

# Incarcerated Parents and Their Children: Perspectives from the Smart Decarceration Social Work Grand Challenge



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**Abstract** Over half of people incarcerated in state prisons and over three-fifths of people incarcerated in federal prisons were parents to minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Families of incarcerated parents are negatively impacted and burdened by mass incarceration, increasing family instability, economic hardship, substance use, and mental health challenges. The staggering economic, social, and human costs to society resulting from mass incarceration call for research and evidence to inform “Smart Decarceration” policies and practices that reduce imprisonment, support well-being, and promote justice. Therefore, this chapter brings attention to the cross section of families and the Smart Decarceration Social Work Grand Challenge. In so doing, this chapter illustrates the need for “smart” policies and practices that meaningfully take these experiences and contexts into account and aim to reduce the criminal justice system’s reach while building community and social institutions’ supportive capacity. This chapter explores different types of family-focused programming that is available to incarcerated parents and their families and concludes with a discussion about Smart Decarceration efforts that inform and support the development of partnerships, programs, and policies fostering resiliency and improving outcomes for impacted families.

**Keywords** Incarcerated parents · Children of incarcerated parents · Jail · Prison · Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge

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J. Krysik, N. Rodriguez (eds.), *Children of Incarcerated Parents*, Children of Incarcerated Parents: From Understanding to Impact, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84713-5\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84713-5_13)

Estimates show that 52% of people incarcerated in state prison and 63% incarcerated in federal prison were parents to minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Consequently, over five million US children under the age of 14, or 7% of all children who resided with their parent, have been separated because of prison or jail (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). An important aspect of incarceration in the United States is the large racial disparities in the US criminal justice system. Compared to their white counterparts, African American children are six times more likely to have an incarcerated parent (11.4% compared to 1.8%), while Latinx children (at 3.5%) are approximately two times more likely (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010).

The staggering economic, social, and human costs to society resulting from mass incarceration call for research and evidence to inform “Smart Decarceration” policies and practices that reduce imprisonment, promote safety and well-being, champion justice, and support communities most impacted by mass incarceration. Social Work’s Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge addresses mass incarceration by reducing the criminal justice system’s reach and working toward outcomes that reduce racial, behavioral health, and LGBTQ-related disparities in the criminal justice system (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2017).

Families of incarcerated parents are one of the groups most impacted and burdened by mass incarceration, increasing family instability, economic hardship, substance use, and mental health challenges (Arditti, 2012; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Sugie, 2012; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2018). Consequently, parental incarceration has been consistently associated with negative outcomes for children, including increased behavioral and mental health problems, cognitive delays, homelessness, academic difficulties, and exposure to other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), adjusting for a range of characteristics (Gottlieb, 2016; Turney, 2018; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014; Wildeman, 2009). These unique challenges call for action that addresses families’ needs in innovative ways. The social work profession is well positioned to lead these innovation efforts with a focus on decarcerating parents and proposing actions that maximize child and family well-being (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

Given the staggering effects of mass incarceration on American families, this chapter aims to bring attention to the intersection of incarcerated parents and children and the Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge. We do this by focusing on variation within the criminal justice system itself and on contexts that shape the experience of families during and after parental incarceration, including differences in prison and jail settings, variation in programs and services, and ways of maintaining parent-child contact. We conclude with recommendations informed by the Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge about partnerships, programs, and policies that aim to foster resiliency and improve outcomes for impacted families.

## Do Differences in Prisons and Jails Matter for Families?

Prisons are defined as long-term confinement facilities that typically hold people convicted of crimes serving sentences of more than 1 year (Bronson & Carson, 2019). The United States operates 50 state prison systems and one federal prison system, collectively housing 1,833 separate state prisons and 110 federal prisons (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). Estimates also suggest that 28 states incarcerate people in privately operated prisons (The Sentencing Project, 2019). Differences in prison rules and operations between states, and even between facilities within states, can have implications for children and families. The type of prison facility where a person is incarcerated can affect the physical proximity of a child to their incarcerated parent, the regulations that dictate visiting options, the type of contact children and parents can have during visits, and the availability of family-friendly or parent-focused services for the incarcerated parent (Shlafer et al., 2015; Turney & Goodsell, 2018).

