



Encouraging Responsible Parenting among Fathers with Histories of Incarceration

Activities and Lessons from Six Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Jocelyn Fontaine, Lindsey Cramer, and Ellen Paddock

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Importance of Parenting Activities for Fathers with Incarceration Experiences

The massive growth in incarceration rates in the United States has had significant consequences for families. Over the past four decades, incarceration rates have more than quadrupled (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014). In 2007, the most recent year for which national statistics are available, an estimated 53 percent of the more than 1.5 million individuals incarcerated in state and federal prisons were parents of minor children (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). As of 2012, between 5 and 10 million children in the United States had lived with a parent who had been incarcerated at any point in the child's life (Murphey and Cooper 2015; Schirmer, Nellis, and Mauer 2009). Given that rates of incarceration are higher among nonwhites than whites, a higher percentage of minority children, particularly black children, have experienced parental incarceration in their life. Approximately 7 percent of all children in the United States have had a parent spend time in prison or jail, ranging from 6 percent of white children to nearly 12 percent of black children (Murphey and Cooper 2015). Similarly, children from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to experience parental incarceration than those from families of higher socioeconomic status (Murphey and Cooper 2015).

Children left behind because of parental incarceration experience worse life outcomes relative to their peers, including economic hardship caused by the loss of a parent's income (Phillips et al. 2006), residential instability (Geller et al. 2009), academic difficulties (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003), mental health problems (Murray and Farrington 2008), and behavioral problems (Dannerbeck 2005; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Wildeman 2010).

BACKGROUND

With funding from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation contracted with the Urban Institute to conduct an implementation evaluation of OFA's Community-Centered Responsible Fatherhood Ex-Prisoner Reentry Pilot Projects ("Fatherhood Reentry").¹ Six organizations were funded to implement a range of activities intended to help stabilize fathers and their families, help move fathers toward economic self-sufficiency, and reduce recidivism. The following organizations received funding and were included in Urban's evaluation:

- **Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action, Inc. (KISRA)**, headquartered in Dunbar, West Virginia, which called its program the West Virginia Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Initiative²
- **Lutheran Social Services (LSS)**, headquartered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which called its program Fatherhood and Families
- **New Jersey Department of Corrections' (NJDOC) Office of Substance Abuse Programming and Addiction Services**, headquartered in Trenton, New Jersey, which called its program Engaging the Family
- **PB&J Family Services, Inc. (PB&J)**, headquartered in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which called its program the Fatherhood Reentry Program
- **The RIDGE Project, Inc. (RIDGE)**, headquartered in McClure, Ohio, which called its program TYRO
- **Rubicon Programs, Inc. (Rubicon)**, headquartered in Richmond, California, which called its program Promoting Advances in Paternal Accountability and Success in Work

As required by the authorizing legislation, each organization provided activities in three areas: responsible parenting, healthy marriage, and economic stability.³ The activities in the three areas were implemented in collaboration with various nonprofit and government agencies. As a complement to the OFA-funded activities authorized by legislation, the organizations helped participants address their reentry and fatherhood needs by using external referrals to nonprofit and government agency partners and internal referrals to services supported by non-OFA funding streams. This brief describes the range of services available to Fatherhood Reentry project participants during the evaluation period.

A note on language: the authorizing legislation uses the term "healthy marriage" as one of the three core activities. Throughout this brief, we use the term "healthy relationship," which represents one aspect of the authorized healthy marriage service provision. As made permissible by the authorizing legislation and discussed throughout this brief, the programs primarily provided healthy relationship classes and services within the healthy marriage activity area and characterized their programs as such.

The Fatherhood Reentry projects provided activities to fathers (and their families) in institutional settings as they were nearing release ("prerelease") and in their offices located in the community ("postrelease"). All six projects provided services in multiple institutional settings: federal prisons (KISRA), state prisons (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon), county/regional jails (KISRA, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon), and residential substance abuse treatment facilities (Rubicon). All projects provided services in their community-based offices for participants served by the program prerelease. With the exception of the NJDOC project, fathers who were formerly incarcerated could be enrolled and served in the community-based offices without having been served by the programs in the institutions.⁴ Four projects (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, and RIDGE) provided services in multiple communities across their respective states, and two (PB&J and Rubicon) provided services in one county.⁵ Five projects (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, PB&J, and RIDGE) were operational from September 2011 through September 2015, and the sixth (Rubicon) was operational from September 2012 through September 2015.

