



Answering the Front Door: Family Reunification Model Research

Key Points:

- **Healthy co-parenting** impacts father engagement, improves children’s emotional regulation, and reduces family tension.
- **Programs that support parents reentering** into the community and their families have shown promise in reducing parental stress, increasing social support and providing debt relief. Providing gender-neutral programs that support domestic abuse survivors can strengthen family bonds and promote greater agency and positive self-concept.
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- **Children in relative kinship** family situations experience better mental health, higher academic achievement and housing stability, and those children have some relationship with their biological parent(s). Additionally, these families experience lower incomes, they are less likely to foster or adopt, and children are less likely to have adequate health insurance.
- **Child support services** that assist in the reduction of debt among parents increase the frequency and amount of child support payments and strengthen family ties.
- **Justice-involved adults nearing retirement age** experience a disruption in their Social Security benefits as a consequence of their incarceration. The Special Enrollment Period has been extended for eligible justice-involved aging adults.

Strengthening Cooperative Co-Parenting

The strain imposed on families as a result of a parent being incarcerated can bring about challenges in the relationships between incarcerated or reentry parents and resident parents and/or caregivers. The instability of income and parental engagement can contribute to a breakdown in trust in families, which can reduce social capital among justice-involved parents.¹

❖ **The following research findings highlight the need for co-parenting alliance:**

- Incarceration disrupts parenting, which destabilizes the parent-child and parent-caregiver relationship. When parents are incarcerated, their relationship with their child is regulated by the at-home parent or caregiver. Research has found that incarcerated parents perceive the co-parenting relationship less favorably when the at-home caregiver reported higher rates of inattentiveness, impulsivity, acting out, and arguing.¹
 - Co-parenting cooperation and integrity have been found to impact children’s internalizing conflict.¹ However, co-parenting conflict, competitiveness, and triangulation have been linked to increases in children externalizing (i.e., anger outburst, defiance, and physical aggression) and internalizing (i.e., depression, withdrawal, and anxiety) conflict.²
- Strong co-parenting alliances increase father engagement with their child. Parents and caregivers with a cooperative co-

Key Terms

- **Co-Parenting Alliance or Cooperative Co-Parenting:** Co-parenting alliance, or cooperative co-parenting, is the ability for parents to team up and agree on goals that are in the best interest of their children and parents share the burden and benefits of looking after their children.
- **Triangulation:** Triangulation happens when one or both caregivers involved in a conflict tries to pull the child into their conflict.

¹ Tadros, Fanning, Jensen & Poehlmann-Tyann (2021)

² Zhao, Wu, Li, Zhang, & Hou (2022)

parenting relationship report more favorable perception of the co-parenting relationship.³

- Consistent father engagement with their child has shown a positive impact on mothers' perceptions on co-parenting. Specifically, when there is a decrease in the lapse in time between father visits with their child, mothers are more likely to report more favorable perceptions of their co-parenting relationship.³
- Healthy co-parenting has shown to have temporal effects on father-involvement.³ When fathers can contribute to the rearing of their child, fathers increase their engagement with their child. Research has shown that fathers, who do not live in the home with their child, spend 8 days more with the child when co-parenting is healthy.³ Healthy co-parenting has been found to increase the likelihood of father-involvement for up to 5 years.³

Families characterized by healthy co-parenting experience sustained father engagement with their child³ and report elevated moods and positive familial interactions.⁴

Parent-Centered Services (PCS)

This section details Parent-Centered Services (PCS). It should be noted that although both housing and financial stability increases parent engagement and fidelity to the family, evaluations of current Father-Specific Services (FSS) are not showing an impact on father's housing and financial stability. Creating linkages from FSS to employment and housing services may be an additional area of focus.

► Fatherhood-Specific Services (FSS)

Although, there is a lack of evidence showing that FSS have a significant impact on housing and income stability of fathers who participate in these programs. FSS have been shown to increase fatherhood involvement, and the reporting of positive experience of fathers in both parenting and co-parenting relationships. Furthermore, fathers who are co-parenting experience the most benefit from participating in FSS.

