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Programs for Incarcerated Parents

Preliminary Findings from a Pilot Survey

The prison population in the United States grew drastically in the second half of the twentieth century. From 1980 to 2010, the number of adults incarcerated in the United States increased by roughly 1.1 million (Sentencing Project, 2021), resulting in what is now known as a period of mass incarceration. Multiple political and economic factors spurred the rise of incarceration, including growing political conservatism, high unemployment rates, changing sentencing policies and practices (e.g., minimum sentencing laws, repeat offender laws, and stricter parole board practices), and punitive approaches to combat drug use, primarily in minority communities (Western and Wildeman, 2009). Incarceration rates peaked in 2009, with more than 1.6 million adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons (Sentencing Project, undated). Despite modest declines in the prison population over the past decade, the United States is still the world leader in incarceration.

Today, there are about 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States (Sawyer and Wagner, 2020), most of whom are parents (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). It is estimated that more than 5 million children (i.e., one in 14) in the United States have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives, and more than 2.7 million children in the United States have a parent who is incarcerated (Cramer et al., 2017). Approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are under ten years old (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). The rates are disproportionately higher for Black and Hispanic children.

Research suggests the incarceration of a parent can put a strain on the parent-child relationship and increase the risk for child delinquency, poor academic achievement, and social and emotional problems. Many U.S. prisons offer services and programs designed to support incarcerated parents and their children; however, little is known about exactly what programs exist, how they are implemented, and the extent to which incarcerated parents participate. In this pilot study, we sought to explore and describe the current landscape of prison-based programs and services for

KEY FINDINGS

- Most facilities offer at least one program designed to support incarcerated parents and their children.

- Most programs appear to use nationally known—and, in some cases, researched-based—parenting interventions. Programs support parent well-being and nurture positive family relationships through parenting education; reading, writing, and literacy; and visitation supports.

- Few parenting programs offer reentry supports, direct supports for children, mental health supports, education and training, or legal supports; however, these services are commonly offered to residents at some correctional facilities.

- Most programs employ eligibility criteria to enroll parents, such as a child age requirement. Most administrators noted that programs are open to any caregivers.

- Programs meet relatively frequently, and nearly half of the programs surveyed meet one or more times per week.

- Besides program staff, classroom space and instructional or program-specific materials are the most-common resources used to support implementation.

- The most common funding source is facility discretionary funding. Most administrators reported that programs are implemented by facility staff.

- Administrators representing more than half of the programs reported that their programs supported gender and cultural responsiveness; however, strategies used for cultural responsivity were fairly limited.

- Survey respondents had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the programs at their facilities and agreed that programs were successfully meeting objectives.

- The most commonly reported strength was the motivation of the participating parents. Other commonly reported strengths were effective resources, staff skills, and staff buy-in.

- Notably, the most common challenge was identical to the most common strength: lack of parent motivation. Other commonly cited challenges were staff burnout and limited funds.

incarcerated parents. We also aimed to determine the extent to which programs seek to mitigate the effects of policies and practices that disproportionately affect Black and Latinx families. This report presents the study findings, beginning with a review of the literature on incarceration in the United States, racial disparities in incarceration rates, and programming for incarcerated parents.

Incarceration and Its Effect on Parents and Children

Discriminatory policies that contribute to mass incarceration disproportionately affect Black and Latinx communities. For example, Black Americans represent 40 percent of the prison population (Sawyer and Wagner, 2020), despite only comprising roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population. Although less likely than Black people to be incarcerated, Latinx individuals are also significantly more likely than White people to be incarcerated. According to Sentencing Project, 2021, one out of every three Black men and one in six Latino men born in 2001 will be imprisoned at some point in their lives. In comparison, one in 17 White men will have the same fate. Native American individuals experience incarceration rates more similar to Black or Latinx individuals; however, incarceration in these populations is significantly less studied (Bruns and Lee, 2019). Although incarceration rates for women are lower than those for men, similar disparities are present. Black women are six times more likely than White women to be incarcerated; Latina women are over two times as likely as

White women to be incarcerated (Sentencing Project, 2021). Disparities in incarceration rates of Black and Latinx people have downstream effects on their children. Approximately one in nine Black children (11.4 percent), one in 28 Latinx children (3.5 percent), and one in 57 White children (1.8 percent) in the United States have at least one incarcerated parent (Cramer et al., 2017).

Effects of Incarceration on Families

The entire family experiences the negative effects of incarceration. In general, individuals who experience incarceration have worse physical health, higher rates of mental illness, an increased risk of suicide, financial strain, and ongoing stigmatization. Incarcerated parents in particular experience higher rates of mental health and substance use problems, divorce, familial instability, and psychological distress (Arditti and Few, 2006; Armstrong et al., 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2019). Given that minor children typically lived with at least one of their parents prior to the parent's incarceration, caregiving and custody issues are a significant source of stress during incarceration (Finney Hairston, 2007; Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). After a parent is incarcerated, children might be placed with family, foster care, group homes, or in other external placements (Finney Hairston, 2007; Harris and Boudin, 2020). As a result, incarcerated parents are at an increased risk of losing their parental rights (Harris and Boudin, 2020). Parental incarceration also compounds economic disadvantage (Tremblay and Sutherland, 2017). In cases in which the parent was a wage earner, parental incarceration results in a loss of family income and can lead to financial strain (Turney and Goodsell, 2018). In addition to families needing to adjust to the loss of income, they incur added expenses for fines and legal fees, costs associated with providing for the incarcerated individual (e.g., money for commissary and phone calls), and the reduced earning potential of the parent after release (Couloute and Kopf, 2018; Harris and Boudin, 2020).

Parental incarceration can also be a source of trauma and stigma for children, which in turn increases their risk of negative psychosocial and behavioral outcomes. Children who experience parental incarceration have worse physical and mental health, such as increased rates of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, antisocial behavior, eating disorders, substance use, and sleep disorders (Davis and Shlafer, 2017; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol, 2012; Purvis, 2013), which are largely caused by parent-child separation and lack of contact resulting from incarceration. Parental incarceration has also been classified as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), and it increases the risk of these children having additional ACEs (Axelson and Boch, 2019). Young children might experience delays in cognitive development, and older children might experience worse academic outcomes, such as being absent from school for extended periods, repeating grade levels, receiving increased discipline for behavioral concerns, and dropping out of high school (Dawson, Jackson, and Nyamathi, 2012; Harris and Boudin, 2020; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol, 2012; Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010). Additionally, children with incarcerated parents are five times more likely to experience incarceration themselves (Harris and Boudin, 2020). Because Black and Latinx children disproportionately experience parental incarceration, it is likely that parental incarceration contributes to racial disparities and inequities in child well-being. Wakefield and Wildeman, 2013, estimates that mass incarceration increased the Black-White gap in infant mortality rates by 18 percent, childhood homelessness by 65 percent, and behavior problems by 26 to 46 percent.

It is also difficult for families to maintain contact with incarcerated family members (Harris and Boudin, 2020). More than 60 percent of parents in state prisons are incarcerated more than one hundred miles away from their families (Rabuy and Kopf,

Abbreviations

ABE	adult basic education
ACE	adverse childhood experience
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DOC	Department of Corrections
GED	General Educational Development
MRT	Moral Reconation Therapy
SME	subject-matter expert

2015). Distance, high travel costs, and the potential for loss of income from absences from work to visit the incarcerated parent make visitation challenging (Harris and Boudin, 2020). Historically, because of these barriers, incarcerated parents have been indefinitely separated from their children. Parental absenteeism because of incarceration can have detrimental impacts on children, such as behavioral problems, unaddressed anger and sadness, poor academic performance, and declines in self-esteem and overall well-being (Cramer et al., 2017; De Claire and Dixon, 2017; Haverkate and Wright, 2020; Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010; Poehlmann et al., 2010). Although, in certain jurisdictions, incarcerated parents can participate in remote video visitation, facilities often charge fees for video visits, and video visitation provides a substantively different experience for children and families seeking to maintain contact with their loved ones (Harris and Boudin, 2020).

Although relatively few studies have examined differences in the impact of parental incarceration by racial groups, some studies have identified notable disparities (Bruns and Lee, 2019). Some work suggests that parental incarceration compounds systemic racism and other inequities, such that children of color experience greater harm when a parent is incarcerated (Bruns and Lee, 2019). For instance, research indicates that Black and Hispanic children whose fathers are in prison are more likely to exhibit externalizing behavior problems than White children are (Craigie, 2011). Studies have also found that paternal incarceration is a risk factor for homelessness among Black children (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2013) and delinquency for Hispanic children (Swisher and Roettger, 2012). In contrast, other researchers posit that parental incarceration might have *less* of an impact on outcomes for children of color compared with White children, either because of protective cultural factors (e.g., extended family support systems) or because systemic racism is so pervasive that essentially there are floor effects for some outcomes (Bruns and Lee, 2019). For example, studies find maternal incarceration causes a greater increase in school dropout rates for White students than it does for Black or Hispanic students (Cho, 2011), and parental incarceration is more strongly associated with theft among White boys

than it is among Black boys (Murray, Loeber, and Pardini, 2012). Few studies examine the impact of parental incarceration on girls specifically, and even fewer examine parental incarceration at the intersection of race and gender (Bruns and Lee, 2019).

Programs and Services to Support Incarcerated Parents

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, support for incarcerated parents was predominantly focused on improving treatment and care for pregnant women and providing nursery programs to allow infants to live at the correctional facility with their incarcerated mothers. Prenatal support and nursery programs existed in some facilities; however, the policies and implementation of these programs were incredibly varied across the country (Craig, 2009). Nursery programs began to decline in the 1960s after social workers from the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare inspected the nursery program at Alderson federal women's prison and reported that growing up in a prison environment would be deleterious to a child's development (Craig, 2009; Heffernan, 1992).