This brief, one of three in a series,⁶ focuses on the responsible parenting activities implemented by the projects. First, we provide context for the importance of responsible parenting activities for fathers who are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated, highlighting studies that discuss the impact of parental incarceration on children, the challenges associated with family support and contact during incarceration, and the difficulties fathers face reengaging with their children upon returning to the community. We then discuss the key strategies the programs used to provide parenting activities to participating fathers and their families. We conclude with recommendations, based on the experiences of the Fatherhood Reentry projects, for practitioners seeking to implement parenting activities for the reentry population.

Although research suggests that maternal incarceration is more detrimental for children than paternal incarceration (Gabel and Johnston 1995; Dallaire 2007), the effects of paternal incarceration are farther reaching because 92 percent of incarcerated parents are fathers (Glaze and Maruschak 2008).

Parental incarceration also affects other family members, specifically intimate partners and caregivers, who may have to deal with a loss of income and/or other forms of emotional or material support that were provided by the incarcerated parent. The negative effects of parental incarceration on children and other family members, such as loss of contact or emotional support, are partly attributable to the barriers incarcerated parents face in trying to keep in touch with their children and families. These barriers range from the prohibitive cost of phone calls to incarcerated parents' feelings of shame, which can hinder communication and contact during their time in institutions and pose a challenge to family reunification once they are released to the community (Fontaine et al. 2012; Travis and Waul 2003).

Several obstacles prevent fathers from actively engaging with their children during incarceration. Often, parents are incarcerated far from their homes at distances difficult for children and other family members to travel (McKay et al. 2010). In other cases, facilities prohibit or heavily restrict visits (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest 2003; Lewis 2004). Some coparents or family members feel the correctional environment is too unwelcoming, and mutual feelings of shame can often hinder parent-child or parent-family contact during incarceration (Fontaine et al. 2012). Although parent-child contact visits, where children can interact with their parents without a glass barrier, can be therapeutic for parents and children (Johnston 1995), they are not widely offered in correctional facilities. Only 41 percent of fathers incarcerated in state prisons and 55 percent of those incarcerated in federal prisons report ever having a personal visit with their children while incarcerated (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Further, the conditions under which these visits take place can make them more traumatic to children than helpful (Murray 2005). It is not uncommon for children and caregivers to wait an hour or longer in waiting rooms that are not welcoming to children for a brief visit with their incarcerated family member. Fathers may be required to remain seated or have their mobility restricted, limiting their ability to interact with their children during their time together (Arditti 2005). For these reasons, many fathers try to maintain contact with their children through telephone calls, handwritten or typed letters, or videoconferencing, the latter of which has become an increasingly popular option (Arditti 2012; Hairston 1991; Murray 2005; Poehlmann et al. 2010).

Contact and communication between incarcerated parents and their children and families can be mutually beneficial. Fathers staying in contact with their children can mitigate the negative effects of parental incarceration on children. An evaluation of a therapeutic, prison-based fatherhood program found that weekly father-child contact visits helped fathers become more empathetic toward their children, decreased self-reported stress related to parenting and child behaviors, and decreased problem behaviors among children (Landreth and Lobaugh 1998). Maintaining contact with family members can also help incarcerated fathers successfully reintegrate into the community upon release (Dowden and Andrews 2003; La Vigne et al. 2008; Shollenberger 2009). Formerly incarcerated parents who have healthy relationships with their children have better employment and substance abuse

outcomes than incarcerated parents who do not have these healthy relationships (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; Visher, Debus, and Yahner 2008). Therefore, activities that encourage incarcerated parents to stay in touch with their family members can help fathers successfully reintegrate into the community.

Fatherhood Reentry Programs' Approaches to Providing Parenting Activities

Responsible parenting activities were one of three core components of the Fatherhood Reentry projects.⁷ Although this brief is exclusively focused on parenting activities, the three project activities were intended to be complementary.

