussion, but staff members should feel free to talk about other subjects that are relevant to the individuals in the class, even if they stray from the curriculum. Thus, in addition to selecting appropriate curricula, you may need culturally competent facilitators to determine how best to make the content of the parenting classes fit the needs of participants.

Finally, determine how many facilitators are needed for the parenting classes. Program staff members in the locations we visited preferred having two facilitators per parenting class. They said that two facilitators were more effective at communicating with and engaging the parents; facilitators also could take turns with one another so they did not have to facilitate an entire class on their own. In particular, we heard that coed parenting class facilitation can be effective because male and female facilitators are able to model what a healthy relationship looks like for class participants. For example, facilitators can demonstrate respect to one another, take turns leading the class, and apologize to one another openly when appropriate. Despite the advantages of using two facilitators, this option is more expensive than having only one facilitator. It is important to determine what best fits the needs and goals of the program.

### COACHED PHONE CALLS

Another component to consider incorporating in your comprehensive family-focused program is coached phone calls between parents and their children. When developing the Family Support Program, the Allegheny County Jail Collaboration found that it was very expensive for parents to call their children and other family members. Therefore, a critical component of the program is free: coached phone calls that parents can make to their children (as well as to their spouses, partners, and children's caregivers).

Before starting to coach phone calls, you need to determine how to facilitate the coached phone calls, how long the phone calls should last, and how many phone calls each parent should be given. In Allegheny County, calls are typically 10 minutes long, and each participant receives two phone calls per month. Again, you should figure out what best fits the needs and goals of your program.

Likewise, create procedures to ensure that parents are using the phone calls appropriately: (1) to talk with their children, (2) to provide advice, and (3) to make appropriate parenting decisions. You may want parents to use the phone calls to learn about how their kids are doing in school, whether they are getting along with other family members, how they are feeling at home, or whether they are struggling with anything. That process may be accomplished by providing program oversight, encouragement, and help during the phone calls.

In Allegheny County, a program staff member dials the number of the child or family member and listens to the conversation. Staff members also provide advice and support to the parent if a situation or conflict arises during the call. One example we heard during our interviews was a conversation during which a staff member was able to help a parent talk to a child who had a developmental disability and figure out which additional services that child should receive. Program staff members also redirect conversations if parents begin to focus on things other than the child or family during the call. If such is needed, a staff member can debrief and provide feedback to parents after the phone call is over.

## CONTACT VISITS

Another component of the One Family and the Family Support programs to consider implementing is contact parent–child visits. In both San Francisco and Allegheny County, contact visits are not allowed for the general jail population; rather, they are a special privilege reserved for parents enrolled in the family-focused program. Because the programs are meant to be comprehensive with each program component building on one another, you will need to determine how to implement the contact visits in conjunction with other program components, such as parenting classes and coached phone calls. For example, parents in San Francisco are allowed to have visits only after they have attended or enrolled in a parenting class. In Allegheny County, parents must have started both parenting classes and coached phone calls.

Still, it is important to be flexible with these requirements and to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. For instance, some parents may be in jail for only a short period of time and thus would not be able to meet the requirements in time to benefit from the contact visits. Other parents might be in other jail programs that conflict with the schedule of the parenting classes or coached phone calls, thereby preventing them from meeting the requirements for the contact visits.

It is important to make the visits conducive to strengthening the parent–child relationships. To accomplish this goal, program staff members might provide coaching and support to parents during the visit. The relationships also can be strengthened by holding contact visits in rooms that are kid-friendly. The visiting rooms in San Francisco and Allegheny County were decorated colorfully and had brightly colored rugs, toys, games, and other activities for the children to play with. By making visitation rooms kid-friendly, children and parents feel more at ease during the visit and are more likely to interact with one another. Thus, you will need to find the staff, space, and materials necessary to make the visits enjoyable and effective.

---

*It is important to make the visits conducive to strengthening the parent–child relationships.*

---

## OTHER COMPONENTS

Though parenting classes, coached phone calls, and contact visits are the three main program components of the family-focused jail programs, many other services can be provided. For example, the One Family and the Family Support programs offer several services that are important on their own or that support the three main program components. Both locations offered a type of relationship class in addition to the parenting class. Relationship classes can help parents strengthen their relationships with other adults and family members (e.g., spouses, partners, coparents, and caregivers), which may ultimately benefit the child as well.

In Allegheny County, program facilitators also provided coached relationship calls that coincided with the coached phone calls with children. In San Francisco, One Family provides “family transition circles” in which the parent and family discuss what harm is created by the parent’s incarceration, what the parent can do to help heal that harm, and how to support one another after release. Family circles are intended to address the overall effect an individual’s repeated incarceration has had on other family members and to create a space for family members to share honestly with one another.