In contrast to prisons, jails are local correctional facilities designed for individuals awaiting trial and those serving short-term sentences, typically 1 year or less. Jails include city and county correctional facilities, work release programs, and temporary holding or lock-up facilities (Bronson & Carson, 2019). According to the Bureau of Justice Assistance, there are 3,134 local jails and 80 Indian country jails in the United States (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). The size, physical structure, and purpose of these correctional facilities vary widely. Over 50% of jails house 100 people or less, with 33% housing less than 50 people. On the other hand, 4% of jails house 1,000 to 2,500 individuals, and 1% (or 30 correctional institutions) house more than 2,500 people (Zeng, 2019), with the largest jail systems housing up to 19,000 individuals—a capacity that is larger than the entire correctional population of 24 state correctional systems (Bronson & Carson, 2019).

Since people incarcerated in prison serve longer sentences than those in jails, prisons admit and release fewer people each year compared to jails and generally have more formalized policies pertaining to contact with children and other family members, as well as different types of services and programs (Poehlmann-Tynan, 2015). In 2017, for instance, 10.6 million people entered jail compared to 600,000 admitted to prison (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Zeng, 2019). Over 745,000 individuals, or one-third of the correctional population, were being held in jails in 2017, an estimated two-thirds of whom were awaiting trial; additionally, over 50% of the jail population turns over each week with an average stay of 26 days (Zeng, 2019). This dynamic leads to “churning” in and out of jails, resulting in considerably higher jail admission rates compared to prisons.

Although incarceration in the United States occurs most frequently in jails with higher rates of people entering and exiting than in prisons, research on incarcerated parents and their children most commonly focuses on prisons or does not differentiate between the different types of corrections settings (Eddy & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019). Consequently, less is understood about jails and the implications for children whose parents cycle in and out of local correctional

institutions and as a result are removed from the home for frequent, but short periods of time (Siegel & Luther, 2019). Unlike prisons, jails are local correctional facilities and as such are generally found in or near the communities they serve. Because of this, children and caregivers may live in closer proximity to the incarcerated parent resulting in more opportunities to visit than if the parent was held in a prison. However, there is considerable variation within jails in the type of visiting options available. A survey of 50 jails, one from each state in the United States, found significant differences in visit types across jails, including barrier visits using plexiglass (most common), on-site video visits, off-site video visits, and face-to-face or contact visits (least common). In the case of one jail (located in Wisconsin), visits by minors were prohibited all together (Shlafer et al., 2015).

Distinctions between jails and prisons are important because most jails are not designed to incarcerate people for long periods of time and, as a result, lack the space and resources needed to support face-to-face visitation and programming for parents and children (Shlafer et al., 2015). This applies especially to smaller jails because their size and construction place physical limitations on available visitation and programming space, even when opportunities to develop such services are available through community collaborations. While some research has suggested that families are more likely to visit jailed parents because they live in closer proximity to the jail (Arditti et al., 2003), other evidence finds that phone calls are the most common form of contact between children and their jailed parents (Shlafer et al., 2020).

Since prisons are designed to confine people for longer periods of time, they may have the staff and infrastructure needed to provide incarcerated individuals with opportunities for family contact and programming that promotes parent-child interactions and communication during the incarceration stay. Yet, even within a single prison system (e.g., within the same state), actual prison facilities vary widely in terms of number, size, location, programming, and policies as related to visitation and other forms of contact with families (Shlafer et al., 2015).

## **Programs and Services for Incarcerated Parents**

To address the negative consequences of incarceration on children and to improve parents' life outcomes, programs have been developed to assist parents with various aspects of their family life and parenting role in correctional and community settings. Although research is limited, parenting programs in corrections have been linked to improvements in adjustment and misconduct during incarceration (Cochran, 2012; Eddy et al., 2013; Pierce et al., 2018), increases in parenting knowledge and improvements in parent-child relationship quality (Armstrong et al., 2017), and reductions in recidivism and better employment and mental health outcomes for the parent upon release (Duwe & Clark, 2013; Visher, 2013). However, widespread adoption of such programs—in particular, practices that promote parent-child contact—have been limited as a consequence of corrections

administrators' safety and security concerns (Peterson et al., 2019) and a lack of rigorously evaluated evidence-based models (Loper et al., 2019).