Case Management

Case management services were a central part of all six programs' responsible parenting services. Case managers served participating fathers and their families, providing one-on-one coaching and counseling; assessing their needs; and making referrals, connections, and links to services offered through their Fatherhood Reentry program or through external partners. Case management activities were intended to help fathers address their parenting needs and goals and help them reunify with and support their children and families. Case management was not a structured service with mandatory weekly or biweekly meetings; instead, case management was an individualized service provided to fathers based on their specific needs and the needs of their families.

Three programs (LSS, PB&J, and RIDGE) structured their case management services so that the same staff member worked with the participating father on all three of the core components: responsible parenting, healthy marriage, and economic stability. In these three programs, case managers worked with fathers to help them achieve their parenting, relationship, and economic stability goals through activities provided by the programs and by their external partners. The other three programs (KISRA, NJDOC, and Rubicon) assigned participants two case managers, one focused on parenting and relationships and a second focused solely on their employment goals.

Case management functioned as a conduit for fathers to access the programs' parenting services and resources in the community. Case managers collected information from fathers upon their entry into the program and through one-on-one meetings to learn about their children and their custody and child support issues, family living arrangements, level of contact with their children, and quality of their relationships with their children. All the programs administered intake assessments or surveys with questions about participants' children (e.g., number, age, and relationship with the father), level of involvement, living arrangements, and child support obligations. Case managers used this information to connect fathers to various services and opportunities, including parenting classes, support groups, and family and child visits. Case managers also connected fathers to local child support agencies to help

them modify their child support obligations and resolve additional issues regarding paternity, child support arrears, and driver's license reinstatement.

In conjunction with—and often through—the case management services offered in institutions and the programs' community-based offices, parenting activities were intended to strengthen the relationship between fathers and their children by

- building and **developing knowledge** of parenting and child development among fathers through the facilitation of curriculum-based parenting classes and support groups;
- increasing and improving **parent-child contact and communication** through family contact visits, video diaries, and special events; and
- **removing or reducing barriers** to family stability and reunification by helping fathers with child care and child support modifications and payments.

Knowledge Development

All six programs included activities intended to help develop and build fathers' knowledge of parenting and child development and reduce some of the informational barriers that may have prevented them from reunifying and connecting with their children. All six programs included **curriculum-based parenting classes**, and three programs hosted **support groups** for fathers. These activities were also intended to give fathers a safe space to discuss their concerns about parenting and their children, to connect fathers with similar experiences, and to provide information and resources.

CURRICULUM-BASED PARENTING CLASSES

All six programs provided structured parenting classes to participants in the correctional institutions and treatment facilities where they were located. The programs implemented curricula designed specifically for the incarcerated population. Four projects implemented name-brand curricula: Parenting Inside Out (KISRA and Rubicon), InsideOut Dad (LSS), and Active Parenting Now (NJDOC). Two projects developed and used their own curricula: RIDGE developed TYRO Dads, and Rubicon used Back to Family, developed by its core partner, Centerforce. PB&J augmented the InsideOut Dad curriculum with lessons from a curriculum it developed called Importance of Parents and Children Together (ImPACT). Parenting Inside Out was developed by Pathfinders of Oregon and consists of 12 modules designed to help fathers learn parenting skills. InsideOut Dad, developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative, focuses on topics such as the father's role in the family, coparenting and communication, creating a fathering plan, and talking with children about morals and values. Active Parenting Now includes three chapters taught over six weeks on parenting styles, teaching responsibility, and building courage and self-esteem in children. TYRO Dads includes 20 hours of curriculum and teaches fathers how to understand child development, communicate effectively with their children and coparent, and develop a new identity as a father (or parent). Back to Family teaches skills such as effective listening and empowered communication. PB&J's ImPACT curriculum included

the topics covered by InsideOut Dad and also covered child development, how to talk to children about incarceration, child safety, step-parenting, child discipline, and domestic violence.