Other components of the San Francisco program include therapy and one-on-one meetings with parents in jail, which are designed to address the more individualized needs of parents. Program staff members in Allegheny County also conduct post-release check-ins with individuals after they leave jail and return to the community. The check-ins help the program staff to identify parents’ needs and to coordinate service delivery upon their release.

As you consider whether to incorporate those components into the program, think of other services not listed in this toolkit that better fit the needs of the parents, children, and family members you hope to serve. As an example, think about providing additional support or services directly to caregivers or children.

## **Implement the Program**

Once you have identified your goals, have collaborated with necessary partners, and have decided which components to include in the program, you are ready for implementation. In this section, we discuss how family-focused jail programs are being implemented in San Francisco and Allegheny County. While the examples are illustrative, they are not the only ways to implement a family-focused jail program. In implementing the program, consider the following:

- Program structure and sequence
- Eligibility
- Staff training

### **PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCE**

In San Francisco and Allegheny County, the structure of the family-focused programs is similar: They are designed so that individual components build on one another. Parents are not eligible for contact visits in either location until they have participated to some extent in other program components (i.e., the parenting classes and, in Allegheny County, coached phone calls). That structure was implemented because (1) it enables parents to begin building their parenting skills in the parenting class before they have a contact visit with their child, and (2) it requires the parents to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening their relationship with their child. You may similarly want to determine how each of the components selected for the family-focused jail program will build on and support one another.

Because each program component is part of the more comprehensive program, staff members are typically involved in multiple components. The program staff may hold a caseload, facilitate a parenting

class or coached phone call, provide counseling, supervise visitation, and so on. When staff members participate in multiple facets of the program, parents are able to build a relationship with them and to see them throughout each of the various program components. In particular, it is useful to have the staff members who facilitate the parenting classes also oversee the contact visits: this system enables staff members to have a rapport with the parents in class and to use information learned in class to help guide the parents during their visit.

As you consider the structure and sequence of the program, you will also want to think specifically about how each program component—in particular contact visits—will be conducted. Parents in Allegheny County typically receive one contact visit per month; most of the facilities in San Francisco can accommodate one contact visit per week. To determine how many visits your jail(s) can accommodate, think about how much space and staff support are available for visits, as well as what the parents' needs will be. Most of the parents who participate in Allegheny County's program are serving a sentence and thus are likely to be in the jail for a longer period of time than are inmates who are detained and awaiting a sentence. Conversely, the parents in San Francisco's jails are often awaiting trial, are incarcerated for less definite periods of time, and may be better served by more frequent contact visits.

You will also need to determine who will be allowed to participate in the contact visit. In Allegheny County, the incarcerated parents are allowed to bring in as many children as they want, as well as additional family members, including spouses, partners, parents, grandparents, and others. Stakeholders in Allegheny County said that they chose this structure because they were focusing on the family as a whole and that the parent-child relationship was part of the family.

Alternatively, incarcerated parents in San Francisco are allowed to have contact visits only with their children. Family members or caregivers who bring the children must remain in the waiting room during the visit. Stakeholders said the rationale for their policy is that the focus of the contact visit should be the parent-child interaction, and the presence of other family members could be a distraction.

## ELIGIBILITY

It is important to determine who is eligible for the program. In Allegheny County, participation in the Family Support Program is restricted to individuals who are housed in each jail's Reentry Pod. Thus, the family-focused services are part of Allegheny County's larger reentry programming. Individuals in this pod have been assessed to be at a medium or high risk to reoffend, have been sentenced to serve 90 days or more in jail, and have no open charges. However, in some cases (in particular for females), the pre-sentenced inmate population also is eligible to join the reentry pod. After they are in the reentry pod, parents may become eligible to participate in the contact visits once they have (1) attended the first three parenting classes, (2) started the coached phone calls, and (3) remained misconduct-free for 30 days prior to the visit.

In San Francisco, both pretrial and sentenced inmates are eligible for One Family. The program staff meets with individuals to make sure they are ready for the visits. Parents are deemed fit for the contact

visit on the basis of their emotional and mental state. If inmates are not ready for a visit, a staff member works with them to help get them ready. Staff members then check to see if the parents have a restraining order against them, whether they have charges related to their children, and whether they have any behavioral issues. Therefore, as you determine who is eligible for the program, determine the legal status and specific needs of your inmate population.

