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## **An Exploration of Rural Incarcerated Parents' Needs and Existing Jail-Based Parenting Programs**

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Human Services

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Sarah Downard

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

An Exploration of Rural Incarcerated Parents' Needs and Existing Jail-Based Parenting  
Programs

by

Sarah Downard

MS, Grand Canyon University, 2018

BS, Grand Canyon University, 2018

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Human Services

Walden University

February 2024

## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand the holistic and cultural needs in jails to better support incarcerated parents in a rural Western region and to compare the needs to existing programs. The theoretical framework for this study was a program model called the Family Strengthening Project. Data were collected in individual telephone interviews with five professionals with experience working with incarcerated parents and their families in a rural jail and community, including human services practitioners and law enforcement officials. The findings of the study indicated that although the jail is currently offering parenting classes, staffing and the size of the facility make it challenging to tailor the classes to fully meet the needs of incarcerated parents. This included offering services that address trauma and help incarcerated parents maintain their culture during incarceration. Additional findings were a need for data, including longitudinal data and a survey of incarcerated parents to increase understanding of the needs from an incarcerated parents' perspective. This study is significant for positive social change and the social determinants of health, as results may be used to inform practices and the development of a program that can better support the needs of incarcerated parents in the rural jail.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. You have inspired me throughout every step of this journey. I could not have completed this study without your support. Elias, Zachariah, and Anibelle, you inspire me every day, and I strive to make this world better for you. Will, I know this journey was not always easy, but I could not have made it this far without you by my side every step of the way. Bethany, I will forever cherish our relationship, and I am so thankful to not only call you my sister but also my friend. I could not have made it through this last semester without your support. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for always believing in me, allowing me to be myself, and encouraging me from a young age to live with passionate authenticity. Lastly, I dedicate this research to future leaders in human services. May you be inspired to follow your passions and authentically take the path less taken wherever the journey leads.

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank my family, friends, and colleagues who have supported and encouraged me throughout this journey. I would like to give a special thank you to one of my classmates, Brittany Miller, who continuously reached out and provided support and encouragement. I wish to acknowledge the many individuals I have had the privilege of meeting throughout my career. Your strength in adversity will forever inspire me. Thank you, Dr. Benoliel, my dissertation chair, for being my greatest cheerleader. Your belief in me encouraged me to push through my stress and fear, even when I could not believe in myself. I would also like to thank my second committee member, Dr. Sarah Matthey, who helped shape me into a stronger writer.

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

Each year in the United States, approximately 1.7 million parents and children experience separation due to incarceration (McGovern, 2021). According to a 2016 survey, about half of the inmates in state and federal prisons reported having a minor child (Maruschak et al., 2021). The data for state jails are limited. Most states do not regularly collect information on the parenting status of incarcerated individuals, which affects the availability of data; however, one national study estimated that closer to 5 million children who had a parent go to jail or prison (Shlafer et al., 2020).

It is worthwhile to differentiate data between jails and prisons to guide policy and decision making. For example, local organizations operate jails, sentences are frequently less than 1 year, people return more quickly and frequently than in prisons, and often jails offer fewer programs to the inmates (Shlafer et al., 2020). Furthermore, while an estimated 95% of incarcerated persons return to their community, jails often do not offer programs to prepare for this transition, which can leave parents unprepared to return to the role of caregiver and increase the risk of recidivism (Muentner & Charles, 2020). In this study, I explored professional assessment of the needs of parents incarcerated in rural jails in a southwestern state where the population is 14% Native American, which included their evaluation of parenting programs that human service providers can implement to support parents through this transition, including programs that address cultural needs.

In this section, I outline the search strategy I used to explore parents' needs during and after incarceration. In the literature review, I explored the framework for jail policies,

programs, and procedures provided by the National Institute of Correction's Family Strengthening Project (National Institute of Corrections, 2022). According to the National Institute of Corrections (2022), this program incorporated a whole-family approach to parenting services in the jail, including parenting education classes, improvements to jail lobbies and visitation processes, contact visits for parents and children, subsidizing parent-child communication, caregiver support, and family-focused reentry. Lastly, I provide an overview of the problem by exploring the issue of parental incarceration and its effects on the incarcerated individual and family, investigate parenting programs currently offered in jails, and discuss matters affecting parents in rural jails. I explored the needs of incarcerated parents in a Southwestern state, including their cultural needs. Researchers found that culturally adapted treatments incorporating a participant's values, beliefs, and cultural norms effectively supported the parent and the entire family (Yeh et al., 2022).

### **Background of the Human Services Problem**

President Obama reported in a 2015 speech that the United States has the highest prison population in the world, with over 2.2 million adults incarcerated and the population quadrupling over the last 40 years (para. 20). In a report on incarceration in the United States, Sawyer and Wagner (2020) estimated that nearly 600 people per 100,000 living in the United States are incarcerated at any given time, accounting for the highest incarceration rates in the world. Researchers estimated that the number of persons incarcerated in jails each year in the United States is significantly elevated, with 10.6 million people in 2017 sent to jail versus 600,000 sent to prison (Western et al., 2021).

Mass incarceration is a term used to describe the high rates of incarceration seen in the United States over the past 40 years (Shaikh et al., 2021).

Mass incarceration in the United States has resulted from many policy changes implemented at the federal level since the 1970s. For example, in 1986, President Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act into law as part of the War on Drugs (Mihalec & Shlafer, 2022). This law increased the punishment for drug-related crimes, including expanding the list of substances that required punishment and increasing the average sentence length for drug-related crimes (Anti-Drug Abuse Act, 1986). According to Mihalec and Shlafer (2022), in 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. The bill intended to authorize grants to increase policing, expand and modify existing prisons, and develop alternatives to conventional incarceration for young offenders (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, 1993). However, this ruling led to the three-strikes rule, increased the number of persons serving life in prison, and created a need for new facilities to be built throughout the country to house an estimated 43% increase in inmates (Mihalec & Shlafer, 2022). Mihalec and Shlafer also looked at the role that state laws played in the increased incarceration rates, with an estimated 150% increase in state incarceration rates due to drug-related offenses and almost 30 states adopting similar laws related to the 1994 bill to be more “tough on crime” (p. 7).

Mass incarceration also influenced the number of persons incarcerated in local jails. From 2015 to 2019, county jails reported an estimated 10 million admissions annually (Zeng, 2022). According to Sawyer and Wagner (2022), jail populations

accounted for approximately 30% of the average daily incarcerated population in the United States in 2020. Although incarceration in jails is typically brief, research has shown custodial time to negatively affect the outcome of the court proceedings and increase the risk of poverty for the incarcerated individual and families (Western et al., 2021). According to Western et al. (2021), jails also saw increased incarceration rates during the 1970s and 1980s, with disproportionate numbers of persons from low-income neighborhoods and those experiencing addiction imprisoned. However, the history of disproportionalities in the United States jail and prisons goes back to the establishment of the country.

When settlers were met with opposition from the native population and could not take control of their land by force, they began to criminalize the native population to gain control (Thompson, 2019). People of African descent were brought into the country and forced to work as enslaved people. According to Thompson (2019), during the time leading to the abolishment of slavery, today's prisons did not exist as crimes were often settled outside of the court system and rarely led to imprisonment. However, as the United States abolished slavery, racial disparity continued to influence the nation's criminal justice system. One researcher estimated that Black incarceration rates are currently six times higher than White incarceration rates (Duxbury, 2021). According to Duxbury (2021), while these racial disparities continue to exist, it is difficult to identify how the policies and practices in the United States continue to lead to this disproportionality.

I focused this study on rural jails in Eastern California. Like many jails throughout the United States, there is a disproportionate number of Native American individuals incarcerated each year. Statistically, Native Americans account for only 1.2% of the jail population. However, Zeng (2022) noted a need to adjust the percentages to compare them to the average population. The United States Census Bureau (2022) reported that 14% of the population in the county at the focus of this study are Native American. However, they account for approximately 30% of the daily jail population in the county of focus and 19% in a neighboring rural jail. According to Elm et al. (2021), the four most common adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among the Native American participants were substance abuse, witnessing a violent crime, parental incarceration, and sexual abuse. I specifically explored parental incarceration's effects and parenting programs' role in rural jails.

### **Social Problem**

The social problem that prompted this study was intergenerational incarceration, which I observed in a rural southwestern community. When researching causes of intergenerational incarceration, the stress and trauma related to parental incarceration, including the child's bond with the parent, the family climate in the home, and the parent's ability to nurture, all increased risk of incarceration for future generations (Giordano et al., 2019). Most states do not recognize that children with incarcerated parents need programs to provide support (McGovern, 2021). Although human services staff currently offer a parenting program in the local jail, the studied counties do not have data to support the needs of local rural incarcerated parents.



I had not found research addressing the needs of parents in rural jails during incarceration. Although I found current studies investigating this issue, I did not find literature or human services practices addressing the unique needs of rural communities related to the challenges of parental incarceration. Giordano et al. (2019) found that providing children experiencing parental incarceration opportunities to build prosocial relationships to mitigate the effects of parental incarceration was crucial. Programs developed to reduce the effects of trauma that come with parental incarceration could help improve outcomes for the children (Roettger & Dennison, 2018). However, Roettger and Dennison (2018) concluded that further research was required to understand the needs and what types of programs would be most effective. Lastly, Loudy (2020) studied the needs of individuals touched by parental incarceration in rural communities; however, I focused on adult survivors and indicated a need for further research on the needs of rural communities.

Furthermore, research is needed to explore how incarceration has affected individuals from different cultures. Minority communities, including indigenous peoples, are disproportionately represented in carceral settings worldwide and face additional challenges, including racism, discrimination, and acculturation (Ho Schar et al., 2020). While staff in custodial settings often receive cultural awareness training, it takes continuous work to address an individual's beliefs and biases and begin incorporating the training into policies and practices. Furthermore, curricula offered at jails and prisons may contribute to acculturation. For example, programs that incorporate a cognitive behavioral therapy approach (CBT) encourage inmates to rethink their irrational thoughts

and replace them with something more rational or “normal” (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022, p. 141). This approach can lead to an individual questioning their values and beliefs.

In addition to losing individual culture in corrections, jails and prisons have their own culture, as people need to adapt to survive. Fowler et al. (2022) described two models inmates used to adapt. Importation is the ability to adapt to prison by using the skills a person brought into prison versus deprivation, which occurs when a person has limited contact with the outside world (Fowler et al., 2022). Fowler et al. further explained that deprivation can lead inmates to transition from their cultural values and beliefs to adopt the prison culture, attitudes, and beliefs. Furthermore, prisons create a culture focused on punishment, with inmates labeled and separated based on their crimes (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022). These factors contribute to acculturation and can affect individuals and their families as they return home from jail or prison.

In 2012, Australia opened a prison that incorporated culturally appropriate procedures and policies, including housing inmates based on family ties, language, and security level; engaging in rehabilitative programs that were reflective of their culture; and creating a safe space for inmates to express their culture (Ho Schar et al., 2020). According to Ho Schar et al. (2020), Hawaii worked towards establishing a similar framework with the goal of allowing all correctional facilities to incorporate cultural values, wisdom, and practices. While this study was a pilot, and Ho Schar et al. noted a need for further research, the results could have implications for correctional settings and human services systems throughout the United States.

### **Local Problem**

As I began investigating the issue of intergenerational incarceration during my master's program, I was interested in the correlation between parenting relationships and outcomes for children of incarcerated individuals. I began to explore the parenting programs currently offered in the local jail. During my research, I spoke with two individuals working for a human services agency and currently offering parenting classes in the county jail. Both reported receiving similar feedback from parents that they appreciated the lessons but felt they needed more to meet their needs as incarcerated parents. For example, one parent would like more opportunities to practice the skills they learned in the parenting class with their children. Another reported that they did not have contact with their children. Additionally, staff said there needed to be current data regarding the number of incarcerated parents and a process for receiving referrals to their program.

The last data I located regarding the needs of parents in the local jail was from 2017. Approximately 25 inmates and their families participated in the survey. Around 70% of inmates reported contributing at least 50% of their family's income before incarceration. While finances were the most significant concern, the other top fears included losing custody of their children, losing contact, being cut off from their families, and not knowing who would care for their children while they were in jail. Additionally, parents and families reported that they would benefit from more counselors and programs in the jail, services that prepared the incarcerated individual and family for their release, family counseling, and support for the caregiver in the community. Finally, the local

program also collected data on ACEs from parents who participated in parenting classes in the jail from 2013-2017. A community partner conducted a similar survey, and the results showed an average score of 4.8 in the jail compared to 3.3 in the community. One ACE worth noting was that 39% of community members who participated in the survey reported having an incarcerated parent during their childhood versus 55% of participants in jail. Further research is needed to determine if there is a correlation between parental incarceration and risk for future generations and programs that someone can implement locally to support incarcerated parents.

Furthermore, there is a need for cultural awareness training for custodial staff and jail service providers. As part of this study, I sought data regarding the training requirements for custodial staff and treatment providers. During the 4 years I worked in the local jail providing reentry services to a limited population, I collaborated with the local tribal organization to bring programs and services into the jail. While these community partners offered limited services, they desired to expand their services to include more cultural practices. Staff responded to these requests with safety limitations we could not resolve during my tenure. Through this study, I explored how the local jail and community providers can work together to provide culturally responsive programming to the custodial staff and increase understanding of the importance of these services.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purposes of this qualitative case study were to (a) explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural Western region and (b) to explore how local human

service providers can build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community. Using a cross-case analysis approach, I conducted multiple individual interviews, including jail service providers, to better understand the needs related to parental incarceration locally. The results from this study then informed a white paper that could educate human service professionals on parenting programs and make recommendations for programs that leadership can implement to better address the needs of incarcerated parents in rural communities.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural Western region?
2. How can local human service providers build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community?