All of the curricula were interactive, encouraged group discussion, and covered similar material, such as communication skills, parent and child roles, coparenting skills, and conflict resolution. The frequency and duration of classes ranged from one to two hours a day, one to five times a week, for 3 to 12 weeks. Rubicon's program included the most parenting class hours: fathers could receive 105 hours of Parenting Inside Out classes. LSS and NJDOC provided the fewest parenting class hours: fathers could receive 12 hours of InsideOut Dad through LSS or Active Parenting Now classes through NJDOC. Several factors affected when and how often classes were taught, including curriculum guidelines for the brand-name approaches, the length of the curriculum, correctional facility rules on how often and for how long classes could be taught, and the availability of space needed to facilitate classes. Program staff occasionally modified the structure of classes to make them more suitable for their program. For example, to minimize attrition in its classes and accommodate participants' short lengths of stay, Rubicon condensed its Parenting Inside Out curriculum in the county jail from 12 weeks to 7 weeks.

As part of its curriculum-based parenting activities, LSS also provided participants in institutions with informational packets on parenting upon enrollment in its program. These Dad Packets included general information about child support obligations, pamphlets on coparenting, tips for staying involved with children, a parenting handbook that discussed various topics (e.g., respecting children's feelings, getting along with children's caregivers, reuniting with children, regaining custody, and improving communication skills), blank greeting cards for fathers to send handwritten letters to their children, and a children's storybook fathers could read through their video diaries. The blank greeting cards and video diaries are discussed in more detail below.

In addition to their prerelease offerings, KISRA, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon also offered parenting classes in their community-based offices. Community-based parenting classes allowed fathers who missed some prerelease classes to complete the curriculum and allowed people who enrolled in the program in the community the opportunity to take the curriculum for the first time. The frequency and duration of classes offered in the community ranged from one to three times a week for four to six weeks. KISRA and Rubicon offered the most parenting class hours in the community: fathers could receive 24 hours of Parenting Inside Out through KISRA or Back to Family classes through Rubicon. PB&J provided the fewest parenting class hours in the community: fathers could receive 12 hours of InsideOut Dad classes.

Program staff employed several strategies to encourage participant engagement in classes and completion of the curriculum. All six programs offered certificates of completion when fathers finished the curriculum to provide a sense of accomplishment. RIDGE and Rubicon held special completion sessions in correctional facilities and in their communities to recognize dads who completed their curricula. RIDGE presented fathers with a TYRO pin after completing the TYRO curriculum. Encouraging participant engagement in communities was more difficult than in institutions. The programs recognized that fathers were more mobile after they were released from prison, and it

became particularly important to ensure that class materials were relevant to their postrelease lives and that class times accommodated their schedules as much as possible.

Most programs (KISRA, LSS, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon) provided incentives, such as bus tokens, gas cards, grocery cards, and hygiene kits, to encourage participation. KISRA gave participants \$10 a week to help with transportation costs and another \$25 for completing the parenting classes. LSS staggered their incentives: fathers received a “starter kit” upon release from prison that included basic supplies, such as hygiene products, bus passes (if needed), and two \$10 Walmart gift cards. Participants received an additional \$200–250 for job-related supplies once they found employment and a \$10 Walmart gift card each week for the first eight weeks they retained employment. PB&J provided participants with gas cards and bus vouchers, if necessary. RIDGE provided fathers with scholarships for transportation costs in the form of bus tokens, bus fares, or gas gift cards. Rubicon gave hygiene kits to fathers who completed the parenting classes and transit passes to travel to and from the classes, as needed.

Other programs incentivized attendance in parenting classes by linking fathers to the services they seemed more eager to engage. For example, PB&J offered paid employment opportunities in their workforce development center only to participants that completed or were currently enrolled in parenting classes. Similarly, KISRA required all participating fathers to complete the parenting curriculum before they could receive employment services such as subsidized employment opportunities and transitional jobs. RIDGE also made its postrelease parenting classes mandatory for fathers who wanted to receive additional services, such as welding or commercial driver’s license training. KISRA and RIDGE program staff believed that making the classes mandatory encouraged fathers to complete them.