By the 1990s, programs such as educational classes, family literacy, and visitation support became more widespread. A 1990 survey of federal, state, and U.S. territory Departments of Corrections (DOCs) found 36 of the 43 responding departments reported some type of programming to support mothers and children (Clement, 1993). A survey of facilities in 1994 found more than 230 programs to support incarcerated mothers and their children (Craig, 2009). Programs to support incarcerated fathers also emerged, but there is a paucity of data on their national prevalence historically. In 1994, approximately 4 percent of incarcerated women and 1 percent of incarcerated men participated in some type of parenting program while incarcerated (Morash, Haarr, and Rucker, 1994).

Parenting programs at carceral facilities expanded considerably in the twenty-first century, largely because of the passage of the Second Chance Act of 2007. But expansion started in 2004, preceding the Second Chance Act legislation (Loper,

Clarke, and Dallaire, 2019). By 2004, approximately 27 percent of incarcerated mothers and 11 percent of incarcerated fathers in state facilities had participated in parenting or child-rearing classes at some point while incarcerated (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Individuals who lived with minor children prior to incarceration were more likely to participate in parenting classes. Specifically, 30 percent of mothers and 12 percent of fathers who lived with their minor children participated in parenting classes, compared with 23 percent of mothers and 9 percent of fathers who did not live with their children (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Surveys have also found that more than 60 percent of incarcerated fathers wanted to take parenting classes (Purvis, 2013; Visher and Lattimore, 2007), suggesting there is substantially greater demand for parenting programs than is indicated by participation rates.

According to a national survey of almost 400 state facilities, most offer some type of support program for parents, although facilities for women were consider-ably more likely to have parenting programs compared with facilities for men (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). Parenting classes without direct child involvement were the most common type of parenting program (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). The archetypal parenting program consists of group classes on parenting skills and communication techniques and uses a locally developed curriculum (Eddy, Kjellstrand, et al., 2019; Eddy, Martinez, et al., 2008). Less commonly, programs provide education on child development, anger and stress management, discipline, self-esteem, and parental rights and other legal issues (Bednarowski, 2014; Eddy, Martinez, et al., 2008). Interestingly, only about half of all national programs teach parents how to parent from prison (Eddy, Martinez, et al., 2008). Rather, parenting skills curricula are typically derived from parenting programs that are tailored to the general population, although children of incarcerated parents often have distinct behavioral concerns and needs (Eddy, Kjellstrand, et al., 2019; Valle et al., 2004).

There is considerable heterogeneity in program delivery. Most programs meet for a few hours each week for several months (Eddy, Martinez, et al., 2008); however, programs might range from less than ten to more than 90 hours of instruction delivered over the course of three to 12 weeks (Armstrong et al., 2018; Bednarowski, 2014; Eddy, Kjellstrand, et al., 2019). Instructors might be prison employees, employees of external organizations, members of faith groups, or community volunteers (Loper, Clarke, and Dallaire, 2019). There is little information on typical instructor credentials or background.

Aside from offering parenting education, programs might provide visitation opportunities, enable remote communication, facilitate parent-child reading, or involve parent mentorship. Visitation programs might provide child-friendly visitation rooms that allow for increased physical contact between the parent and child, provide books to read or other activities for the parent and child to do together, create additional visitation opportunities, or assist with family members' transportation or lodging during visitation (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2019). Other programs might enable remote parent-child communication through video calls, letters, or small gifts (Bednarowski, 2014; National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, 2021). Reading programs allow parents to read to their children via video call or audio or video recording (Blumberg and Griffin, 2013). Mentorship programs offer individualized support to parents by matching each participant with a mentor. The mentor might be a program employee or another incarcerated parent who previously completed the program (Bednarowski, 2014).

Few programs for incarcerated parents are evidence-based, and data on program outcomes are not often collected (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010; Newman, Fowler, and Cashin, 2011). However, formal evaluation of prison-based parenting programming is becoming more common. Some studies show that parenting programs are associated with positive outcomes for both parents and children. Figure 1 highlights some of the negative effects of parental incarceration that prison-based programs seek to address and the key program components and positive outcomes commonly associated with these features.
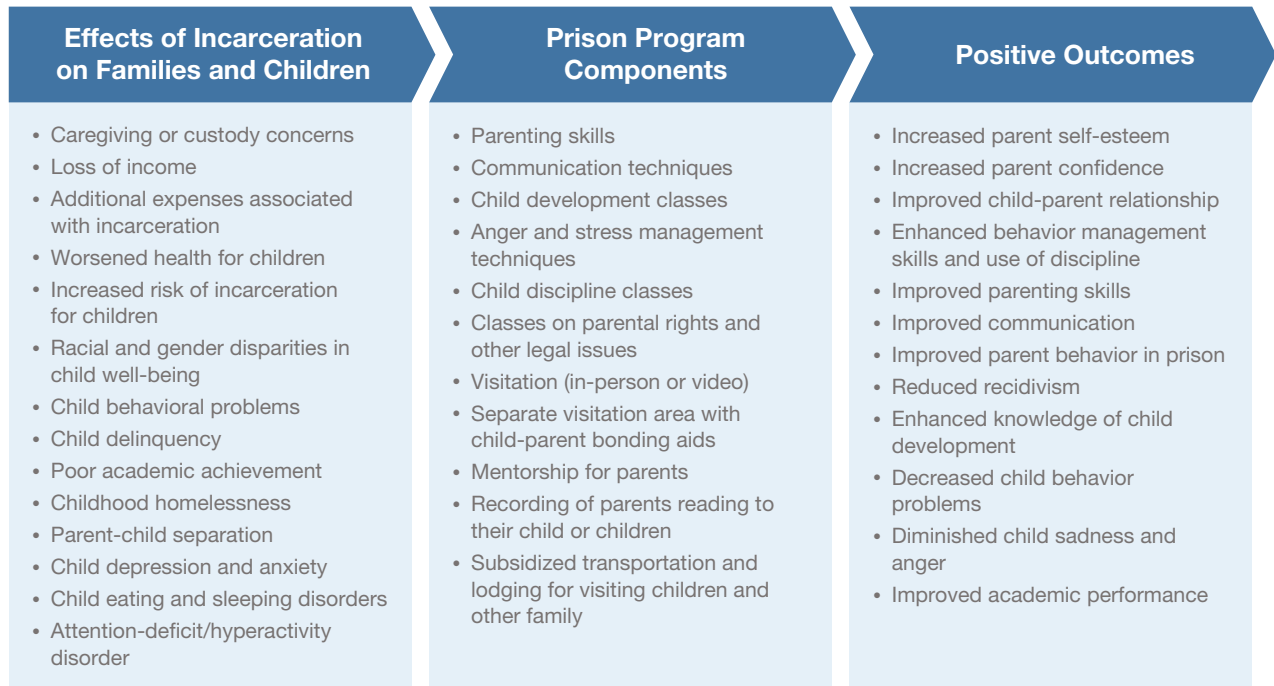
Specifically, Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010, finds that parenting programs increase self-esteem and parental confidence and enhance behavior management skills and use of discipline. Programs that focus on developing overall communication skills and visitation (whether in-person or virtual) foster improved child-parent relationships, ultimately decreasing child behavioral problems, improving grades, and diminishing the child's sadness or anger associated with the loss of a parent to incarceration (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). Parent-child contact (through in-person meetings, mail, or telephone calls) during incarceration is also typically associated with higher relationship quality, improved parent and child well-being, positive academic outcomes (Cramer et al., 2017; De Claire and Dixon, 2017; Haverkate and Wright, 2020; Poehlmann et al., 2010), and reduced recidivism and misbehavior (De Claire and Dixon, 2017; La Vigne et al., 2005; Purvis, 2013). In addition, there is some evidence that parenting programs improve children's self-esteem and mental health (Purvis, 2013).

Racial and Gender Responsiveness in Programming

There is a dearth of research on how parental incarceration and parenting program outcomes vary according to parent and child race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and the intersection of these factors (Bruns and Lee, 2019). However, as noted earlier, there appear to be important disparities. Given these inequities, it is important for programs to be responsive to the different needs of parents and children according to race and gender (Bruns and Lee, 2019; Loper, Clarke, and Dallaire, 2019). For programs to be responsive, they must account for the incarcerated parent's gender, race, and cultural identity when designing and developing parenting program options. However, in many instances, programs are designed to be implemented with all incarcerated parents without consideration for gender, racial, or cultural differences. Because inequities do not affect every person equally, efforts should be made to account for this

Positive Outcomes Associated with Programs for Incarcerated Parents

Effects of Incarceration on Families and Children	Prison Program Components	Positive Outcomes
• Caregiving or custody concerns • Loss of income • Additional expenses associated with incarceration • Worsened health for children • Increased risk of incarceration for children • Racial and gender disparities in child well-being • Child behavioral problems • Child delinquency • Poor academic achievement • Childhood homelessness • Parent-child separation • Child depression and anxiety • Child eating and sleeping disorders • Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	• Parenting skills • Communication techniques • Child development classes • Anger and stress management techniques • Child discipline classes • Classes on parental rights and other legal issues • Visitation (in-person or video) • Separate visitation area with child-parent bonding aids • Mentorship for parents • Recording of parents reading to their child or children • Subsidized transportation and lodging for visiting children and other family	• Increased parent self-esteem • Increased parent confidence • Improved child-parent relationship • Enhanced behavior management skills and use of discipline • Improved parenting skills • Improved communication • Improved parent behavior in prison • Reduced recidivism • Enhanced knowledge of child development • Decreased child behavior problems • Diminished child sadness and anger • Improved academic performance

SOURCE: The information is drawn from research referenced in this report.

intersection of social factors (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Because an intersectional identity has effects on parenting, efforts to incorporate such identities in any parenting program will provide a better approach to reach the most incarcerated parents possible, which might ultimately benefit their children. For example, incarcerated fathers who have visitation with their children were found to have increased levels of self-esteem in parenting and everyday life, as well as a renewed vigor to maintain or create relationships with their children (Bednarowski, 2014; Eddy, Martinez, et al., 2008; Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). Therefore, a gender-responsive parenting program for fathers should have elements of self-esteem building and interaction with children. Likewise, incarcerated mothers have long histories of physical and substance abuse (James, 2014). Taking these factors into account when designing parenting programs for incarcerated mothers would result in specific mental health practices and substance use interventions. Few evaluations exist that focus on the racial or cultural responsiveness of programs.

