

“One thing that sticks with me is the unconditional love between child and parent. No matter what the parent did. To the child, that’s still mom and dad.”

—Children of Inmates Volunteer¹

In the short time since the release of The Annie E. Casey Foundation [policy report](#) on the effects of incarceration on children, families and communities², the federal government and the Obama Administration made significant strides to improve the transition for individuals leaving prison.

In April, the federal Bureau of Prisons³ announced new policies for prisoners with children, including training for prison staff on how to interact with children when they are visiting their parents in prison. They are developing a guidebook to help incarcerated parents who have children in foster care better understand how the child welfare system works and tip sheets to help prisoners prepare for a visit with their child. A pilot program will be implemented to allow incarcerated parents to take part in positive youth development activities with their children. In May, the administration announced that Health and Human Services is implementing some improvements in Medicaid for individuals leaving prison and those living in halfway houses (in states that chose to expand Medicaid).

Every program, initiative, and policy that helps individuals leaving prison has an impact on their children, families, and communities. In this article, we highlight the programs in Missouri directed at children of incarcerated parents, including the nationally recognized Amachi Program.

NATIONAL AND STATE DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARENTS IN PRISON

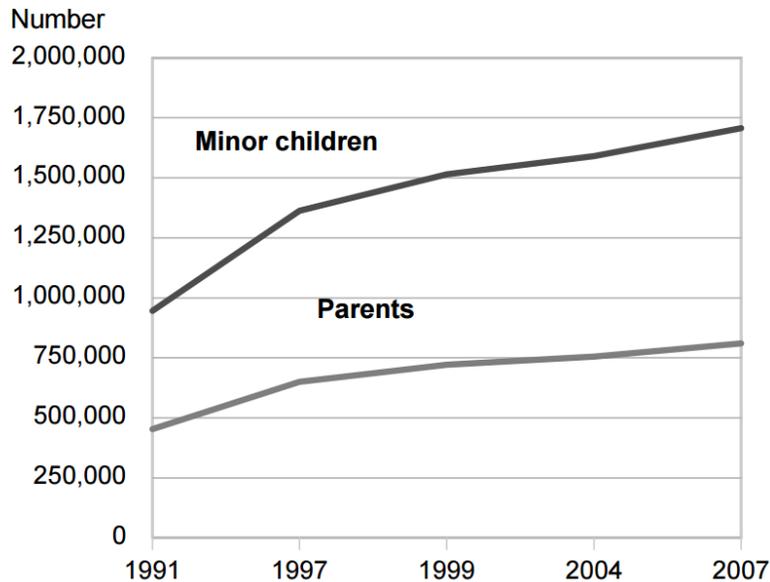
“Parental incarceration is a strong risk factor for a number of adverse outcomes (for children and youth), including antisocial and violent behavior, mental health problems, school dropout and unemployment.”⁴

According to a recent report from the Council of Economic Advisors:⁵

- Over half of all prisoners in the U.S. are parents. From 1991-2007, the number of children with a mother in prison increased 131%, while the number with a father in prison increased 77%.

- It is estimated that more than 5 million children have a parent that has been incarcerated, and rates of parental incarceration are 2 to 7 times higher for Black and Hispanic children compared to White children.
- More than half of fathers in state prison report being the primary breadwinner in their family. The probability that a family is in poverty increases by nearly 40% while a father is incarcerated.

Estimated number of parents in state and federal prisons and their minor children



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. Glaze and Muruschk (2008) ⁶

- Though Blacks and Hispanics represent approximately 30 percent of the population, they comprise over 50 percent of the incarcerated population.
- Approximately 65% of prisoners have not completed high school, and 14% have less than an 8th grade education.
- Over a third of the prison population has received public assistance at some point in their lives, 13% grew up in foster care, and over 10% experienced homelessness in the year before entering prison.
- Over 50% of the incarcerated have mental health problems while approximately 70% were regular drug users.

In Missouri, 20,744 inmates report having children, and 47,612 children are reported as dependents of these inmates.⁷ Such estimates are based on self-reported data and thus likely

underrepresent the actual number of children with an incarcerated parent. The Missouri Department of Corrections estimates that approximately 100,000 children in our state have an incarcerated parent or caretaker.

Such information paints a sobering picture of the high cost of parental incarceration on children. The Missouri Department of Corrections, along with a wide array of volunteers around the state, have long recognized that inmates have families and children who need help to effectively cope with the consequences of incarceration.

PROGRAMS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

These are some of the exceptional programs that assist children, parents, and families affected by incarceration in our state (this is not a comprehensive list).