SUPPORT GROUPS

To foster peer-to-peer exchanges and encourage fathers to interact with one another to discuss their parenting experiences, three programs (LSS, PB&J, and RIDGE) hosted weekly support groups for participating fathers. In the last year of the program, LSS launched a weekly support group called “Fatherhood Fridays,” an informal gathering where participants could discuss their children and their parenting challenges. LSS offered lunch during these groups. Once a father attended four Fatherhood Fridays, LSS provided incentives to fathers for their children. As a program support, PB&J offered weekly dinners at its offices for fathers, partners/coparents, and children to share a meal together. PB&J case managers then led separate group sessions for adults and children. Adult sessions were based loosely on the InsideOut Dad and ImPACT curricula, addressing topics such as communication and problem-solving, goal-setting, nutrition, child well-being, and financial stability. Children’s sessions used child-centered activities to give children an opportunity to discuss their experiences regarding their parents’ incarceration and return from incarceration. RIDGE encouraged fathers to establish TYRO Alumni Communities in correctional institutions and several communities throughout Ohio. Alumni communities offered fathers an opportunity to share their parenting experiences, provide emotional support for one another, engage in peer-to-peer mentoring, and hold each other accountable to TYRO values. RIDGE staff were invited to alumni meetings but not required to attend. Each alumni community was led by a board of TYRO alumni. Board members connected with fathers weekly and

helped them with their reentry needs (e.g., transportation, housing search assistance, connections to employers). Alumni communities also engaged in community service projects (e.g., cleaning parks and public spaces) and hosted events (e.g., community festivals).

Parent-Child Contact and Communication

All six programs engaged in activities intended to increase contact and communication between fathers and their children during incarceration and in the community. Three programs facilitated **family contact visits** and two facilitated **communication** through phone calls, video diaries, and letter-writing activities in institutions. Four programs hosted **special events** in their communities to facilitate family contact and communication. These activities gave fathers an opportunity to practice what they learned through the parenting curricula, to connect and interact with their children and families, to demonstrate to their partners and children that they wanted to be involved in their lives, and to improve their relationships with their families.

INSTITUTIONAL FAMILY CONTACT VISITS

Three programs (LSS, PB&J, and RIDGE) facilitated some form of family contact visits in the institutions. LSS hosted family activity days in all correctional facilities where its program was implemented. Family activity days were hosted quarterly and open to all inmates with minor children. Because of the early success of family activity days, the South Dakota Department of Corrections wanted all fathers, not only Fatherhood and Families participants, to be able to participate. At each family activity day, LSS staff provided snacks and brought games, puzzles, and crafts so children could play with their fathers. In the program's final year, corrections staff allowed children to take home the crafts they made with their father as a tangible memento from the visit. LSS also made visiting rooms in some state prisons more welcoming to children by supplying children's books and toys and painting murals on the walls.

PB&J facilitated family contact visits in the institutions where it was located. PB&J's case managers reached out to participants' children and their caregivers about the visits, acted as liaisons to help resolve conflicts where relationships were strained, and educated fathers and caregivers about the importance of visitation for parents and children. PB&J also communicated with correctional staff to secure approval for the visits and transported children to the facilities. Visits were held in a room at the jail and in a designated trailer at the prison with a living room, kitchen, bathroom, and play room. PB&J made the trailer more welcoming by painting murals on the walls and bringing in a television, furniture, books, and toys. At institutions where PB&J implemented its program, visits were between parents and children only, and other family members or caregivers were not present. PB&J case managers were present to monitor the visits. Parent-child visits lasted one hour in the jail and two hours in the state prison. Parents and children could openly interact with each other during visits, playing games or reading books. PB&J case managers also met with children and coparents/caregivers before the visits and debriefed with children and caregivers immediately after to ensure the experience was beneficial. Debriefs were intended to discuss and address any issues that may have come up during the visits.

RIDGE facilitated two types of family contact visits, Family Days and Time with Dad, in all correctional facilities where it was located. During Family Days, hosted annually, fathers and children

could visit different centers around the room to make T-shirts, build their “Lego-cy” (a model dream home), play games, get their faces painted, or read books. Time with Dad events were hosted monthly for two and a half hours. The structure of these visits varied across prisons because of differences in policies and available space. During Time with Dad events, family members interacted with each other, ate snacks, played games, and made crafts. The events also gave fathers an opportunity to help their children with homework.