❖ The following research findings highlight the need for FSS:

- Barriers to legal decision making with at-home parent or caregiver(s) are exacerbated for justice-involved fathers when they are unmarried and not in the home with their child, reducing their perceived role in the family.⁵
 - Unmarried and non-residential fathers are more likely to experience co-parenting conflict and reduced time and access to their child, than married or resident fathers.⁵ Research has found that justice-involved fathers are more likely to be involved in uncooperative and unsupportive co-parenting relationships.⁶
 - Non-residential, unmarried, and never married fathers' benefit from increases in social capital, contact with the child, and contribution to decision making for the child when the co-parenting relationship is healthy.⁵
- Fathers who have stable employment experience more contact with their child than fathers who experience employment instability.⁷ Stable employment allows fathers to consistently contribute to their family. This stability contributes to more positive co-parenting relationships.⁹
- Many fathers report that repairing the relationship between the child's mother is the least motivating factor for attending FSS.⁸
 - The primary motivation for fathers in participating in FSS is improvement in father-child relationship, with the second most reported motivation being improvement with job situation

³ Carlson, Mclanahan, Brooks-Gunn (2008)

⁴ Loper, Phillips, Nicholas, & Dallaire (2014)

⁵ Tinkew & Horowitz (2010)

⁶ Lopoo & Western (2005)

⁷ Coley & Morris (2002)

⁸ Alamillo & Zaveri (2018)

and improving the relationship with the mother being the least reported reason.⁸ This may provide some insight into why mothers are more likely to attend parenting programs with co-parenting components than fathers when administered in jails.⁹

- FSS participation can improve father’s understanding of the mother’s role and the benefits of a healthy father-mother co-parenting relationship.

❖ **The U.S. Department of Health evaluation of Connection to Success, Fathers Support Center, The FATHER Project, and Urban Ventures found the following features of FSS have shown promising evidence in increased reachability and support among fathers.¹⁰**

- **Providing meals before each workshop** increased participation from fathers that reported housing instability.
- **Partnership with the court system** increased participation from fathers who were justice-involved.
- **Onsite mental health service** increased participation from fathers who report having depression.
- **Peer support services** increased participation from fathers who reported the last time seeing their child was a month or more from the present day.
- **Case management** has been identified as a common resource adopted in fatherhood models. Research into case management in FSS has not been thoroughly investigated.
- **Multigenerational Healing/Family Therapeutic Interventions** rebuilds the connection between the justice system parent and family.

❖ **Additionally, the following are recommendations to address intimate partner violence programming:**

- **Providing intimate partner violence support services** that meet the Oct 2022 recommendations outlined by the State of California’s Auditor’s Office.¹¹ Findings of the audit found that domestic violence programs in Alameda County, among 4 other counties in California, had limited impact on intimate partner violence. The following areas are highlighted, among others, as areas of growth.
 - **Improvements to holding offenders accountable**
 - **Inform courts when offender violates probation**
 - **Review the escalation practices for violations**

▶ **Motherhood-Specific Services (MSS)**

Motherhood-Specific Services (MSS) have shown evidence of improving family relations, reducing substance abuse, stabilizing mental health, and strengthening the parent-child relationship.

❖ **The following research findings highlight the need for MSS:**

- Women experience incarceration at historically high rates, showing the greatest population increase in the jail system compared to other subgroups. Women who are mothers are more prevalent in local jails (80%) than in prisons (58%) in the U.S.¹²
- Despite men being more likely than women to be incarcerated¹³, women with criminal records face reentry challenges that are exacerbated by their gender and racial status. Stigmas around women’s gender and the interaction of race puts them at greater scrutiny in a variety of social contexts, ranging from the family to employment.¹⁴
 - A 2018 study found that among justice-involved people, women with a criminal record were more likely to be unemployed compared to men. However, black women with a criminal record had the highest unemployment rate among all groups (44%), which also nearly doubles the

⁹ Miller, Weston, Perryman, Horwitz, Franzen, & Cochran (2014)

¹⁰ McKay, Lindquist, Corwin, Bir (2015)

¹¹ Tilden (2022)

¹² Bertram & Sawyer (2021).

¹³ Bushway, Cabrerros, Paige, Schwam, & Wenger (2022)

¹⁴ Liu & Visher (2021)

