



Home Visiting Services With Justice-Involved Families

Introduction

More than 5.2 million children in the United States have experienced the [incarceration of a parent](#) (Ghandnoosh et al., 2021), a known adverse childhood experience (ACE) that can negatively impact young children's well-being (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Up to 19 percent of children with parents in state prison and 13 percent of children with parents in federal prison are estimated to be 4 years old or younger (Ghandnoosh et al., 2021). An additional 55,000 women experience pregnancy while in prison each year (Sufrin et. al, 2020).

Parental incarceration often co-occurs with other household adversities, such as unaddressed substance use, mental health conditions, and domestic violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Dong et al., 2004). These adverse experiences can be traumatic for young children and lead to [persistent gaps](#) in health, behavior, and achievement outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Many incarcerated caregivers have also experienced significant trauma, including past abuse and violence, homelessness, complex mental health problems, and substance use issues. This past trauma can hinder parents' ability to effectively navigate or advocate for themselves in correctional health care settings.

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Families experience complex challenges trying to maintain household routines and parent-child relationships while a parent is incarcerated (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021). Complex challenges are also presented by the time and resource demands parents face trying to meet court-related requirements outside of incarceration. As a result, entire families can benefit from the holistic supports provided by home visitors before, during, and after parental incarceration (Fauth et al., 2020; Fauth & Winestone, 2021).

This brief highlights five voluntary initiatives that support the needs of justice-involved families, defined broadly throughout to include incarcerated parents and other affected family members¹:

Prevalence of the Issue

Initial efforts to gauge whether home visiting participants are or have been justice involved highlight the prevalence of this dual experience. In Connecticut, 19 percent of mothers enrolled in home visiting had past or current involvement with the justice system, while in Wisconsin, 48 percent of enrolled mothers' partners had experienced incarceration (Duffy et al., 2015; Merksy et al., 2018). By contrast, Jackson et al. (2024) estimates that fewer than 33 percent of home visitors receive training on serving justice-involved families.

- ✓ Minnesota Prison Doula Project (MnPDP)
- ✓ Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment: Minnesota
- ✓ The Child and Family Research Center (CFRC), University of Nevada
- ✓ Maternity Care Coalition (MCC): Pennsylvania
- ✓ Florida State University Young Parents Project (YPP)

Defining Terms

Carceral: A term that describes anything related to jail, prison, or other institutions within the criminal justice system (Purdue University Critical Data Studies, n.d.).

Jails: Locally run facilities that primarily hold individuals who have not been convicted and are awaiting sentencing (Smith, 2022).

Prisons: Federal and state institutions where individuals serve sentences (Smith, 2022).

Minnesota Prison Doula Project

About: [MnPDP](#) provides group-based parent education, one-on-one doula services, and lactation support to pregnant and postpartum women in Minnesota state prison and some county jails. The project was founded in 2010, when a social work intern held listening sessions with pregnant women living in a correctional facility to identify their pregnancy, birth, and postpartum needs. Today, MnPDP serves parents in eight correctional facilities across Minnesota and offers services supporting community reentry.

Goals and Purpose: MnPDP seeks to address the needs of pregnant and postpartum women in the carceral setting. Doulas provide prenatal and early parenting education and support; peer counseling; and social support to mothers who are often socially isolated and lack autonomy over their movement, diet, and daily decisions. Doulas support expecting mothers by helping them create a birthing plan and increasing their feelings of control and autonomy during the birthing experience. They also advocate for mothers throughout their pregnancy and delivery to ensure their needs are met and to promote early bonding with their newborns.

Who Is Involved: MnPDP partners with Minnesota's Department of Corrections and correctional health services. The women's prison identifies pregnant individuals or those who have given birth in the last year and refers them to the MnPDP parenting coordinator, who describes and offers services.

Notable Details: Ten doulas deliver a 12-week [prenatal education program](#) through weekly, 2-hour sessions. The curriculum implemented in the program is designed to meet the needs of pregnant and postpartum parents and to support childbirth during incarceration. The curriculum was developed with input from experts and parents with lived experience. Pregnant women also participate in at least six one-on-one sessions with their assigned doula throughout their pregnancy and during and after birth. Doulas also support postpartum mothers if they are separated from their newborns. MnPDP doulas have completed a general doula training program and received an Advanced Prison Doula Certification. To earn the certification, doulas must participate in a 3-day training, followed by 6 months of regionally organized group-based mentorship and peer support from other doulas providing services in prison settings.

