

Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents

Views from Mentors

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Introduction

In 2007, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided funding to the Urban Institute (UI) to undertake several tasks that would expand current understanding of the impact of a parental incarceration on children. As part of the project, the Urban Institute partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) organizations to obtain a qualitative perspective on the experiences and needs of children with incarcerated parents through a series of focus groups with adult volunteers mentoring those children. The following report describes the results of the focus groups, with particular attention to differences within this population and to comparisons to similar children who do not have a parent involved in the criminal justice system.

The focus groups drew on participants' experiences working with children of incarcerated parents to explore a series of questions:

- What are the family situations of these children?
- What were their relationships with their parents prior to incarceration?
- Who is caring for them now?
- How is the parent-child relationship maintained or disrupted during incarceration?
- How does parental incarceration affect children emotionally, behaviorally, and developmentally?
- What are the needs and challenges of children with incarcerated parents?
- How do these needs differ from those of other at-risk children?

This report describes the focus group methodology and then explores several key themes that emerged during the focus groups in response to the questions outlined above. Although our findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of children with incarcerated parents, they raise valuable questions and can provide a launching point for future research on the impact of parental incarceration. Throughout the report, effort is made to synthesize and present insights in a way that is useful to individuals working in the field as well as to those conducting research on this population of children.

Focus Group Methods

For this project, UI researchers partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) programs in Baltimore, Maryland; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Washington, D.C. A BBBS coordinator from each site compiled a list of those individuals who had mentored a child with a currently or formerly incarcerated parent and whose mentoring relationship with that child had lasted at least six months. Staff members from UI and BBBS successfully recruited 31 mentors and convened four focus groups in Baltimore, two in Milwaukee, and one in Washington. A detailed description of the participants and their Little Brothers and Sisters¹ is provided in Appendix A.

¹ Staff and volunteers involved in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program commonly refer to the mentors as “Bigs,” short for Big Brothers or Big Sisters, and the mentees as “Littles,” short for Little Brothers or Little Sisters. This report adopts this terminology.

The focus groups were conducted between June and December 2007. Some groups were intentionally restricted to either mentors of children with incarcerated mothers or mentors of children with incarcerated fathers in order to examine how the gender of the parent influences child outcomes. Each focus group began with an introduction by UI staff members, who clarified the purpose of the study, described how the focus group would be conducted, and explained the informed consent procedures. Participation was voluntary and all findings are reported in the aggregate or in a way that does not identify individual mentors or children. Focus group participants also completed background forms providing basic demographic data on themselves and their Littles. The focus group discussions averaged 90 to 120 minutes in length, which allowed time for the UI moderator to cover the questions described in the introduction while developing a rapport with participants. One UI staff member served as moderator for each group while another took detailed notes on the discussion.

In order to supplement findings from the focus groups, UI also interviewed six BBBS staff members in Milwaukee and Baltimore to provide context on the BBBS program and to gain further insights into the research questions. Some of the staff members interviewed also had previous experience mentoring children with incarcerated parents.

Key Findings

As would be expected, participants provided differing perspectives in response to many of the questions we raised. Nonetheless, several themes consistently emerged across the focus group discussions and interviews at the three sites. Our discussion of findings is organized around these nine themes, which can be summarized as follows:

- A mother's incarceration is a greater disruption in a child's life than a father's incarceration.
- Children with incarcerated parents often face difficult living situations.
- Maintaining a relationship with a parent during incarceration is challenging.
- The process of release and reintegration is a particularly stressful time.
- Parental incarceration is associated with a variety of negative behavioral outcomes.
- It is unclear whether children of incarcerated parents differ from their peers.
- Shame and stigma distinguish incarceration from other forms of parental absence.
- Demographic variation among children impacts their reaction to the incarceration of a parent.
- Children with incarcerated parents need a variety of supports.

The project was exploratory in nature and, as with all focus groups, was designed to provide qualitative, anecdotal data. Findings are limited to the groups that were convened and should not be generalized to the broader population of children who have a parent incarcerated. Nonetheless, the findings raise some valuable questions and suggest areas for further exploration. This report attempts to present the ideas and perspectives that were most widely discussed and agreed upon, and to indicate how representative these perspectives are among participants.