- [Building Strong Families \(BSF\)](#): A strength-based curriculum developed by a team from the University of Missouri Extension. BSF helps families find their strengths, build on those strengths, and learn skills to create stronger families, improve relationships, and increase communication. Offenders have the opportunity to develop parenting skills that they can use while inside the institution and when they leave.
- [InsideOut Dads](#): The curriculum developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative is led by trained staff within the Department of Corrections. A voluntary 12 session program designed to assist fathers with establishing or re-establishing relationships with their children, learning how to parent effectively, and building strong connections to family.
- [Girl Scouts Beyond Bars](#): A mother-daughter visitation program, sponsored by Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri, whose purpose is to lessen the trauma of separation, strengthen the mother-daughter bond through sharing experiences with their mothers in the supportive setting of a Girl Scout troop meeting, and interact with experienced volunteers and advisors who model positive behavior.
- [Parents as Teachers \(PAT\)](#): An early education program for parents. The goal is to develop a home-school partnership emphasizing family as the most effective tool to help a child achieve the best possible start in life. The Department of Corrections at Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in partnership with the Hannibal Public Schools offers the only PAT program in a correctional institution in the nation. Offenders receive personal visits with the parent educator, parent group meetings, screenings to assess the child's development and a resource network linking the family to community services.
- [PATCH](#): A not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping children maintain contact with their incarcerated mothers. PATCH visits provide a private, less formal environment for mother and child to interact during a four-hour session. During these visits, offenders and their children interact by reading books, playing games and working on craft projects. PATCH is offered at the Chillicothe Correctional Center.

- **StoryLink Program:** A program where offenders can pick out a book to read on cassette tape to their child or grandchild. The program sends the book and tape to the family as a way to strengthen bonds and communication between family members. Since the program started over 15,000 books have been read to children and many relationships have been restored.
- **4-H LIFE:** In partnership with MU Extension, the Department of Corrections offer this program that is based on the 4-H youth development club model. Weekly parenting education and leadership classes equip offenders to be positive leaders during monthly 4-H Family Club meetings. Parents help design and plan the family activities for the 4-H family meetings, which take place monthly during visitation at the correctional center. This program operates at four state correctional centers.

AMACHI MISSOURI: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF INCARCERATION

'Amachi' is a word of West African roots that means *'Who knows but what God has brought us through this child'*. Amachi captures the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive regardless of circumstance, which is the foundation for Amachi Missouri.

Amachi Missouri was created and launched in 2003 by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri (St. Louis metro region and Cape Girardeau and Scott Counties). In 2006, the program expanded to a statewide partnership to include Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliates in Columbia, Jefferson City, Kansas City, and Springfield.



What is Amachi?

Amachi is a one-to-one mentoring program in which children of incarcerated individuals are paired with positive adult role models. Through careful matching procedures, each child is paired with a caring mentor with the goal of fostering a meaningful, supportive, long-lasting relationship. At the core of the program is the belief that each child has different needs to be addressed and talents to be fostered. Amachi mentors help children of incarcerated parents by providing tailored support, guidance, and encouragement to allow them to see beyond the turmoil of incarceration. Amachi has successfully served 1,078 children affected by incarceration in our state.

In addition to supporting children during parent incarceration, Amachi also assists families in the transition period when parents are released from prison. The program encourages open communication with family members and mentors with the purpose of fostering trusting and enduring relationships before parent release thus making parent reentry less stressful for the family.

What is the impact of Amachi?

Amachi Missouri is a unique program that takes a holistic approach to addressing the needs of children of incarcerated parents. The program is informed and driven by a heavy emphasis on data collection—including behavioral and socioemotional competencies and academic achievement—just to name a few.

Behavioral and Socioemotional Outcomes	
	69% Reported feeling socially accepted
	90% Reported avoiding risky behaviors
	95% Reported a sense of parental trust
	74% Reported having positive education expectations
	71% Reported feeling a sense of academic competency
<i>Source: Youth Outcomes Survey provided by Amachi Missouri.</i>	

During the 2014-2015 school year, children participating in Amachi reported significant improvement in behavior and academics as indicated by data collected from schools.

	<i>Attendance Success: 70% missed less than 10 days of school</i>
	<i>Behavior Success: 88% had less than 4 discipline referrals</i>
	<i>Reading Success: 79% had a C or above in reading</i>
	<i>Math Success: 78% had a C or above in math</i>
<i>Source: ABD Data 2014-2015 cumulative provided by BBBSEMO-Amachi Missouri.</i>	

Missouri Amachi was recognized by Blueprint for Violence Prevention (US Department of Justice) as a best practice program in preventing juvenile delinquency—the first step to preventing young people from entering the adult correction system.