Accomplishments: MnPDP served 371 women and supported the birth of 5 children in 2024, setting mothers on a path toward reentering the community.

MnPDP has also raised awareness to drive state legislative changes that—

- ✔ Allow pregnant and postpartum mothers sentenced to prison to be released into community-based alternatives (Healthy Start Act, 2021)
- ✔ Limit the use of restraints during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum (Minnesota Statute 241.88, 2022)

MnPDP was the first project under the [Ostara Initiative](#), which now includes similar projects in Alabama and Oregon. The project's approach has been implemented and adapted in approximately 22 other jurisdictions, including in Virginia, Florida, and Michigan.

Upcoming Activities: MnPDP, through the Ostara Initiative, is helping launch a new prison birth project in Wisconsin. The initiative will continue to work with other states interested in developing similar programs adapted to local policies, correctional systems, and community needs.

For More Information: Contact Autumn Mason (amason@mnprisondoulaproject.org), program manager for MnPDP, or email info@mnprisondoulaproject.org.

Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment

About: The Department of Public Health and Environment in Washington County, Minnesota, has provided home visiting services to families in the county jail for more than 13 years. In 2013, the department's family health home visiting team began providing weekly parenting groups in the jail. In 2024, the team shifted to an 8-week cohort model and began using the [Circle of Security](#) curriculum focused on secure parent-child attachments.

Goals and Purpose: The team selected the Circle of Security curriculum in response to a 2019 survey of incarcerated parents attending the parenting groups; parents expressed a need for more support understanding child behavior, managing mental and emotional health for themselves and their children, and rebuilding relationships after incarceration.

Who Is Involved: The department manages a team of 12 home visitors. Four or five home visitors are selected for their expertise and strong interest in working with justice-involved families to support parenting work in the jail. One nurse home visitor acts as a point person to process referrals from the jail's correctional health nursing program. Although parents of any minor children are eligible to participate, the program prioritizes participants with young children when space is limited. Cohorts include five or six parents, on average, and rotate between male and female participants.

Notable Details: The home visiting team modified the Circle of Security curriculum for the jail setting because participants cannot immediately apply new skills with their children. The department is also considering how to better meet participants' needs and timelines after noticing that many women are not in jail long enough to attend eight sessions.

All current home visitors working within the jail have completed training to implement the Circle of Security groups and the jail's required trainings. They have also engaged in other specialized preparation, including a video developed by University of Minnesota researchers to address the unique challenges of working in a correctional setting. Home visitors working in the jail also receive additional [reflective supervision](#) time.

Accomplishments: Between 2013 and 2025, more than 250 parenting groups have been held at the county jail, reaching 629 fathers and 305 mothers. The department estimates that as many as 2,500 children have been impacted by this work. Nearly 50 parents have participated in the Circle of Security groups since they began in 2024.

The home visiting team plans to analyze the program's pre-post survey on learning objectives in 2026; early survey results suggest the program is associated with a range of outcomes, including reduced parenting stress.

Upcoming Activities: The team plans to pilot one-on-one work specialized for pregnant and parenting mothers. Women can sign up for consultations with a nurse home visitor using a kiosk. These meetings will lead to adapted individualized planning and implementation of the Circle of Security curriculum, and when needed, connections to programs in other counties following release.

For More Information: Contact Tyler Roenicke (tyler.roenicke@washingtoncountymn.gov), nurse home visitor supervisor for the Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment Home Visiting Program.

The Child and Family Research Center, University of Nevada

About: The CFRC operates a home visiting program to support pregnant women and parents of children under age 5, both in the county jail and after reentering the community. Services are also available to caregivers of children with an incarcerated parent. The CFRC began providing services for pregnant mothers in the jail in 2017, and expanded services to women and men with children under the age of 5 in 2024.

Goals and Purpose: The CFRC promotes healthy parent-child relationships regardless of incarceration status. Home visitors seek to help participants reestablish their bond with their child, connect with the child's other caregiver, and reenter the community.

Who Is Involved: The CFRC partners with the county jail to refer identified parents of young children to the program. A team of 10 home visitors travels to the county jail weekly to conduct hour-long, one-on-one sessions. Services are available for 1 hour every other month to individuals caring for the child of an incarcerated parent.