### **Framework**

I found a program model that incorporated a whole family approach to parenting education during incarceration and supported the family framework called the Family Strengthening Project (see National Institute of Corrections, 2022). This project looked at ways to reduce the traumatic shock of parental imprisonment while providing education and reentry support for the incarcerated parent. According to the National Institute of Corrections (2022), this approach included parenting education, improvements to jail lobbies, contact visits between the child and incarcerated parent, subsidized parent-child communication, caregiver support, and family-focused reentry. I used this model as a

framework as I developed my focus group questions and researched existing evidence-based programs to see how this model aligns.

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study included a holistic approach that considered the cultural and family needs and programming that human services staff can implement at the jail to better support incarcerated parents. I used the framework from this model as a lens to frame my study. When I conducted my interviews, I used this framework to help understand the needs of incarcerated parents and their families. I began each interview by outlining the framework before the discussion. As interview participants discussed what treatment providers currently offer in the jail, and what participants wanted to see, I explored how their responses align with the framework. If it did not come out naturally through questioning, I referred participants back to the framework to see if there was anything else they would like to add. For example, what, if anything, needs to change in the jail lobby to support incarcerated parents and their families? Additionally, this framework related to my research question as I explored the needs of incarcerated parents in the local rural jail.

### **Nature of the Study**

This qualitative study included a cross-case analysis approach to address the research questions by comparing data mined through individual interviews and a review of existing literature (see Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). The original design of the study was an action research approach. However, due to post-COVID and geographic restrictions that impacted recruitment, I decided, in consultation with the committee, to

move from the original action research plan with multiple focus groups to a cross-case analysis approach with individual interviews.

A cross-case analysis approach is different from other types of research as it creates a way to organize existing data by comparing individual case studies and using the accumulative information for a greater understanding (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). The purpose of cross-case analysis is to gather information from individuals based on their experiences and opinions to assist with finding solutions to problems they are experiencing and comparing the individual studies to one another (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). While this type of research may include individual case studies and interviews conducted by the researcher, a literature review also has a role in finding answers to the problem. Research can help to understand the topic's history and to find similar solutions from other communities (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). According to Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008), cross-case analysis provides a way for the researcher to compare information across individuals and communities to gather information that leaders can use to inform policy and decision making.

I used a cross-case analysis approach to help understand parental needs from the perspective of those who have experience working with families impacted by incarceration in a rural community. Although I did not implement changes as part of this study, human services professionals can use the information to address the identified needs. In addition to the cross-case analysis, I used some of the action research model, which applies a look, think, act approach to guide my study as this model has a step-by-step for exploring social situations where there is a goal of social change (see Stringer &

Ortiz Aragon, 2021). The first step, look, includes gathering data through observations and a literature review to define the problem and gather information (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021, p. 8). I began my study with a literature review and conducted individual interviews to gather information to help understand local issues.

Conducting individual interviews during this first step allowed those who bring different perspectives to the issue of parental incarceration to speak openly. The cross-analysis of the information from the interviews helped me to understand the gap in local services for incarcerated parents. Comparing the assessed needs to the review of existing programs serving incarcerated parents conducted during the literature review step of the research process can help inform leaders of ways they may expand the parenting program at the jail to meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community.

### **Defined Terms**

*Acculturation*: The process by which an individual modifies the culture or beliefs they developed from birth, adopting behaviors or values from another culture to relate to or fit in (Leite et al., 2023). This commonly used term describes how an immigrant adapts to the country where they now reside.

*Average daily population*: This term refers to the total number of inmates in jail each day for a year, divided by the total number of days in the year (Zeng, 2022).

*Culture*: In the 1970s, researchers developed a broadly accepted definition of culture. It is considered a framework of values, beliefs, and practices of a group of people (Stone, 2023). Culture can include an individual's race, ethnicity, and religious or social



beliefs. However, the term can also refer to the goals, values, and practices shared by employees within an organization (Kim & Jung, 2022).

*Epigenetics:* This term, first coined by Waddington in 1942, describes a permanent marker placed on DNA without permanently making any modifications (Bozkurt et al., 2022). While some have seen this modification in families predisposed to a genetic condition, researchers have also studied the influences of trauma and how it can leave an epigenetic marker on DNA.

*Historical trauma:* This concept looks at the grief and trauma that compounds over one's lifetime or across generations (Swanson et al., 2022). According to Swanson et al. (2022), historical trauma effects are seen in an individual, family, or community. Examples of the effects of historical trauma can include increased depression, anger, substance use, or poor health outcomes.

*In custody or incarcerated:* Whether convicted or awaiting sentencing, this term refers to individuals in the physical custody of local jails (Zeng, 2022). One researcher also defined incarceration as spending at least 1 night in jail or prison (Garcia-Grossman et al., 2022).

*Individualized treatment:* Also referred to as personalized medicine, individualized treatment considers how each person's genes, lifestyle, and experiences are different and takes each into account when developing a treatment plan tailored to the specific individual (Belhadj, 2021).

*Jail:* Jails are locally operated short-term facilities that hold inmates awaiting trial, sentencing, or both, and inmates sentenced to a term of incarceration of 1 year or less (Zeng, 2022).

*Reentry services:* Reentry refers to an individual returning to their home or community upon release from jail or prison. Reentry services are support given to formerly incarcerated individuals, including health, employment, housing, education, and family services to assist with their transition (Muentner & Charles, 2020).

*Release:* Persons released after confinement, including completion of sentence, bail release, or transfer to another authority. Releases exclude temporary discharges, such as medical appointments, court appearances, furloughs, and transfers to other facilities (Zeng, 2022).

*Rural:* According to Ratcliffe et al. (2016), rural is defined as not urban—that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left. Urban areas have a population of 50,000 or more.

*Social determinants of health:* Many providers in the healthcare field are becoming more familiar with social factors that may increase an individual's risk of poor health. Commonly referred to as social determinants of health, these factors include “behaviors, social situations, socioeconomic conditions, and physical and policy environments that contribute to health and well-being” (Vest et al., 2019, p. 125). Researchers found that these factors can lead to poorer health outcomes for individuals and more frequent use of services (Vest et al., 2019).

*Turnover:* A jail can calculate the turnover rate by dividing the number of arrests and admissions by the average daily population (Zeng, 2022).

*Whole-family approach:* This approach involves including the whole family in interventions and services provided. Treatment providers consider the needs of all family members, speak with all household members together and individually to assess the family's needs, and involve the entire family in the treatment process (Margolis et al., 2020).

*Wraparound:* The wraparound service methodology incorporates a team-based approach to provide services to families based on their identified needs (Connell et al., 2022). This approach incorporates team members based on the family's needs, including a facilitator, formal providers, and natural support (such as friends, family, and community).

## **Significance of the Study**

### **Significance of the Study for Community or Organization**

This study may be significant because the results may inform practice in rural communities by exploring the unique needs of a particular population of incarcerated parents and implementing the group's needs into the services offered in the local jails. Programs developed to reduce the effects of trauma that come with parental incarceration can help improve outcomes (Roettger & Dennison., 2018).

I sought to learn more about the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails and explore how existing programs can inform practice. By discovering and analyzing existing programs in jails and prisons throughout the country, my study can inform

practices within the community at the focus of this study and other rural communities by comparing needs to existing programs. Using a cross-case analysis approach, including multiple individual interviews and a literature review, local human service leaders may use the information to expand the existing jail-based parenting program. This study promotes positive social change by filling the gap in practice in the local community and discussing the needs of incarcerated parents in rural communities.

### **Significance of the Study for Human Services**

Like the significance of this study for a community or organization, it is significant for human services because it allows providers to understand the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails. Learning more about culturally responsive programming and how jails can incorporate programming that meets the community's unique needs can change how human services programs implement services nationwide. This study addressed how a one-size-fits-all approach fails to meet the needs of incarcerated parents in rural communities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I began my search in the Walden Library using the Thoreau database, SAGE Journals, and the Psychology, Social Work, and Criminal Justice Databases. I searched using the keywords *intergenerational*; *incarceration, jail, or prison*; *parenting programs or parenting classes or parent training*; *culture and acculturation*; *outcomes or benefits or impacts or effects*; *parent-child relationship*; *parent, mother, father, or caregiver*;

*incarceration rate*, and *rural*. I entered these terms in various combinations but limited the results to peer-reviewed and 2019 to present each time.

In addition, I searched the Thoreau database at Walden to locate resources with relevant definitions of key terms. This search included *acculturation*, *culture*, *the definition of incarceration*, *individualized treatment*, *reentry* or *reentry services*, *social determinants of health*, *whole family approach*, and *wraparound*. I limited each search's results to peer-reviewed and published articles from 2019 to the present.

As an alumnus of Grand Canyon University, I also have limited access to their library. I searched the alum EBSCO database using the combinations of the keywords listed above, including *parent*, *parenting*, *parent-child relationship*; *education* or *programs* or *classes*, *incarceration* or *jail* or *prison*; *rural*; and *outcomes*. I limited the search to articles that were peer-reviewed and published 2019-present. I added a limiter so that the results reflected studies in the United States.

Next, I used Google Scholar with similar keywords to find further articles. I also searched using keywords of *parenting programs that served jails or prisons* and was able to locate examples of existing programs. Once I discovered these programs, I used Google Scholar and the Walden Library to find scholarly resources to explore program outcomes and effects. When conducting research for my grant writing class, I found a similar program approach I was interested in learning more about called the Family Strengthening Project. I ran a Google Search to locate other programs implementing this approach.

The Family Strengthening Project was developed in part by the Urban Institute (National Institute of Corrections, 2022). I explored their website to locate research articles published regarding the project. I found an article from 2015 that outlined the development of this project. I then searched the website for other articles from the four authors who drafted the original report. By exploring published research from each author, I found relevant studies. I completed my search of the site by using the search terms *parental incarceration, rural jails, and Family Strengthening Project*. Lastly, I searched dissertations published at Walden University in the past 2 years to see if I could use any relevant theories, frameworks, or resources in my research.

My search for existing research was exhaustive. There were resources located as references within other sources I found. While I found articles exploring the issue of parental incarceration and its effects on children, there needed to be more resources available on the needs of parents in rural communities. I limited the search to, at most, 5-year-old sources.

### **Framework**

The framework I explored in this project is the Family Strengthening Project, initially developed by the Urban Institute around 2018 with funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (National Institute of Corrections, 2022). This project aimed to develop materials based on evidence-informed models that jails and prisons could implement to reduce the adverse effects of parental incarceration and improve outcomes. This model of practice provides a framework to facilitate parent-child communication during incarceration and to remove barriers during and immediately following

incarceration (Peterson et al., 2019). According to Peterson et al. (2019), barriers could include but are not limited to employment, communication, and transportation. The Family Strengthening Project model provided examples of practices that practitioners can use in a correctional setting and not prescribed methods. This model is important because leaders can implement parts of the framework based on the community's unique needs versus the one-size-fits-all approach often found in human services programs.

According to the program website, this system begins with an intake needs assessment (National Institute of Corrections, 2022). Program staff tell interested parents about resources available for parents in the jail, including parenting classes. Participants are prioritized based on the needs assessment results, and an individualized treatment plan is developed based on the parent's needs. Examples of questions asked during the intake include the following: the number of children the parent has and their age(s), if their children are living in the same household, who the caregiver or coparent is, whether participants are interested in parenting resources, and if participants have any immediate safety concerns for their child (Peterson et al., 2019). The National Institute of Corrections (2022) and Peterson et al. (2019) recommended using nonuniformed staff for the assessment to help the parents feel comfortable and gather more detailed information. Once enrolled in the program, participants begin attending group parenting classes. According to the National Institute of Corrections, each jail should identify and select parent-focused courses or groups.

The second recommendation from the Family Strengthening Project is to work with facility staff to understand jail policies and procedures. According to Peterson et al.

(2019), examples include finding out the mail and phone call policies, the visiting rules and regulations, what items are not allowed in the facility, if the waiting room or lobby is child-friendly, if transportation is available, and if there are local resources available for visiting families such as parks or restaurants. These practices make the visit less traumatic for the child and caregiver. The National Institute of Corrections (2022) also recommended providing contact visits and offering video visits as an option between visits.

Program staff should combine contact visits with wraparound-type services that support the child, caregiver, and incarcerated parent (Peterson et al., 2019). Wraparound services allow the program staff to understand the needs of the entire family unit and to provide support to the child and caregivers. While visits with the incarcerated parent can provide connection, they can also be stressful, and a child may experience behavior fluctuations before or after a visit (Pritzl et al., 2022). Wraparound services can support the family throughout parental incarceration and strengthen ongoing parent-child contact.

Maintaining family contact during incarceration benefits the child and the incarcerated parent. Shown benefits include decreased risk of recidivism, increased success with postrelease employment, improved mental health, and more likelihood of maintaining involvement with the children upon release (Folk et al., 2019). Other strategies for maintaining contact are for facilities to subsidize phone calls for parents participating in the program and support participants' contact with systems that influence their children, like their schools, caseworkers, or caregivers (National Institute of Corrections, 2022). Additionally, Peterson et al. (2019) recommended coaching parents



before, during, and after phone calls. Jails may consider these options to help parents maintain regular communication with their children throughout incarceration.

However, as discussed previously, providing simultaneous support to the coparent or caregiver is essential. The National Institute of Corrections (2022) recommended involving the nonincarcerated parent in programming. Examples include community-based groups such as parenting classes and support groups. These groups can focus on the challenges of coparenting with an incarcerated parent, including financial, emotional, stigma, and strained relationships (Peterson et al., 2019). Another idea is to offer the parenting classes on the same day as visiting to allow both parents to attend the classes together.

The final model of this framework is to provide services for family-focused reentry. Reentry can be difficult for the entire family, and it is crucial to provide reentry services that support the whole family (Peterson et al., 2019). Examples of reentry services include communicating with the family as soon as possible regarding plans for reentry; providing resources to the family and the incarcerated parent; working as a whole family to develop a reentry plan; and offering supportive services to the incarcerated parent in preparation of reentry, such as employment readiness, financial planning, reentry support groups, and case management. These services should continue upon reentry.