How are children enrolled in Amachi?

The systematic relationship between Amachi and the Missouri Department of Corrections has been imperative for the success of the program. With the assistance of Corrections personnel, new offenders, current offenders, and offenders on probation or parole can refer their children to Amachi Missouri.

All incoming offenders with children receive information about Amachi Missouri and are given the option of referring their children to the program. If interested, the offender completes a referral form for each child with the assistance of Corrections personnel. The forms are mailed to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri, where they are dispersed to the appropriate agency depending on the service area in which the child lives.

During pre-match procedures, Amachi Missouri shares information with potential mentors including parent's crime and length of sentence, the likelihood of parent release from prison, and suggestions for communication with the parents while in prison.

How can you become involved in Amachi?

Currently, there are over 500 children statewide with an incarcerated parent waiting for a Big Brother or Big Sister. Become a mentor to help children affected by incarceration reach their full potential. To learn more about Amachi Missouri, please visit their [web page](#).

An Inspiring Amachi Story



young son.

Roughly seven years ago, Genise Ray reached out to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri, seeking a little extra encouragement and support for her then 11-year-old son. “Rodrick knew his father but didn’t have the father figure he needed,” the insightful and caring mother recalled. She had heard about Redbird Rookies, and that program’s affiliation with Big Brothers Big Sisters, through parents and staff at Rodrick’s elementary school. In addition, Genise said she learned that Big Brothers Big Sisters had a program for kids affected by incarceration—and thought maybe the youth mentoring organization could positively impact her very quiet

“Oh my goodness,” Genise initially replied when asked about her son’s experience through Big Brothers Big Sisters. “Big Brothers Big Sisters was the best thing that ever happened (to Rodrick),” she asserted. From day one, Rodrick’s Big Brother, Zach Schaefer, has been a positive role model, coach, champion, advocate, friend, and guide. Zach made Rodrick feel good about himself. “They had a lot of things in common,” Genise noted. The single mother has always been a strong force and presence in her son’s life. Adding another caring adult to the mix, was a tremendous source of support, Genise said.

“(Zach) is thoughtful, caring, supportive, open-minded,” Genise said, adding, “He is one in a million—like a part of our family.”

In the next few weeks, Rodrick will graduate from high school and continue his studies at a local community college. Zach plans to be there every step of the way. “We are very thankful he came into our lives,” Genise concluded.



CONCLUSION

In their recent [report](#), the Annie E. Casey Foundation proposed a series of policy recommendations for building a stronger support system for children affected by incarceration. One of these recommendations was to ensure that children are supported while parents are incarcerated and after their return into the community. One of their proposed mechanisms was the delivery of programs and services through early education centers and schools. Childhood is a developmental period in which children are particularly susceptible to environmental influences.

Education interventions can break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration by improving future employment opportunities and reducing the propensity to engage in risky behaviors associated with crime. Early childhood education can reduce crime and incarceration later in life by improving subsequent educational attainment and reducing school dropout rates.⁵ The Obama administration recognized the value of early childhood education by expanding access to high-quality preschool through Head Start and Early Head Start; however, more targeted efforts are needed to ensure that children of incarcerated parents have access to high-quality early childhood education programs.

“Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

—Bryan Stevenson, Author of Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption⁸

USEFUL RESOURCES

- [Removing Barriers to Opportunity for Parents with Criminal Records and their Children: A Two-Generation Approach by Center for American Progress](#)
- [Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to their Children? by Child Trends](#)
- [Having a Parent Behind Bars Costs Children by STATELINE](#)
- [The Intersection of Love and Loss: Children of Incarcerated Parents by TIME](#)

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¹ The Intersection of Love and Loss: Children of Incarcerated Parents TIME Magazine from <http://time.com/4327836/love-and-loss-children-of-incarcerated-parents/>

² A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/a-shared-sentence/>

³ Bureau of Prison Changes Policies for Prisoners with Children from <http://thehill.com/regulation/administration/277746-bop-announces-new-priorities-for-prisoners-with-children>

⁴ The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences from <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/18613/the-growth-of-incarceration-in-the-united-states-exploring-causes>

⁵ Economic Perspectives on Incarceration and the Criminal Justice System from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/23/cea-report-economic-perspectives-incarceration-and-criminal-justice>

⁶ Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children from <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=823>

⁷ Kids Count Interview with Dena Sikoutris from Missouri Department of Corrections

⁸ Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/19/books/review/just-mercy-by-bryan-stevenson.html?_r=0