A mother's incarceration is a greater disruption in a child's life than a father's incarceration.

Regarding the dynamics and impact of parental incarceration, it was clear from the focus group discussions that considerable differences exist between the incarceration of mothers and fathers. In general, mothers played a much greater role in their children's lives prior to incarceration than did fathers, and often served as their children's primary caregivers. As a result, the departure of the mother disrupts children's daily lives and usually places them in the care of grandmothers, aunts, or other female relatives. One mentor described the incarceration of his Little's mother as completely dissolving the entire family structure, which had to be rebuilt around the grandmother. "The incarceration had a tremendous effect," the participant noted. "[Even though] the grandmother provided everything that was needed, it was difficult for my Little to have had that normal structure and then be torn away from it."²

In contrast, mentors reported that fathers are often absent or played less of a role in their children's lives prior to incarceration. Thus, Bigs indicated that children with incarcerated fathers are living in relatively stable, positive environments that were not as greatly disrupted by the father's departure. One Big suggested that because her Little never lived with her father, her life wasn't really changed by the incarceration: "She loves her father and likes it when he's out, but it doesn't upset daily life."

Although children's strong relationships with their mothers prior to incarceration tended to result in greater distress and upheaval upon her departure, it also supported communication during her confinement. Most mentors indicated that their Littles want to maintain bonds with their incarcerated mothers and are more likely than children with incarcerated fathers to have contact with their parent during the incarceration. Children with incarcerated fathers tend to have far less contact and are more ambivalent about maintaining a relationship with their fathers, both in prison and after release.

Children with incarcerated parents often face difficult living situations.

Mentors consistently praised those caring for children in a parent's absence. The caregivers, typically mothers, grandmothers, or other female relatives, were often described as hard-working and dedicated to seeking the best for the children in their care. Despite the best efforts of caregivers, however, children often face difficult living situations. Some caregivers do not have sufficient money or time to raise the children in their care. Participants explained that taking in an extra child represents a significant hardship for many caretakers, particularly grandparents with fixed incomes and, often, deteriorating health. Other participants cited the loss of support from the incarcerated parent as a significant strain on the family's finances. Even when caregivers are relatively financially stable, they often have limited time to spend with the children; many mothers of children with incarcerated fathers were single parents who worked long hours to support their families.

As mentioned above, most children of incarcerated parents are being cared for by mothers, grandmothers, or other female relatives. Regardless of whether the mother or father is behind bars, many of these children did not live with their fathers before, during or after the incarceration. While the specific composition of households varies, the majority of inhabitants are female, as are many of those in the

² Quotes used in this report are based on notes taken throughout the focus group discussion and may be paraphrased.

surrounding neighborhoods. One Big noted a general absence of men in his Little's apartment complex, while another commented that most of the males in his Little's extended family are in jail. Some participants speculated that a female-dominated living environment is difficult for boys, with one Big describing his Little brother as "yearning for male interaction."

In addition to the lack of resources and male role models described above, the living situations of children with incarcerated parents often lack stability. Children frequently move following the incarceration of their parent, particularly if that parent is their mother. One Big noted that his Little had lived in seven households within a seven-month period. The households that children of incarcerated parents inhabit often contain several other children and relatives. One participant reported that at one point, her Little was living in a two-bedroom house with 16 other people. Some of the people within these households are likely to be transitory, with one Big commenting that he frequently sees people passing through the house. Children may also face additional moves once the incarcerated parent is released. The constantly changing landscape of places and people may weaken otherwise supportive social ties and lead to, as one big observed, "insecurity about not having a traditional family." One Big noted that her Little is acutely aware of the instability and had commented that "people were always in and out of her life."

Maintaining contact with a parent during incarceration is challenging.

A large number of mentors did not know how much contact their Little had with the incarcerated parent, usually because the Little did not mention it. For those that did know about the level of communication, or at least could speculate as to its extent, most reported infrequent visits, phone calls and letters. One male Little has frequent phone calls with his mother, but has only visited her once in prison. Transportation was cited as the most common barrier to maintaining contact with a parent behind bars. Bigs also described caretakers who are either unwilling or unable to coordinate a visit, as well as an occasional lack of access to phone service either because the parent lost phone privileges or the child's home phone had been disconnected. One Big remarked that her Little's phone would sometimes be cut off, preventing the two of them from speaking for weeks at a time.