To the extent that parenting education and visitation programs exist in prisons and jails, they tend to differ widely along several dimensions, including when services are delivered (during or after incarceration), where they are offered (inside corrections institutions or in the community), and who delivers them (corrections staff, volunteers, social service providers). Treatment models and the level of assessed risk for recidivism also influence whether someone is offered parenting-related services at all. For prisons that rely on Andrews and Bonta's (2010) Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (one of the most widely used and influential treatment planning tools in corrections), higher-risk individuals may be offered programs unavailable to lower-risk individuals because the model is designed so that higher-risk individuals receive more intensive services than those with lower risk (Batastini et al., 2018). However, even treatment for high-risk individuals may not include family-focused services since parenting skills and family relationships are considered of only moderate relevance to reducing criminal behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Thus, correctional systems' use of the RNR model may be leading to less uptake of potentially beneficial services for parents in two ways. First, low-risk parents simply may not be offered potentially stabilizing services (e.g., parenting or relationship skill building classes) that promote pro-social behavior. Second, high-risk parents are limited to treatments that are considered of higher relevance for future recidivism. Because the RNR model may not adequately assess the full range of treatment needs of incarcerated individuals (Ward, 2015), alternative ways of prescribing treatment plans that include assessing parents' needs for parent-child contact and parenting skills and knowledge may be an area for future consideration (e.g., Veeh et al., 2018).

Programs available to incarcerated parents may also differ based on the parents' correctional facility setting. For instance, curriculum-based programs with modules or lessons that build on one another in successive classes may be offered in prisons but not jails because individuals tend to serve longer, more predictable sentences in prisons. For example, the *Parenting Inside Out* parent management training program (Eddy et al., 2013) offers 60–90 hours of curriculum content for prisons usually delivered over the course of 12–18 weeks. A 24-hour jail version does exist in order to increase feasibility of delivery over a short period of time. Indeed, some jails do have the capacity to offer regular and comprehensive programming. Two examples include jails in San Francisco, California, and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, which offer parenting classes based on manualized curricula to fathers and mothers (Peterson et al., 2015). These locations partner with local social service agencies who help provide parenting classes and other services that promote parent-child contact and bonding.

Other variations in family-focused programming, both within and between correctional settings, include delivery format (group meetings vs. one-on-one sessions), length of the program (number of sessions), and frequency of groups (e.g., biweekly, weekly). Significant variation in program structure centers around the type and scope of family-focused practices that correctional facilities

incorporate into their daily operations. For instance, the only family related programming in prisons and jails might be an assessment at intake to evaluate immediate parental needs because of the parent's incarceration (e.g., are children safe, does the parent need to make a call about the child). However, in comparison, the assessment at intake might instead gauge interest in family-focused and parenting classes, which could then be provided during incarceration (Peterson et al., 2019).

Corrections settings also vary widely in terms of the information provided to family members who want to visit in person or communicate by way of mail, email, or video. There is little research on correctional practices related to how family members are notified of visiting rules and other inmate communication guidelines or how to make a visit appointment. Furthermore, practices vary within and between correctional facilities related to sharing information about where incarcerated people are located and when they are transferred between facilities. Additionally, there is no consistency in how incarcerated individuals and their families are notified about family-focused programs that will be offered to the parent in prison or jail or information about resources that could be helpful to affected children and caregivers in the community.

## Contact and Communication

Services and policies that promote contact and communication between children and their incarcerated parents have the potential to positively influence parent-child relationships during incarceration (Poehlmann et al., 2010) and strengthen relationship bonds important to parental involvement and residence with children after release (Charles et al., 2021). However, the type of contact and the frequency with which it occurs varies significantly across correctional settings with implications for the well-being of children and parents. Moreover, not all incarcerated parents and families have equal access to these forms of contact, highlighting the economic disparities that incarcerated individuals and their families often face. Evidence suggests that financially vulnerable families find it hard to afford the costs associated with maintaining contact with their incarcerated family members. Expenses related to travel and transportation (Christian, 2005; Clark & Duwe, 2017; Cochran et al., 2016), calls, and mail to correctional facilities can prove prohibitive (Christian et al., 2006) making it difficult or impossible for children to talk with, see, or otherwise communicate with their parent.

Variations in visiting patterns among children and family members exist for a myriad of reasons. Traveling long distances, inadequate and unfriendly visiting spaces for children, and unclear visiting policies (e.g., what to wear, when to visit, what can be brought into the facility) all contribute to the barriers that families face when considering visitation opportunities (Schirmer et al., 2009). A fifty-state review of visiting policies in state prisons and the federal prison system revealed similarities, as well as wide-spread differences across systems with no clear

understanding or explanation as to the source of the policies (Boudin et al., 2013). For instance, North Carolina restricts visits to weekly, 2-hour sessions, while New York allows for visiting 365 days a year. South Dakota restricts who can be on an incarcerated person's visiting list (two people plus family members), while California allows individuals to list any number of people. In the case of jails, evidence suggests that family members may be more likely to visit because they live closer to the facility (Arditti et al., 2003). However, jail visitation policies often vary more than they do within state prison systems because of the discretion that local administrators have on visiting policies.

