

Issues Affecting the Efficacy of Programs for Children with Incarcerated Parents

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Abstract

Research suggests that intervening in the lives of children with an incarcerated parent to preserve and strengthen positive family connections can yield constructive societal benefits in the form of reduced recidivism, less intergenerational criminal justice system involvement and the promotion of healthy child development (Christian, 2009). Since 2008, Central Connecticut State University's (CCSU) Institute for Municipal & Regional Policy (IMRP) has been working with two programs that provide interventions for youth with an incarcerated parent: the Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program in Hartford and Bridgeport, and the Families in Crisis (FIC) program in Hartford. The Big Brothers Big Sister program is managing the delivery of mentoring services for children with an incarcerated parent. Families in Crisis provides support services to youth with an incarcerated parent and their family. This article summarizes observations offered by some of the children, parent/caregivers, program mentors and agency staff involved with these programs. Their observations can be grouped into six main issues and the primary facilitating factors and constraints that affect these issues. This information should be of interest to other groups across the country offering such programs.

Introduction

The rising prison population in the state of Connecticut, as well as nationwide, is taking its toll on the millions of children whose parents are behind bars. According to the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (2009), by 2007 more than 1.7 million American children had a parent in prison or jail, half of whom were under 10 years old. A recent study by Bouchet (2008) for the Annie E. Casey Foundation indicates that in the 10

years leading up to 2005, incarceration increased 57% for women and 34% for men, with 75% of the women being mothers. The separation incurred from parental incarceration may cause a host of negative emotional and psychological effects in both the child and the parent.

The extent of the emotional and psychological toll is based on a number of variables, including the age at which the separation occurred, the length of the separation, the child's familiarity with the new caregiver and the strength of the parent-child relationship. Other factors that may impact child reactions include periods of prior separation, the nature of the parent's crime, the availability of family or community support, and the degree of stigma that the community associates with incarceration (Gaudin & Supten, 1993). Further research has shown that children may suffer from negative self-image and exhibit emotional distress such as fear, anxiety, anger, sadness and resentment (Child Welfare League of American, 2002). As a result, they may withdraw from friends and family and begin to show signs of mental illness such as depression, as well as eating and sleeping disorders. These difficulties are also likely to manifest into educational and behavioral problems. Their academic work may suffer and they may exhibit difficulty behaving in the classroom, as well as exhibit physical aggression and disruptive behavior in all of their environments.

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Research Methods

Ten, ninety minute interviews were completed with ten children and ten, one hour interviews were completed with ten parents/legal caregivers of these children. Half of the children and caregivers were enrolled in the BBBS program; the other half was enrolled in the Families in Crisis program. The child and parent/caregiver interviews were conducted by four IMRP interviewers. Participant responses were recorded in detail on the questionnaire by the interviewer. The child interview was also audio recorded. The process was managed and the completed questionnaires/recordings were content analyzed for key themes by one of the two IMRP principal investigators.

Three, ninety minute interviews were completed by one of the two IMRP principal investigators with pairs consisting of one case worker and one supervisor from the two BBBS programs and from the FIC program. The interviews identified perceptions of program strengths and weaknesses. Participant responses were recorded in detail on the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were content analyzed for key themes by one of the two IMRP principal investigators.

Two focus groups were conducted with youth mentors from two of the BBBS programs (Hartford and Bridgeport). Five mentors from the Hartford program and nine mentors from the Bridgeport program were present at the focus groups. The focus groups were moderated and written notes were documented by the two IMRP principal investigators. The discussions were also audio recorded. Notes and recordings were content analyzed for key themes by the two IMRP principal investigators.

Findings

Issues facing Children with an Incarcerated Parent

Defining the problem

Agency staff respondents believe that if the incarcerated parent has been absent from the life of the child or parent/caregiver for a long time, than the effects may be minimal. But if there had been close communication between the child and the parent prior to incarceration than that loss can negatively affect the child. Program mentor respondents believe that lack of attention from the parent that is incarcerated is a problem for some children.

Single/low income parent households

Parent/caregiver respondents agree that life is difficult as a single parent regardless of whether the other parent is in prison or is simply absent from the

home. Youth respondents agree that having a parent in prison is similar to any child who has a missing parent – i.e., they miss spending time alone with that parent and getting to do typical parent-child activities. Agency staff and program mentor respondents also believe that the challenges that caregivers face are typical of challenges faced by many single parents – i.e., they are stressed by time, economic and resource limitations and by childcare commitments. Program mentor respondents believe that some mothers may be struggling with their own issues (e.g., alcohol addiction) and are therefore incapable of focusing as much as they should on their child's welfare.