Objective

Many U.S. prisons have some sort of parenting program because they are expected to improve prosocial outcomes, reduce recidivism, and equip parents to improve the emotional, social, and behavioral well-being of children. Some programs offer prison nurseries for incarcerated women to care for infants. Other programs emphasize parenting education, physical and verbal contact between incarcerated parent and child, communication, and positive attitudes toward parenting. However, there have been no comprehensive, nationwide studies documenting the prevalence of and variation in programs for incarcerated parents. Indeed, little is known about exactly what programs exist nationally, how they are implemented, and the extent to which incarcerated parents participate. Among the programs documented, the interventions historically focus on the needs of incarcerated mothers, and few DOCs provide programs for incarcerated fathers.

Given this situation, the RAND Corporation initiated this pilot study to explore the landscape of

programs for incarcerated parents. The goal was to answer the following research questions:

1. What prison-based programs exist for incarcerated parents?
2. What are the key program components, how are programs implemented, and what are the programs' resources?
3. To what extent do available programs support gender and cultural responsiveness?
4. What are prison officials' assessments of the efficacy of the programs, and what are their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of implementation?

To answer our research questions, we developed and fielded a pilot survey with prison facility administrators in five states. We also conducted cognitive interviews with select survey respondents to gather information on whether the survey questions were understandable and perceived by the participants as intended. Throughout the research process, we engaged an advisory panel of subject-matter experts (SMEs) to (1) support survey development and fielding and (2) interpret the survey findings.

How This Report Is Organized

The next section details the study design for the project and is followed by a discussion of the study results in terms of the research questions. The final section discusses lessons learned and next steps. Appendixes A and B provide additional details about the interview process and survey, and they are available at www.rand.org/t/RRA1412-1.

Study Design

In this section, we detail the design of the study, including how we created the pilot survey, selected states to survey in our pilot sample, and fielded and analyzed the survey data. See Appendix A for more-detailed information about the cognitive interviews.

Developing the Survey

To develop the survey, we first turned to the practice-based resources and research literature on programs for incarcerated parents to learn about general programming and supports and specific approaches to respond to the distinct needs of different racial and ethnic populations. We reviewed a variety of sources, including websites for existing programs for incarcerated parents, research reports and articles from evaluations of programs, and the research literature summarized in the previous section on social services available to incarcerated parents. We used this information to develop a list of key components and characteristics of parenting programs to capture in our survey.

Once we drafted a list of key components and characteristics of parenting programs, we convened an advisory panel of five SMEs to review and provide feedback on the pilot survey. The group of experts represented several key stakeholder groups with valuable knowledge about the experiences of incarcerated parents and the services available to them. The group of SMEs included a commissioner of a state-level DOC, a federal employee of a criminal justice agency whose parent was incarcerated during his childhood, and employees of community-based organizations that design and implement programs for incarcerated parents across multiple states, including an expert who was formerly incarcerated. The SMEs provided feedback on how to edit the survey to ensure it was organized well, captured important information, and reflected the experiences of program implementers and participants.

The survey gathered information on the following topics:

- the number of programs offered per facility
- program goals and whether program administrators believe the goals are being met
- program components and characteristics (e.g., whether programs included parenting education, literacy activities, and reentry supports; the extent to which programs are culturally responsive)
- program structure (e.g., frequency and length of program sessions)

- staffing characteristics (e.g., type of staff who implemented the program)
- program resources (e.g., funding sources)
- strengths of program implementation (as measured by program administrators' perceptions)
- challenges of program implementation (as measured by program administrators' perceptions).

A complete copy of the survey is available in Appendix B.

The survey included both facility-level and program-level questions. The facility-level questions elicited facility-wide information (such as the number of programs offered to parents). The program-level questions elicited program-specific information. For the program-specific questions, the respondents were instructed to pick up to two programs to focus on while answering the questions. The survey instructed respondents from facilities with more than two parenting programs to focus on the "most effective" ones, defined as programs successfully meeting the program objectives (as perceived by the respondents). The survey primarily asked multiple-choice questions, with some opportunities for respondents to provide more information in free-response questions. Most questions elicited factual information on the key components, characteristics, and structure of parenting programs. The survey also asked questions about the respondents' perceptions of the programs'

effectiveness and implementation success and challenges. Respondents who provided information on only one program answered the program-level questions one time; respondents who provided information on two programs answered the program-level questions twice (once for each program).

Selecting the Survey Sample

The sample was created by selecting states according to the following criteria:

- We identified states with a high percentage of children with at least one incarcerated parent.[1]
- Geographic diversity was prioritized to identify one state in each quadrant of the United States: midwest, northeast, south, and west and southwest.
- We identified each state's degree of racial disparities in incarceration—specifically, their Black-to-White ratio.

States chosen and approved for the sample are shown in Table 1 along with their associated rates according to the criteria explained earlier.

We prioritized potential states for study inclusion using their estimated time frame of external research approvals, as indicated by their respective DOCs. The ease of the research approval process was also included in determining a realistic approval time frame. Approval timelines varied from 30 days to 90 or more days and were determined by reviewing

TABLE 1

State Sample Selection Criteria

State	Percentage of Children with Incarcerated Parents[a]	Black-White Disparity in Incarceration[b]	Region[c]
Indiana	10	5:1	Midwest
Iowa	6	11:1	Midwest
Kentucky	12	3:1	South
Montana	11	6:1	West
Vermont	6	11:1	Northeast
National	7	5:1	N/A

NOTE: N/A = not applicable.

[a] Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center, 2021.

[b] Nellis, 2021.

[c] U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, 1994.

online processes and calling states that met the inclusion criteria. We primarily chose those states with a 30-day process and used those with a 60-day process as backup should the original states become unviable.[2]

Although some states have an Institutional Review Board, other states have a more informal external research review process. Some application processes were time-consuming and extensive. Often, there were multiple applications and multiple rounds of review prior to receiving a disposition for this study. As expected, there were some requests for teleconference discussions as well.

DOCs noted various time frames, from 30 days to more than five months. For many states, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic delayed their processes significantly. On average, those states included in the sample for this pilot study completed the research review process within 60 days. Once approvals were received, a letter of support was requested from the DOCs to aid in recruitment for their facilities.

Recruiting and Fielding the Survey

Following the receipt of research approval from each of the five participating states, we worked with representatives from each DOC to obtain contact information for administrators at the state prisons who would serve as the survey respondents. We requested and received contact information from the DOCs for one administrator per facility who was in the best position to provide information on the facilities' programs for incarcerated parents.[3] The administrators for whom the DOC provided contact information varied in position by state and facility; as examples, the list of contacts included wardens, program directors, and caseworkers. We will use the terms *administrator* and *respondent* interchangeably to refer to the facility staff who were invited to take the survey.

We fielded the survey in March and April of 2021; the survey was open for approximately four weeks in each state, although the exact timing differed slightly by state. The survey was only available online. Administrators received up to six email invitations to complete the survey during the administration window (i.e., an initial invitation and up to five reminders). The survey took approximately 45 minutes. At the

conclusion of the survey, respondents were offered up to three incentive choices: (1) an Amazon gift code in the amount of $20, (2) a donation of $20 to a charitable organization, or (3) no incentive. In states that prohibited remuneration to state employees, only options two and three were offered.

Sample and Analysis

In total, administrators from 43 facilities across the five states in our sample completed the survey (Table 2). The sample had a total response rate of 88 percent, which varied by state and ranged from a perfect response rate from Montana's two facilities to 67 percent (*n* = 6) of Iowa's nine facilities.