Notable Details: The CFRC implements the [Parents as Teachers](#) model for parents of young children and [Promoting First Relationships](#) for pregnant mothers. The curriculum content begins with eight foundational visits; future content is developed based on parents' input and needs. This flexibility allows home visitors to meet the distinct needs of incarcerated parents and to avoid topics that may cause distress for participants living apart from their children.

Home visitors receive multiple trainings on trauma and regulation, including the [Neurosequential Model](#) on how the brain processes information. Home visitors can consult with addiction treatment specialists as needed; they also engage in regular reflective supervision.

Accomplishments: The CFRC has provided home visiting services to more than 90 justice-involved families. Participants have shared that home visitors are a key resource for them when they transition out of jail—and in some cases, the first person they call when they are released.

“Parents will say to our home visitors, ‘You’re the first person that didn’t see me as an inmate but saw me as a parent.’” —CFRC Administrator

Program leaders and home visitors have observed multiple benefits for participants who reenter the community; examples include positive reunification with their children, stable employment, closure of Child Protective Services cases, and voluntary relocation for employment or other opportunities. One past participant, who experienced separation from her own parents as a young child, now advises the program as a part of the policy council.

Upcoming Activities: The CFRC plans to expand services to continue serving incarcerated parents transferred from jail to prison; it is also considering ways to expand home visiting services in carceral settings across the state. A team of university researchers is currently evaluating the program’s implementation and effectiveness.

For More Information: Contact Jamie Selby (jselby@unr.edu), director of home visiting and community outreach at the CFRC.

Maternity Care Coalition

About: Since 2006, MCC has provided group home visiting services to justice-involved families in Philadelphia. Home visitors provide wraparound services to help incarcerated mothers—and other caregivers—plan for and adjust to their reentry. In 2023, MCC expanded its services to reach justice-involved families in Delaware.

Goals and Purpose: MCC seeks to support women during incarceration and for up to a year after their release—as well as children’s other caregivers—as they experience challenges with parenthood and reentry. The organization also hopes to help mothers counter negative factors that influence health outcomes, such as lack of access to education and health care, behavioral health issues, and poverty.

Who Is Involved: MCC home visitors, who are also trained doulas, provide services to women while they are incarcerated and during their transition back into the community. They also assist other caregivers raising children in the community.

Notable Details: MCC uses the evidence-based [Growing Great Kids curriculum](#) to provide parenting education and support. It focuses on positive parenting practices and children’s development prenatally up to 36 months. The curriculum is also used for the parenting education groups provided in the jails.

Home visitors provide birth support to mothers who deliver while incarcerated, attending the birth and liaising between the mother and the child's caregiver. Home visitors encourage parent-child bonding after delivery (e.g., skin-to-skin contact, photos for parents to keep while separated) and deliver breast milk. They also connect children's other caregivers to resources and baby items (e.g., diapers, clothing) and support services (e.g., referrals to mental health services).

When mothers are released, home visitors help them connect to support services (e.g., primary health care, mental health support, substance use support) and a longer-term home visiting program.

Accomplishments: MCC has reached 956 women across its 2 active sites. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization temporarily transitioned to virtual services to continue meeting families' needs. MCC was featured in a [2020 national scan on home visiting programs reaching justice-involved families](#). Coverage of MCC's work with justice-involved families has also appeared in several publications, including Philadelphia Medicine Magazine, [Next City](#), [Generosity](#), and on the [Delaware Thrives](#) blog.

Upcoming Activities: MCC hopes to expand services in the future to serve other correctional facilities in the state of Pennsylvania and to provide services to the male population.

For More Information: Contact Colette Green (cgreen@maternitycarecoalition.org), senior director of programs at MCC.

Florida State University Young Parents Project

About: YPP was started by Judge Lester Langer in 2005 as a pilot program for pregnant and parenting female youth involved in the juvenile justice system in Miami-Dade County. In 2022, YPP expanded its home visiting services to engage young fathers. YPP now implements an adapted version of the [Minding the Baby](#) model across seven counties in Florida.

Goals and Purpose: YPP seeks to reduce recidivism, support parent-child relationships, delay rapid subsequent births, and increase parent and child advocacy within the court system. All services are designed to support teens' ability to "hold their baby in mind" as they make important life decisions, so the parent-child relationship becomes the vehicle for change.