While this Family Strengthening Project model provides a framework for jails and prisons, it is only an illustration. Both the National Institute of Corrections (2022) and Peterson et al. (2019) recommended ongoing assessments to understand the individual

needs of the parents and caregivers, including their cultural needs. Staff should design programs based on the current needs and staffed with people trained to be responsive to incarcerated individuals' needs.

## **Themes and Subthemes of Literature Related to the Human Services Problem**

### ***Issues Surrounding Rural Incarceration***

As I conducted my literature review, one of the reoccurring themes was a need for more available resources, specifically current research within the last 5 years. For example, limited data are available for jails versus prisons in the United States. While little research has focused on the more than 3,000 jails in the United States, Riley et al. (2018) estimated that 61% of persons in custody are awaiting sentencing, and those sentenced will serve less than a year in custody. Riley et al. found that jail rates were increasing around 2013, particularly in rural areas, with disproportionate percentages of the overall population accounting for 20% of the jail population in the United States. While the study concluded a need for further research, Riley et al. noted that some reasons for the higher rates of incarceration in rural areas could include higher rates of poverty affecting access to bail, lack of resources for diversion and treatment programs, or regional policies.

**Lack of data.** As reported above, researchers need more data on the number of incarcerated persons in rural jails, particularly confined parents. According to a 2016 survey, 47 % of state prisoners and 57% of federal prisoners reported having a minor child (Maruschak et al., 2021). These data were collected based on self-reports from

incarcerated individuals in 364 prisons throughout the United States and included information from no jails in this report.

A report published in December 2022 stated that 16% of inmates in local jails are held on behalf of federal, state, or tribal authorities, including immigration (Zeng, 2022). Jails renting beds to other authorities may be affecting data available for jails. Although this report is current, the data are still limited and primarily report the numbers of persons incarcerated and general demographic statistics, including race and gender. The report does not include data on the number of incarcerated parents. Furthermore, Zeng (2022) explained that this report was composed of data from four jail surveys over 10 years and one jail census. The jail census is one of 11 collected since 1970. While this report reflected a data collection, it also indicated a need for annual data, contributing to an overall lack of available jail data.

**Poverty Rates.** A report using data from 2013-2017 estimated that approximately 13% of the United States population lives in rural counties, with at least 50% of the population residing in rural areas (Guzman et al., 2018). Guzman et al. (2018) estimated that poverty levels are 3% higher in rural areas than in urban areas, with an average annual income of nearly \$16,000 less per year. A 2022 study of poverty in the United States found that poverty rates were higher than the national average in California (Creamer et al., 2022). According to Creamer et al. (2022), this increased poverty rate included a higher rate of Native Americans living in poverty, accounting for 2.6% of the population living in poverty while only 1.3% of the overall population.

The population in the rural county at the heart of this study is 14% Native American, according to the population estimates from the Census Bureau in July 2022 (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Additionally, the United States Census Bureau (n.d.) reported that the poverty rate of 12.8% exceeds the national average of 11.6%. These statistics are significant because studies have shown that living in poverty can bring additional challenges for a person involved in the criminal justice system (Riley et al., 2018). According to Riley et al. (2018), issues affecting persons in rural and poverty-impacted jails included longer wait times for trial and sentencing, decreased access to diversion and treatment programs, and inability to post bail. One jail found that inability to bail made a defendant 25% more likely to accept a plea deal, 43% more likely to be sentenced to jail, and, on average, serve a longer jail sentence (Golembeski et al., 2022). The inability to pay bail led to additional health risks and adverse outcomes.

**Lack of Resources.** One of the challenges facing individuals in jails is a need for awareness of release dates. As reported above, nearly 71% of individuals incarcerated in jails are awaiting sentencing, and many individuals have reported going to court only to find they will be released the same day (Langley, 2022). According to Langley (2022), access to resources in custody and upon reentry into the community can be essential to outcomes. However, inmates in rural jails may face additional challenges. Langley referenced a study they conducted in 2020 where participants in rural communities reported that a lack of access to public transportation, employment opportunities, and specialty care providers affected their transition.

Additionally, I found that inmates in rural settings also faced barriers during incarceration. One study found that parenting women in rural areas were 97% less likely to seek substance use treatment than their urban counterparts, with 53% reporting access-related issues (Ali et al., 2022). A rural location can lead to recruitment issues due to employees being unable to access more rural areas or a lack of available persons with the required education (Murphy, 2022). According to Murphy (2022), these issues, combined with lower average salaries, can contribute to decreased access to services in a rural setting.

One cause for these barriers in rural jails may be the inconsistent nature of the jail population. Approximately 36% of jail jurisdictions reported an average daily population of fewer than 50 inmates, with a median daily population of 80 (Zeng, 2022). According to Zeng (2022), the average length of stay in 2021 was 33 days and smaller jails with a population under 50 saw an average turnover rate of 99% compared to 31% in larger jails with over 2,500. Furthermore, while the average daily population in jails decreased by approximately 13% from 2008 to 2019, there was no significant rate change among the Native American population (Zeng & Minton, 2021). The high turnover rate, smaller population, and lack of available resources can influence the ability of local jurisdictions to offer programs in rural jails.

**Regional Policies.** Lastly, regional policies can affect incarceration rates in rural counties. For example, California implemented AB109 in 2011, sometimes called realignment (Criminal Justice Alignment, 2011). According to the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC, n.d.), this policy aimed to stop the “revolving

door” that was occurring for low-level offenders in the justice system by shifting the supervision responsibility for some lower-level felonies to local authorities. This policy led individuals to serve their sentence in a local jail rather than a state prison. The Budget Act of 2022 (2022) reported that local jurisdictions received funding to provide services to this population, and as of January 2023, rural populations under 200,000 received \$100,000 to provide services. While the census data provided by Zeng (2022) showed an increase in rural jail populations due to such policy changes, it remains unclear if the funding is enough to meet the increased service needs.

Another method that local jurisdictions are implementing is diversion programs. There are three types of diversion programs: prebooking, postbooking, and collaborative courts (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2022). According to the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA, 2022), prebooking diversion programs involve law enforcement or specially trained staff supporting an individual in enrollment in a substance use or mental health treatment program as an alternative to incarceration. Prebooking diversion programs involved a philosophical shift from looking at people who are suffering from mental illness as criminals to looking at them as persons in need of help (Myers et al., 2022). Postbooking diversion is similar; however, a person is screened after being charged with a crime and may receive treatment as an alternative to a custodial sanction or reduced jail time (BJA, 2022). According to Myers et al. (2022), postbooking programs were effective when working with persons who were traditionally difficult to engage and sometimes supported stabilization.

The BJA (2022) described treatment courts that allow an offender to avoid jail time, instead participating in a collaborative treatment process with similar offenders. While this model originated in 1989 as a drug treatment court, there are now models for mental health treatment courts, veterans, and DUI-related charges (BJA, 2022). A California Senate Bill proposed the expansion of diversion courts to allow pretrial diversion for caregivers of minor children (Skinner, 2019). According to Skinner (2019), while California state law has allowed for the expansion of diversion programs, funding and local policy affected their availability.

### ***Impacts of Parental Incarceration***

The impacts of parental incarceration are often complex and long-lasting. An estimated one in nine school children have an incarcerated parent or one currently involved in the criminal justice system (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2020). Exposure to a parent's criminal behavior can influence a child's behavior, sense of belonging, and ability to form relationships with trusted adults (Pytko, 2021). Further, the stress of incarceration and rules around communication in jails can strain the parent-child relationship increasing the risk of future incarceration (Jian et al., 2022). In this section, I explore the effects of parental incarceration.

**Effects on Children.** Researchers estimated that at least 5 million children under the age of 18, or approximately 7% of all children in the United States, had experienced an incarcerated parent (Murphy & Cooper, 2015). Crouch et al. (2022) found that children with incarcerated parents are more likely to experience childhood trauma, including exposure to parental substance use and mental health issues, financial

hardships, stigma, and poor educational outcomes. Other potential effects include food insecurity, risk of homelessness, family instability, increased risk of antisocial behavior, and future incarceration (Roettger & Dennison, 2018). Children who experience parental incarceration face social, emotional, and economic difficulties and can be at greater risk of poor school performance or behavior issues (McGovern, 2021).

**Impacts on Parent-Child Relationship.** Children who experience parental incarceration may be more likely to experience behavior problems and aggression (Giordano et al., 2019). Giordano et al. (2019) explored the role that social learning theory plays and found that exposure to parental criminal activity or the climate in the household could lead to increased risks for the children. According to Shlafer et al. (2020), children's view of their parent's incarceration could influence their willingness to maintain contact with their parents while in custody and damage the parent-child relationship. Further, Shlafer et al. (2020) found that issues around communication in jails, such as the distance from home for visits or an average cost of \$100 or more per month for phone calls, could affect the parent-child relationship during incarceration.

**Building Resilience.** Programs developed to support the parent-child relationship during incarceration could build resilience and improve outcomes for the children. Muentner and Charles (2020) found that about 95% of incarcerated individuals return to their community. If incarcerated parents maintained positive relationships with their family during incarceration, it improved outcomes for the individual and their children. Children who experience parental incarceration may feel a sense of loss or be unaware of the reasons for separating from their parents (Muentner & Eddy, 2023). Therefore,



Muentner and Eddy (2023) indicated the importance of providing families of incarcerated parents with educational materials and providing parents in jail with educational programming to understand their children's needs and improve outcomes.

### ***Issues Affecting Local Population***

The population at the heart of this research study are two rural counties in a Southwestern state. According to the 2021 census estimate, the population of the primary county is 18,970, with approximately 59.2% Caucasian, 24.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 14.1% American Indian (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). The same source reports that the population of the second neighboring county is estimated at 12,978, with approximately 65.2% Caucasian, 27.3% Hispanic or Latino, and 3% American Indian. While I sought to understand the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural population, it was vital to understand the cultural identity's role, particularly for the Native American population, whose cultural identity has been affected since the founding of this country and continues to be disproportionately affected by parental incarceration.

**Cultural Identity.** When an individual begins to think about cultural identity, it is easy to assume that race or ethnicity is the basis of a person's culture (Day et al., 2022). However, Day et al. (2022) encouraged the reader to consider culture in broader terms and think of it as something learned through how a person views and interacts with the world around them. Culture is a way a person relates to their environment. Stone (2023) defined culture as a framework used to describe an individual's values, beliefs, and practices.

An individual's culture develops over time based on their country of origin, family practices, religious beliefs, gender, age, socioeconomic status, education, and experiences that shape their behavior and ways of thinking (Baptiste et al., 2022). Baptiste et al. (2022) also referred to this process as cultural identity development. During incarceration, an individual's cultural identity can shift to encompass the values, beliefs, and behaviors in jail or prison. The reasons for this change can include an environment focused on punishment and rules that are unwritten or hard to follow (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022). Other risk factors can include treatment by staff and the belief systems of fellow inmates. Acculturation occurs because of external influences combined with the need for survival. According to Bloom and Bradshaw (2022), this loss of cultural identity, combined with other factors, such as cognitive behavioral therapy programs, can aggravate trauma symptoms.

**Increased Risk for Native American Population.** The effects of incarceration and loss of cultural identity can be more significant for the Indigenous incarcerated population because the risk factors may already be higher than the general population. Sometimes referred to as historical trauma, researchers have studied how the trauma experienced by one generation can influence future generations (Conching & Thayer, 2019). According to Conching and Thayer (2019), research has shown through studying DNA that changes in epigenetic markers can last at least two generations. Another study explored how perinatal stressors and an expecting mother's ACEs could affect offspring (Jones et al., 2019). Jones et al. (2019) found that infants born to mothers with high ACE

scores had modified DNA, were at increased risk of preterm birth or congenital disabilities and showed an increased stress response as infants.

Further studies have shown how trauma has affected the Native American population. One researcher estimated that the Native American population in the United States decreased by 95% following the arrival of settlers from Europe who forcibly removed Indigenous people from their land, stripped them of their language and culture, and forced their children to attend boarding schools (Grayshield et al., 2015). This trauma has led to increased health disparities among the American Indian population, including increased drug and alcohol abuse, diabetes, and poor health outcomes (Gameon & Skewes, 2021). Furthermore, Native American men and women are almost 50% more likely to experience intimate partner violence and witness household violence (Elm et al., 2021). Additionally, according to Elm et al. (2021), increased ACEs can be attributed not only to poor health outcomes but also to living in poverty, lower education rates, and increased risk of incarceration.

Resilience and healing from trauma are possible. One study found that participants longed for a sense of belonging with family and community involvement (Swanson et al., 2022). Further, Swanson et al. (2022) found that the participants of the study reported a need for families, communities, and tribes to work together to provide services that are culturally responsive and build resilience. Authors of another study discussed how Native American teens live in a world between two cultures, with changes to their diet, economy, and generational relationships disrupting their culture (Rivkin et al., 2019). However, providing intervention strategies focusing on cultural values and

traditions can inspire hope and positive emotions and build resilience. Providing culturally responsive programming in the jail may support improved outcomes.

**Remote location.** One of the most significant barriers to services in the jail at the focus of this study is the location of the jail in comparison to the populous areas of the county. The rural county, which is the largest in the state geographically, is located 3 to 4 hours from urban cities. The remote location makes it challenging to access services like treatment and education. Additionally, the more remote location of the jail makes it even more challenging, with the jail located approximately 45 miles from the most populated city in the county, where most service providers and families reside. Compounding this barrier is limited public transportation that provides limited daily services.