- unemployment rate of white women (23%). The presence of a criminal background for black women made them more unemployable than black men with or without a criminal record.¹⁵
- Stigmas and stereotypes around black women’s cooperativeness and aggression may explain how a criminal record can confirm bias and supply an objective justification for not hiring members in this group.
 - The unemployment rate of justice-involved mothers increases poverty experienced by mothers and contributes to housing instability and family discourse.¹⁶
- Incarcerated mothers are 5 times more likely than incarcerated fathers to have their child placed in foster care and have their parental rights removed.¹⁶ These differences may be attributed to the fact that mothers are more likely to be the custodial parent.¹⁷
 - The MSS proximity with child protective services (CPS), can be a deterrent feature among low-income minority mothers who would otherwise participate.
 - Historically, adoption initiatives, like the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, which terminated parental rights if a child had been in foster care for 15 of 22 months, incentivized child protective services, through increased government funding, to target children in poverty and parents who are justice-involved.¹⁸
 - Research has found that black and indigenous families in poverty are often charged with neglect and more likely to be investigated than white mothers.¹⁸
 - Among single mothers, the poverty rate for black women is nearly doubled (29.3%) the poverty rate of white mothers (17.3%).¹⁹
 - 75% of maltreatment cases were reportedly due to *neglect*, which has been identified as a dog whistle for poverty.¹³
 - June 2023, decisions in the *Brackeen v. Haaland* case will aim to keep Indigenous families together, leaving primarily black poor families exposed to child protective services if passed.²⁰
 - Since the inception of social welfare programs through the Mothers Pension and the Social Security Act of 1935, black mothers’ parental fit has been in question and has acted as a barrier to receiving services. Stigmas around black mothers not being stay-at-home mothers led to legislation that promoted the continued participation of black mothers in the workforce.²²
 - Despite having historically higher participation rates in the labor force and contributions to the relative household income, and longer histories in domestic service work than white mothers, policies, like TANF, were initially developed to impose strict work requirements as a response to black mothers receiving services.²¹
 - Research that echoed eugenics sentiment, like the Moynihan Report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” has supported wars on the black community – i.e., War on Poverty – without the acknowledgment of the societal and systemic structures that created great obstacles in wealth acquisition, and family disruption and separation in these very communities.
 - Societies’ persistent disregard of black women’s womanhood, and equal rights to support and services, is also evident through income differences between black women and women of other races. For example, despite black women continued and increased participation in the labor market¹¹ and comparable rates of negotiating promotions and raises to white women,²² black women earn on average 12% less than white women and are 31% more likely to be the breadwinners in their home.²²
 - Mothers in ethnically marginalized groups experience higher rates of intimate partner violence.

¹⁵ Couloute & Kopf (2018)

¹⁶ Hager & Flagg (2018)

¹⁷ Grall (2016)

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch (2023)

¹⁹ Statista Research Department (2022)

²⁰ Native American Fund (2022)

²¹ Banks (2019)

²² Lean In (2023)

- Black, American Indian, Alaska native, and multiracial women report between 30% to 50% higher incidences of intimate partner violence (i.e., physical violence, rape, and/or stalking) than women in other racial groups.²³
 - Bisexual women report higher rates of intimate partner violence than heterosexual women.²³
 - Many risk assessments were normed on predominantly male samples. To address the needs of the growing women justice-involved population, risk assessments that are both evidence-based and gender-responsive need to be adopted.²⁴
- ❖ **Evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative program identified the following features of MSS as having shown promising evidence in increased reachability and support among mothers¹⁶.**
 - **Substance abuse workshops** reduced substance abuse among mothers.
 - **Cognitive behavioral therapy** reduced trauma related to intimate partner violence, anxiety, and depression experienced by mothers.
 - **Partnership with the court system** increased participation from mothers who were justice-involved.
 - **Communication and self-advocacy workshops** increased family understanding of mother's feelings and experiences.
 - **Linkages to employment and housing supports** in the community.
- ❖ **MSS programming is challenging to provide in jails because of the short stays, which makes evaluation of effectiveness difficult. The MSS Strengthening Families Program³⁷ was modified to support parenting programming for mothers incarcerated in jails. The program led to evidence supporting the validity of the following additional MSS features:**
 - **Child age-appropriate program design**
 - **Consider parents gender and role**
 - **Cross system collaboration**
 - **Strengthening mothers and family bonds**
 - **Financial Stability and Employment**
- ❖ **Lessons that covered the following were of particular interest in the Strengthening Families Program:**
 - **Behavior Rewards Workshop** focused on disciplinary alternatives to spanking children.
 - **Communication From a Distance Workshop** focused on building and maintaining parent-child relationships despite separation.
 - **Better Relationships Workshop** focused on improving communication skills.
- ❖ **Feedback from participants in the Strengthening Families Program evaluations highlighted the following:**
 - The desire for children to be present when doing parental-child exercises.
 - Lessons that help mothers with managing their child's stress.

► Child Support Services and Resources (CSSR)

Growing research is examining the reentry experiences of justice-involved parents who have child support orders.