In Table 3, we present information on key characteristics of the 43 facilities in the sample, both collectively and disaggregated by state. The facilities' size ranged from as few as 59 residents served to more than 2,000. The facilities in Indiana were the largest, on average, while the facilities in Vermont held the fewest residents. All the facilities in the sample served men or women only, with the majority serving men only (86 percent). A variety of security levels are represented in the sample,[4] and many facilities (37 percent) served a mix of security levels. We also present information on the distribution of the race and ethnicity of facility residents. Because of differences in how information on race and ethnicity data were collected across states, we only present within-state statistics. Across all states, the largest percentage of residents identified as White (averag-

TABLE 2
Survey Sample

	Number of Facilities Invited	Number of Facilities That Responded	Response Rate	Percentage of Sample
Indiana	18	17	94.4	39.5
Iowa	9	6	67.7	14.0
Kentucky	14	13	92.9	30.2
Montana	2	2	100.0	4.7
Vermont	6	5	83.3	11.6
Total	49	43	87.8	100.0

TABLE 3
Facility Demographics

	Full Sample (n = 43)		Indiana[a] (n = 17)		Iowa (n = 6)		Kentucky (n = 13)		Montana (n = 2)		Vermont (n = 5)	
Prison size	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Number of residents	866.1	59–2,311	1020.7	123–2,311	871.83	500–1,050	930.15	300–1,938	912.5	225–1,600	148.2	59–266
Gender served	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%
Women only	37	14	2	11.8	1	16.7	1	7.70	1	50	1	20
Men only	6	86	15	88.2	5	83.3	12	92.31	1	50	4	80
Security level	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%
Minimum	8	18.6	5	29.41	1	16.7	2	15.4	0	0	0	0
Medium	14	32.6	6	35.29	2	33.3	4	30.8	0	0	2	40
Maximum	5	11.6	4	23.53	0	0.0	1	7.7	0	0	0	0
Mixed	16	37.2	2	11.76	3	50.0	6	46.2	2	100	3	60
Racial and ethnic distribution of residents[b]	Avg. % in sample	% of natl. pop.	Avg. % in sample	% of state pop.	Avg. % in sample	% of state pop.	Avg. % in sample	% of state pop.	Avg. % in sample	% of state pop.	Avg. % in sample	% of state pop.
Black	N/A	13.4	33.5	9.9	23.83	4.1	31.2	8.5	2.2	0.6	7.2	1.4
Hispanic	N/A	18.5	3.7	7.3	6.67	6.3	N/A	3.9	N/A	4.1	11.4	2.0
White	N/A	76.3	61.7	84.8	66.70	90.6	67.7	87.5	68.9	88.9	86.6	94.2
Other	N/A	10.2	0.9	5.3	2.80	5.4	1.0	4.0	29.0	10.5	5.8	4.4

NOTE: The data in this table were reported by the DOCs in each state. Avg. = average; N/A = not applicable; Natl. = national; Pop. = population.

[a] Three Indiana facilities were missing information on race and ethnicity.

[b] The information on race and ethnicity was collected differently in each state. For this reason, we do not present aggregate statistics for the full sample. In Indiana, the four presented categories were mutually exclusive. Kentucky and Montana collected data on three mutually exclusive categories only: *Black*, *White*, and *other*; no data on residents' Hispanic status were reported. In Vermont, data on race were collected separately from data on residents' Hispanic status. Residents were categorized into one of three mutually exclusive race categories (*Black*, *White*, and *other*); in addition, they were categorized as *Hispanic* or *not Hispanic*. None of the states provided explicit definitions of the racial and ethnic categories included in *other*; therefore, we take *other* to mean any category outside those explicitly named.
State and national race and ethnicity data use the 2019 U.S. Census Bureau population estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Residents were categorized into one of three mutually exclusive race categories (*Black*, *White*, and *other*); in addition, they were categorized as *Hispanic* or *non-Hispanic*. The category *other* includes individuals who identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or two or more races.

ing 68 to 88 percent). The average percentage of Black residents ranged from 2 percent in Montana to 33 percent in Indiana. However, as noted in Table 1, all five states in our sample displayed disproportionately high incarceration rates for Black people as compared with White people. This is in reference to the base population rates in each state, as reported in Table 3. Facilities had the lowest average percentages of residents who identified as Hispanic (3 to 11 percent) or other races and ethnicities (less than 1 percent to 6 percent).[5] In the results section, we present descriptive tabulations of the survey questions. Because of the small sample and pilot nature of the survey, we focus on providing the results in the aggregate for the full sample. We do not have the sample size to disaggregate and compare the results by state or any of the facility characteristics described earlier. For questions that had open-ended responses, we read through all the responses and thematically coded the information using the study research questions and the specific topics each question addressed.

Study Results

In this section, we report the study results. We describe information on the parenting programs at the 43 facilities that completed the survey. As noted earlier, results are shown in response to four questions:

1. What prison-based programs exist for incarcerated parents?
2. What are the key program components, how are programs implemented, and what are the programs' resources?
3. To what extent do available programs support gender and cultural responsiveness?
4. What are prison officials' assessments of the efficacy of the programs, and what are their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of implementation?

Question 1: What Prison-Based Programs Exist?

To begin, we wanted to know the number of parenting programs typically offered at the correctional facilities in our sample. For the survey, we defined

a *parenting program* as a structured set of activities, services, supports, and resources intended to promote positive outcomes for incarcerated parents and their children and families. This definition was intentionally broad so that it would encompass the variety of programs that might exist across facilities. The survey provided examples of the kinds of services that might be considered parenting programs (such as programs that focus on parenting skills or programs that provide visitation opportunities for families; see Appendix B). Of the 43 facilities we surveyed, approximately 80 percent (*n* = 35) reported offering at least one parenting program to residents (Table 4). Most of these facilities (over 80 percent) offered one or two programs, with a small number offering three or four parenting programs.

Note that one facility—a potential outlier—reported offering nine parenting programs, substantially more than any other facility in the sample. If our survey sample is representative of facilities nationwide, this outlier might indicate that there are some institutions with many programs for parents. These facilities might have access to unusual resources—such as more than typical amounts of funding for social programs or specially trained staff—to offer such a high number of programs. Or it is possible this data point represents an error or inconsistency. In particular, we note that the definition of *parenting program* was confusing to some respondents (see the cognitive interview results in

TABLE 4

Number of Parenting Programs per Facility

Number of Programs	Number of Facilities	Percentage of All Facilities (*n* = 43)	Percentage of All Facilities with Any Programs (*n* = 35)
0	8	18.6	N/A
1	16	37.2	45.7
2	13	30.2	37.1
3	2	4.7	5.7
4	3	7.0	8.6
9	1	2.3	2.9

NOTE: Percentages might not sum to 100 because of rounding.
N/A = not applicable.

Appendix A); in some instances, respondents were not sure what counted as a program. The respondent who reported nine programs might have been more liberal than others in applying the definition. For example, imagine a program with multiple components, such as parenting education courses, extra visitation supports, and mental health resources, in which all activities are funded by a single source and fall under the heading of one program name. We imagine most respondents would report this collection of activities as one program, but it is possible that the administrator from the potential outlier facility would have reported three distinct programs for the three types of activities mentioned.

Eight of the 43 facilities in the sample reported that they did not offer any programs for parents. Four of the five states in the sample were represented among the facilities without programs; Montana was the only state for which all sampled facilities in the state (two in total) reported offering programs for incarcerated parents. We gave the respondents at these facilities the opportunity to describe any services or resources for parents that they felt did not rise to the level of *program*. In general, not much additional information was provided. Thus, at nearly 20 percent of the facilities surveyed, there were almost no reported programs, services, or resources explicitly designed to support parents.

Program-Level Sample

The 35 facilities that had at least one parenting program represented all five states in the sample. As described earlier, these administrators were given the option on the survey to provide more detail about up to two of the programs at their facility. For facilities with more than one or two programs, the respondents were asked to select the programs that they felt were *most effective*, defined in the survey as the programs that were successfully meeting the program objectives according to staff perceptions, parent perceptions, conducted research, or other evidence. Given this condition, the program-level sample might represent the most successful of the facilities' parenting programs. In total, the respondents provided detailed information about 44 programs; 26 facilities provided information on one

program, and nine facilities provided detail about two programs. The remainder of the results will focus on these 44 programs.

Question 2: What Are the Programs' Components and Resources? How Are They Implemented?

Program Goals and Objectives

To respect the anonymity of the facilities within the sample, we do not report the names of all 44 parenting programs within the sample. However, it is helpful to report that more than half of the programs had names indicating that they were using models developed by nationally known—and, in some cases, researched-based—parenting interventions, such as the Moral Reconation Therapy (MRT) parenting program (n = 9 programs; Correctional Counseling, Inc., undated), InsideOut Dad (n = 10 programs), and 24/7 Dad (n = 4 programs; National Fatherhood Initiative, undated). A review of the goals and descriptions of these programs indicates that they aim to support parent well-being and positive family relationships. For example, the publicly accessible MRT parenting program materials are

> designed to help participants develop parenting skills and assess values related to family issues and relationships. Clients confront their parenting skills and habits, perform a clarification on their values regarding family, and establish appropriate discipline routines. (Correctional Counseling, Inc., undated)

Similarly, InsideOut Dad "connects inmate fathers to their families, helping to improve behavior while still incarcerated and to break the cycle of recidivism by developing pro-fathering attitudes, knowledge, and skills, along with strategies to prepare fathers for release" (National Fatherhood Initiative, undated). As indicated by the program names, some programs are specifically designed to serve fathers (e.g., InsideOut Dad and 24/7 Dad). None of the national programs in the sample were specifically designed for mothers. (See the section on "Gender Responsiveness" for a discussion of the ways programs in our sample reported being gender-responsive.)

The data we collected on the goals of the 44 programs in our sample were aligned with information on these national programs (Table 5). Nearly every program focused on improving the parent-child relationship or other types of family relationships. The respondents' free-response answers about program goals echoed this theme. For example, one administrator described the program as "help[ing] incarcerated fathers bridge the gap with [their] children." Improving parenting skills was the second most common goal, reflected in 41 of the programs in the sample. The free-response options also indicated a focus on building parenting skills that participants could use while separated from their family during incarceration and skills to use once they have been reunited following their release. For example, one respondent wrote, "Our hope is that what our incarcerated mothers learn during their time in the program will be put to use when they leave our facility and return home." Other common goals were improving parents' communication skills and increasing parent self-esteem and self-efficacy. All but one program selected more than one goal, and most (41) selected three or more. This pattern indicates that the parenting programs in our sample have multiple, interrelated objectives. In the next section, we describe the programmatic components and activities that programs used to meet these goals.