### STAFF TRAINING

An important part of implementing a program is making sure to have a properly trained and prepared staff to facilitate and operate the program. Staff members at Community Works and Family Services of Western Pennsylvania have a range of credentials, training, and relevant experiences, including licensed therapists and individuals who personally experienced parental incarceration. When possible, it also helps to have facilitators and other employees who themselves have experience in the criminal justice system. Such individuals can be great facilitators and make strong connections with participants. If you are interested in including former inmates on your staff, you should determine what restrictions the jail has in allowing individuals with a criminal history to work in the facility.

For an organization to be successful in developing family-focused jail programs, the program staff should have experience in jail-based service provision and should be knowledgeable about child development and well-being. Staff members should also have adequate training and continued support throughout their work. Some staff members may find working in a jail setting each day to be difficult. Take care to hire individuals who are able to handle the situations they will experience in such facilities.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Throughout our field interviews, stakeholders discussed challenges they encountered and lessons they learned as they designed and implemented their family-focused jail programs. Consider the following issues:

- Have adequate and appropriate space for the various program components
- Strike a balance between having fun and providing a service
- Minimize the trauma associated with visiting a parent in jail
- Account for high population turnover in jails
- Secure adequate, sustainable funding

**Challenge:** Stakeholders indicated that a challenge in implementing family-focused jail programs is *having adequate and appropriate space for the various program components*. Space must be big enough to accommodate the various program components, such as contact visits and parenting classes. Moreover, as indicated in a previous section of this toolkit, the contact visiting rooms need to be kid-

friendly enough to provide a fun and supportive atmosphere for the parent–child interactions. Locating the necessary space can be a challenge when space and materials are limited in jails.

**Lesson Learned:** Stakeholders in San Francisco and Allegheny County often had to *convert existing rooms in the jail to create child-friendly visiting spaces*. In many cases, staff members had to convert traditional visiting spaces and existing classrooms into rooms that could accommodate contact visits and then return them for use in other jail programs and services. Staff members would bring carpets, toys, games, and other activities into the rooms for the contact visits, and then would remove the materials and clean the rooms afterward. Explore similar options in your own jurisdiction to find and create a space that is conducive to program components.

**Challenge:** Stakeholders also cautioned that contact visits must be educational and can reinforce what parents learn in class, but visits must also be fun and enjoyable for both the parent and child. Thus another challenge you may encounter is *striking a balance between having fun and providing a service*.

**Lesson Learned:** To remedy this problem, the program staff in both locations *supervised the visits and provided assistance to parents* as necessary. If staff members saw parents paying more attention to an activity (or, in Allegheny County, to another family member) than to their children, they would intervene and encourage parents to focus on the child, or they would offer suggestions for conversation topics. However, staff members also *provided parents and children with toys and decorated the visitation rooms*. Parents and children in both of the locations we visited have access to books, toys, puzzles, games, and other child-friendly activities. Those items gave parents positive, prosocial tools to use when interacting with their children. In Allegheny County, staff members even took pictures of the children with their parents and printed a copy each for the child and the parent.

**Challenge:** Another challenge is *minimizing the trauma associated with visiting a parent in jail*. Program staff members learned that children found it traumatic to watch their parents being led out of the visitation room one-by-one and searched at the end of each visit. Watching their parents leave the room caused them to relive feelings of separation and anxiety, and then they had to wait until all of the parents were returned to their cells. The process is required by jail administration to make sure family members do not leave before there is confirmation that no contraband has been introduced into the facility.

**Lesson Learned:** As a solution, consider *providing an additional service to the children to entertain and distract them from noticing their parents* being led out of the visitation room and searched. In Allegheny County, program staff members partnered with another local organization to read stories to the children while the parents were being called back to their cells. During our visits, the children seemed to really enjoy the stories and to not be too focused on the parents being led away.

Similarly, stakeholders in Allegheny County realized that children and family members were coming to the facility early in the morning to check in before the contact visits but that the children had nothing to do in the waiting room. To address that problem, program staff members *created a family-activity center in the lobby of the jail*, which includes an area for arts and crafts, a video nook, and a book corner.

**Challenge:** The stakeholders we interviewed also mentioned the challenge of *accounting for high population turnover in jails*. Staff members had difficulties engaging parents in family-focused services for very long, especially the parents who were awaiting trial and not serving a sentence.

**Lesson Learned:** Stakeholders recommend *being flexible in how policies are enforced*. For example, despite the eligibility requirements that both San Francisco and Allegheny County have before a parent can have a contact visit (i.e., participating in a parenting class and a coached phone call), program staff members should try to be flexible with the requirements if a situation calls for it. Flexibility will help ensure that parents and children participate in and benefit from the program as expediently and appropriately as possible.