Although some Littles have minimal contact with their parent, several of them look forward to having a relationship with the parent upon release, particularly if the incarcerated parent was their mother. Bigs described children who have never met the incarcerated parent or were too young to remember them before they went away but still dream of having a relationship upon release. Others remained attached to parents regardless of the level of parental engagement prior to incarceration. On the other hand, a number of Littles seem to show no interest in maintaining or reestablishing a relationship with their parent, especially in the case of incarcerated fathers. As mentioned above, children tended to have stronger relationships with their mothers prior to incarceration than their fathers, resulting in a greater level of contact between children and incarcerated mothers and a stronger interest in continuing the relationship during incarceration and upon release.

Children with incarcerated fathers tend to have far less contact with their parent during incarceration and are more ambivalent about maintaining a relationship with their father, both in prison and after release. While some anxiously await their father's return and "missed him terribly," others resist

attempts at reunification. Many Littles remain silent on the topic around their Bigs, though one mentor noted that his Little “always denies wanting to have a relationship with his father, but I can hear the anger in his voice.”

The process of release and reintegration is a particularly stressful time.

The period following a parent’s release is likely to be one of disruption and disappointment. Children sometimes have high expectations about changes that will occur in the family and in their parent’s behavior, while parents may make promises that only cause these expectations to grow. One Big worried that her Little’s father would not be able to follow through on all of the promises he has made to his child about what would happen when he came out of prison. Another mentor whose Little’s mother cycles in and out of jail described the mother as making extensive promises and statements of love only to disappear after a few days and end up back in jail. “She paints a pretty picture for my Little, and it’s just enough to do a little more damage,” said the Big. A BBBS staff member explained that when children continually have their expectations built up only to be disappointed, they repeatedly have their trust broken. As a result, issues of abandonment may surface along with an expectation of inconsistency from others in their lives.

In addition to the disappointment that can accompany the parent’s return, it is often a time of change and uncertainty. The child may move and family dynamics shift as the parent tries to reunite with his or her partner and other family members. Children are uncertain about the parent’s role in their life. They may be exposed to additional risks, such as witnessing criminal activity or watching their parent slide back into substance abuse and crime. One Big reported that the year before her Little’s father went back into prison, the child witnessed his father’s drug relapse.

As a result of the challenges associated with release, many focus group participants and BBBS staff members felt that a lengthy sentence was less damaging for a child than a parent who is constantly cycling in and out of incarceration. One Big commented that the process of her Little’s father coming in and out of jail was traumatic for her Little, who can never predict when the father would be around. In contrast, another mentor remarked that his Little was so young when his father began a long sentence that he lost the need for the father’s support and has built up the ability to get by without it. The Big also suggested that the consistent lack of a father makes it easier for others to recognize gaps in the child’s support system. A BBBS staff member agreed that it was difficult for children to have people in their lives one minute and out the next, noting that “if they’re consistently gone, it’s almost better.” In this person’s opinion, when parents are gone for long periods of time, children can build more trusting relationships with adults who can provide support.

Parental incarceration is associated with a variety of negative behavioral outcomes.

Some Bigs found their Littles to be fairly resilient and to suffer from behavioral issues no more extensive than other children their age. However, others encountered behavioral concerns and identified a variety of negative outcomes associated with parental incarceration. These included anger, acting out, withdrawal, lack of trust, feelings of isolation, difficulty coping with the reason for the parent’s absence, trouble in school and with the law, and lack of respect for authority.

Children, especially boys, were often described as angry, rebellious, undisciplined and prone to soliciting attention through misbehavior. One mentor noticed such changes when his Little Brother's father went to prison, recalling "a period when my Little and his brother were acting out, getting into fights in school." In contrast, other Littles were described as quiet, guarded, worried, shy, and closed off, especially around adults. They appeared to have problems with trust and seem to expect inconsistency from the adults in their lives. One Big described his Little as "waiting for me to leave," while another noted that it takes a long time for Littles to believe that mentors are going to be consistent figures in their lives.