Letters represent the most frequent and common form of communication and contact between incarcerated parents and their children (Shlafer et al., 2015) for various reasons (e.g., affordable, can be saved and re-read). However, there are certain drawbacks as well. For instance, mail correspondence is less instantaneous, and the frequency and sensitivity of certain life-events may not be communicated in letters. Also, younger children often rely on their caretakers to assist with reading the letter and corresponding (Shlafer et al., 2015).

While phone calls are the second most common form of communication, they present monetary and privacy challenges, where the correctional facility environment can make it difficult to share personal matters (Shlafer et al., 2015). Email correspondence or electronic messaging is a potentially lower-cost option for some incarcerated parents and their loved ones; however, computer and Internet availability vary across facilities, nearly all messaging services charge fees, and many institutions block messages, limit the length of messages, and restrict attachments (Raheer, 2016).

This said, innovative strategies have been developed in some states that offer family support services, including various types of contact between children and incarcerated parents (McKay et al., 2010). For example, some correctional facilities provide child-friendly visiting services specifically for children and their incarcerated mothers (Peterson et al., 2019), such as a Texas prison's implementation of the "Sesame Street Goes to Prison" curriculum (Poehlmann-Tyan et al., 2020) or the New Jersey Department of Corrections' case managers who assist with visitation barriers (McKay et al., 2010). Case managers help arrange travel plans, submit documentation, and schedule visits. While research has found that settings with supportive services are more likely to have a positive effect on children and incarcerated parents (Poehlmann et al., 2010), some correctional environments facilitate less secure attachment between children and their parents. Often seen in jail settings, these facilities permit visits through plexiglass and provide minimal to no opportunity for children and their parents to hug, hold hands, or interact naturally (Loper et al., 2009; Poehlmann-Tyan & Pritzl, 2019).

A more recent method of communication that is drawing increased attention in both prisons and jails is the use of video chat through platforms similar to Zoom or Skype. While the evidence in this area is not well understood, research is underway to develop and test enhanced parent-child visits that include a combination of supportive visit coaching with jailed parents and at home caregivers and video chat technology, Internet access, and other family-friendly educational apps (e.g., health, finances, and parenting).

## Recommendations from a Smart Decarceration Perspective

Our review points to evidence that interactions between parents and children in prisons and jails vary widely. Drawing from this information, we conclude with a set of recommendations that reflect the Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge goals put forth to help shape the identification, implementation, and evaluation of innovative strategies aimed at undoing decades of mass incarceration. The goals, which include (1) substantially reducing the incarcerated population in jails and prisons, (2) redressing existing social disparities among the incarcerated, and (3) maximizing public safety and well-being, act as guideposts to help ensure that we achieve effective, sustainable, and socially just decarceration (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2017). With these goals in mind, there are three pathways we hypothesize would be advantageous to pursue in promoting child and family well-being for incarcerated parents and their children. The first is to consider alternative sentencing or diversion away from prison or jail for parents. The second is to develop and test parenting programs inside corrections settings and support services for children and families in the community. The third is to ensure that parents and children are provided opportunities for contact and communication during incarceration.

### *Alternative Sentencing*

One mechanism to decarcerate parents is to employ alternative sentencing strategies, an approach already used with certain groups through specialized courts (e.g., drug courts, mental health courts), typically used for individuals convicted of low-level offenses and implemented through time served under community supervision or probation (Tyuse & Linhorst, 2005). These alternative sentencing models often combine social services (e.g., mental and behavioral health treatment), with close monitoring and restrictions in the community to address various needs and disorders while maximizing public safety. The empirical evidence on the success of these alternative sentencing strategies is mixed. However, findings from the use of drug courts suggest favorable effects (i.e., reductions in recidivism and substance abuse), as do the use of mental health courts (i.e., decreases in recidivism) (Honegger, 2015). But, many of the studies are fraught with methodological problems limiting the degree to which conclusions can be drawn, pointing to the need for improvements in research in order to rigorously assess their impacts (Epperson et al., 2014).