TABLE 5

Parenting Program Goals

Program Goal	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Improve parent-child relationship and other family relationships	43	97.7
Improve parenting skills	41	93.2
Improve parents' communication skills	37	84.1
Increase parents' self-esteem and self-efficacy	33	75.0
Improve child well-being	25	56.8
Improve parents' mental health	22	50.0
Other	3	6.8

NOTE: The survey response options were not mutually exclusive.

Key Program Components

Using our review of the literature and feedback from our panel of SMEs, we identified eight key programmatic components common in parenting programs for incarcerated parents:

- **parenting education**—resources or activities designed to improve parenting skills and knowledge (e.g., courses on child development and parenting practices)
- **reading, writing, and literacy**—resources or activities designed to connect incarcerated parents and their children via reading books, writing letters, and other activities that involve the use or development of literacy skills (e.g., parents sending recordings of books to children)
- **visitation supports**—resources or activities that foster in-person or virtual interactions between incarcerated parents and their children (e.g., virtual visitation opportunities)
- **reentry supports**—resources or activities designed to support smooth reentry of the parents into their community and life stability following incarceration (e.g., housing resources)
- **direct supports for children**—resources or activities directly administered to the children of incarcerated parents (e.g., peer support groups for the children of parents enrolled in the prison-based program)
- **mental health supports**—resources or activities designed to support parents' wellness and emotional health (e.g., counseling)
- **education and training**—resources or activities designed to build parents' skills and human capital (e.g., postsecondary education courses)
- **legal supports**—legal assistance for incarcerated parents pertaining to the care or custody of their child or their rights as a parent.

In Figure 2, we present results on the prevalence of each component across the 44 programs in the sample. Parenting education was the most common component, consistent with the literature (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). Three-quarters of parenting programs (*n* = 33) had activities or resources focused on improving participants' parenting skills.

FIGURE 2
Parenting Program Components
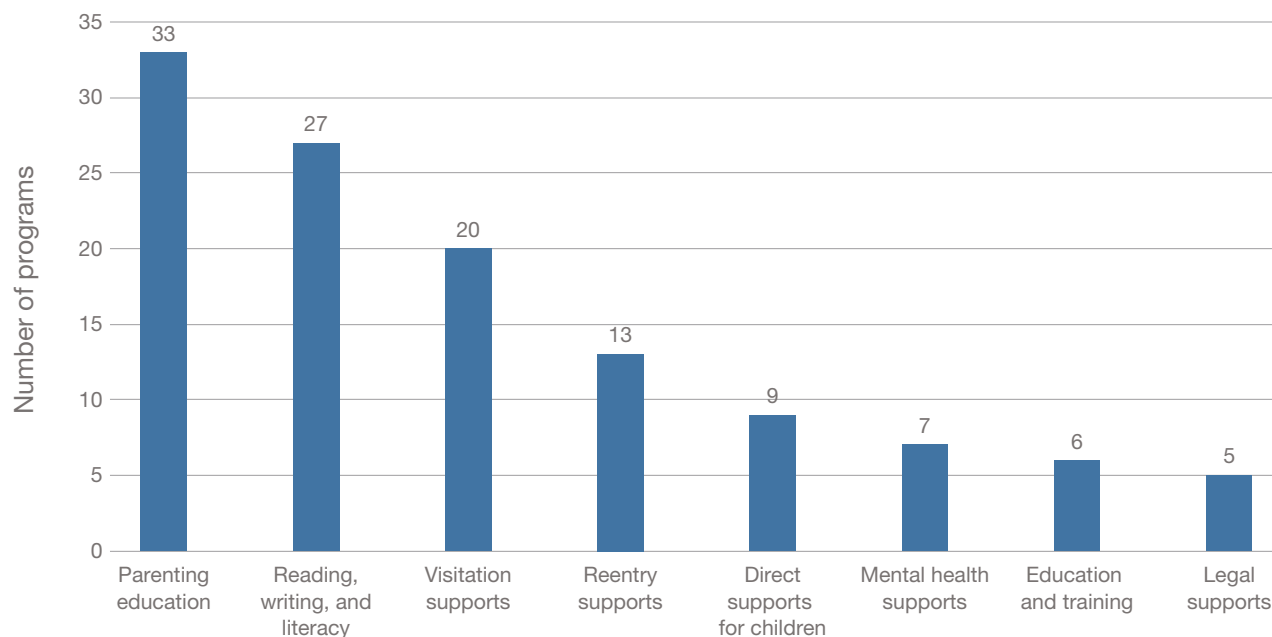
NOTE: The survey response options were not mutually exclusive.

Reading, writing, and literacy activities and visitation supports were the next most-common components, reported as part of 61 percent ($n = 27$) and 46 percent ($n = 20$) of the programs, respectively. The least common components were mental health supports, training, and education and legal supports for parents. The lack of prevalence of these components might be because they tend to be available facility-wide to all prison residents as opposed to part of a parenting program (Cropsey et al., 2007).

Notably, most programs (75 percent; $n = 31$) featured more than one program component. That is, most programs offered multifaceted supports to participating programs. Parenting education activities were the most common feature across multifaceted programs, consistent with the data in Figure 2. Although parenting education was featured with multiple other components, it was commonly paired with the reading, writing, and literacy component; nearly half of the programs with more than one component (14 programs) featured these two components together. This pattern might suggest that developing parenting skills and providing parents with the opportunity to engage in literacy activities that help to build a connection with their children go hand-in-hand. One limitation of the survey data is that we cannot identify the programmatic components that are most important in the programs. Nor do we know how time or resources are split across the different components. For this reason, it is difficult to provide more detail about how the components are brought together to form a coherent program. Although we cannot describe how the components fit together, the following sections provide more detail on the implementation of some of the most commonly reported components.

Parenting Education

Research suggests that parenting education for incarcerated individuals can lead to improvement in parenting skills and increased contact with children (Block et al., 2014). In this way, parenting education can be an effective component of programs for incarcerated parents. As described earlier, 33 programs in our sample (75 percent of programs; Figure 2) offered parenting education as part of their intervention.

Most of the programs (*n* = 30) used a curriculum to guide the parenting education component of the program. In some cases, the reported name of the curriculum indicates the facilities were using materials from national programs, such as InsideOut Dad; in other cases, the curricula might have been developed locally. As shown in Table 6, the programs with parenting education covered a variety of topics, including parenting techniques, communication with children, and child development.

Reading, Writing, and Literacy

The research literature suggests that reading, writing, and literacy activities for incarcerated parents can be beneficial for both parents and children (Blumberg and Griffin, 2013; Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). Specifically, programs with these activities can help to support both parents' and children's literacy skills through direct instruction and exposure to literature. In addition, these activities can foster communication between parent and child and help to sustain the parent-child relationship while the parent is incarcerated (Blumberg and Griffin, 2013). Twenty-seven programs in our sample offered at least one activity or resource in the reading, writing, and literacy component category. As shown in Table 7, there was notable variation in the kinds of program activities reported. Activities that foster written communication between parents and children—such as parents writing emails, letters, or cards—were the most common and were reported in more than 40 percent of all programs in the sample (*n* = 19). Activities that involve parents reading to their children were also reported in several programs. For example, 15 programs provided an opportunity for parents to record themselves reading a book and then send the recording to their child.

Program administrators who completed the survey reported that these sorts of activities are beneficial to the parents who participate. As one administrator wrote in a free response, "Book taping provides another opportunity for parent/caregiver/child to stay connected and communicate in a way that the child might find most appealing through literature." Another administrator noted that, in addition to providing a connection between parent and child via the recording itself, the recording

> creates a space where the fathers can share something with their child/children that they can continue to talk about on the phone as well as assisting in working with their children/child to read more efficiently. The fathers

TABLE 6
Parenting Education Topics

Parenting Education Topic	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs with Parenting Education
Parenting techniques	31	93.9
Communication with child	31	93.9
Child development	28	84.8
Parent self-esteem or self-efficacy	25	75.8
Plans to reenter child's life upon release	23	69.7
Co-parenting	22	66.7
Anger management	20	60.6
Other	6	18.2

NOTE: The survey response options were not mutually exclusive. The 33 programs that reported a parenting education component serve as the total sample for this question.

TABLE 7
Reading, Writing, and Literacy Activities

Parenting Education Topic	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Parents write to children	19	43.2
Parents record themselves reading, and recording is sent to child	15	34.1
Parents read directly to children in-person during visitation	10	22.7
Books are provided to children	10	22.7
Books are provided to parents	9	20.5
Other literacy development activities are offered	6	13.6
Literacy instruction is provided for parents	3	6.8
Parents read directly to children via internet or satellite	2	4.5

NOTE: The survey response options were not mutually exclusive.

really enjoy looking for books that they know their children will enjoy!

Some programs have opportunities for parents to read to their children during in-person visitation ($n = 10$). Providing books to parents and children was also common. One of the least common activities was providing literacy instruction to parents. This might suggest that although the activities in this category might result in parents exercising or strengthening their literacy abilities, most programs do not offer instruction that intentionally builds new literacy skills. It is more likely that literacy instruction takes place as part of formal education programs for the general prison population, such as adult basic education (ABE) offered to incarcerated individuals.