For children who did open up about their feelings, many expressed feeling "different" and were insecure about not having a traditional family. Boys in particular often seem desirous of male attention and affection. One mentor noted that "even dysfunctional families in the media (like the Simpsons) are still families in cohesive households. [My Little] has a wonderful grandmother, but wants more." Some children are confused about their parent's absence and worry about his or her well-being. Others rationalize or make excuses for the parent's negative behavior, while some worry what others would think were they to find out about the incarceration.

Some children have trouble at school, including academic problems, suspensions, and truancy, as well as early encounters with the criminal justice system. Negative views of authority, particularly the police, are common; one mentor described her seven year old Little as having a "jaded view of the police." Another child witnessed his mother's arrest and now views the police as "the people that took his mother away." Some mentors described sons of incarcerated fathers living in communities with high rates of male incarceration who come to view incarceration as "a rite of passage," and even, in a few cases, "a badge of honor."

It is unclear whether children of incarcerated parents differ from their peers.

Participants were divided on the question of whether the problems in their Littles' lives are directly related to their parent's incarceration or are the result of other challenges, such as poverty and family dysfunction. Participants noted that many of their Little's peers and neighbors, though they did not have an incarcerated parent, did come from single parent households and are being raised by mothers or grandmothers. "The needs of these children [with incarcerated parents] are comparable to other at-risk kids," one Big noted, explaining, "Parental incarceration is one more thing piled on. With a lot of peers, the mother and father are there, but not involved... and I'm not sure if one is worse than the other. The key problem seems to be the parents not being there." Other Bigs agreed, identifying fathers missing from their children's lives because of incarceration as one piece of the larger problem of absent fathers. One participant noted, however, that when a father is not incarcerated there are more options for becoming a good parent or at least having some involvement in his child's life. This participant explained, "When you get out of jail and don't have any money, you can't do anything for your child and it makes you shy away from reunification."

Shame and stigma distinguish incarceration from other forms of parental absence.

Within the discussions outlined in the section above, several Bigs suggested that stigma is a key factor distinguishing incarceration from other hardships, including other types of parental absence. As one mentor stated plainly, “The stigma and shame associated with parental incarceration is different from what other disadvantaged kids experience.” Mentors felt that this is particularly true in the case of maternal incarceration, which is less common and perceived as more shameful than paternal incarceration.

The stigma associated with a parent’s incarceration often results in efforts to conceal the truth from children and others in the community. In most cases, as one Big explained, “The parent’s incarceration is not necessarily taboo, just something that they [family members] don’t talk about.” The majority of children know that their parent is incarcerated but have little other information about the situation, such as why the parent is incarcerated or when he or she will be released. Some children are deceived entirely about the incarceration and provided other reasons, or no reason at all, for the parent’s absence, typically out of the belief that the child is “too young to understand” or the fear that he or she might “follow in the same footsteps.” Children may react to their limited knowledge of the situation with fear that others will find out about the incarceration and ostracize them. Other children are unable to cope with the reality of their parent’s absence, with one Big noting that “because my Little doesn’t know why his father is away, he feels almost like the man could come back at any time, even though it’s been six years since he left.”

Perhaps as a result of the stigma attached to parental incarceration, a surprisingly large number of mentors did not find out about the parent’s incarceration until well into the relationship with their Little. A few even found out upon being invited to participate in the focus groups. UI moderators asked one focus group if their attitudes changed when they found out that their Little’s parent was or had been incarcerated. One participant described finding out as “...a reality check. I now know that when he gets into trouble, I’ll have to step it up because those behaviors might lead to problems later on.” For another Big, finding out changed his interactions with the family. He described a need to establish boundaries because he didn’t want problems to emerge when the father was released from prison and tried to reenter his children’s lives.