PRERELEASE COMMUNICATION

LSS encouraged fathers to communicate with their children through written letters and video diaries using items that were provided to them through the Dad Packets upon enrollment. LSS institutional case managers worked with fathers to write letters to their children and with correctional staff to ensure these letters were mailed. LSS case managers also helped fathers create and send video diaries to their children. Fathers recorded themselves reading books, singing songs, or delivering a message. LSS provided the DVD, case, and postage to mail the videos to the fathers’ families. Fathers were allowed to make as many videos as they wanted. Video diaries allowed children to get to know the voice and face of a parent who they may not have remembered, had not seen for a while, or may have never met.

Following the parenting classes, NJDOC staff allowed participants to make coached phone calls for free to their children and other important adults in their children’s lives, such as caregivers, day care workers, teachers, and doctors. This activity was helpful because fathers often struggled to make phone calls because of limited free time, long wait times for available phones, screening rules, and expensive call fees. The coached phone calls helped fathers stay connected with their families, especially if the family lived far away. NJDOC program staff provided guidance to fathers before and during the calls to ensure that interactions between fathers and children were positive and mutually beneficial. Case managers then talked with participants afterward about how the calls made them feel.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Four programs (KISRA, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon) hosted Father’s Day events and several other special events in the community for participants and their families. KISRA held Calling All Dads miniworkshops for fathers and children that included parenting tips for fathers and parent-child activities such as laser tag. PB&J held “bring your kid to work days” for fathers working in one of its small business workshops, which allowed children to see their fathers working, and designed hands-on, on-site projects for fathers, such as washing cars and painting birdhouses with their children. PB&J started an alumni club in the final year of the program and hosted a monthly barbecue for participants and their families to recognize participants who found employment after their time at the workforce development center. RIDGE hosted Catch with Dad, a day when participants attended a professional baseball game and played catch with their children on the field before the game. Rubicon hosted a holiday cookie-baking night, barbecues, a Halloween movie showing and costume event, and fishing trips. Rubicon also organized outings to professional football games for participants and their children. These events gave fathers and their children opportunities to apply and practice the parenting and communication skills they learned in the parenting classes.

Barrier Removal

To help fathers overcome barriers to reentry that interfered with their ability to parent their children, all six programs provided **assistance with child support services** by helping fathers modify their child support orders and get their driver's licenses reinstated if they were suspended because of child support arrears. Two programs (KISRA and RIDGE) also provided **assistance with child care** or help paying for child care. Managing child support obligations and arrears can be one of the more difficult challenges returning fathers encounter. Connecting fathers with child support services was intended to reduce the barrier to child reunification and connection that child support obligations may have caused. Child care assistance was intended to help fathers attend parenting classes or other program and nonprogram activities, such as going to work or other important appointments.

CHILD SUPPORT ASSISTANCE

All six programs provided assistance with child support, at minimum by developing partnerships with local child support agencies to provide information and resources to participating fathers. The Fatherhood Reentry programs helped fathers navigate child support obligations and arrears and address child support as a barrier that could impede their ability to find work or financial stability (through suspensions on their state-issued licenses and income withholding). Building strong partnerships with child support agencies was essential to offering these activities.

All the programs offered educational workshops where child support representatives explained their agency's rules and processes. Rubicon hosted child support representatives at their offices to meet with participants in one-on-one sessions to discuss the circumstances of their cases and allow fathers to apply for child support modifications at their offices instead of traveling to child support offices. All the programs regularly helped participants apply for child support modifications. Three programs (LSS, PB&J, and RIDGE) worked closely with child support agencies to lift holds on participants' driver's licenses that were suspended because of outstanding child support payments. LSS case managers coached fathers through the child support process, helped participants complete applications for child support modifications and wrote accompanying letters of support, and occasionally worked with child support agencies in other states when participants had children living outside of South Dakota. In some cases, program staff went to court to advocate for participants summoned for child support-related reasons. PB&J and Rubicon also worked with participants to regain visitation rights. PB&J identified participants' custody and visitation issues when developing Individual Family Service Plans during program enrollment. Using the Individual Family Service Plan as a guide, case managers provided services to help fathers address these needs. PB&J also referred participants to the Child Support Enforcement Division's Prisoner Outreach Program, which employed a case manager to work with fathers in institutions to review their parental rights. Rubicon conducted legal assessments for participants out of their community-based offices. Assessments helped Rubicon's legal staff determine whether participants needed referrals to child support, housing, or employment. If a father needed legal services for custody or divorce proceedings, Rubicon referred them to a family law facilitator and the administrative court office.