Who Is Involved: Families are referred to YPP by the judicial system, juvenile probation officers, case managers, and/or child welfare staff. The adapted Minding the Baby model is implemented by a social worker, nurse educator, and infant mental health specialist. YPP staff work with community experts and partners at the Florida Institute for Child Welfare and the state's early childhood courts.

Notable Details: YPP serves young families who are court involved and volunteer to engage in the program; on average, participants are 15 years old at the time of first arrest. Services are available for at least 2 years, with some participants staying on after completing court-ordered sanctions.

Home visitors meet with participants and their babies once a week for approximately 1 hour. Additional time is available to address more complex needs. YPP staff support parents in obtaining identification, accessing care (e.g., primary care, mental health, dental health), addressing barriers to continued school enrollment, enrolling children in quality childcare, and getting referrals for developmental screenings.

YPP mostly serves young parents who have experienced complex trauma (e.g., sexual exploitation, human trafficking, community and family violence). Outreach staff proactively visit locations frequented by young families (e.g., schools, community centers, parks, restaurants, libraries) and keep the line of communication open to youth who do not respond or engage in services.

Accomplishments: YPP has served more than 400 families, including fathers in recent years.

Upcoming Activities: To support future evaluation efforts, YPP has collected data on multiple factors. Examples include youth demographics, history of involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice, educational progress, subsequent births, health screeners, child custody, and housing stability.

For More Information: Contact Jill Little-Brown (jslittl@cpeip.fsu.edu), project director at Florida State University YPP.

Conclusion

The efforts highlighted in this brief promote healthy parent-child relationships and aim to reduce trauma during periods of parental incarceration. They also point to the potential benefits of home visiting in supporting reentry. Although home visiting can be a critical resource to justice-involved families, model and curriculum adaptations may be necessary to meet their unique needs and provide services in carceral settings. Effective support requires flexibility in service delivery, trauma-informed and strengths-based approaches, and strategies to maintain connections during incarceration and after reentry. This support is essential as families navigate disrupted family dynamics, housing instability, and limited access to resources.

The initiatives highlighted in this brief offer the following guidance for other programs interested in providing home visiting services to justice-involved families:

- ✓ **Establish relationships with key partners in the justice system.** It is essential to build strong, collaborative relationships with partners such as correctional health staff, probation officers, and facility administrators. Programs must understand what each partner contributes to the work and how to collaborate to advance it. It is especially important for frontline staff in the justice system (e.g., corrections officers, jail or prison coordinators) to know about, be invested in, and support program activities to ensure successful implementation. These relationships can foster trust, improve coordination of referrals, and support responsive, trauma-informed services.

- ✔ **Adapt services to local settings and policies.** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to serving justice-involved families. Service strategies must be tailored to align with varying policies and practices across cities and states—and between jails and prisons. These differences affect what types of services are allowed, including options for individual and group visits. Programs interested in this work must understand their service area and adapt their approach and services based on local needs, values, and policies.
- ✔ **Provide training and reflective supervision to staff.** Training and reflective supervision are key to effectively serving justice-involved families. Training equips home visitors with the knowledge and skills needed to engage justice-involved parents and navigate the unique challenges of correctional settings. Reflective supervision provides a structured, supportive space to process challenging emotions and experiences that may emerge working with justice-involved parents.
- ✔ **Be a reliable presence.** Justice-involved families often experience isolation and limited autonomy. Showing up consistently as a home visitor can provide stability and reassurance and reinforce that families are seen, valued, and supported. Doing so requires workforce stability within the program. Program leaders can take steps to incentivize home visitor retention (e.g., adequate salaries, benefits, specialized coaching, reflective supervision).

Implementing these strategies can enhance support for justice-involved families by strengthening parent-child relationships and connecting parents and caregivers with important community resources to foster stability and successful reentry.

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Notes

ⁱ The definition of “justice-involved families” and “justice-involved parents” used in this brief varies from stricter interpretations by some researchers. Smith (2022), for example, limits “justice involved” to include only people with direct contact with the criminal justice system as a defendant at some point. Lamphere & Pomykacz (2022) uses the term “justice impacted” to refer to people who have been affected by someone else’s interaction with the justice system.

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