Despite the mixed findings about these more established alternative court models, early evidence about alternative programs geared toward *parents* suggests promising findings and is a strategy receiving increased attention (Goldman, et al., 2019). For example, Washington state's Community Parenting Alternative program, which allows for a parent to serve their last year of incarceration in the community with monitoring and a sponsor, shows that the odds of recidivism are reduced by over 70% compared to similar non-participating parents (Aguilar & Leavell, 2017).



Oklahoma instituted an alternative sentencing program for incarcerated mothers with substance abuse disorders in 2009 through a partnership between the George Kaiser Family Foundation and a community-based organization serving children and families. Research from this program shows promising effects on children with mothers who had an alternative sentence compared to mothers who served their sentence in prison with children performing better on externalizing behavior problems, parental trust, parental alienation and communication, and parent-child attachment (Fry-Geier & Hellman, 2017).

Oregon also instituted a model in 2016, the Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Program, under House Bill 3503. This program serves parents with non-violent offenses facing a prison sentence whose children are at risk of entering foster care. Early evidence shows a range of positive outcomes including increased patience with children, motivation to succeed while on probation, and enthusiasm for the future (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2019). While probation agents attribute these early findings to more intensive and specialized supervision and interaction with participants and increased resources geared toward meeting families' needs (e.g., parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, life skills classes), more time is needed to assess outcomes on recidivism and housing and employment stability (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2019).

While the number of studies evaluating the effects of alternative sentencing models in the United States are limited, evidence from other countries suggest a clearer picture of potential promise for positive outcomes among parents and their children. Analyses from a longitudinal data registry of the Danish population suggest a range of encouraging findings (see Goldman et al., 2019, for a more extensive discussion). Evidence about children of incarcerated parents indicates lower risk of foster care placement (Andersen & Wildeman, 2014) and a decreased likelihood of being charged with a criminal offense in early adulthood (Wildeman & Andersen, 2017). Research about parental outcomes finds a reduction in social welfare dependence (Andersen & Andersen, 2014) and some indication of lower recidivism in the short run (Andersen, 2015).

### ***Family-Focused Programming and Strategies***

Alternative sentences that allow parents to remain in the community should be matched with programs and services that promote rehabilitation and address underlying conditions linked to criminal justice system involvement during and after incarceration in cases where getting locked up cannot be avoided. Programs and services should address individual needs (e.g., trauma, mental illness, substance abuse disorders, parenting skills, and family connections) and contextual factors if possible (e.g., poverty, housing instability, child welfare system involvement). Differences in the proximity of prisons and jails to family members and children, as well as variation in services and programs in different types of institutions, should be accounted for when implementing models that are family friendly.

Jails, whose location closer to families makes visits less onerous, generally have fewer programs and services. As such, they could be the focus of models to support parenting and child connections. For example, Dane County Jail in Wisconsin recently instituted a screener at booking, which can be used to identify individuals who are parents that then trigger referrals and services (C. Jones, personal communication, October 30, 2020). The screener questions include “Are you a primary caregiver for any child(ren) under the age of 18?” “Do you have any concerns about your child’s safety and well-being right now?” (If yes, the parent is offered a free phone call to confirm the child’s location and safety.) “Would you like your information shared with the Dane County Jail Family Connections Social Worker who can follow up with you to provide information and resources for family services available at the jail?” And finally, “Are you interested in information about how to communicate and visit with your family and child(ren) while you are housed at the jail?” If yes, they are offered information about a tablet for communication (e.g., video visits, messaging, photo sharing), setting up a phone account for calls, and details on visiting policies. Instituting screeners like this at the front end of incarceration, combined with assessments to determine other needs before release from jail or prison, are necessary to link parents to services that match the support they require to be successful in the long run.

Research suggests that parents are interested in programs that focus on rebuilding relationships with caregivers and family members, maintaining child contact, and strengthening parenting skills, as well as programs that offer counseling and treatment to address trauma and behavioral and mental health disorders (Charles et al., 2019; Dworsky et al., 2020). Strengthening parenting skills and knowledge, and increasing family connections while separated, can help ease the transition to the community and to parenting once released (Miller et al., 2014). Drawing from an ecological systems approach (Holmes et al., 2010), interventions in the community can also work to support family members (e.g., partners, relatives, children) of those currently and formerly incarcerated so that their needs are also addressed (Pettus-Davis, 2021). An example of how to engage loved ones of formerly incarcerated parents in programming is to offer similar services to both family members. For example, instead of solely providing parenting services to the formerly incarcerated parent, invite the other caregiver (e.g., mother, grandparent) of the child to participate as well. Complementing parenting services with other needed supports such as counseling and support groups so that fathers, mothers, as well as their partners and relatives can share experiences, offer support to one another, and build knowledge and skills, is also critical (Eddy et al., 2013; Fontaine et al., 2017).