Role model

Program mentor respondents believe that many children have issues trusting adults because they have been "let down" by the adults in their life. The children may have particular trust issues with males. Several mentors stated that positive male role models are lacking in the children's lives. Parent/caregiver respondents agree that they want their child to have a mentor because they believe their child needs a positive role model in their life.

Psychological issues

Agency staff respondents believe that some children of incarcerated parents are apt to exhibit psychological/emotional problems. They feel that some children may have self esteem problems caused by the stigma that they sense is attached to having an incarcerated parent. They feel that some children may have difficulty reconciling their unconditional love for the incarcerated parent with the fact that they committed a crime. Agency staff respondents also believe that some children feel a sense of loss, as if they have been abandoned by their parent. Parent/caregiver respondents agree that getting counseling and support for the child was the main reason they joined the program.

Sense of shame

Agency staff respondents believe that some parents/caregivers harbor a sense of shame or guilt about their original choice of partner (the incarcerated parent) and struggle with protecting themselves from what they think is a stigma attached to having an incarcerated spouse. Program mentor respondents feel that some children and their caregivers are harboring an underlying sense of shame over their association with the incarcerated parent and try to ignore the fact that they even exist. For most program mentor respondents, little time is spent with their child discussing the father's circumstances. This can be either

because the child may have never known their father well or the child is trying to avoid thinking about the fact that they have an incarcerated parent. Youth respondents wish that other people would recognize their parent as a parent and not as just an incarcerated individual.

Reintegration

Agency staff respondents state that reintegration of the parent that was incarcerated back into the family after release can be very disruptive. Caregivers and children agreed that having a strong support network could facilitate this reintegration.

Program facilitating factors

Communication with youth

Parent/caregiver respondents agree that a mentor needs to spend time with the child to help the child communicate more openly. Respondents all agree that the current mentor is doing this appropriately and well. They agree that their child is now more open with them after spending time with the mentor/caseworker. Youth respondents agree that having the mentor/caseworker has enabled them to be more open with their family members.

Program management

Agency staff respondents believe that communication between case managers and mentors has improved greatly since the agency went to a more centralized computer record keeping/ performance management system that allows case workers to quickly access details of a case and respond to mentors' concerns.

Mentors/caseworkers

Parent/caregiver respondents agree that they are generally pleased with the mentor/caseworker they have been assigned. They agree that the mentor/caseworker has good communication with both themselves and their child. Youth respondents agree that their caseworker/mentor is excellently matched to them and they are comfortable sharing concerns and problems when they arise. Youth respondents agree that the best thing about having a mentor are the various activities they engage in, such as going to the movies, playing ball, or just spending time together.

Program mentor respondents believe that an important benefit of the program is simply that they can provide the undivided adult attention that a child needs. Respondents believe that most of the mothers welcome the mentor

taking the child away for a short time. This provides the mother a needed break from the pressures of parenting. They believe that they have the ability to expose the children to ideas, places and things that they have not been exposed to before and probably would not be exposed to otherwise. Program mentor respondents believe that the emails they receive from case managers alerting them to ideas for activities they might do with the children are extremely helpful. They also believe that the occasional emails they receive about clinical issues pertaining to children of incarcerated parents are helpful. Program mentor respondents feel that the effects of mentoring on the child include the ability to trust others more, greater confidence and assertiveness, and they are more apt to engage in conversation.

Social network

Youth respondents agreed that having a strong support network – i.e. family members, a mentor, friends who also have an incarcerated parent – is very important in helping them adjust to having an incarcerated parent. Caregivers also maintained that the more support they received from caseworkers and family members, the less stress and anxiety they had in their lives.

Outcomes

Several program mentor respondents have observed that the children are well aware of the issues that contributed to their father being incarcerated and have made a concerted effort to avoid these problems (e.g. drugs, alcohol, violence). Agency staff respondents agree that they have seen the following changes in client families since the beginning of the program.