**Challenge:** The final challenge encountered by stakeholders is *securing adequate, sustainable funding*. Programs such as those in San Francisco and Allegheny County are often funded by a mix of public and private dollars, both of which can run out at any time. Funding uncertainty can make long-term stability difficult to maintain. Similarly, funding is often inadequate to implement all of the program components that you think are necessary for the parents in your jail.

**Lesson Learned:** Although there is no simple solution to this challenge, one option to consider is to *think about collecting adequate data from the inception of the program*. Keeping track of program participation, successes, and outcomes might help to answer questions such as these: Does program participation improve parents' behavior in jail? Are parents learning more about child development? Do the parenting classes improve the way parents interact with their children during visits? You may also want to partner with other agencies, such as school districts and child welfare agencies, to collect data directly on children's well-being. Being able to demonstrate improvement might help during the search for ways to fund the program.

## Conclusion

The strategies addressed in this toolkit seek to add opportunities for key decisionmakers to address the needs of parents in jail and their children. Our conversations with stakeholders in San Francisco and Allegheny County revealed that family-focused jail programs appear to hold promise for improving parent-child relationships. Successful implementation of family-focused jail programs may mitigate the trauma and feelings of separation that children experience when their parents are arrested and placed in jail. Although we cannot quantify the outcomes or effects (both positive and negative) that such policies have on parents or children, the programs appear to be worth considering if your goal is to become more child- and family-centric.

## Appendix A. Links to Other Sources of Relevant Information

- **The National Institute of Corrections Children of Incarcerated Parents Project:**  
<http://nicic.gov/coip>
- **The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated:**  
<https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>
- **San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership:** <http://www.sfcipp.org/>
- **Osborne Association's New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents:**  
<http://www.osborneny.org/programs.cfm?programID=23>
- **The International Association of Chiefs of Police's *Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents*:**  
<https://www.bja.gov/Publications/IACP-SafeguardingChildren.pdf>
- **The National Reentry Resource Center:** <http://csgjusticecenter.org/jc/category/reentry/nrrc/>
- **Crime Solutions:** <http://www.crimesolutions.gov/>

## Notes

1. Pew Charitable Trusts (2010).
2. Bendheim-Thoman Center (2008); Brazzell (2008); Ehrensaft et al. (2003); Foster and Hagan (2007); Geller et al. (2009); Moses (2006); Murray and Farrington (2005, 2008); Murray, Janson, and Farrington (2007); Murray, Farrington, and Sekol (2012); Phillips et al. (2002); Phillips et al. (2006); Phillips and Gleeson (2007); Trice and Brewster (2004); Wildeman (2014); Wright and Seymour (2000).
3. Kurs et al. (2015).
4. Cramer et al. (2015).
5. Peterson et al. (2015).

## References

- Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. 2008. "Parental Incarceration and Child Well-Being in Fragile Families." Fragile Families Research Brief 42. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Brazzell, Diana. 2008. *Using Local Data to Explore the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Cramer, Lindsey, Bryce Peterson, Emma Kurs, and Jocelyn Fontaine. 2015. "Toolkit for Developing Family Impact Statements: Children of Incarcerated Parents Project." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Ehrensaft, Miriam, Ajay Khashu, Timothy Ross, and Mark Wamsley. 2003. "Patterns of Criminal Conviction and Incarceration among Mothers of Children in Foster Care in New York City." New York: Vera Institute of Justice and NYC Administration for Children's Services.