In response to the heavy stigma and sometimes guilt associated with parental incarceration, focus group participants stressed the importance of helping children separate the actions of their parents from their own actions in order not to internalize that stigma. One Big worried that her Little will have to live with the fact that his mother was incarcerated for the rest of his life. Another noted that “we often take on a lot of blame for the mistakes of others... we need to learn that parent’s actions have nothing to do with our own.” While participants did not necessarily advocate keeping the incarceration a secret from those outside of the family, when asked in one focus group whether schools and teachers should know which students have an incarcerated parent, many participants felt that this circumstance should remain private and not make a difference in the classroom. Some mentors advocated not treating children of incarcerated parents any different than their peers, as such actions might only perpetuate the stigma and the child’s feelings of being abnormal.

Demographic variation among children impacts their reaction to the incarceration of a parent.

Participants identified several variables that impacted how children react to the incarceration of their parent, including gender, age, income, and ethnicity.

Gender: Girls seem to cope differently with the loss of their fathers to incarceration than they do with the loss of their mothers. Girls with incarcerated fathers were described as shy, withdrawn, having trouble opening up, and needing attention, but without extensive behavioral problems. However, girls of incarcerated mothers display considerable anger, aggression, and problems in school. One little sister even requested anger management classes. In contrast, boys of both incarcerated mothers and fathers were described as experiencing problems with school, lacking discipline and respect for their caregivers, having anger issues, and getting into fights.

Age: Children's current age, as well as their age when their parent was first incarcerated, both influence their response to the incarceration. Children who grew up without a parent tend to be more adjusted to the loss than children coping with an incarceration that had begun more recently. Younger children seem to experience greater confusion about their parent's absence, sometimes because they are kept in the dark about the situation. Older children tend to have a clearer understanding of the situation but often develop behavioral problems and withdraw from their relationships with adults, although some Bigs questioned whether these actions are simply normal adolescent behaviors unrelated to the parent's incarceration. There was no clear consensus about the role age plays in the response to a parent's incarceration, but participants did indicate that it should be taken into consideration when trying to understand a child's needs.

Income: Although there was not a great amount of economic diversity among Littles, mentors did identify financial strain on caregivers and their children as an issue and agreed that children from lower-income households or neighborhoods tend to fare worse than those from more economically-advantaged areas. One Big speculated that the effects of parental incarceration appear "more starkly in poorer neighborhoods." Other Bigs noted that although having more financial resources may serve as a protective factor for some, income is not the only determinant of who needs help and support.

Race/Ethnicity: The majority of Littles were black, making it difficult to meaningfully distinguish reactions to parental incarceration across ethnic groups. However, a BBBS staff member who had extensive experience working with both black and Latino children offered some interesting perspectives on parental incarceration within the Latino community. He noted that many Hispanic grandmothers did not live in the United States and were therefore not available to offer support, leading children with an incarcerated parent to look to neighbors, members of their extended family, and other community members to make up for missing family structure and support. The participant also suggested that parental incarceration carried an incredibly strong stigma in the Latino community, resulting in families who "simply do not mention the incarceration." As a result, the mentor felt that it was difficult to identify children of incarcerated parents within this population who might be in need of support.

Children with incarcerated parents need a variety of supports.

Mentors offered several suggestions regarding what their Littles, and children of incarcerated parents in general, need in order to thrive and discussed ways that mentoring could address these needs. Across focus groups, participants pointed to a strong need for consistency and stability in the lives of their Littles. As has been discussed above, many of these children have experienced major disruptions in their lives and have learned not to expect consistent support from adults around them. Bigs felt that mentors could provide some much-needed stability for these children. Boys especially may need supportive, adult male role models who can provide the male interaction and affection that is missing from their lives. In terms of mentoring, several Bigs felt that their Littles benefited more from regular visits and routine activities (cooking, watching a movie) done consistently than from exciting or expensive activities with a mentor whose availability and support were inconsistent. In addition to needing consistency and stability from the adults in their lives, these children often need structure and boundaries. For example, some Bigs suggested that children of incarcerated parents need someone to have high expectations for them and to express concern and disappointment when they misbehave or do not meet these expectations.

