

# Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: FINAL REPORT TO THE STATE COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SCHSAC)

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup was formed by the State Community Health Services Advisory Committee (SCHSAC) and the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association, to assess the role of counties in preventing and mitigating adverse effects on children of their parents or primary caregivers being incarcerated.

State and local stakeholders had raised concern about the high number of Minnesota children impacted by parental incarceration as well as uncertainty about positive outcomes in their lives. Since efforts to address the issue at the local level were limited to isolated initiatives, the Association of Minnesota Counties asked SCHSAC to partner with the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association, to take a lead role in understanding opportunities to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents. This multidisciplinary workgroup was charged with focusing on the roles of programs, systems, and environments at the county level, paying particular attention to the intersection of local jails and local public health.

## Overview of activities

The workgroup held eight meetings between May 2018 and July 2019. During three of the meetings, the workgroup heard from individuals who were directly impacted by this issue: 1) caregivers of children with incarcerated parents, 2) young adult children with incarcerated parents, and 3) formerly incarcerated parents. Their comments and discussions provided the impetus for the workgroup to identify common themes across each of the panels.

The workgroup acknowledged that multiple research sources describe parental incarceration as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that puts children at high risk for poor social, emotional, educational, and health outcomes. This is especially true because other ACEs tend to be part of these children's lives, raising their ACE score and increasing how susceptible these children are to undesirable outcomes.

The workgroup reviewed a variety of research and emerging practices on the topic of children of incarcerated parents and compared these to current practices occurring in local communities and jails in Minnesota.

The workgroup endorsed a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Health and the University of Minnesota to develop a learning community among four Minnesota counties, and then engaged the National Institute of Corrections to provide technical assistance in implementing model practices for parents in prisons and jails.

From these activities the workgroup synthesized a set of observations, and prioritized actions and future directions for consideration by SCHSAC and the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association.

## Observations

Each of the observations has a variety of nuances and complexities that the full report summarizes.

- Many Minnesotans are impacted by incarceration, yet children with incarcerated parents are hidden—mostly invisible to systems, programs, and communities.
- Minnesota’s youth of color and American Indian youth are disproportionately affected by parental incarceration.
- Children impacted by incarceration need emotional support including immediate support at the time of the arrest.
- Incarceration engages a complex set of county systems, which creates challenges. Systems that may serve children with incarcerated parents rarely coordinate.
- Communication with families from arrest to release is inadequate and often inaccurate.
- Visiting processes are confusing and stressful.
- Physical contact during visits is especially important, but not allowed in most jails.
- Caregivers of children with incarcerated parents struggle with understanding and navigating corrections, social services, public health, and other family support systems—limiting their access to services and hampering their ability to meet the basic needs of the children in their care.
- Involving those with lived experience in developing solutions is imperative. Families experiencing incarceration repeatedly called upon providers not to design services and programs without their engagement: “Nothing about us, without us.”
- Current programs and practices to support children with incarcerated parents in Minnesota’s jails and other systems are limited and fragmented, yet promising practices are emerging. The workgroup noted that raising awareness of this topic has quickly led to changing attitudes and action at the county level.
- Local public health agencies are distinctively positioned to convene stakeholders to create policy, systems, and environmental changes that support improved outcomes and create best practices in Minnesota.

## Priorities for action

The workgroup developed conclusions and recommendations with three overarching priorities that are foundational to improving outcomes for children with incarcerated parents:

Priority 1: **Raise awareness** within county government, among professionals, elected officials and within the public.

Priority 2: **Change attitudes** to support strengthening the parent-child bond, to build resilience and reduce parental recidivism.

Priority 3: **Take action** to build resilient children and families.

## Recommended next steps

The workgroup has identified the following next steps:

- SCHSAC and the Minnesota Commissioner of Health approve and accept this report.
- Obtain feedback on this report from those impacted by incarceration to address the following: What concerns does the report raise for you? What's missing? What's incorrect? What are realistic next steps?
- Creation of a second phase of the SCHSAC Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup to inform and guide an interdisciplinary collaborative approach across Minnesota that raises awareness, in order to change attitudes and support action to build resilient children and families.

## More information

For more information on this workgroup or to read the full report, visit [www.health.state.mn.us/schsac](http://www.health.state.mn.us/schsac).

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