Visitation Supports

Opportunities for incarcerated individuals to have outside visitors are typical at most facilities. A national survey of state DOCs and the system run by the Federal Bureau of Prisons showed that all states have some provision or policy that allows for visitation at their facilities (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman, 2013). The literature suggests regular visitation is one effective strategy to sustain the parent-child relationship during parental incarceration (Cramer et al., 2017). Face-to-face contact can ease the difficulty associated with the prolonged separation and help parents and children to feel present in each other's lives (Mignon and Ransford, 2012). Despite the importance of visitation, less is known about visitation opportunities that are a part of parenting programs. Our survey indicated that 46 percent of parenting programs in the sample ($n = 20$; Figure 2) included visitation supports that were explicitly for parents in their program. Enhanced visitation was one of the two most-common visitation supports (Table 8). Enhanced visitation typically refers to visitation opportunities above and beyond what is offered to the general facility population; however, the specifics of these opportunities tend to vary by facility. For example, one administrator noted that parents enrolled in their facility's parenting program can spend an entire afternoon with a visiting child (longer than the typical two-hour visiting window generally offered at the facility). Administrators from

TABLE 8

Visitation Supports

Visitation Supports	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Enhanced visitation	11	25.0
Separate child visitation area	11	25.0
Video or virtual visits	8	18.2
Other	8	18.2
Transportation assistance	6	13.6
Lodging assistance	2	4.5

NOTE: The survey response options were not mutually exclusive.

another facility described hosting a "kids day" once per month as part of the visitation supports in their program. Children can spend up five hours at the facility during kids day. Administrators from this facility also described enhanced visitation options for mothers with newborns; these mothers can receive up to five visits per week with their baby.

One-fourth of parenting programs also reported the use of a separate area in the facility dedicated to visitation for children. For example, one program reported using a "family preservation area" for child visits. The area is reserved just for children and is completely separate from the regular visitation space. Research suggests that creating warm and welcoming spaces for children in criminal justice facilities is one way to make the visitation experiences more enjoyable for children because they reduce the potential anxiety associated with visiting a correctional facility. These spaces might help families enjoy their time together, thus supporting the parent-child relationship (Cramer et al., 2017). Having a separate visitation area for children might make it easier to create family friendly spaces.

Administrators from eight programs reported that participants have access to video or virtual visits as part of the parenting program. We asked administrators to report on the characteristics of their program prior to March 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that, during the pandemic, facility residents (both parents and nonparents) had increased access to phone calls or video visits, given the general suspension of in-person visits. Data from

a national study of prison visitation practices during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that many facilities made phone calls free when in-person visitation was not possible; however, facilities often had limited capacity for video visits (Dallaire et al., 2021).

Facilities sometimes offer transportation assistance, such as free or subsidized travel to a facility, or lodging assistance, such as free or subsidized lodging close to a facility, to ease the burden families incur to visit incarcerated parents. Visitation can often be costly, particularly when parents are placed far from where their family resides (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010). Very few programs in our sample offered either type of support (6 percent offered transportation support; 2 percent offered lodging support). These results might suggest that despite a documented need for such supports (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger, 2010), they are relatively uncommon as part of parenting programs.

Reentry Supports, Education, and Training

Many social services within incarceration facilities are geared toward supporting residents' smooth reentry back into their community once they leave prison. Research on reentry supports for the general incarcerated population (i.e., not supports specific to parents) suggests that well-executed programs can help adults successfully transition out of prison and back into the community (Solomon et al., 2004). Reentry supports for the general population often focus on housing, employment, and strategies to reduce recidivism (Huynh et al., 2015). Reentry programs also involve reconnecting incarcerated individuals with family, including children. Theory indicates that strong family relationships are key to a successful reentry; at the

Theory indicates that strong family relationships are key to a successful reentry.

same time, reentry can be made difficult if the familial bond was strained during incarceration (Solomon et al., 2004). Therefore, some reentry programs focus on family-specific needs, such as the steps parents might take to reenter their children's lives and reassume the role of a day-to-day caregiver (Skinner-Osei and Stepteau-Watson, 2018).

We asked the facility administrators in our sample whether their parenting programs included reentry supports; these services were a part of 30 percent of programs (n = 13). In most of these programs (n = 8), the respondents did not select a specific reentry support; therefore, we have little information about exactly what these supports involve. For example, one administrator explained that their program has "[w]orkshops or courses on reentering the child's life after release." Six programs reported that staff work with participants on planning for housing after release, and five programs reported working with participants on planning for employment, training, or education after leaving the facility.

In addition to supporting parents in planning for reentry into the community, correctional facilities often offer opportunities for residents to receive education and training while incarcerated. Indeed, education opportunities such as ABE, high school equivalency certificates (e.g., the General Educational Development [GED] Test or the High School Equivalency Test), or postsecondary education are common offerings by state DOCs in prison facilities (Davis et al., 2014). However, the data from our sample suggest education and training are relatively uncommon components of parenting programs; only 14 percent of programs (n = 6) offered any education or training, such as job training or employment counseling, and financial literacy courses were the most-common educational opportunities offered as part of the parenting programs in our sample. No programs reported offering high school equivalency or GED preparation, ABE, or postsecondary education to participating parents. The lack of educational opportunities as part of parenting programs might reflect that these opportunities tend to be provided in separate programs offered to the full prison population.

Other Program Components

The remaining programmatic components we collected data on include direct supports for children, mental health supports, and legal supports; all three were relatively uncommon. Just over 20 percent of programs (*n* = 9) had direct supports for children, such as support groups for the children of parents enrolled in prison-based programs. As an example of this type of service, one administrator noted that they provide boxes with activities for parents and children to do together during visitation and materials for children to take home. Sixteen percent of programs (*n* = 7) offered mental health supports to parents in the program; according to free-response answers connected to this question, most mental health support came in the form of one-on-one counseling. The least common programmatic component was legal supports related to program participants' rights as parents; only five programs in the sample offered these supports. Past research suggests that both mental health services and legal supports are commonly offered to all residents at some correctional facilities (Cropsey et al., 2007). The general accessibility of these services might explain why they are less often incorporated in parenting programs.

Program Implementation and Resources

We also report details on program implementation, including participant characteristics, program structure, staff characteristics, and program resources.

Program Participation and Eligibility

We attempted to collect data on the number of parents the programs in our sample served in a typical year;[6] however, doing so proved difficult. Administrators representing exactly half the program in the sample (*n* = 22) did not know how many parents were served. Given the low response rate for this question, we have chosen not to report the information here. The lack of data might indicate that facilities do not keep accurate records on program participation. Alternatively, it is possible that facility administrators did not have access to or were not comfortable sharing the information.

Although we do not know how many parents were served by programs in our sample, we learned that most programs (70 percent; *n* = 31) employed eligibility criteria to enroll parents. The most common specified eligibility criteria were related to child age; 14 programs had a child age requirement. Most of these programs required participants to be connected to minor children (18 years or younger), although some targeted parents of younger children (e.g., 13 years old or younger, five years old or younger). Three programs reported having facility residents who were not eligible for the program because they were identified as sex offenders or had sentences precluding them from contact with children.

The description of some of the programs' eligibility criteria highlights the variation surrounding programs' definitions of *parent*. That is, many program administrators noted their programs were open to any individual in a caregiving role, such as biological parents, adoptive parents, legal guardians, stepparents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. One administrator noted the program is open to participants who wish to have children one day, even if they are not in a caregiving role while incarcerated. Other responses indicated they might use a more restrictive definition of *parent*. For example, some programs noted participants must have "children or step-children that can be verified" or be in an "active parenting role."

Program Structure

In Table 9, we report on key aspects of the structure of the parenting programs. The programs in our sample met relatively frequently, with 39 programs reporting regular meetings of some form. Programs with regular meetings for parents met at least once per month. Nearly half the programs (*n* = 21) met one or more times per week. Most programs with regular

TABLE 9

Program Structure

Program Structure	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Meeting frequency		
Less than once per month	0	0.0
One to four times per month	12	27.3
One or more times per week	21	47.7
Program participation varies	6	13.6
No regular meetings	3	6.8
Unknown	2	4.6
Meeting format[a]		
Group only	27	69.2
Group and individual	7	18.0
Individual only	4	10.3
Other	1	2.6
Meeting length[a]		
30 minutes or less	1	2.6
31 to 60 minutes	10	25.6
60 minutes or more	23	59.0
Session length varies	5	12.8
Program duration[a]		
One month or less	2	5.1
One month to six months	21	53.9
Six months to one year	5	12.8
More than one year	1	2.6
No start or end	6	15.4
Unknown	4	10.3
Services following prison release		
Yes	7	15.9
No	26	59.1
Unknown	11	25.0

NOTE: The responses under each heading are mutually exclusive. Percentages might not sum to 100 because of rounding. We collected data on meeting frequency for all 44 programs in the sample. When a program reported no regular meetings or when meeting frequency was unknown ($n = 5$), programs were not asked about meeting format, meeting length, or program duration.

[a] The total number of programs that received these questions is 39.

meetings convened parents in a group setting. This might indicate that the programs aim to build community among participating parents. Some programs combined both group sessions and one-on-one meetings between parents and staff; a small number of programs ($n = 4$) offered only one-on-one meetings. Although the length of program sessions varied by program, most sessions ranged in length from more than 30 minutes to more than an hour.

We also collected information on program duration. Most programs (72 percent; $n = 28$) lasted one year or less. A small number of programs ($n = 6$) had no established start or end date. These flexible programs might be designed to accommodate varying sentence lengths, acknowledging that the amount of time parents spend in a correctional facility can vary. The variation in the frequency of program meetings and program duration in our sample is consistent with other findings in the literature showing that prison-based parenting programs are organized in multiple ways (Armstrong et al., 2018; Bednarowski, 2014; Eddy, Kjellstrand, et al., 2019). Of note, most programs only offered services while parents were incarcerated and in the facility. Only seven programs had services that continued after the parents finished their sentences and returned to the community. The lack of continued programming following parents' reentry into the community might represent a missed opportunity for continuity of services. Research on the implementation of other social services for incarcerated people (e.g., mental health supports) indicates that a "warm-handoff" between prison-based services and community reentry services can support improved outcomes (Hicks, Comartin, and Kubiak, 2021).