Along these same lines, participants suggested that children with incarcerated parents need to be shown early and often that there are options available to them other than their incarcerated parent's way of life. Mentors stressed the importance of showing Littles that money can be made through legal activities and that boys have many other roles to aspire to than criminal ones. One mentor commented on how surprised his Little was to discover that he and his wife were married and stressed the importance of exposing the child to stable families. One way that children can be shown possibilities beyond their parent's choices is through activities. Bigs advocated for sports involvement to keep children active and art programs that "teach them to dream and imagine a world beyond what they know." Several mentors indicated that their Littles were bright and simply needed to have their minds stimulated in a more positive direction. Along with involvement in activities came the need for support at such activities, such as having a mentor or caregiver attend school functions or sporting events.

Bigs consistently emphasized that this process of guiding children in the right direction—which is often away from choices their parents have made—must be achieved without judging or criticizing the incarcerated parents. Many of these children still love their incarcerated parent and need the opportunity to reconcile their love for their parent with the parent's negative behaviors. Children of incarcerated parents may wrestle with how to feel about the parent and how to create a distinct identity from someone for whom they may care deeply. They may ask questions about the incarceration as they get older and will need honesty and support as they navigate their own feelings about their parent. Again, Bigs emphasized the need for mentors to provide support and guidance without judging or criticizing the parent as a person, even when discussing the negative outcomes of his or her choices.

Summary

The results of these focus group discussions, while largely qualitative, raise a number of instructive findings, some of which are well documented in literature and others that provide new insights on the challenges and needs of children of incarcerated parents. Perhaps the most prevalent theme that arose throughout discussions with mentors was the considerable variation within the population of children of incarcerated parents, particularly between those who experience maternal incarceration and those who experience paternal incarceration. Children who have a mother behind bars are likely to have lived with her prior to incarceration and typically experience substantial upheaval in their lives following her departure. These children are likely to retain a strong attachment to their mothers, which may enable communication during incarceration but also result in great emotional distress. Typically, fathers had long been absent in cases of both maternal and paternal incarceration, and because of this absence, mentors stressed the need for supportive male role models in the lives of these children, particularly boys.

In addition to the parent's gender, the dynamics of their criminal justice involvement influenced children's responses. Children with a parent serving a long sentence seem to fare better in some ways than those with a parent who is constantly cycling in and out of prison. Children in the former group often lost the need for their absent parent's support and did not experience the inconsistency and repeated traumatization of children whose parents are in their lives one minute and out the next. Age was also a factor in the degree to which children respond to and internalize the loss of a parent to incarceration, with younger children less able to understand or process their parent's absence.

Stigma and shame represented an experience shared by most children of incarcerated parents that distinguished them from other at-risk peers. Littles were often deceived about their parent's whereabouts or had limited knowledge of the incarceration, and as a result, found it difficult to understand why their parent was no longer in their life. Mentors worried that these children might internalize the shame and not be able to separate their own actions from those of their incarcerated parent.

These findings indicate considerable variation within the population of children with incarcerated parents, suggesting that there is no "one size fits all" approach to anticipating and meeting the needs of children with incarcerated parents. Nonetheless, mentors were unanimous in their call for more support for these children, particularly for adult figures who are reliable and consistent in children's lives and who provide examples of stable and successful families and adults.

Appendix A: Participant Characteristics

Summary	
Total Focus Groups	7
Total Participants ³	31
<i>Baltimore</i>	12
<i>Milwaukee</i>	14
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	5
Mentor Information	
Age	
<i>Average</i>	38
<i>Range</i>	23–77
Gender	
<i>Male</i>	19
<i>Female</i>	12
Race	
<i>White</i>	18
<i>Black</i>	11
<i>Other</i>	2
Hispanic	2
Average time served as a mentor (months)	22
Average time mentoring current Little (months)	20
Children Information	
Age	
<i>Average</i>	11
<i>Range</i>	7–14
Gender	
<i>Male</i>	21
<i>Female</i>	10
Race	
<i>White</i>	5
<i>Black</i>	23
<i>Multiracial/Other</i>	3
Hispanic	3
Family Information	
Mother incarcerated	14
Father incarcerated	22
Both parents currently/formerly incarcerated	5
Siblings currently/formerly incarcerated	2
Other family member currently/formerly incarcerated	5

³ Five of these participants were also Big Brothers Big Sisters staff members.