Research suggests that parent-child visitation during parental incarceration is a protective factor for the parents and the children (Rubenstein et al., 2021). However, the need to travel long distances, lack of transportation, taking time off work, and other factors make visitation challenging. Due to these barriers, researchers found that only one in five prisoners received a visit weekly, with less than 40% reporting monthly visits (Young et al., 2019). Young et al. (2019) reiterated that inmates are often housed far from home, and the long distance and expense of travel make visits challenging. While the visitation challenge may not be unique to this county, the distance to the jail creates a barrier for families.

### ***Parenting Programs in Jails and Prisons***

There are currently multiple parenting programs available in jails and prisons throughout the United States to combat the effects of parental incarceration. In this

section, I reviewed the existing programs and provided a background on the stated purpose of the programs and their outcomes. While I located several of these programs on a list indicating that the classes are offered in jails or prisons, I could not find peer-reviewed sources indicating outcomes for each program.

**Inside Out Dad.** The National Fatherhood Initiative, a non-profit, developed the Inside Out Dad curriculum in 2005 (National Fatherhood Initiative, n.d.). According to the National Fatherhood Initiative website (n.d.), this program aims to “connect inmate fathers to their families, helping to improve behavior while still incarcerated and to break the cycle of recidivism by developing pro-fathering attitudes, knowledge, and skills, along with strategies to prepare fathers for release” (para. 2). The program consists of 12 core sessions plus 26 optional sessions, including six sessions focused on reentry (Kennedy Spain, 2009). An initial evaluation of the program completed by Kennedy Spain (2009) found that participation in the program increased communication between the incarcerated parent and child, increased knowledge of parenting, and improved attitudes.

**Parenting Inside Out.** An evidence-based program developed by a non-profit, Parenting Inside Out, uses a cognitive-behavioral approach to teach parenting skills. According to Parenting Inside Out (n.d.), this curriculum has four versions, including one for jails. The jail curriculum consists of 12 modules, including parenting skills, roles, developing routines, and preparing to return home. According to Parenting Inside Out (n.d.), SAMHSA has reviewed the curriculum and it appears on the national registry for evidence-based programs. One study found that parents who participated in this program

reported a 90% satisfaction rate and were less likely to engage in substance use or criminal behavior 6 months after their release from prison (Eddy et al., 2022). While Eddy et al. (2022) reported limitations, including parent participation, they determined there was value in evidence-based programs specially designed for incarcerated parents and families.

**Triple P Positive Parenting Program.** The goal of Triple P was to provide parenting and family support to prevent and treat emotional and behavioral concerns in children (Triple P International, n.d.). According to Triple P International (n.d.), Triple P is an evidence-based program that offers flexibility in how it is delivered, the intensity, and the target age of the children. However, it has not been developed specifically for parents in a carceral setting. Group Triple P is delivered over eight sessions that teach parents about child development, managing misbehavior, and planning for high-risk situations (Nogueira et al., 2021). Nogueira et al. (2021) concluded that Triple P helped in working with low-income families. Nogueira et al. found that participants reported decreased child behavior problems, increased confidence in their parenting, and an increased ability to regulate their own emotions as well as the emotions of their child.

**GO KIDS.** Unlike other parenting programs, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice developed GO KIDS to provide services to children with a parent involved in the criminal justice system. Their research found that children of incarcerated parents are six to eight times more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system, with over half of the juveniles in a detention center reporting having a parent who was incarcerated (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, n.d.). According to the Texas Department of

Criminal Justice (n.d.), this program aims to provide services and resources to children of offenders and their families, including family-inclusive programming and programs designed to improve relationships during incarceration. I could not find further information on this program or its outcomes.

**New Beginnings Program.** The New Beginnings Program was designed to minimize the effects of divorce on children by improving the quality of parenting and reducing parental conflict (Sandler et al., 2020). Sandler et al. (2020) conducted a study on the effectiveness of the New Beginnings Program and found that, while the participating parents noted an improvement in parenting skills and a reduction of conflict, the researchers found disparities in the results based on ethnicity. The results were less significant and lasting for Hispanic families than their non-Hispanic classmates (Sandler et al., 2020). Sandler et al. determined that this could be related to cultural differences and needed further research to understand this disparity. However, according to Family Transitions (n.d.), the New Beginnings Program has been the focus of multiple research trials over the last 25 years. The 10-session program had lasting results up to 15 years after completion. I could not find any research on using this program in jails; however, I did locate one article discussing it as an option in family diversion programs.

**Active Parenting.** According to the program website, Active Parenting brings a unique approach to parenting education by hosting online classes where parents can come together and learn about various parenting topics, including communication and why children misbehave (Active Parenting, n.d.). While three separate groups are offered depending on the ages of the participants' children, each group is held over six sessions

and covers five essential qualities for parenting (Active Parenting, n.d.). These qualities are respect, responsibility, courage, cooperation, and self-esteem (Popkin, 2014).

According to Popkin (2014), this is an evidence-based program that is effective for most families because, at their core, families are “more alike than different” (p. 8).

**24/7 Dad:** This program was designed by the National Fatherhood Initiative to train fathers and remind them of the importance of being committed to their children 24 hours per day (Lewin-Bizan, 2015). According to Lewin-Bizan (2015), the lessons are delivered 2 hours per week over 12 weeks for 24 hours total. Topics include parenting skills, self-care as a parent, fatherhood skills, self-awareness, and relationship skills (Lewin-Bizan, 2015). The researchers of another study found that participants in the 24/7 Dad program expressed an overall increase in skills in the areas taught through the curriculum (Wilson et al., 2019). However, Wilson et al. (2019) also indicated a need for more mental health services, including stress reduction and coping skills. The participants also reported a high unemployment rate and a need for parenting programs that address all social determinants of health and not just fatherhood skills.

**Fatherhood is Sacred, Motherhood is Sacred:** This program was developed by the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association to assist Native American fathers, mothers, and families in seeing their full potential. This program, delivered over 12 weeks, aims to give participants a deeper understanding of their role as a parent (NAFFA, n.d.). According to the NAFFA website (n.d.), fundamental concepts of this curriculum include defining the purpose of life, understanding the importance of heritage, the role of a parent, understanding the creator, the role of prayer in the Native American



culture, understanding the freedom of choice, and the consequences of decisions. A local tribal organization currently teaches this curriculum at the local jail, but participation is limited to Native American parents or parents of an Indigenous child. I also could not locate any research conducted on the outcomes of this program, and it does not appear to be evidence-based. One strength of this program is that it does include a cultural component for American Indian participants.

**One Family Program:** San Francisco jail developed the One Family program using the Strengthening Families framework. Services provided by the clinical staff include contact visits for parents, individual therapy, parenting classes, parent-teacher conferences, and support with CPS cases (San Francisco Reentry, n.d.). This program is offered to parents in San Francisco jail, and those who recently reentered the community through a non-profit organization called Community West Works. According to San Francisco Reentry (n.d.), this program aims to help parents and children feel connected by supporting visits or helping a family say goodbye and manage the transition as the parent begins their sentence. While there were no reports regarding outcomes, according to the San Francisco Reentry website (n.d.), the goal of the Community West Works non-profit is to provide culturally responsive and trauma-informed programs.

### **Summary**

According to McGovern (2021), parental incarceration affects an estimated 1.7 million parents and children annually. The stress and trauma related to parental incarceration, including the effect of the child's bond with the parent and the parent's ability to nurture, increased the risk of incarceration for future generations (Giordano et

al., 2019). There are a lack of data available on the influences of parental incarceration, particularly for parents in rural jails.

In this section, I thoroughly reviewed the literature related to this topic. I outlined rural incarceration's issues, including a lack of data, higher poverty rates, a lack of resources to provide resources, and how regional policies have affected the number of persons incarcerated in jails. Next, I reviewed the effects of parental incarceration, including the effects on children and the parent-child relationship. The local issues highlighted include the disproportionate number of Native American persons in the local jails and the increased risks for the Indigenous population, including cultural identity's importance. I also outlined how the remote location of the jails can affect incarcerated parents, including a lack of transportation and availability of services. Lastly, I reviewed existing parenting programs serving parents in jails and incarcerated persons returning to the community. Overall, I found a lack of available data on the influences of these programs on incarcerated parents. One reoccurring theme of the literature review was a lack of evidence supporting the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails.

In the next section, I outline the methodology used in this research study, including how I used a cross-case analysis approach to gather information. Using individual interviews, including key stakeholders, I gathered data to increase understanding of the needs of incarcerated parents and what programming providers currently offer in the local jail. Using the framework from strengthening families as a guide, I investigated how a whole-family approach to parenting can serve the needs of

incarcerated parents and families in a rural community. Lastly, this section outlined the research design, my role as the researcher, and any ethical considerations.

## Section 2: The Project

Parental incarceration affects millions of children and families annually in the United States, with about half of the inmates in state and federal prisons reporting having a minor child (Maruschak et al., 2021). Each year in the United States, approximately 1.7 million parents and children experience separation due to incarceration (McGovern, 2021). My literature review showed a lack of available research on the needs of incarcerated parents, particularly those in rural jails. In this section, I outline the research design of this study, including the methodology, the participants, the existing data, and any ethical considerations.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purposes of this cross-case study were to (a) explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural Western region and (b) to explore how local human service providers can build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community. The goal of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural western region?
2. How can local human service providers build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community?

Researchers use cross-case analysis to gather information from multiple sources, including individual case studies, and compare the data to enhance the researcher's understanding of the problem and look for themes and potential solutions (Khan &

VanWynsberghe, 2008). According to Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008), a researcher can compare existing data and individual case studies to examine the problem further. The results from this study informed a white paper to educate human service professionals on parenting programs that support incarcerated parents and inform recommendations for a program that leadership can implement to address the needs of incarcerated parents in rural communities.

### **Project Design**

Originally, in the project design, I had hoped to conduct an action research study with focus groups of participants. However, it was not possible to recruit participants due to geographic and COVID-related restrictions. In the end, I used a cross-case analysis approach, including individual interviews as Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008) described.

I gathered information through individual interviews using the objective, reflective, interpretational, decisional (ORID) method to develop the questions (see Stanfield, 2005). The ORID method is a way of communicating that allows participants to think about the topic more in-depth while thinking logically (Stanfield, 2005). Ideally the ORID method can be used in groups. In this situation, participants could not be in a group setting. Leading individual interviews using a modified approach to the focus group protocol designed by Stewart et al. (2007) allowed those who bring different perspectives to the issue of parental incarceration to speak openly. Analyzing the information from the individual interviews helped to understand the gap in local services for incarcerated parents and increased understanding of their needs. During the individual

interviews, I asked a series of questions to gather information on the needs of the incarcerated parents and the service providers. These questions explored how rural agencies can support the cultural needs of program participants and provide training to increase understanding for treatment staff.

The next step, thinking, involves analyzing what is happening and theorizing why things are the way they are (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021, p. 8). Similarly, a cross-case analysis compares the information gathered through the interviews and existing literature to look for themes (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Analyzing the information from the interviews and the literature review expanded local knowledge of the problem. According to Stringer and Ortiz Aragon (2021), the role of the researcher is not to bring a consensus but to reveal the truth of what is happening based on the various perspectives that participants bring. Once my interviews were complete, I looked for recurring themes from the interviews and literature review. Examples included analyzing what programs and services participants listed as a priority based on the strengthening families framework. However, I also considered whether there were reoccurring barriers or challenges I must address in my white paper.

I did not take action as a part of this study but consolidated my research in a white paper that can be presented to local human service leaders. The goal of the white paper was to illuminate the service gap and recommend steps leaders can take and programs that human services staff can offer locally to meet the needs of incarcerated parents. A copy of the white paper is in Appendix A.

## **Methods**

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, it was essential to consider if any preconceived ideas influenced my research. I was a local leader in the human services field and have worked with many program providers in the jails. My role in this research was to remain neutral and objective. I did not allow my own experiences or knowledge to influence the research. However, I analyzed the data based on the information collected through this study, including my experience as a service provider in the jail.

I also considered ethical concerns when conducting my research. Although I worked with several program staff and treatment providers, I did not include anyone who directly reported to me or was a part of my staff. While I had worked with some of the study participants during my tenure as a human services provider, I did not have a role of authority over them. I cannot affect their future based on their participation in the study.

I also acknowledged that by conducting my research in a small rural community, I will know several participants, and they will know one another. However, it is vital to include participants from the communities at the focus of the research to understand the need. The research process brings a person's work, community, and private lives together for a conversation, and as the researcher, I must handle this with care (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). Therefore, I did not allow my prior relationships with participants to influence me, and I took steps to ensure confidentiality.

## **Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy**

I began this study by recruiting stakeholders for individual interviews and gathering archival program information. The goal of interviews with stakeholders is to gather information from an identified group of individuals willing to provide the information and representative of the population you are interested in learning from (Stewart et al., 2007). From the beginning of the research process, it is important to consider from all angles who will benefit from the research and provide all stakeholders an equal opportunity to participate (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). To recruit participants, I created a flyer asking for community members affected by parental incarceration, as an incarcerated parent or family member, or have experience working with this population to contact me if they are interested in participating in a study (Appendix B). I recruited local leaders and contacted the jails to see if staff members could participate.

The flyer provided a brief overview of the study as an exploration of the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural jail. I indicated in the description that I was a Walden University student, and if they would like more information or are interested in participating, contact me. I provided my contact information, including my phone number and email address. To ensure that all members of key stakeholder groups had equal access to the advertisement, I placed the flyer in locations where participants from each stakeholder group would see it. I posted the flyer in the local jail and at the human services and probation offices with permission. I also distributed it to community partners



who provide services to incarcerated parents in both the county at the focus of this study and a geographically similar neighboring county.

As people responded to my recruitment flyer, I identified people who qualified to participate. The qualified persons fit into only one of the categories previously identified as key stakeholders. These included persons who supported incarcerated parents (for example, human services providers, treatment providers, probation, and custodial staff). Because the interviews occurred individually, I avoided potential conflicts of interest.