- Foster, Holly, and John Hagan. 2007. "Incarceration and Intergenerational Social Exclusion." *Social Problems* 54 (4): 399–433.
- Geller, Amanda, Irwin Garfinkel, Carey E. Cooper, and Ronald Mincy. 2009. "Parental Incarceration and Child Well-Being: Implications for Urban Families." *Social Science Quarterly* 90 (5): 1186–202.
- Kurs, Emma, Bryce Peterson, Lindsey Cramer, and Jocelyn Fontaine. 2015. "Toolkit for Developing Parental Arrest Policies: Children of Incarcerated Parents Project." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Moses, Marilyn C. 2006. "Does Parental Incarceration Increase a Child's Risk for Foster Care Placement?" *National Institute of Justice Journal* 255: 12–14.
- Murray, Joseph, and David P. Farrington. 2005. "Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency through the Life-Course." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46 (12): 1269–78.
- . 2008. "The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children." *Crime and Justice* 37 (1): 133–206.
- Murray, Joseph, David P. Farrington, and Ivana Sekol. 2012. "Children's Antisocial Behavior, Mental Health, Drug Use, and Educational Performance after Parental Incarceration: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 138 (2): 175–210.
- Murray, Joseph, Carl-Gunnar Janson, and David P. Farrington. 2007. "Crime in Adult Offspring of Prisoners: A Cross National Comparison of Two Longitudinal Samples." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 34 (1): 133–49.
- Peterson, Bryce, Jocelyn Fontaine, Emma Kurs, and Lindsey Cramer. 2015. *Children of Incarcerated Parents Framework Document: Promising Practices, Challenges, and Recommendations for the Field*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Pew Charitable Trusts. 2010. *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*. Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- Phillips, Susan D., and James P. Gleeson. 2007. "What We Know Now That We Didn't Know Then about the Criminal Justice System's Involvement in Families with Whom Child Welfare Agencies Have Contact." Children, Families, and the Criminal Justice System Research Brief. Chicago: Center for Social Policy and Research, University of Illinois at Chicago.
- Phillips, Susan D., Barbara J. Burns, H. Ryan Wagner, Teresa L. Kramer, and James M. Robbins. 2002. "Parental Incarceration among Adolescents Receiving Mental Health Services." *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 11 (4): 385–99.
- Phillips, Susan D., Alaattin Erkanli, Gordon P. Keeler, E. Jane Costello, and Adrian Angold. 2006. "Disentangling the Risks: Parent Criminal Justice Involvement and Children's Exposure to Family Risks." *Criminology and Public Policy* 5 (4): 677–702.
- Trice, Ashton D., and JoAnne Brewster. 2004. "The Effects of Maternal Incarceration on Adolescent Children." *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 19 (1): 27–35.
- Wildeman, Christopher. 2014. "Parental Incarceration, Child Homelessness, and the Invisible Consequences of Mass Imprisonment." *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651 (1): 74–96.
- Wright, Lois, and Cynthia B. Seymour. 2000. *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America Press.

## About the Authors



**Bryce Peterson** is a research associate in the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. His research focuses on correctional policy, prisoner reentry, children of justice-involved parents, federal and state justice statistics, and quantitative data analysis. He has received grants from federal agencies, such as the National Institute of Corrections, and has used his training in quantitative research methods and data

analysis to write about and present on several criminal justice issues, such as prison and jail misconduct, criminological theory, cross-national comparative analysis of crime, and juvenile delinquency. He received his PhD in criminal justice from John Jay College/the Graduate Center, City University of New York.



**Lindsey Cramer** is a research associate with the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she works on the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), the Study of Community-Centered Responsible Fatherhood Ex-Prisoner Reentry Pilot Strategies, and Mitigating the Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children: Promising Practices from Arrest through Pre-Adjudication. As it relates to the JRI project, Cramer coordinates technical assistance providers working with state and local jurisdictions implementing a justice reinvestment model aimed at reducing the costs of corrections services and reinvesting the savings in initiatives to improve public safety. She also supports the study of responsible fatherhood reentry pilot programs, which work with incarcerated parents to ensure they have a stable transition into the community. Additionally, she assists with identifying promising practices for providing services and programming to children whose parents are incarcerated. Cramer graduated from the College of Wooster with a BA in economics.



**Emma Kurs** is a research assistant in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where her work focuses on children and families of justice-involved individuals, juvenile justice reform, and reentry initiatives. At the Justice Policy Center, Kurs primarily coordinates and conducts primary data collection for multi-site evaluations as well as supports technical assistance to corrections officials, public agencies, and community-based organizations to improve their reentry programs and services. She focuses on disseminating evidence-based and innovative practices to practitioners in the justice field. Kurs graduated from Skidmore College with a BA in government.



**Jocelyn Fontaine** is a senior research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her research portfolio is focused mostly on evaluating community-based crime reduction and reentry initiatives targeted to vulnerable populations. Fontaine directs projects using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to explore the effect of community-based initiatives on a range of outcomes, including individual, family/social network, and community outcomes. Fontaine is committed to using rigorous social science methods to change policy and practice and contribute to the public discourse on crime and the justice system. She received her PhD in justice and public policy from the School of Public Affairs at American University.

# Acknowledgments

This report was funded through Cooperative Agreement 13CS22GKP1 with the National Institute of Corrections. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. Funders do not, however, determine our research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

In particular, we want to thank Greg Crawford from the National Institute of Corrections for the feedback and help he provided on the various components of this project. We also thank Eugene Schneeberg, Madeleine Solan, and Jessica Neptune for providing feedback on drafts of this toolkit. Finally, we are indebted to the many stakeholders in the Bay Area, California; Allegheny County and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and New York City who met with us to share their knowledge and experience providing services to improve the lives of children and their justice-involved parents.



2100 M Street NW  
Washington, DC 20037  
[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

## ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.

Copyright © June 2015. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.