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE

KISRA and RIDGE offered child care assistance so fathers could attend program activities or go to work. KISRA's main office location in Dunbar, West Virginia, had a Child Development Center available to Pathways participants and other KISRA clients. The Child Development Center charged \$50 a week per child and could serve 60 children of kindergarten age or younger. For children in first through fifth grade, KISRA offered an after-school program that served up to 50 children and cost \$100 a month per child. RIDGE provided fathers with money to help pay for child care costs. The rate of the subsidy was \$2–6 an hour per child.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The Fatherhood Reentry programs implemented several activities in the institutions and communities where they were based to help fathers reunify with their children and their families. These activities were primarily focused on building fathers' knowledge of parenting and child development, increasing contact and communication between fathers and their children, and removing barriers to successful family reunification. Across the programs, more parenting activities were provided in institutions than in community-based offices. Participating fathers in communities faced several competing demands on their time and resources that made it difficult to routinely participate in parenting activities. Fathers had to contend with fluctuating and unpredictable schedules and time commitments (e.g., work and family obligations, community supervision requirements) and meeting needs that they did not have while incarcerated, such as finding employment and housing. It was also difficult for many fathers to get to and from the community-based offices where activities were offered. Because of some of the difficulties keeping fathers engaged in program activities in the community, program staff prioritized working with fathers individually on meeting their immediate needs (e.g., employment and housing) so they could then focus on reunifying with their children.

The Fatherhood Reentry programs successfully implemented a wide array of parenting activities in correctional institutions (and treatment centers) and communities. Program staff developed strong partnerships with government agencies, such as child support agencies and state corrections agencies.

The following recommendations are drawn from the experiences and lessons learned of the Fatherhood Reentry programs and are intended for practitioners seeking ways to foster parenting activities that help fathers returning from incarceration reunify and connect with their children:⁸

- **Leverage the opportunities present in the prerelease and postrelease environments.** Engaging fathers in prerelease and postrelease environments presents both opportunities and challenges. Parenting classes were better attended in institutions because there were fewer activities and obligations competing for fathers' time and attention than there were in the community. Correctional institutions provide a unique opportunity for program staff to connect with fathers for a substantial period of time, mostly without their children or caregivers present. However, there are greater logistical hurdles in correctional institutions and rules and procedures that preclude certain social activities. In their community-based offices, the

programs could more easily implement a greater variety of social activities with fathers and their families, such as barbecues and sports outings, that were simply not possible in correctional facilities. Given the opportunities and challenges presented by the two distinct environments, programs that operate in both settings can build a comprehensive program that uses the opportunities present in each context in complementary ways.

- ***Use a range of parenting activities that give fathers several tools to help reunify with their children.*** The Fatherhood Reentry programs used classes to teach parenting skills but also used letters, video diaries, coached phone calls, parent-child contact visits, and family activity days to create opportunities for fathers to engage with their children in the institutions and in the communities. These activities also incorporated coparents/caregivers whenever possible. Because fathers may be at different levels of readiness for reunification with their children (and their coparents), they may benefit from a variety of tools for reconnecting. Coparents or other caregivers may be hesitant to allow fathers back in their children's lives immediately, and fathers may face several reentry barriers that divert their focus from reconnecting with their children immediately. Some fathers may feel shame about the criminal activity that led to their incarceration, limiting their willingness to reunify with their children. Using a variety of tools allows programs to work with fathers at all levels of readiness for reunification to help them overcome these emotional, psychological, or economic barriers and approach improving relationship dynamics with patience. Providing an array of activities allows programs to work on family reunification when fathers are ready, recognizing that coparents and children may also have different levels of readiness. The more tools programs offer, the more choices fathers will have to use the appropriate ones to reunify with their children and families.
- ***Address fathers' economic stability needs as part of the child/family reunification process.*** Once released from incarceration, fathers feel pressure to address their economic stability needs, such as housing and employment, as well as needs for food and clothing. Meeting these immediate needs can consume much of their emotional and physical energy. Programs may want to work with participants to ensure that these needs are being met and help them achieve a level of economic stability. This will enable fathers to commit more energy, time, and resources to reconnecting with their children and being a successful parent. For example, LSS believed it was important to help fathers address their needs for employment and housing first to allow them to focus on parenting activities. To identify fathers' needs, LSS developed a checklist based on the Hierarchy of Needs, a questionnaire that asked fathers about their needs for housing, employment, obtaining identification cards or birth certificates, substance abuse treatment, and help modifying their child support order or navigating the child support system.⁹ LSS case managers administered the checklist to participants upon their release from prison so they could prioritize the services fathers needed immediately in hopes that fathers would be able to devote more time and energy to reconnecting with their children.
- ***Cultivate child/family-friendly environments in institutions by establishing strong relationships with correctional staff.*** The Fatherhood Reentry programs were able to implement parenting