### **Description of Participants**

Below, I outline an example of participants from the four categories I previously identified as key stakeholders.

#### ***Category 1***

This category comprised treatment providers and program personnel working with the incarcerated population. As I screened potential participants, I sought people with at least a year of experience in the field because I wanted to ensure they had the experience to share as part of this study. Ideal candidates provided services in the local jails and the communities.

**Human Services Providers.** This included government staff from employment and eligibility who provided employment readiness classes, substance use treatment providers, mental health, staff from the First 5 program, staff with child protective services, or any other staff from human services programs who have worked with incarcerated parents and their families.

**Community Partners.** Partners included staff from agencies who provided services to the subject population of incarcerated parents. Examples were a non-profit agency that helped with housing, local tribal organizations that provided employment, education, and treatment services, legal self-help, and school staff.

**Leaders.** It was desirable to include leaders, as they are decision makers. I wanted to understand their knowledge of what services providers offered in jail and the needs of incarcerated parents. Examples of leaders included administrators in human services programs, the sheriff, the district attorney, the county board of supervisors, the chief of probation, and county administrators. I also wanted to include leaders in the local tribal communities.

### ***Category 2***

This category contained persons affected by parental incarceration. As I screened potential participants, they had to be at least 18. I aimed to include participants from multiple families to bring a diverse perspective.

**Children of Incarcerated Parents.** Adults who experienced parental incarceration as a child. Although I did not exclude persons whose parents were incarcerated in another jail or prison, my primary focus was children whose parents were incarcerated at the local rural jails.

**Caregivers.** Parents or caregivers of a child with an incarcerated parent. Examples included grandparents, friends, and other relatives who provided care during parental incarceration. Ideally, this person had experienced coparenting while the parent was incarcerated and was able to provide feedback on what resources could best support

them as the caregiver, the child, and the incarcerated individual. I excluded anyone whose negative relationship with the incarcerated parent influenced their ability to participate in the study.

### ***Category 3***

This category consisted of formerly incarcerated parents. Like Category 2, I was willing to include persons once incarcerated in prison or another facility, but the ideal participant was incarcerated in the local jail for at least 3 months. To allow time for reflection regarding what services and support might have been most beneficial during incarceration, I sought parents who had been in the community for at least 6 months postrelease.

### ***Category 4:***

This category focused on custodial staff and law enforcement. In my experience working in the jail, they brought a different perspective to treatment, as safety is always a priority and may affect how providers deliver services.

**Custodial Staff.** This included any staff working for the sheriff's department in the jail. Custodial staff are primarily custodial officers and corporals. Nevertheless, I invited any law enforcement staff with at least 1 year experience working in a jail. If they worked for at least a year in the local jail, I was open to former custodial staff such as an officer promoted to patrol. Because this study focused on the needs in the local jail, including the training needs of the custodial staff, I did not include custodial staff from another facility.

**Probation.** Probation staff work with incarcerated parents during incarceration and upon reentry into the community. I invited probation staff who wanted to share their experience working with incarcerated parents and their observed needs. Like with the custodial staff, ideal participants had at least a year working in the local communities.

### **Participant Selection**

I interviewed participants to screen them for meeting the criteria of having experience related to the topic. As recommended by Stewart et al. (2007), I asked a few background questions on their experiences either as a previously incarcerated parent, an adult child of a previously incarcerated parent, or an employee of a jail or program serving incarcerated parents, to confirm that they were fit for the study. I also determined if their experience was relevant to the local geographical area of focus and that they had the qualified minimum experience outlined above to participate. I needed to be aware of this study's sensitive nature and did not want to trigger a trauma response in participants. Gauging an individual's readiness to participate in this discussion and share their experiences was a part of the screening process.

During the screening call, I provided the participant with more information about the nature of the study, how I would gather the information during the individual interview, and what the participation process would look like (see Stewart et al., 2007). By the end of the screening call, I determined if the interested party was qualified, and if so, I emailed the participant a consent form to read and return to me, saying, "I consent to be in the study." Upon receipt of the consent from the participants, I notified them of a date and time for the individual interview.

## **Instrumentation**

The ORID method is established by the researcher asking participants objective questions to discover what they already know about the topic. Questions should be about facts and reality (Stanfield, 2005). Next, ask a reflective question to gauge participants' feelings about the subject. According to Stanfield (2005), whenever people encounter an external reality, like data, they have an internal response. By presenting participants with existing facts or data regarding programs offered to incarcerated parents, I learned through their responses to the data.

Interpretive questions begin to dive deeper into the subject. I asked questions to determine what the participants would like to see change and began identifying what was important to them. The interpretive questions draw out what is significant to participants, what they value, or what will have the most significant impact (Stanfield, 2005). Lastly, the decisional questions help to conclude what future actions leadership should take and try to get a consensus on the first action steps. Stanfield (2005) said that decisional questions allow the conversation to finish as participants decide on the future.

Using the ORID method outlined above, I developed broad questions I asked everyone. The questions varied slightly based on the information shared but generally followed this method of gathering information. I included prompts as follow-up questions to ensure participants considered their responses through the lens of the family strengthening framework. I collected data from each interview. Additionally, I took detailed notes during each of the interviews, which the participants verified. The notes

allowed me to review the information and look for reoccurring themes regarding service needs and barriers.

I designed the questions below using the ORID method (see Stanfield, 2005). Beginning with the objective questions, I asked the participants about what they already knew, including exploring what data was available (see Stanfield, 2005). In my interviews, I explored what programs and data were currently available and tried to gauge if the incarcerated parents and their families were aware of the currently available services. It was challenging since no formerly incarcerated parents or families elected to participate in the study. However, I still attempted to gather some of this information through the interviews.

According to Stanfield (2005), the process uses reflective questions next to explore how participants feel about the information they know, such as any concerns or anything that excites them. I then asked interpretive questions (see Stanfield, 2005) such as “What does the information provided mean, or how does the individual interpret the data?” During these questions, I explored how the participants felt about the strengthening families framework and interpreted the risks or benefits of using a similar framework in the local jails. Lastly, a researcher can use decisional questions to gather information on the next steps or priorities (Stanfield, 2005). Per Stanfield, the focus groups conclude by providing a summary of the information discussed and providing participants with an opportunity to share any final thoughts. I incorporated this same strategy into my interviews. Appendix C contains a copy of the modified focus group script used for the interviews.

**Data Collection**

I conducted five individual interviews by phone. I recorded the names of the participants and their contact email in an electronic file, which is also password protected. Detailed notes were recorded during the interviews in Microsoft Word in a password-protected document and emailed to the participants following the interview for confirmation. I typed the notes from my interviews directly on my computer, and I saved them in a folder that is also password-protected.

**Considerations**

From the beginning, if I recruited too few participants, my plan was to have individual sessions with the participants rather than focus groups. While ideally, I would have had enough participants for focus groups, I needed to consider alternative options to gather the data, which led me to the cross-case analysis approach. Although most of the participants were from the same category, meaning there were enough participants for one focus group, additional ethical considerations led me to use individual interviews to avoid conflict of interest by placing a participant in a focus group.

Once each interview was complete, I debriefed each participant briefly to check in and ensure they were emotionally well and that participating in this study did not trigger any unintended negative consequences. I provided information on how to receive mental health services if needed on the consent form and during the interview. I thanked each participant for taking the time to provide feedback for this study and their role in the interview. Additionally, each participant received a preliminary summary of the findings and recommendations of the research.

## **Existing Data**

I reviewed the data available regarding existing parenting programs that are being used in jails and with previously incarcerated parents. I summarized these data in section one under Parenting Programs in Jails and Prisons. In my search, I also included the two parenting programs currently offered in the local jail. To gather information, I found a list of parenting programs currently offered in jails. I searched for information regarding each program using Google and found the original program websites. Using the program information page for each, I gathered what information was available regarding each program. I then searched the Walden Library for data regarding each program. I limited the results to articles published within the last 5 years.

I provided an overview of how each program is delivered. I also included a summary of the goal of each parenting program I analyzed. I attempted to locate information regarding how the existing programs evaluate outcomes. Unfortunately, I could not locate data for several programs and found that many were not specifically written for incarcerated parents.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Once I collected oral data in the interviews, I transcribed the notes from each interview in a password-protected Word document, which I sent to the participants for member-checking. I began to analyze the data following the recommendation of Stewart et al. (2007). I organized the data under the categories of needs from the Strengthening Families Framework and looked for common themes to create a list of codes based on the research questions. I manually coded the data myself without software using the QDA



strategy for coding provided by Saldaña (2014). For example, “What are the reoccurring themes around employment, treatment, or other needs?” Or, “What barriers did the participants identify?”

Khan & VanWynsberghe (2008) suggested several ways to analyze data and present it for cross-case analysis, including using pre-selected variables or using a case comparison approach that looks for groups of data. I presented the data analysis in two ways in the next section. I coded the data by hand, looking for themes as suggested by Saldaña (2014). Using the coding for patterns method, I looked for repetitive recommendations or barriers that appeared more than twice in my interviews (Saldaña, 2014). I categorized the data into four reoccurring themes, including sub-categories of each theme.

Next, I included as a second method the anecdotal narrative data as quotes in the form of evidence that the participants presented. This information was a collected narrative of themes that I noted through an analysis of the data. I compared it to themes that I found in the literature. Additionally, cross-case analysis can use existing literature to suggest ideas that have worked in other areas to address similar problems. Therefore, I used existing literature to recommend potential solutions for common barriers reported. In my white paper, I also included unattributed direct quotes from participants because sharing their experiences in their own words could be a powerful way to paint a picture of the needs of incarcerated parents.

### **Trustworthiness of Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data can be open to interpretation, and as a researcher, I must take steps to demonstrate rigor and show the trustworthiness of the data I have collected. Lincoln and Guba proposed four measures to ensure reliability in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amin et al., 2020). I hosted multiple individual interviews to gather rich data to demonstrate credibility in this study. Including participants from diverse backgrounds allowed me to confirm the themes and reported parenting needs of incarcerated parents. I kept a detailed journal with notes and tracked my steps throughout the research process.

I demonstrated transferability through my white paper. Also referred to as applicability, transferability is qualitative research's rich and detailed product (Amin et al., 2020). According to Amin et al. (2020), examining the process by which the researcher carried out the study reflects the dependability of the data. By keeping a detailed journal of each of the steps I took throughout the research process, I demonstrated the dependability of the data collected. Lastly, I provided a summary of the results at a sixth-grade level to the participants before publishing the results. This summary allowed participants to correct any errors and to confirm the data.

Additionally, I reflected rigor and trustworthiness in my data by avoiding confirmation bias. Researchers may be prone to bias, even if it is subconscious (McSweeney, 2021). Therefore, I took steps to bring any potential unconscious bias into my consciousness by examining personal experiences that could influence my research. I took steps to avoid bias by asking open-ended questions in my interviews and allowing

the participants to lead the conversation. I did not ask questions that confirmed what I believed to be the needs of incarcerated parents but instead allowed the participants to lead the conversation. When analyzing the data, I did not have a list of themes in advance but allowed the data to lead me. Lastly, I avoided confirmation bias by allowing participants to review the study's results. Each of these steps reflect the rigor and trustworthiness of my qualitative research.

### **Ethical Considerations for Data Collection**

To ensure that my research is ethical, I took steps to protect my participants. I began by obtaining informed consent. I reviewed the consent form when I screened each participant during the selection process. Next, I emailed the form to participants, and they provided consent before participating in an individual interview. When giving an introduction at the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the consent form and confirmed the participants did not have questions before I began.

I took steps to consider ethics during the recruitment of participants. All participants were recruited using the same flyer and were not asked personally to participate. While I provided the recruitment flyer to specific individuals, it was not to recruit them as participants but based on their ability to share the flyer with people who may be good candidates for the study. I also did not include any participants I had authority over as a supervisor. While I knew some participants due to the small community size, I ensured that there were no conflicts of interest.

Since the topic of this study is parental incarceration and the persons involved may have lived experience, I ensured that participation in the study brought as little

emotional harm as possible. I outlined the social problem that prompted this study and the family strengthening framework during the introduction. As I provided an overview and reviewed the consent, I acknowledged that this may be a difficult conversation. At any time, if someone needed a break or to leave the conversation, I asked them to let me know.

During the consent process, I informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time, even after the data were collected. If a participant withdrew, I did not use the information they shared as a part of the study. However, I informed participants in the consent that they would no longer be able to withdraw once the study was published. Lastly, I was cognizant if a participant appeared overwhelmed by a topic, and I called for a break or checked on them. As a part of my debriefing with each participant, I checked in to see how they were doing and offered a referral to a mental health provider if needed.

During my welcome, as we reviewed the consent form, I informed the participants that I was conducting this interview as part of a research study. I recorded notes from each session for research purposes only to review the shared information and analyze it. I only shared the notes with my research supervisor. Since each interview was individual and not a focus group, I completed the interviews by phone, not by TEAMS as initially planned, and participated in the calls from a private location to ensure privacy.

It is important to note that while I took steps to ensure confidentiality, participants were not anonymous. I know their identity and have their personal information for the consent forms. However, that information was kept private and only shared with my

research supervisor as needed. I did not include names in the published results of the study. To ensure that I preserved confidentiality, I assigned each participant an alphabetical code before participating in the sessions. Any time I refer to a participant in this study, it uses the assigned code.

I stored all data electronically, and any paper records, including my handwritten notes from the interviews, were scanned, and shredded. Copies of consent emails were stored electronically. Additionally, I kept an electronic copy of the interview notes. All data collected related to the interviews are held on a locked computer that only I have the password. I added additional security through a password-protected folder. My research chair was the only person who had access to any of these data. I backed up the files on a removable drive, locked in a secure box. I will store this information for 5 years per the IRB requirements. This study complies with all Walden University Institutional Review Board requirements, with the approval number 05-24-23-1155050.