Program Funding, Staff, and Other Program Resources

The programs in our sample were funded by a variety of sources (Table 10). Internal discretionary funding from the facility was the most common source, followed by funding from the state DOC.[7] Ten program administrators did not know how the programs were funded. This might indicate that the administrators who responded to the survey did not have access to information about program finances.

We also asked several questions about program staff. First, we explored which organizations employed the staff who implement programs for incarcerated parents (Table 11). Facility staff were involved in implementing most programs (68 percent). Other programs relied on staff from contracted agencies, such as community-based groups and nonprofit organizations.[8] Or they relied on staff from the State DOC. Because of variation in staff titles across facilities and programs, it was difficult to collect

TABLE 10

Program Funding Sources

Funding Source	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Facility's discretionary funds	15	34.1
State DOC funds	9	20.5
Other	8	18.2
Funds from faith groups	6	13.6
Private funds	3	6.8
Unknown	10	22.7

NOTE: Response choices were not mutually exclusive.

comparable information across the facilities on the type of staff who implemented parenting programs. Specifically, administrators for nearly 50 percent of programs reported the program staff type as "other." Administrators' qualitative responses indicated that "other" represented a variety of program-specific staff types and titles, such as "program director" or "program facilitator." It is difficult to know how these roles are similar or different across facilities or programs. Almost one-third of programs relied on support from volunteer staff, highlighting the importance of volunteer community support. Some programs used mental health clinicians, such as social workers, and a small number of programs were implemented by correctional officers, current or former incarcerated facility residents, or both.

Administrators reported staff in 50 percent of programs in the sample ($n = 22$) received training to implement the program. This suggests that many programs might benefit from additional professional development opportunities for program staff. Of the programs that did offer training, the topics and skills covered in program training varied from parenting techniques ($n = 15$) to family-centered practices ($n = 13$) to trauma-informed interventions ($n = 12$).

The survey respondents indicated that programs used a variety of resources in addition to program staff to support implementation (Table 12). Classroom space was the most common resource. Thus, facilities planning to implement a program for incarcerated parents might want to start by ensuring that the facility has the space to accommodate the

TABLE 11
Staff Characteristics

Staff Characteristics	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Organization that employed program staff		
Facility	30	68.2
A contracted agency	14	31.8
State DOC	13	29.5
Other	9	20.5
Other state or federal agency	1	2.3
Type of staff		
Other staff	21	47.7
Volunteers	18	40.9
Mental health clinicians or social workers	10	22.7
Correctional officers	4	9.1
Current or former incarcerated facility residents	3	6.8
Unknown	1	2.3

NOTE: Response choices were not mutually exclusive.

TABLE 12

Program Resources

Resources	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Classroom space	39	88.6
Instructional or program-specific materials	38	86.4
Technology	15	34.1
Other materials and resources	14	31.8
Visitation space	12	27.3

NOTE: Response choices were not mutually exclusive.

program. Unsurprisingly, instructional materials or program-specific materials, such as workbooks, curriculum, materials, and books, were needed for most programs (86 percent; $n = 38$). Less than one-third of programs relied on technology (including computers, tablets, and smartphones). The "other materials and resources" category reflects different kinds of materials that respondents did not feel fit in any of the existing categories, including materials for children (e.g., books, art supplies for visits), meals, and supplies for specialized outings with children (e.g., fishing supplies for a trip to the outdoors).

Question 3: How Responsive Are Programs to Gender and Culture?

As described in the background section at the beginning of this report, programs that attend to parents' specific needs and distinct circumstances might be more successful at promoting positive outcomes (Bruns and Lee, 2019; Loper, Clarke, and Dallaire, 2019). In particular, parents' gender, gender identity, and cultural identities and practices are important to consider when designing and executing programs for incarcerated parents. In this section, we report on the ways in which the programs in our sample reported using practices that were responsive to gender and culture.

Gender Responsiveness

We defined a program's *gender responsiveness* as its use of activities, topics, and materials that are designed to reflect the distinct needs of the participants related to their gender or gender identity.

Administrators representing more than half of the programs (60 percent; $n = 26$) reported that their programs were gender responsive. For 11 programs, administrators reported that their programs were gender responsive because they were designed for and administered to participants of a specific gender. For example, InsideOut Dad, a nationally run program represented in the sample, is designed for incarcerated fathers. The program materials focus on topics meant to align with male or male-identifying experiences of fatherhood; for example, the curriculum materials have a unit entitled "Being a Man" (National Fatherhood Initiative, undated). Similarly, at least one program implemented at a facility that serves only women reported that the program is specific to women and the female experience. Some respondents described specific curricular topics that make programs gender responsive ($n = 6$), such as gender roles, men's health, and masculinity. Administrators representing two programs in the sample described being attentive to the needs of parents who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, and transexual.

Cultural Responsiveness

We defined a program's *cultural responsiveness* as its use of activities, topics, and materials that are designed to reflect the cultural background of the participants. Administrators representing 66 percent of programs ($n = 29$) reported that their programs are culturally responsive. Most commonly, respondents stated that programs were culturally responsive because they were offered in a non-English language or languages ($n = 8$). Other recurring themes among culturally responsive programs involve having structured discussions or formal units on cultural differences ($n = 5$) and reading programs that provide participants with diverse book choices (e.g., featuring varied languages, cultures, or characters of various ethnicities; $n = 4$). Individual programs mentioned other features, such as partnering with tribal organizations to ensure programming was appropriate for Native American parents or having content on implicit bias.

Question 4: What Are Survey Participants' Perceptions of the Strengths and Challenges of Programs and Their Implementation?

The survey respondents had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the programs at their facilities. Administrators representing 93 percent of the programs in the sample either agreed or strongly agreed that the programs were successfully meeting their goals and objectives; not a single respondent disagreed with this statement (7 percent neither agreed nor disagreed).

The administrators noted that there are a variety of programmatic strengths that contribute to the successful implementation of parenting programs in their facility (Table 13). The most commonly reported strength (from 91 percent of the programs) was the interest and motivation of the parents participating in the programs. One program administrator described the importance of parent interest and motivation in this way: "The main factor for any successful program is the [participants'] buy-in and willingness to participate and learn." Other commonly reported program strengths were effective resources, staff skills, and staff buy-in. In speaking about their program staff, one respondent reported, "Teamwork and communication [play] a significant part in instituting a smooth and progressive program."

The administrators who took the survey also reported challenges to implementation (Table 14). Notably, the most common challenge was identical to the most common strength: parent motivation.

TABLE 13

Implementation Strengths

Strength	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Parent interest and motivation	40	90.9
Effective resources (e.g., program materials, space, equipment)	36	81.8
Staff skills	25	56.8
Buy-in from the facility staff	25	56.8
Buy-in from the state DOC	23	52.3
Adequate funding	20	45.5

NOTE: Response choices were not mutually exclusive.

TABLE 14
Implementation Challenges

Challenge	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Limited parent interest and motivation	16	36.4
Low participation from parents	14	31.8
Staff burnout	12	27.3
Limited funding	11	25
Low participation from children or other family members	10	22.7
Too few staff to implement	9	20.5
Limited parent availability and time	6	13.6
Limited space, materials, or resources	6	13.6
Limited staff capacity	4	9.1
Insufficient staff training	2	4.5
Lack of staff buy-in	2	4.5

NOTE: Response choices were not mutually exclusive.

Administrators from 36 percent of the programs in our sample reported that limited interest or motivation from parents posed a challenge to implementation. As one respondent put it, "[parents'] unwilling[ness] to participate or for some to even acknowledge they need to improve their parenting skills certainly factored in on participation." The fact that parent motivation was both the most common strength and the most common challenge underscores the importance of this construct for parenting programs: It can make or break an intervention. Notably, parents' motivation was cited much less often as a challenge versus a strength. But respondents were generally less likely to cite any challenges compared with strengths. In addition to parent motivation, other commonly reported challenges were staff burnout and limited funding for programs.

Impact of COVID-19 on Programming

We fielded the survey in March and April 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we asked respondents to report on the pre–March 2020 components, structure, and characteristics of their programs, *before* regulations related to COVID-19 drastically changed the day-to-day functioning of incarceration facilities. Thus, the information in this report presents a prepandemic picture of programs for incarcerated parents. At the end of the survey, we asked respondents to describe how, if at all, their programs had changed because of the pandemic. Over 60 percent of the programs in the sample ($n = 27$) had been suspended temporarily or were suspended indefinitely as of April 2021. The pause to programming was caused by a variety of factors, including new regulations prohibiting groups to gather, limited space in the facility, and the inability of nonfacility staff and volunteers to enter the facility. Administrators from five programs noted that the visitation components of their programs became impossible during the pandemic. Therefore, most programs were negatively affected by the pandemic. However, facilities were also able to adapt to the challenging circumstances. For example, administrators from six programs reported that they were able to maintain some program components through virtual instruction.

Discussion and Next Steps

Discussion

Limited information is available about how state correctional facilities support and address the needs of incarcerated parents and their children. Although this pilot study was limited to five states, it expands our knowledge and understanding of programming for parents who are incarcerated. The results offer details on the prevalence and types of parenting programs available, key program components offered, and implementation practices used. In addition, the report provides perspectives on how these programs are performing. To our knowledge, this is the first study to directly inquire about efforts to respond to the distinct and diverse needs of incarcerated parents representing different racial, cultural, and gender identities.