- Children have realized genuine improvements in their self-worth.
- The at-home parent is more apt to feel empowered to make decisions.
- The incarcerated parent is less apt to feel powerless.
- Communication with the incarcerated parents has become more meaningful.

Support services

Agency staff respondents believe that referrals for child care services, education about managing money, education about parenting skills, support group meetings for parents, and the support services for school-based behavioral issues are important components of the program. Caregivers also emphasized the importance of support services and stressed the need to be made aware of what all is available to them.

Program constraints

Parent/caregiver support

Some parent/caregiver respondents lament the fact that they cannot get help for themselves because the BBBS mentoring program is not designed to address the needs of the parent/caregiver. The program is only designed to identify and address the needs of the child. Other parent/caregiver respondents agree that they receive some limited services (especially from the FIC program) but could benefit from additional programs such as group therapy, assistance with finding housing and clothing, and especially, they could benefit from their own caseworker, separate from the child's caseworker.

Caseworker/mentor commitment

Parent/caregiver respondents had little criticisms of the child's mentor but youth respondents feel that more time with the caseworker/mentor would be helpful. Some program mentor respondents agree that the time spent with their child is too little. They feel that the children can use all the help they can get. Yet, most mentors agree that finding additional time to spend with their child and remaining consistent with this time would be difficult.

Program mentor respondents believe it is important that the parent/caregiver understands the limits of the program; e.g., mentors are not a source of limitless funds, free child care, or endless tutoring. They believe that case managers need to do more to make sure that the parent/ caregivers understand these limitations.

Communication with the incarcerated parent

Youth respondents agree that communication with the incarcerated parent is often difficult. They agree that visitation is difficult to manage – either getting to the prison, or lack of privacy with parent once there – and that phone communication was limited as well. Agency staff respondents believe a new component of the program that helps children and caregivers communicate more effectively with the incarcerated parent is needed. FIC staff respondents stated that though FIC does supply transportation so that families can visit the incarcerated parent, it still remains a challenge for many families.

Support for mentoring activities

Program mentor respondents feel that it would be helpful if case managers could coordinate more activities and outings (e.g., Halloween parties, Christmas parties, bowling excursions) that involve multiple mentors/children. They feel it is very beneficial for everyone to interact at these events.

Program mentor respondents feel more frequent and substantive contact with case managers is needed to head off problems and open up opportunities, especially when there is case manager turnover. They feel that face to face contact should be mandatory between mentors, parents and new case managers soon after a new case manager has been hired. Program mentor respondents feel that rules and procedures are often interpreted differently by different case managers and this ambiguity can be confusing. They feel that case managers and mentors should communicate with each other once per week either on the phone or via email, especially during the first six months.

Mentor training

Program mentor respondents believe that the initial training that they are provided as mentors is not enough. They feel that mentors should have more chances to consult and learn from each other. They feel they could use more feedback about their work with the children.

Conclusion

While much has been written about the emotional and psychological impacts on children of having an incarcerated parent, much less has been written about remedial measures to address these issues. Both the Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Families in Crisis programs that have been discussed in this article offer support services to children and families with an incarcerated parent. While we cannot yet predict the long-term outcomes of these services, we do maintain that there are several positive effects on the children and caregivers that participate in the programs, especially those that had a close relationship with the parent prior to their incarceration. The programs' mentoring and counseling services provide a positive adult role model for children who are very much in need of this type of support. The mentors help the child deal with emotional and self-esteem issues and learn to communicate more openly. In addition, to this one-on-one attention to the children, other program staff provide the children and their caregivers a consistent source of support that can help empower them to take control of their lives - something that is sometimes missing in the lives of lower income single parent households

In closing, it is worth reiterating some of the constraints discovered in the research described in this article. Importantly, considerable effort needs to be directed to improving communication between all parties involved: the mentor, caseworker, caregiver, and child. The better the communication is between these parties, the more productive the associations will be. In addition, it is

important that program staff remember that the mentors are volunteers who will need training, support and recognition. They will need help identifying activities to do with their children, suggestions on how to respond to their child's emotional needs, and will need assistance maintaining open communication with the child's caregiver. Recognizing their good work will also help sustain their motivation. In addition, our research has shown that while it is the child of an incarcerated parent that receives the majority of assistance from these programs, the caregiver is also a key part of the equation with needs that often go unfulfilled. Many caregivers could benefit greatly from program services designed to help them.

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Biographical sketch

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