Lastly, I provided the study results to the participants in a summary written at a Grade 6 level. It was vital to keep the participants updated if they wanted to know the status of this research. Researchers recommended that participants are notified as a part of the informed consent of their rights to receive the study results (Hintz & Dean, 2020). I provided a brief outline of what that means, and participants selected if they wanted to receive the results. Sharing an initial draft also allows participants to withdraw or for the researcher to redact any information they do not want published in the final study (Hintz & Dean, 2020). According to Hintz and Dean (2020), the benefit of sharing the results with the participants is that it can reinforce the importance of their participation in the

study and reduce the risk of harm. Additionally, I offered to provide participants with a copy of my white paper.

### **Summary**

In this section, I outlined the methodology used in this research study, including how I used an action research approach to gather information. Using individual interviews, including key stakeholders, I gathered data to increase understanding of the needs of incarcerated parents. Using the framework from strengthening families as a guide, I investigated how a whole-family approach to parenting can serve the needs of incarcerated parents and families in a rural community. Lastly, this section outlined the research design, my role as the researcher, and any ethical considerations.

The following section is an overview of my study. I provide details on the number of participants from each group of stakeholders, including any barriers that occurred or changes to my plan. I provide the data and results of my study, including tables and charts based on the answers to the research questions. The section will end with a summary of my recommendations for leaders.

### Section 3: Results of the Study

The purposes of this qualitative case study were to (a) explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural Western region and (b) to explore how local human service providers can build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community. In this section I discuss the methodology used to collect data and summarizes the participants. Additionally, I describe the data analysis techniques, present the results, and outline the barriers and limitations of the study.

#### **Research Question(s)**

The goal of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural western region?
2. How can local human service providers build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community?

#### **Methodology**

I conducted five 60-minute, individual interviews to gather data following the ORID method (see Stanfield, 2005). The data were analyzed using a cross-case analysis approach to mine data from the interviews and compare them with existing data to better understand the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural jail (see Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Following the recruitment plan, I recruited participants using a flyer. Later in this section, I further outline barriers to recruitment and changes to the original recruitment plan. Participant recruitment occurred over 2 months. I conducted the interviews in 10

days by telephone. Participants were encouraged to participate from a quiet and private location. The interviewer joined from a private office location to ensure privacy.

### **Summary of Participants**

The goal of this study was to gain insight from participants from four categories: persons who have experience working with incarcerated parents, such as human services professionals; formerly incarcerated parents; families of incarcerated parents, including adult children or caregivers of children of incarcerated parents; and law enforcement, custodial staff, and probation. I did not recruit participants from all four categories, as not everyone who expressed interest met the minimum qualifications outlined on the flyer and consent form. The final sample comprised five participants, including three human services professionals with almost 70 years of combined experience working with incarcerated parents in the jail, providing parenting classes and support to incarcerated parents, children, and families of incarcerated parents, and supporting the parents and families upon their return to the community. Additionally, I interviewed two probation officers with over 30 years of experience working with incarcerated parents, primarily in the community, following a period of incarceration.

### **Data Analysis**

As I collected data in the interviews, I transcribed the notes from each interview in a password-protected Word document. I began to analyze the data following the recommendation of Stewart et al. (2007). I read through each interview transcript several times and sent the participants a copy of the notes to confirm accuracy. I began looking for themes and coded the data using the categories of needs from the strengthening



families framework. I manually coded the data myself without software using the QDA strategy for coding provided by Saldaña (2014). Then, I grouped common themes into categories based on recurring topics, including parenting programs, communication, data, and transportation.

According to Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008), a researcher can use cross-case analysis to learn from personal experiences by comparing similarities and differences and making linkages between the information shared. Using a cross-case analysis approach, I compared the data from the interviews to existing data from my literature review and the framework provided by the Family Strengthening Project, which has at its central premise, “Sustaining and repairing connections with family and those identified as sources of support” (National Institute of Corrections, 2022, para. 3). In the table below, I have outlined the areas of implementation from the Family Strengthening Project that the National Institute of Corrections (2022) recommended for jails to consider implementing to support sustainable connections with family and other sources of support. Participants reviewed the overview of the project before participating in the individual interviews.

**Table 1***Overview of the Family Strengthening Project*

Areas of implementation from the Family Strengthening Project	Examples
Training and core competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build staff buy-in on the importance of family-centered practices.</li> <li>• Improve understanding of family needs and behaviors.</li> <li>• Develop specific skills among staff.</li> <li>• Implement core competencies into training.</li> </ul>
Intake and assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell parents about resources and gather information about immediate parental needs at intake.</li> <li>• Administer ongoing assessments.</li> <li>• Prioritize parents based on need.</li> <li>• Use nonuniformed staff to administer assessments.</li> </ul>
Family notification and information provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notify families about parents' status.</li> <li>• Create or update the facility website.</li> <li>• Provide information at the facility.</li> </ul>
Classes and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify parent-focused classes and groups.</li> <li>• Select, design, and implement classes.</li> </ul>
Visitor lobbies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a welcoming environment.</li> <li>• Make visitor lobbies child and family friendly.</li> </ul>
Visitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review visiting guidelines and procedures.</li> <li>• Make physical changes to visiting space.</li> <li>• Offer contact visits.</li> <li>• Make noncontact visits more family friendly.</li> <li>• Offer video visits to supplement contact and noncontact visits.</li> </ul>
Parent-child communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer parents free or subsidized phone calls with their children.</li> <li>• Provide parents with opportunities to communicate with individuals and systems that affect their children.</li> <li>• Revise policies for mailing letters and packages.</li> <li>• Consider electronic communication.</li> </ul>
Caregiver support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve caregivers in programming in facilities.</li> <li>• Provide free or low-cost transportation to and from the facility.</li> <li>• Partner with a community-based provider to offer childcare.</li> <li>• Connect caregivers to support groups.</li> <li>• Offer separate programming for caregivers.</li> </ul>
Family focused reentry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include caregivers and children in the reentry planning and programming.</li> <li>• Provide reentry information to visiting families.</li> </ul>

Adapted from “The Family Strengthening Project Overview” by The National Institute of Corrections, 2022

(<https://info.nicic.gov/fsp/#:~:text=The%20goal%20of%20the%20Family%20Strengthening%20Project%20is,online%20children%20and%20improve%20reentry%20outcomes%20for%20parents> ).

With this framework in mind, individuals were asked during the interviews to reflect on the needs of incarcerated parents in the local jail. To help me code the data from the interviews, I produced a table that reflected what the individuals suggested are the needs that are the greatest priority to support sustaining and repairing connections with family. I coded the data by hand, comparing them to the areas of implementation from the family strengthening framework. Table 2 shows how I coded the data to identify themes. I also added common barriers reported. If participants made no comments regarding a specific area from the framework, I coded the area as N/A or not applicable.

**Table 2**

*Coded Data*

Areas of implementation	Occurrence	Quotes regarding assessed need
Training and core competence	I	All of our staff has received training, but it is not specific to the incarcerated population.
Intake and assessment (data)	III	I would like to visit other jails and see what they are doing. We could learn from them what is working for collecting data.  There is a lack of transparency around what data is being collected. Local agencies could work together and share data to improve understanding of the needs.
Family notification and information provision	0	N/A
Classes and groups	III	I think we can find innovative ways to expand the classes and groups we offer in the jail. The pandemic helped us to find ways we could expand our services to continue offering classes to parents in the jail, and i think we could build off of that further, including using technology.
Visitor lobbies	0	N/a
Visitation	III	Contact visits can help parents and children with the trauma of incarceration. It can help the children to see that their parents are okay, and it can help the parents with motivation to take the steps they need to be there for their children.

Areas of implementation	Occurrence	Quotes regarding assessed need
		There is a limited space for the number of visits, so you may get to the jail to visit and find out that the space is full for the day.
Parent-child communication	III	When working with the parents in the jail, they would frequently bring up the burden of finances and try to find a way to help their family while in jail. The expense of phone calls was brought up frequently as the parents knew how much their families at home were struggling without their income during incarceration.
Caregiver support	0	N/a
Family focused reentry	0	N/a
Other: transportation	II	The cost of gas can make it difficult for family to visit the jail, and public transportation does not consistently run on the same days as visitation.
Other: employment (finances)	II	I had parents in my parenting classes concerned about income and how their family was going to struggle without them working.
Other: housing	II	There is a lack of available affordable housing.
Other: staffing	III	The rural geographic location exacerbates already existing staffing challenges. We do not have a feeder college to recruit staff from.
Other: space	III	We have seen increased challenge with shuffling staff and existing services due to the limited space in the jail the more services we try to put in the jail. How to move people through the facility and provide the custodial oversight required.

### **Limitations**

As previously discussed, the original project design was to conduct an action research study with focus groups of participants. However, I could not recruit sufficient participants due to geographic and COVID-related restrictions. Ultimately, I used Khan and VanWynsberghe's (2008) cross-case analysis approach, which included individual case studies or interviews. Additionally, my original goal was to recruit participants from four different categories of stakeholders as outlined in the Description of Participants included in Section 2. Unfortunately, I only recruited human service providers and law

enforcement participants. Therefore, their input and the data collected are an assessment of incarcerated parents' needs based on their experience working with this population.

### **Presentation of the Results**

The purposes of this qualitative case study were to (a) explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural Western region and (b) to explore how local human service providers can build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community. I emphasized these purposes in developing the focus group questions and used them as a guide when coding the data. Due to a lack of participation by previously incarcerated parents and their families, I was unable to fully answer the first question regarding the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural Western region.

However, through the interviews, I was able to gather data on the assessed needs based on the understanding of professionals experienced working with incarcerated parents and families. I discovered four primary themes during the data collection, each with subthemes, including identified barriers. I outline each identified theme below and describe how each theme correlated to these research questions.

### **Themes**

After reviewing the notes from the interviews and comparing them to the categories within the Family Strengthening Project, I coded the responses by hand to see what themes emerged. The participants indicated that some of the categories within the framework were related, so I combined them, and four themes emerged. Each theme contained subthemes, including barriers, further outlined in this section. The first theme

involved the parenting classes presently offered in the jail. All participants identified a need for more programs beyond what service providers offered at the jail. The next theme was parent-child communication during incarceration, including a no-cost way for parents to call their children and in-person contact visits. Both themes addressed question one, which asked about the needs of incarcerated parents.

Additionally, both themes addressed the second question as participants discussed the need for jail programs to respond to the trauma of incarceration and be culturally competent. The next theme that emerged was around intake and assessment and the need for consistent and longitudinal data. Lastly, a theme emerged around staffing and space limitations within the jail, which impact services. These last two themes address the second question, exploring how providers can build off existing programs to meet the needs better.

### **Current Classes**

All study participants knew of two parenting classes offered in the local jail, including Triple P and Motherhood/Fatherhood is Sacred. Several participants shared that more than these classes are needed, as parents need the opportunity to practice the skills they are learning in the classes. Additionally, many parents need consistent contact with their children. Another subtheme that emerged was that the classes could be traumatizing for the participants as they face memories of their childhood, and participation provoked reflection on their past parenting missteps. Furthermore, participants felt that providers could expand existing classes to address the cultural needs of parents. Participant 2 stated,

I think we can find innovative ways to expand the classes and groups we offer in the jail. The pandemic helped us to find ways we could expand our services to continue offering classes to parents in the jail, and I think we could build off that further, including using technology.

Multiple participants also felt that expanding mental health services and allowing parents opportunities to talk about their children and their trauma would be beneficial. I will discuss space limitations later in this section, but one participant had an idea for how the jail could expand services to meet the identified needs better.

### **Parent-Child Communication**

All participants mentioned the need for services that support parent-child communication during incarceration. Many of the participants heard from parents about the challenges of communicating with their children during incarceration, including the cost of phone calls and the reliance on another party to answer the calls. Participant 1 shared,

When working with the parents in the jail, they would frequently bring up the burden of finances and try to find a way to help their family while in jail. The expense of phone calls was brought up frequently as the parents knew how much their families at home were struggling without their income during incarceration.

One subtheme that emerged relating to parent-child communication was the challenges of visitation at the jail. Participants expressed that the current set-up for visits through glass with a phone on each side can limit a parent's ability to communicate with their children, especially for children under 5. Many participants felt that contact visits

would help address the trauma of parental incarceration while also supporting parent-child attachment. Participant 2 stated,

Contact visits can help parents and children with the trauma of incarceration. It can help the children to see that their parents are okay, and it can help the parents with motivation to take the steps they need to be there for their children.

Additional barriers mentioned included transportation. Multiple participants discussed the distance of the jail from the location where many of the children and families live, approximately 45 miles, and the financial burden of visiting the jail, including the cost of gas. According to Participant 3, “There is a limited space for the number of visits, so you may get to the jail to visit and find out that the space is full for the day.” Additionally, one participant mentioned that the public transportation system does not run on the same days as visitation, which only occurs on the weekends. The fact that no visit is guaranteed exacerbates these barriers.

### **Intake and Assessment**

One consistent theme throughout the interviews was that the participants needed clarity about the data custodial staff collected at intake and assessment. Participants believed that the jail staff was collecting rudimentary demographic data and that staff needed to consistently ask who is a parent, how many children are still in the home, the ages of the children, or who the children are with during incarceration. Participant 4 offered, “There is a lack of transparency around what data is being collected. Local agencies could work together and share data to improve understanding of the needs.”



Multiple participants felt that various service providers were collecting data for their programs and identified an opportunity for providers to work together to gather data.

Beyond demographic data, many participants felt that it was essential to gather data from the parents to help custodial staff and service providers understand the needs of the parents. Many felt that hearing the desires directly from the parents would allow providers to expand services to meet the needs while making the services more meaningful. Additionally, participants felt that there needed to be more longitudinal data. There needs to be a mechanism for tracking data beyond incarceration to know what programs are having the most significant impact or what resources parents are accessing in the community upon their release from custody. Participant 3 shared one solution. “I would like to visit other jails and see what they are doing. We could learn from them what is working for collecting data.” One participant had insight into how human services providers can expand the current programming to better meet the needs of incarcerated parents and help collect data.