Our preliminary study of the prevalence of parenting programs offered in correctional facilities revealed that programs are widespread but vary in number. Although most facilities indicated that

they offer one to two programs, 14 percent of our sample stated that they provide three or more programs, and one outlier facility reported that it offered nine. Twenty percent of facilities in the sample said that they did not offer any programs for parents. It is possible that this variation accurately reflects program availability; however, using feedback from the SMEs and administrators who participated in the cognitive interviews, we determined that some survey respondents might have been unclear about our definition of a *program*. Some respondents might have considered components of a single program as distinct programs, thus resulting in a higher number of programs reported. Conversely, some respondents might not have viewed stand-alone program components (e.g., parenting education classes, enhanced visitation) as parenting programs, and they thus indicated their facility did not have any programs. In future studies, the definition of *programs* needs to be modified for clarity to minimize the likelihood of misinterpretation and improve our ability to capture a comprehensive picture of program offerings.

Consistent with the literature on programming for incarcerated parents, the primary program component reported by facilities in our sample was parenting education. Parenting education was mostly implemented using curricula from national programs for parents. Although this study did not attempt to assess the extent to which parenting education addresses the unique circumstance of parenting during incarceration, research indicates that many national parent education programs do not focus on how to parent from prison (Eddy, Martinez, et al., 2008), and programs often are derived from materials tailored to parents in the noncarceral general population (Eddy, Kjellstrand, et al., 2019; Valle et al., 2004). Because facilities in our sample appeared to rely heavily on national programs, we recommend that programs consider adapting their curricula to provide education that explicitly equips parents to address the unique social, emotional, and behavioral needs of their children, which might differ from those of children who are unaffected by incarceration (e.g., children of incarcerated parents might grapple with poor academic achievement, parent-child attachment issues, or child delinquency). Though population-specific programming is important, the prevalence of even general programs in the sample states shows a promising opportunity for parents and children, given that the literature provides evidence of the value of parenting education programs on improving parenting skills and parent-child relationships.

Survey results also indicate that few programs provide reentry services, education and training, mental health supports, and legal supports. These resources might be extremely beneficial to incarcerated parents. As noted earlier, these supports might not be integrated into parenting programs because they are typically offered to all residents in the facility. However, many facility residents will return home at some point ill-equipped to assume financial responsibility for their children for reasons that might include low levels of education and training or a history of mental health and substance abuse (James, 2014). Therefore, facilities should explore the potential value of augmenting existing parenting programs to better prepare parents to reenter the community and contribute to the care of their families. Integrating these supports into programs designed specifically for incarcerated parents might increase the uptake of these services and ultimately improve housing and employment outcomes, reduce recidivism (Huynh et al., 2015), strengthen family bonds (Solomon et al., 2004), and aid in the transition back into a daily parenting role (Skinner-Osei and Stepteau-Watson, 2018). Future studies should inquire about collaboration efforts between parenting programs and correctional departments to support parents' reentry, education, employment, mental health, and legal needs.

This assessment also contributed to our understanding of how programs in the sample are implemented, and the results provided information on participant characteristics, program structure, staff characteristics, and program resources. Response rates to questions about program implementation

Program administrators from most facilities viewed their parenting programs as successful.

varied. For example, roughly half of the respondents were knowledgeable about program participants, and several program administrators were unable to answer questions about program funding. Alternatively, most respondents were able to provide information about program structure. One possible explanation for this variance is that the staff selected to complete the survey might not possess a depth of knowledge about all aspects of the program. In addition, some programs might not systematically collect the information we requested. Future efforts to collect information about program implementation should ensure that survey respondents have access to these program details.

Recognizing that a sizable and disproportionate number of facility residents represent racial and ethnic minority groups, this study aimed to learn how parenting programs responded to different cultural identities. In addition, because parenting programs have historically focused on the needs of female residents, we asked survey respondents about the extent to which programs attended to residents of different genders. Most respondents described their programs as responsive to culture and gender; however, the strategies used for cultural responsivity were fairly limited (e.g., offering materials in different languages). The literature on developing culturally responsive programs for correctional populations is very sparse. This gap presents an opportunity to explore the transferability of culturally responsive practices—and sensitivity practices used in other settings—to programs for incarcerated individuals, including parents.

Another important finding from this study is that program administrators from most facilities viewed their parenting programs as successful. The most commonly noted reason for program success was parent interest and motivation to participate in the program. It is unclear from this study what the typical participation rate is for these programs, largely because of low response to these questions in our survey. However, given the importance of parent participation to program success, we suggest facilities encourage and track parent involvement in these programs and limit restrictions on participation.

Next Steps

Overall, this study provided detailed information about prison-based programming for parents in the five sample states. However, although the survey covers all the topics we deemed most important from our review of the field's literature, we faced some limitations in our data collection. For example, a survey is not an effective tool to request detailed information on *why* the programs are structured in a particular way. Although our findings effectively describe the programs in our sample, we cannot offer information on the logic behind the programs' designs. In addition, to keep the survey a manageable length, we were limited in the amount of information we could gather. For example, respondents only provided information about up to two programs. As a result, we might have missed out on gathering information on programs at facilities with more than two programs for parents.

Next, we aim to use information from this preliminary study to refine and scale up the survey for administration in all states. A national survey will provide a more comprehensive assessment of program offerings and implementation for incarcerated parents. We also intend to conduct case studies of select states that use evidence-based and promising practices to gather more-detailed information about program design and implementation that is not easily captured in a survey. Ultimately, this information will contribute to a better understanding of how prison facilities can provide equitable supports to parents and children affected by incarceration and improve outcomes.

Notes

[1] We intended to target states in which the percentage of children with at least one incarcerated parent was above the national average; however, we ultimately included two states that were just below the average because of variation in states' willingness to participate in the study.

[2] We attempted to recruit 32 states that met the inclusion criteria and appeared to have a research approval timeline that was 60 days or less and a feasible approval process. These states are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

[3] We received contact information from the DOCs in all states except Iowa. To identify potential administrators who could complete the survey, we searched the Iowa DOC website and called each facility.

[4] While some states use slightly different names for security level designations, all can be assigned to four categories: *minimum*, *medium*, *maximum*, and *super maximum*. For this study, *super maximum* was not included in our assessment of the programs available for incarcerated parents. We provide definitions for each level here, drawn from Alarid and Reichel, 2008:

- **Minimum:** This is the lowest security level of all U.S. state prisons. Facilities categorized as minimum security house residents who are typically serving sentences for nonviolent offenses. These facilities offer much more freedoms to incarcerated persons than the facilities at higher security levels. Characteristics include little to no physical barriers surrounding the facilities, no guard towers, and no tall fences. Residents in these facilities are also offered educational release and work furloughs, only restricted by a particular time frame.
- **Medium**: Residents in medium security facilities are granted limited freedoms during work assignments and other program activities. They have free reign of the facility until nightly lockdown. If a resident at this security level leaves the facility, they are always accompanied by a correctional officer. Increased supervision, fences, and guard towers along the property are characteristics of medium security facilities.
- **Maximum:** Maximum security facilities were historically created as fortresses, surrounded by cement walls and guard towers. Many have barbed wire fences that are approximately 20 feet tall, and others have electric or double wire fences. Because of the level of supervision required, maximum security facilities have a much larger number of correctional officers than other levels.

[5] We note that it is difficult to summarize the data on the average percentage of Hispanic residents because of the differences in how the data were collected across the states. In Indiana and Iowa, *Hispanic* was one of four mutually exclusive race and ethnicity categories. In Kentucky, *Hispanic* was not included as a category. In Vermont, Hispanic ethnicity status was collected separately from the race categories, such that an individual could be counted as Hispanic *and* one of the three remaining categories. Therefore, the data are not comparable across the states.

[6] Respondents were asked to report on program participation in fiscal year 2019. We did not define the exact time parameters because we anticipated that fiscal years differed across facilities. Our goal was to reference the completed fiscal year prior to the start of the pandemic in March 2020. However, it is possible some facilities might have referenced a fiscal year that included March 2020 or later.

[7] Among the programs that selected "other," it was unclear from the added free-response information how to categorize the description of the funding source according to the survey options.

[8] The responses from programs that selected "other" indicated many of these organizations might be social service organizations and were likely contracted to implement the program. However, we did not have enough information to confidently count these responses as staff from "contracted agencies."

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About This Report

A significant number of incarcerated individuals in the United States are parents of minor children: Approximately 2.7 million children have at least one parent in prison. Research suggests that the incarceration of a parent can strain the parent-child relationship and increase the risk for child delinquency, poor academic achievement, and social and emotional problems, which disproportionately affect children of color because of racial and ethnic disparities in incarceration rates. Many U.S. prisons offer services and programs designed to support incarcerated parents and their children; however, little is known about exactly what programs exist, how they are implemented, and the extent to which incarcerated parents participate. In this pilot study, RAND researchers sought to explore and describe the current landscape of prison-based programs and services for incarcerated parents. They also aimed to determine the extent to which programs seek to mitigate the effects of policies and practices that disproportionately affect Black and Latinx families. Specifically, the authors distributed an online survey to administrators of state prison facilities in five states to gather information about key program components, such as how programs are implemented and what the program resources are; the extent to which programs are responsive to gender, culture, or both; and administrators' perceptions of the efficacy of the programs.

Information from this study will help the authors prepare for the national administration of the survey. Ultimately, the authors aim to create a publicly available compendium that documents prison-based programs for incarcerated parents. This resource will help guide administrators of correctional institutions and policymakers within the criminal justice system as they make decisions about how best to use resources to support incarcerated parents and their children.

Justice Policy Program

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of the RAND Corporation that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.

Funding

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