



Promising Practices

Programs to Strengthen Families For Individuals with Justice Involvement

Families are often disrupted by the justice involvement of one or more of their members. Arrest, detention, trial, community supervision and incarceration all impact family life. While this is a year-round issue, such family disruption may be more pronounced during the holiday season.

Programming aimed at strengthening families affected by justice system involvement seeks to help maintain or repair family networks. These programs can reduce recidivism among justice-involved family members and prevent justice involvement among children in these families.

Family Strengthening Promising Practices

In May 2021, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published [Promising Practices for Strengthening Families Affected by Parental Incarceration](#), a literature review of effective family strengthening programs. Many of the programs reviewed are—or could be—operated by justice system agencies and could be funded with justice-specific funding, such as the [Byrne Justice Assistance Grant \(Byrne JAG\)](#).

The OPRE report reviews family strengthening programs that address six focus areas key to producing beneficial outcomes. They are:

- engaging non-incarcerated caregivers,
- considering children's ages in program design,
- considering a parent's gender and role,
- engaging in cross-system collaboration,
- implementing strategies to engage parents who are incarcerated and their families, and
- promoting families' financial stability.

Programs that address one or more of these areas can strengthen families which can, in turn, prevent justice involvement for all family members. Following are brief descriptions of a few promising programs described in the OPRE report. The programs below are just a few of the dozens reviewed in the OPRE report that show promise for strengthening the families of justice-involved people.

Couples-Based Family Strengthening Services for Incarcerated Fathers and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners

A [review of four programs](#) funded by federal Office of Family Assistance in Indiana, Ohio, New Jersey and New York found that even relatively "low dosage" interventions had measurable impacts. In Indiana, for example, program participants had improved intimate relationship quality, higher employment following release from incarceration and were more likely to make parenting decisions cooperatively.

The study authors caution that results are subject to implementation factors, but that such efforts hold promise for strengthening families, relationships and reducing recidivism.

Whole Family Approach

Some programs, such as [Look Up and Hope](#), serve the whole family, including mothers, caregivers and children, in addition to providing parenting and relationship counseling to parents. The program offers:

- After school and summer programming for youth;
- Basic needs support, including food, clothing, and transportation;
- Case management services, including home visits from social workers;
- Employment services and vocational training;
- Family group conferencing;
- Individual and family therapy;
- Parenting classes;
- Rapid re-housing assistance; and
- Substance abuse and mental health counseling.

Participants demonstrated improvements in family connection, school outcomes, health of children and caregivers, parenting skills and mothers' employment status. Of special note were the program's return on investment and potential future cost savings. It was estimated that the Look Up and Hope program can produce a benefit of as much as \$14.31 for every dollar spent, depending on the implementation and investment level.

Nebraska Prison Nursery Program

Nebraska's Prison Nursery Program, was one of the first in a women's correctional facility in the U.S. The program includes "[parenting classes, overnight on-grounds child visits, extended day visits, and a nursery program.](#)" It allows extended visiting hours for children and an opportunity for them to spend the night with their incarcerated mothers in a unit separate from the general population. The program began in 1974 and has expanded to include services for women who give birth while incarcerated.

A [2010 study](#) of the Nursery Program found that participants had higher rates of contact and intimacy with their children and reduced institutional misconduct. The study's author hypothesized that reduced misconduct was a function of reduced "[strain](#)," which may lead individuals to misbehave or commit crime.

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