### **Size and Staffing Limitations**

Throughout each interview, a theme emerged surrounding staffing and space limitations at the jail. Participants mentioned that the rural location of the county and the even more isolated jail location made it challenging for the jail and service providers to recruit and retain staff. The recruitment challenges made it difficult to train staff and to offer services to incarcerated parents. Additionally, jail space is limited, making it challenging to expand programming. One participant recommended that building a structured schedule like a school, where parents attend classes from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Monday through Friday, could help the jail to offer more programming. Multiple participants recommended technology as a resource that could help expand services.

### **Outliers**

Overall, the assessment of the needs of incarcerated parents collected during the interviews was consistent, with 80% of the participants mentioning a need for further programming to support incarcerated parents, in-person contact visits to help with parent-child communication and bonding, and a need for longitudinal data, including gathering data directly from the parents regarding their needs. One constraint to these findings was that none of the participants had experienced parental incarceration, and there were no participants from the custodial staff. The lack of participation limited the results; for example, all participants mentioned they needed to know what data custodial staff were collecting and what training they received.

Using the ORID method from Stanfield (2005), I asked each participant where they recommended local staff begin to address the needs and concerns discussed during their interview. Seeing how data were discussed frequently throughout each interview, including a lack of knowledge of what data were currently collected and a need for longitudinal data, it did not surprise me that 80% of participants felt the priority should be intake and assessment, including collecting information directly from parents regarding their needs. However, one participant instead felt the place to begin was with staff training and core competence. This participant related the need for training to their previous discussion regarding a need for classes that addressed the cultural needs and traumatic experiences of incarcerated parents.

The participants did not discuss several areas of the family strengthening framework. One participant briefly mentioned jail lobbies and family notification, while no participants mentioned caregiver support and family-focused reentry. The lack of mention of family support and reentry was noteworthy as some of the studies in the literature review discussed the importance of whole-person care and a family focus, but this was not a need discussed by participants in this study.

### **Summary**

I conducted this study to better understand the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural jail, including cultural needs and recommendations for how human services providers could build off existing programs to better meet those needs. I identified four themes in this study. Two responded to the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural jail, including (a) expanding parenting programs to offer mental health and substance use treatment and ways for parents to discuss trauma and (b) improving parent-child communication, including contact visits to support bonding and outcomes. The last two addressed ways that human service providers could meet those needs, including (c) collecting longitudinal data on parents in the custodial setting, including basic demographics and the needs of parents in their own words, and (d) finding innovative ways to expand programs despite space and staffing limitations.

In the final section, I summarize the overall findings of this study, which I used to inform a white paper that could educate human service professionals on parenting programs and make recommendations for programs that leadership can implement to better address the needs of incarcerated parents in rural communities. I reflect on the

study, including an outline of barriers and limitations for this study and implications for social change.

#### Section 4: Conclusion and Reflections

The purpose of this study was to explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community and how local providers can build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs of incarcerated parents. Using a cross-case analysis approach, I conducted multiple individual interviews to gather service providers' assessment of the needs and recommendations of steps agencies can take to better address these needs (see Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). The findings from this study indicated that the jail is already offering parenting classes but could expand these services to include programs that address treatment, cultural needs, and the trauma of incarceration. Additionally, participants expressed a need for collaboration in data collection better to understand these needs from the perspective of incarcerated parents. In this section, I reflect on this study's overall success and challenges and make recommendations for action steps human services leaders can take to support the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails.

#### **Reflection of Self**

This doctoral journey has stretched me in ways I could never have imagined. As a mom, wife, professional, and student, I have learned the importance of balance. Sometimes, I prioritized others around me while neglecting myself, and I realized that a part of balance is making time for myself and learning to verbalize my needs. This process has allowed me to reflect on my goals for the future and take a leap with new faith in myself.

The personal growth I experienced during my doctoral journey may be even greater than my professional and academic growth. I have learned to persevere despite the setbacks. In the past, I have backed down in the face of adversity, but through this journey, with the support of my advisor, I learned to pivot and keep moving forward. Additionally, I was faced with imposter syndrome multiple times and the feeling that I did not belong. I was able to overcome this challenge thanks to my excellent support system. I had the opportunity to reflect on how I handled adversity during this journey compared to past trials. I have grown and look forward to continuously finding my voice and developing as a leader.

### **Reflection of Scholar-Practitioner**

Throughout the past 2 1/2 years, I have grown as a scholar and a professional. My courses challenged me as a writer, and I learned how to support my vision by using research as a foundation. As someone who has always been passionate about advocacy, I learned the importance of using research as a basis for grant writing and evidence when making a case to leadership. Before enrolling in my doctoral program, I never wanted to write or be a published author, but this journey opened doors and made me consider the possibility.

My academic growth will endure in my career as I continue to manage grants and advocate for my community. This study reminded me of the importance of hearing about the needs from those impacted directly. I look forward to the opportunity to engage in community needs assessments and advocate for this type of data collection in the future. During my doctoral journey, I had the chance to reflect on my goals as a professional,

and this has led me on a new path and continuously challenged me to think outside the box when considering the next steps in my career.

### **Recommendations for Human Services Organization**

Through my extensive literature review and the assessment of local needs in this study, I found a need for programs that address the trauma of incarceration. Roettger and Dennison (2018) found that programs developed to reduce the effects of trauma that come with parental incarceration could help improve outcomes for the children. Although my literature review found that there were many robust parenting programs available, none I found, including the two currently offered in the local jail, addressed the needs of incarcerated parents or the trauma of incarceration.

Based on this finding, I searched for parenting programs that address trauma. I found one model called CARE that supports caregivers of children who have experienced trauma and included culture-specific fact sheets that offer ways that providers can modify the program for use with different groups. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, 2020) developed Child-Adult Relationship Enhancement (CARE) to help providers develop skills for working with parents of children who have experienced trauma, including information from evidence-based programs, mental health treatment, and strategies that can be used in a variety of settings. According to NCTSN (2020), providers can offer CARE training to parents or caregivers in a single setting or through consultation. CARE training is an example of how local service providers can expand current programs to address the assessed needs, including trauma, culture, and mental health. I recommend that local leaders train staff in CARE or a similar program that can

enhance existing services. Augmenting existing classes can be a cost-effective way to expand services while addressing space concerns, as staff will bring enhanced skills to currently provided services rather than offer additional classes.

Another assessed need is longitudinal data to better understand the needs of incarcerated parents, including learning about their needs in their own words. Gathering input directly from stakeholders impacted by decision making has been a long-standing best practice. In 1993, President Clinton ordered agencies to consider customers' needs, desires, and satisfaction when developing goals and evaluating an organization's performance (Franklin, 2001). Additionally, gathering stakeholder input can help to avoid misimplementation or decision makers continuing ineffective programs or activities or prematurely discontinuing effective ones (Kasman et al., 2023). By gathering stakeholder input from the incarcerated parents before making any changes to the current level of programming at the jail, local decision makers can avoid misimplementation.

I recommend that local leaders meet with local jail service providers and custodial staff to discuss ways to collaborate to gather needs information directly from incarcerated parents and their families. Once they have met, I recommend surveying parents at the jail to begin collecting data on their needs in their own words. Data can be collected using a brief survey distributed at intake or to parents participating in programs. One jail randomly gathered surveys from families using iPads while they awaited visits (see Siegel & Napolitano, 2021). The local jail can gather data from inmates and their families using a similar strategy, increasing understanding of needs.



Additionally, based on the feedback of one of the study participants, I recommend that leaders reach out to several of the universities in the state to see if any are currently collecting longitudinal data on incarcerated parents or if any have students who would be interested in partnering with the local organization to help develop a mechanism for gathering this data. University partnerships could also support staff recruitment as the local organization builds relationships within the academic community.

### **Recommendations for Human Services Field Advocacy**

This study highlighted the necessity for advocacy around the needs of incarcerated parents. Particularly for disproportionately represented minorities in the local jails and jails throughout the country, there is a need for advocacy to support inmates in maintaining their culture during incarceration. As previously stated, minority communities, including indigenous peoples, are disproportionately represented in carceral settings worldwide and face additional challenges, including racism, discrimination, and acculturation (Ho Schar et al., 2020). Leite et al. (2023) defined acculturation as the process by which an individual modifies the culture or beliefs they developed from birth, adopting behaviors or values from another culture to relate to or fit in. I recommend that human service leaders advocate for culturally responsive programs to support individuals' cultures.

As this study relates to the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails, it is important also to discuss the challenges that rural jails face, including space, staff recruitment and retention, and transportation limitations. While these challenges may not be unique to rural jails, the rural locations of the jails and the lack of available resources

and funding exacerbate the challenges. There is an opportunity for human services field advocacy for funding to support rural areas. Often, the smaller population size can lead to lower funding, which does not allow rural areas to support the needs of a larger or more urban population.

The findings from this study will inform my practices as a human services provider as I continue to advocate for the needs of those in my community. I will seek training to develop skills that support the impacts of trauma on those I serve. Additionally, I will continue to educate myself on culture and ways to incorporate strategies that support a person's life experiences into my work. Similarly, this study can inform practices in the human services field as providers can enhance current programs to build resilience and honor the culture of those they serve.

### **Practices and Policy Considerations**

Rural communities and human services organizations throughout the country may use the results of this study to inform practices. Programs developed to reduce the effects of trauma that come with parental incarceration can help improve outcomes (Roettger & Dennison., 2018). As was assessed by the participants in this study, providers must seek ways to address the trauma of incarceration. Human services agencies can write policies and procedures incorporating trauma-informed strategies, including staff and provider training. In addition, organizations can offer training on culture and provide staff with tools to prevent acculturation.

Organizations can reflect on how they currently gather data through needs assessments. For example, are pertinent stakeholders included in the assessment process

and given equal opportunities to provide input? As I learned in this study, sometimes giving equal opportunities does not mean equal participation, which challenges organizations to find strategies to improve the participation of all key stakeholders.

### **Limitations**

As previously reported, this study had limitations. Due to issues that impacted recruitment, I could not gather the information through focus groups as initially planned; instead, I collected data through individual interviews. The benefits of focus groups are that individuals can build from what others share, which can enhance the information collected. Similarly, due to recruitment issues, the sample size of participants was relatively small, which could also impact the results. Lastly, as previously mentioned, no previously incarcerated parents or family members participated in the study. The lack of participation resulted in the information collected being an assessment of their needs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the results of this study, I recommend that further research be conducted in rural communities to continue learning about the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails. Once the local jail begins collecting data from incarcerated parents and their families regularly, it may increase buy-in from these populations for future studies by reinforcing the value of their opinions. Additionally, I recommend researching mechanisms that are most effective for tracking longitudinal data on the efficiency of programs. This research will help organizations know which programs have the most significant impact and avoid misimplementation. By disseminating the information learned in this study through a brief article in an online publication like the National

Institute of Justice and through presentations at conferences, other organizations can learn from this study and use the information to inform future practices.

### **Summary**

I conducted this study to increase understanding of the needs of incarcerated parents in rural jails and to recommend programming local leaders can implement to better support these needs. A rising number of parents and children are impacted each year by incarceration. The findings showed that, while parents appreciate the opportunity to participate in parenting programs while in custody, they may also contribute to the trauma of incarceration. The results indicated a need for human services providers to find ways to incorporate trauma-informed care and mental health treatment into the services offered to incarcerated parents. Additionally, the findings indicated a need to protect and honor the culture and life experiences of the program participants.

The study also highlighted the importance of regularly collecting data to continuously understand the needs of incarcerated parents, as needs can change and evolve. Through the data collection, including a literature review, this study made an informed recommendation to local leaders on how they can expand existing programs to meet the identified needs while also being cognizant of local limitations. The results of this study can inform practices in human services and to support social change and advocacy for the needs of incarcerated parents.

The results of this study informed a white paper aimed at local decision makers, including leaders in human services, probation, and law enforcement. A copy of the white paper is in Appendix A. In addition to sharing the white paper with leaders in the area at

the focus of the study, I will identify ways to publish the results to share with human services providers throughout the country. Results from this study can inform practices and support the trauma and cultural needs of incarcerated parents and their families.

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## Appendix A: An Exploration of the Needs of Incarcerated Parents in Rural Jails

### **Introduction**

Each year in the United States, approximately 1.7 million parents and children experience separation due to parental incarceration (McGovern, 2021). According to a 2016 survey, about half of the inmates in state and federal prisons reported having a minor child (Maruschak et al., 2021). The data for state jails are limited. Most states do not regularly collect information on the parental status of incarcerated individuals, which affects the availability of data; however, one national study estimated that close to 5 million children had a parent go to jail or prison (Shlafer et al., 2020).

It is worthwhile to differentiate data between jails and prisons to guide policy and decision making. For example, local organizations operate jails, sentences are frequently less than 1 year, people return more quickly and frequently than in prisons, and often jails offer fewer programs to the inmates (Shlafer et al., 2020). Furthermore, while an estimated 95% of incarcerated persons return to their community, jails often do not offer programs to prepare for this transition, which can leave parents unprepared to return to the role of caregiver and increase the risk of recidivism (Muentner & Charles, 2020). This white paper addresses the needs of parents incarcerated in rural jails in a southwestern state where the population is 14% Native American and 23% Hispanic, including an assessment of parenting programs that human service providers can implement in jails to support parents through transition back to their families and address cultural needs.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem is continuing intergenerational incarceration in the rural Southwest and a lack of culturally appropriate programs available to address the impacts of parental incarceration on families. Minority communities, including indigenous peoples, are disproportionately represented in carceral settings worldwide and face additional challenges, including racism, discrimination, and acculturation (Ho Schar et al., 2020). The United States Census Bureau (2022) reported that 14% of the population in the county at the focus of this study are Native American and 23% Hispanic or Latino. However, they account for a combined 57% of the daily jail population at the time of this report. While staff in human services organizations and custodial settings often receive cultural awareness training, it takes continuous work to address an individual's beliefs and biases and begin incorporating the training into policies and practices.