activities in institutions by communicating to correctional staff the importance of each program and its goals. Coordinating a visit involving children, correctional staff, and coparents/ caregivers required that programs advocated for the importance of the visits and managed the logistics carefully while ensuring appropriate security measures were still in place. Program staff may need to convince correctional staff (and sometimes coparents/caregivers) of the importance of allowing children to have contact with their fathers during incarceration. There are varying approaches to promoting the importance of family contact visits and ensuring they are enjoyable for everyone involved, including creating a welcoming physical environment where family members can interact, preparing families for visits, transporting families to correctional facilities, and debriefing with them after visits.

The experiences of the Fatherhood Reentry programs offer various lessons for practitioners who wish to work with fathers who are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated. Strengthening and preserving relationships between children and their fathers is important, as incarceration can strain family relationships. The incarceration of a parent can have significant repercussions for children and families. By working to help fathers maintain contact during incarceration and reconnect in the community, programs can potentially mitigate trauma and promote healthier parent-child relationships.

Notes

1. The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation and the Office of Family Assistance are both part of the Administration for Children and Families in the US Department of Health and Human Services.
2. KISRA was funded under a different funding opportunity announcement than the other five projects and served fathers who may not have had recent incarceration histories.
3. The Fatherhood Reentry projects were part of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood initiative, a discretionary grant program originally authorized under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 and reauthorized under the Claims Resolution Act of 2010.
4. Postrelease enrollment varied widely: LSS, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon enrolled fathers who had been released from incarceration in the past six months; KISRA enrolled formerly incarcerated fathers with no time limit on the recency of their last incarceration; NJDOC did not enroll any fathers in the community.
5. Additional information about implementation of the programs, including target populations, geographic locations, and partnerships can be found in a companion report (Fontaine et al. 2017).
6. Two other briefs in this series focus on economic stability (Fontaine and Kurs 2017) and healthy marriage (Fontaine, Eisenstat, and Cramer 2017).
7. The other two components were healthy marriage and economic stability activities. Additional Information about the healthy marriage and economic stability activities the Fatherhood Reentry programs implemented can be found in two companion briefs (Fontaine, Eisenstat, and Cramer 2017; Fontaine and Kurs 2017).
8. These recommendations include suggestions for service provision that are not allowable by the authorizing legislation that funded the Fatherhood Reentry projects.
9. The OFA-funded Fatherhood Reentry projects were not permitted to use grant funds for child support payments.

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About the Authors



Jocelyn Fontaine is a senior research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where her research portfolio is focused primarily on evaluating innovative community-based crime reduction and reentry initiatives targeted to vulnerable populations.



Lindsey Cramer is a research associate with the Justice Policy Center, where her research focuses on evaluating programs and developing policies designed to support and strengthen fathers and families impacted by the criminal justice system.



Ellen Paddock is a research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her work focuses on the overlap between public health and criminal justice and on public safety strategies that effectively reduce crime and minimize collateral damage to vulnerable communities.

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Nicole Constance, project officer
Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
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SUBMITTED BY

Jocelyn Fontaine, project director
Urban Institute
2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

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2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

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