In addition, evidence shows that inadequate housing, lack of education, and unemployment top the list of needs that parents have when asked about the supports required to keep them from being incarcerated in the future (Muentner & Charles, 2020). While continued research is needed to build evidence about parenting programs, findings suggest promise when these services are combined with other critically needed supports. Termed “multimodal” (Eddy et al., 2019), this approach aims to address the range of needs that people have (Western, 2018). Services that can be useful cut across multiple domains including employment training and job

placement assistance, transitional and permanent housing, guaranteed drug treatment and healthcare services, mentoring or peer support, and case management.

These programs and services should be provided through a linked service delivery system that begins upon entry to prison or jail and continues after release by using “in-reach” with community staff or volunteers who go into the prison and jail to assess needs and develop a reentry plan pre-release that continues with consistent transitional support once a person returns to the community (Miller & Miller, 2010). Moreover, these services should be comprehensive (i.e., meeting multiple needs), evidence-based, and social justice focused (i.e., use strategies that keep children and families safe while making opportunities available to justice-involved individuals so they can meaningfully transform their lives) (Poehlmann-Tynan & Eddy, 2019; Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2015).

### *Maintaining Connections during Incarceration*

In addition to the need for family-focused services and programs, it is important for children and parents to directly communicate with one another during incarceration in order to maintain parent-child bonds. While in-person contact is preferred by many people including incarcerated parents and advocates, there are circumstances that make visits with direct contact not possible or unsafe (e.g., distance, COVID-19) and instances when parents and caregivers simply prefer to not have their children visit a corrections setting.

Traditional forms of communication including in-person or contact visits, telephone, and letter writing have largely been associated with a range of positive outcomes for parents, although conclusions are uncertain owing to variability in the rigor of studies on the topic (see De Claire & Dixon, 2017, for a review of in-person visits). This said, available evidence suggests promise for incarcerated individuals who have contact with loved ones including improved mental health post-release (Folk, et al., 2019), successful future employment, lower levels of substance use (Visher, et al., 2013), and less recidivism (Duwe & Clark, 2013). It is important to note, however, that the quality of visits can impact the range of outcomes experienced by incarcerated parents, children, and family members (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). For instance, without supportive interventions that accompany visits to help children and parents have positive interactions (Poehlmann, et al., 2010), when plexiglass is used to separate children from their parents (Poehlmann-Tynan, et al., 2015), when visiting spaces are unfriendly for children (Dworksy et al., 2020), and when noisy, public, controlling visiting environments prohibit hugging and sharing of personal experiences and feelings, contact between parents and their children can lead to more, not less, problems. For instance, studies have found in some circumstances, contact (via plexiglass) leads to increased child anxiety and behavior problems (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2015) and less parent-child closeness (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014). As such, support services and parenting programs that include in-person contact when feasible, child-friendly visiting spaces, and

family-focused visiting practices that promote closeness and bonding are needed so that parents have the greatest chance of fulfilling their parenting role (Peterson et al., 2019).

A newer, but now exploding form of communication owing to COVID-19 is video chat or video visitation. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, video chat was being used or explored by approximately 500 institutions across the United States in some way (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). While research is needed to obtain an accurate estimate of where video visitation is being used, how frequently, and at what cost today, the evidence is beginning to build and suggests that when implemented with appropriate supports, video visits can offer significant benefits to children and their parents as a supplement to in-person contact visits (McLeod & Bonsu, 2018; Skora Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020; and see chapter in this volume on enhanced child visits).

## Conclusion

The family-related consequences of incarceration are widespread impacting children, parents, relatives, and entire communities in ways that are often lost in the shadows of the criminal justice system. The Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge seeks to bring light to those shadows by transforming programs, policies, and research efforts so that the incarcerated population is reduced, and evidence-driven strategies take the place of unjust, unsafe, and unsustainable practices. Smart Decarceration offers an opportune way to prioritize the needs of incarcerated parents, to make changes to systems to promote child well-being, and to work toward preventing future generations of parents behind bars.

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