The stress and trauma for the family related to parental incarceration, the negative effect on the children's bond with the parent, the deteriorated family climate in the home, and the parent's reduced ability to nurture, all increase the risk of incarceration for future generations (Giordano et al., 2019). Although human services staff currently offer parenting programs in the local jail, there has not been sufficient evidence until now to identify the rehabilitation and reentry needs of local rural incarcerated parents. Research has established that programs developed to reduce the effects of trauma that come with parental incarceration could help improve outcomes for children (Roettger & Dennison, 2018).

**Local Problems**

In a 2017 survey of parents incarcerated at the local jail collected by one of the local parenting program providers, finances were the most significant concern, with 70% of parents surveyed reporting they were the primary source of income for their family before incarceration. The other top fears included losing custody of their children, losing contact, being cut off from their families, and not knowing who would care for their children while they were in jail. Additionally, parents and families reported that they would benefit from more counselors and programs in the jail, services that prepared the incarcerated individual and family for their release, family counseling, and support for the caregiver in the community.

**Market and Social Drivers**

Although local human services agencies currently offer some parenting programs in the local jail, these programs do not support the parent-child relationship during incarceration, address the trauma of incarceration, or support the child and designated surrogate caregiver during parental incarceration. Furthermore, cultural awareness training would benefit custodial staff and jail service providers.

Based on the needs reported in research (Downard, 2024), these key issues require local consideration:

1. The local jail does not currently collect data on the number of parents incarcerated. This information will increase understanding of the need locally, including data on the number of children, the average length of sentences, demographics, and other factors that could influence the program.



2. The programs currently offered in the jail do not support the entire family unit. Research shows that more contact with children during incarceration leads to less parenting stress, improved relationships with the caregiver, and reduced risk of recidivism (Charles et al., 2021).
3. The current parenting programs do not address the mental health needs of the parent or family related to incarceration. As outlined above, research has shown that the trauma and stress of parental incarceration can lead to adverse outcomes for children.
4. Given the disproportionate representation of minorities in the local jail, there is a need for programs that honor individual cultures and incorporate cultural competence.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Gathering stakeholder input can help to avoid mis implementation that occurs when decision makers continue ineffective programs or activities or prematurely discontinue effective ones (Kasman et al., 2023). Although it is beneficial to hear directly from incarcerated parents and their children regarding their needs, one must gather this information ethically, as they are considered vulnerable populations. Therefore, the recommendations included in this white paper are an assessment of the needs of incarcerated parents by professionals with experience working with incarcerated parents and their families.

### **Advocate Responsibilities**

The research reported here was conducted ethically. All participants were volunteers and documented their informed consent prior to participation. As the advocate, the researcher, and a prior employee of the organization at the focus of this study, I did not include any participants I had authority over as a supervisor or case manager. While I knew some participants due to the small community size, I ensured that no conflicts of interest existed.

### **Evidence Supporting the Need for a Solution**

The evidence included in this white paper was collected in interviews and analyzed using a cross-case analysis approach (see Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Information garnered from the interviews was compared to existing data, including the Family Strengthening Project, which has at its central premise, “Sustaining and repairing connections with family and those identified as sources of support” (National Institute of Corrections, 2022, para. 3). In The Family Strengthening Project the National Institute of Corrections (2022) recommended areas of implementation for jails to consider applying to support sustainable connections with family and other sources of support such as: training for custodial staff, assessment of incarcerated parents’ needs, parenting groups or classes, regular visitation, frequent parent-child communication, and family-focused reentry. Research findings indicate a need for enhanced programming to further support the needs of this group of rural incarcerated minority parents, particularly those needs related to trauma and culture. Four primary themes outlined below summarize the identified needs.

**Current Classes**

The two parenting classes currently offered, Motherhood and Fatherhood is Sacred and Triple P, are insufficient. Parents need the opportunity to practice the parenting and life skills learned in the classes. The classes can be traumatizing for the participants as they face memories of their childhood, and participation provokes reflection on their past parenting missteps. Additionally, the local human services agency should expand classes to incorporate mental health services and allow parents opportunities to talk about their children and their trauma. Providers can expand existing classes to address the cultural needs of parents in this rural jail.

**Parent-Child Communication**

There is a need for additional services that support parent-child communication during incarceration. Incarcerated parents face challenges communicating with their children during incarceration, including the cost of phone calls and the reliance on another party to answer the calls. Regular contact visits can help address the trauma of parental incarceration while also supporting parent-child attachment. According to one professional, “Contact visits can help parents and children with the trauma of incarceration. It can help the children to see that their parents are okay, and it can help the parents with motivation to take the steps they need to be there for their children.” Additionally, regular contact visits can motivate parents to participate in classes and allow them to practice the skills they are learning.

### **Collaboration in Intake and Assessment**

Clarity about the data collected at intake is needed. Jail staff could consistently ask who is a parent, how many children are in the home, the ages of the children, or who the children are with during incarceration. Although service providers may collect data for their programs, there is an opportunity for providers to work together to gather robust data. One party recommended, “Local agencies could work together and share data to improve understanding of the needs.” Hearing the needs directly from the parents would allow providers to expand services to meet the individual needs and make the services more meaningful.

### **Jail Size and Staffing Limitations**

Staffing and space limitations at the jail exacerbate the needs listed above. The rural location of the county, and the even more isolated jail location make it challenging for the jail and service providers to recruit and retain staff. The recruitment challenges make it difficult to train staff and offer more services to incarcerated parents. Additionally, jail space is limited, making it challenging to expand programming. One suggested, “I think we can find innovative ways to expand the classes and groups we offer in the jail. The pandemic helped us to find ways we could expand our services to continue offering classes to parents in the jail, and I think we could build off that further, including using technology.”

### **Proposed Solution**

Programs that have already been developed to reduce the effects of trauma that come with parental incarceration could help improve outcomes for the children (Roettger

& Dennison, 2018). Expanding on existing parenting programs to address the trauma and mental health impacts of incarceration could reduce the risk of incarceration for future generations. It is recommended that local leaders research alternative programs they can implement to enhance existing parenting classes to address the mental health and cultural needs of the parents incarcerated in the local jail. Augmenting existing classes can be a cost-effective way to expand services while addressing space concerns, as staff will bring enhanced skills to currently provided services rather than offer additional classes.

Additionally, local leadership can explore ways to expand programming using the former juvenile detention center across the street from the jail. The fenced-in yard could allow inmates access to fresh air and sunshine, which could help with healing from trauma. Local providers could offer culturally relevant programs such as sweat ceremonies or other services to help incarcerated parents maintain their culture during incarceration. The secure facility would also allow the jail space to offer contact visits between parents and their children. Maintaining that connection during incarceration can help support the incarcerated parent and reduce the risk of intergenerational incarceration.

It is recommended that local leaders meet with jail service providers and custodial staff to discuss ways to collaborate to gather needs information about family status directly from incarcerated parents and their families. Survey parents at the jail to begin collecting data on their needs in their own words. Data can be collected using a brief survey distributed at intake or to parents participating in programs. One jail randomly gathered surveys from families using iPads while they awaited visits (see Siegel &

Napolitano, 2021). Since the local jail already has iPads, they can gather data from inmates and their families using a similar strategy, increasing understanding of needs.

### **Conclusion**

Although incarcerated parents in the region appreciate the opportunity to participate in parenting programs while in custody, existing programs may also contribute to the trauma of incarceration. Additional steps can be taken at minimal cost to reduce the trauma, respond to cultural needs, and enhance reentry post incarceration for families. Local human services providers can find ways to incorporate trauma-informed care and mental health treatment into the services currently offered for incarcerated parents and to protect and honor the culture and life experiences of the program participants. It is essential to gather information on the needs of incarcerated parents and their families from parents currently enrolled in the programs. Local human services agencies, community service providers, law enforcement, and probation can meet to explore implementing strategies to enhance existing programs to support better the needs identified. Additionally, leaders can discuss ways that the agencies can collaborate and use technology to collect longitudinal data to understand the needs of the parents enrolled in the program, the number of persons impacted by parental incarceration, and the effectiveness of the programs in reducing intergenerational incarceration. With these additional steps, the local agency can better support the needs of incarcerated parents and their families in this rural area and strengthen the family network, improving outcomes for future generations.

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## Appendix B: Recruitment

My Name  
Address Line 1  
Address Line 2  
Email Address

Date

Name  
Title  
Company  
Address Line 1  
Address Line 2

RE: Focus Group Recruitment

To whom it may concern:

My name is Sarah Downard, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. The goal of my research is to explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community and how local providers can build off existing programs to develop a program that will better meet the needs. I will be conducting focus groups as part of my research to gather information from key stakeholders in the community to support my understanding of the needs of incarcerated parents.

To recruit participants for my research, I am requesting permission to post the attached flyer in \_\_\_\_\_ building. This will allow key stakeholders who are an integral part of the study to view the flyer and contact me if they are interested in learning more information. Please feel free to share this flyer with other parties who you feel may also be interested in participating, such as formerly incarcerated parents, adult children of incarcerated parents, jail treatment providers, community leaders, and corrections officers.

I appreciate you taking the time to review this request. Please respond to this email to confirm I have permission to post the flyer at the above location.

Sincerely,

Sarah Downard

Attachment: Recruitment flyer

# Invitation

To Participate in a Research Focus Group

## ***An Exploration of Rural Incarcerated Parents' Needs and Existing Jail-Based Parenting Programs***

### Seeking Study Participants who:

- Providers who worked with incarcerated parents for at least 12 months in a custody setting (examples: treatment providers, jail program providers)
- Providers who work with formerly incarcerated parents (examples: attorneys, community treatment providers)
- Community leaders (examples: senior management, county administration, board of supervisors)
- Tribal leaders

*\* All participants must be at least 18 years old. \**

### What is expected from participants:

- Participation in a focus group, meeting together in an online setting with other members of the group to share your experiences related to the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural community, lasting approximately 90 minutes.  
*\*If minimum number of participants is not met, may be asked to meet with researcher individually.*
- Review a summary of the research findings to provide any corrections, approximately 15-30 minutes

**In consideration for your participation in this study you will receive a \$10 gift card**

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please contact the researcher for more information:

**This study is being conducted by Sarah Downard as a part of my Walden University Dissertation.**

*\*This research is not affiliated with the organization or the researcher's role within this organization\**

### Appendix C: Interview Questions

**Overview of the topic:** The social problem that prompted me to research is intergenerational incarceration in the community. When researching causes, I found that stress and trauma related to parental incarceration, including the impact of the child's bond with the parent increased risk of incarceration for future generations. This focus group will explore the parenting needs of incarcerated parents, the services currently offered to incarcerated parents and their families, and the gaps that need addressing.

When researching parenting programs, I found a framework that provides a whole-family approach to services for incarcerated parents called the Family Strengthening Project (National Institute of Corrections, 2022). This project looks at ways to reduce the traumatic impact of parental imprisonment while providing education and reentry support for the incarcerated parent. According to the National Institute of Corrections (2022), this approach includes parenting education, improvements to jail lobbies, and visitation processes, including contact visits, subsidizing parent-child communication, caregiver support, and family-focused reentry. I provided you with an overview of this project before this session. However, I have included a copy in the chat box for your reference. Please keep this framework in mind as you participate in this interview.

**Main questions:**

- 1) What do you currently know about the parenting needs of incarcerated parents in a rural setting? (ALL)

What do you know about the parenting programs currently offered at the jail? (ALL)

What, if any, data are currently collected locally regarding incarcerated parents? (I will ask this question to Groups 1 and 4 only).

What training do staff receive in providing trauma-informed services? (I will ask this question to Groups 1 and 4 only).

What training do staff receive in cultural competence? (I will ask this question to Groups 1 and 4 only).

- 2) What, if any, concerns do you have about these existing programs and services? (ALL)

What, if any, concerns do you have about the current level of data collected? (I will ask this question to Groups 1 and 4 only).

What, if any, communication barriers exist for incarcerated parents and their families? (ALL)

What more could providers do to deliver services that respond to the cultural needs of incarcerated parents (ALL)

- 3) What are the effects, if any, of the current level of programming for incarcerated parents? (ALL)

What would be the significance of expanding the parenting program for incarcerated parents? (ALL)

What would be the significance of providing trauma-informed and culturally responsive services? (ALL)

What would be the benefits of providing further training for staff on culture and how it influences the services provided? (Only for Groups 1 and 4 only).

4) What would you like to happen regarding programming for incarcerated parents? (ALL)

What services would have benefited you/your family during incarceration (Groups 2 and 3)?

What data do we need to collect? (Groups 1 and 4 only).

Where do you recommend that we begin? (ALL)

**Summary:** Before we go, I will provide a summary of what was discussed as a group and next steps. For example: “We have had a good discussion today regarding the needs of incarcerated parents in a rural jail. I appreciate you sharing information on the programs that are currently being provided and barriers you have experienced. You determined that we need to begin by creating a list of available programs in the community that may address some of the needs that were raised today and where there is a gap in services. Does anyone have any final thoughts before we conclude the discussion today?”

**Closing statement:** Thank you very much for attending and participating in this discussion. I appreciate that you all created a respectful environment and allowed

everyone to share personal knowledge and experiences. As a result of this discussion, I will write a summary that will be shared with the participants. Additionally, the information will be summarized in a white paper that can be used by local leaders for decision-making regarding the needs of incarcerated parents in the rural jail. Your participation is essential to my research, and I appreciate each of you being here. If you want to provide your contact information, I would like to send you a small thank-you gift for your participation.