- ❖ **The following research findings highlight the need for CSSR:**
 - In California, an estimated 40% of justice-involved fathers have child support orders, with many of them defaulting on payments.²⁵ 70% of the national child support debt is held by low-income families with annual salaries of \$10,000 or less.²⁶ Nevertheless, the average child support debt for justice-involved parents is an estimated \$21,666 in California, which is two times the national average of low-income, non-justice-involved parents.²⁶

²³ National Crime Victims Week Resource Guide: Crime and Victimization Fact Sheet (2018)

²⁴ Kennedy, Mennicke, & Allen (2020)

²⁵ Haney & Mercier (2021)

- In California, incarceration is still considered voluntary unemployment.²⁶ This status allows for child support payments to continue to accrue while incarcerated and act as a barrier for justice-involved parents seeking modifications to child support.
 - Seven out of ten child support orders for low-income non-custodial parents are default orders.²⁷ Default orders create a barrier for justice-involved parents in areas with a high cost of living and no rental control, because they are based on the areas minimum wage and full-time employment. With justice-involved people being 50% less likely to receive a call back for employment,²⁸ more likely to experience work with inconsistent hours,²⁹ and lower wages,²⁷ the default orders can be particularly challenging for noncustodial justice-involved parents to fulfill in Alameda County.
 - The consequences of falling behind on child support payments can further exacerbate challenges to employment, stable housing, and reentry.
 - Driver's license revocation presents transportation challenges and narrows the employment opportunities that justice-involved parents can apply for.²⁷ The lack of adequate transportation can create instability in their attendance at work, financial contributions to their family, and engagement with their child. Additionally, if reincarceration is an issue, it can reduce parents' trustworthiness and both financial and social capital in their family.
 - Justice-involved parents are less likely to be affected by threats of reincarceration because of failure to pay child support.²⁷
 - Justice-involved fathers are less likely to engage with their children and are more likely to experience family tension and report reduced parenting self-efficacy when debt is high.²⁷
- Navigating the family court system is a barrier for justice-involved parents. Information around parental rights as it relates to child support claims while incarcerated and modifications or suspension of child support payments while incarcerated have shown better reentry outcomes.²⁷
- Justice-involved parents seek support from family members to assist in child support payments. This contributes to an exhausting of financial resources and stress that can contribute to the further breakdown of family's ties.²⁷

❖ **The following features of CSSR have been identified by the National Institute of Justice Child Support Reentry that may assist parents.**

- **Debt relief and consolidation services** reduces debts to manageable levels, increases child support payment frequency, increases support payments, and strengthens family ties.
- **Family Court, Service Navigation and Pre-Release Services** increases child support payments and reduces debt.
- **Partnership with the court system through reentry programming** allows for services to be tailored to parents needs and increases employment, wages, and payment compliance.
- **Multigenerational Healing/Family Therapeutic Interventions** rebuilds the connection between the legal system parent and family.
- **Child-support interest accumulation relief** reduces debt burden.

²⁶ Employment Development Department (2023)

²⁷ Lerman & Sorensen (2003)

²⁸ Pager (2003)

²⁹ Couloute & Kopf (2018)

Family and Kinship

Although children in kinship care experience better behavioral development, mental health, and stability in placement than children in non-relative kinship,³⁰ relative kinship caregivers often experience challenges in accessing adequate health insurance for the child and experience lower economic status.³¹

❖ The following research findings highlight the need for support for family and kinship:

- Despite earning more on average, non-relative kinship families receive more services and financial support than relative kinship families.³⁴
 - For example, in California, children who are placed with relatives only qualify for Federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children-Foster Care (Federal AFDC-FC) and need to be licensed as a foster parent to access child welfare services. However, non-relative kinship caregivers can receive both state and federal assistance.
 - Legislation, like AFDC, poses additional barriers to family reunification. AFDC recipients lose eligibility if the child's parent is in the home.³⁸ With housing services being one of the top programs utilized by probationers in Alameda County, this caveat can present additional housing challenges for those families affected by incarceration, forcing relatives to choose between housing the child or the parent. This may explain why children in relative kinship have stronger connections and better life outcomes than those in non-relative kinship homes.
 - Research has shown that children in non-relative kinship homes are less likely to have any relationship with their parent.³⁹ Severing the child-parent bond has shown to negatively impact children's ability to form and sustain healthy relationships.⁴⁰
- Research has shown evidence that relative kinship caregivers are less likely, than caregivers with non-kinship custody arrangements, to create additional barriers to reunification with the biological parent by not engaging in adoption³² or not receiving comparable governmental assistance, despite higher reports of poverty rates than non-kinship families and increase home expenditures from taking in relative children.⁴¹
- There is evidence that the number of insured children has decreased from 36% in 2005⁴³ to 21% in 2012⁴⁴. However, the gap between uninsured children who live with their biological parents (9%) is still wide.⁴⁴

❖ Limitations of relative kinship placement:

- **Lower probability of permeance through adoption** which creates barriers and can make legal decision making on behalf of the child difficult.⁴²

Types of Placements:

- **Private or Informal Kinship:** Living arrangements made without the involvement of a social service agency.
- **Voluntary Kinship:** Social services agency helps place a child with a relative without court involvement.
- **Foster Care:** A social services agency places a child with court involvement.

Types of Kinship:

- **Kinship:** A close family member or other person in the family's social network who has taken on the informal responsibility of caring for a child.
- **Relative Kinship:** A biological family member who has taken on the informal responsibility of caring for a child.
- **Non-Relative Kinship:** A friend or other person in the parent's social network who has taken on the informal responsibility of caring for a child.
- **Relative Kinship Foster Care/Kinship Foster Care:** Refers to children who have been placed in foster care by a social services agency with a family member or another individual in the family's social network.
- **Non-Kinship Foster Care:** Refers to children who have been placed in foster care by a social services agency with a caregiver who is not related to them or in their family's social network.

³⁰ Falconnier, Tomasello, Doueck, Well, Luckey, Agathen (2010)

³¹ Bramlett, Radcliff, & Chow (2017)

- **Limited access to government assistance programs** that can help with medical and healthcare insurance for the child in relative kinship families.

Support for Aging/Older Adults

Aging justice-involved adults are at great risk of health, housing, and income instability.

❖ The following research findings highlight the need for support for aging justice-involved adults:

- Research has found that housing insecurity becomes more prevalent as justice involve people age. Additionally, black women reported the highest incidence of housing insecurity compared to other demographics.³²
- Penal institutions have a higher prevalence of adults with a disability than in the general population. Maintaining adequate medical insurance is a unique obstacle for successful reentry for retiring adults.³³
- Social Security benefits have been responsible for the decline in poverty among aging adults in the last 5 decades.²⁴ In 2021, among the general public, Social Security benefits accounted for as much as 80% of the total income for adults in poverty aged 65 years or older and earnings from employment accounted for no more than 4% of their total income.³³
 - The suspension of both SSI and Social Security benefits, because of incarceration, reduces income among aging adults, making it difficult for many to continue to pay Medicare premiums. Failure to pay premiums leaves many incarcerated aging adults without medical health insurance while incarcerated.¹⁷
 - Amendments to the Special Enrollment Period, SEP, allows qualified justice-involved adults twelve months from release to enroll in Medicare Insurance. However, this change will only affect justice-involved people released on or after January 1, 2023.³⁴
- Older women experience more poverty as they age, doubling the poverty rate of men by the age of 80.¹⁷ Research has also found that adults who reported either being unmarried, single, having children, or being of racial minority status reported higher rates of poverty.¹⁷
- Research has found that justice-involved adults, who were 54 years old or younger, worked 20% fewer weeks than the general public during a 4-year period.³⁵

❖ The following features of programming that supports aging adults have been recommended:

- **Pre-release and reentry assistance** with wraparound services that includes assistance with housing and income stability, obtaining quality health insurance and social security benefits.
- **Linkages between the court system and caregiver** serves to provide aid to people with disabilities.
- **Rebuilding family ties and connections to community.**
- **Financial education and debt relief education** in addition to social security application assistance.
- **Multigenerational Healing/Family Therapeutic Interventions** rebuilds the connection between the legal system, parent and family.

³² Burke, Prunhuber, Phan, & Takshi (2022)

³³ Zhe & Dalaker (2022)

³⁴ Department of Health and Human Services (2022)

³⁵ Wang & Bertram (2022)

³⁷ McCormick, Sarfo, & Brennan (2021)

³⁸ California Department of Social Services (Retrieved 2023)

³⁹ Epstein (2017)

⁴⁰ Kenny (2018)

⁴¹ Rufa & Fowler (2016)

⁴² Hanlon (2022)

⁴³ Hegar (2005)

⁴⁴ Dudek (2017)

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