

PROJECT S.E.E.K. LONGITUDINAL STUDY ON CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Executive Summary

From 1989-2004, Genesee County, Michigan was home to Project S.E.E.K. (Services to Enable and Empower Kids), the country's first and only comprehensive service provider and longitudinal study focused on children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers. We conducted a pilot study of key informant interviews among a small sample of former Project S.E.E.K. participants who experienced parental incarceration as a minor child and their former caregivers. This project attempted to explore risk and resilience among the two populations to determine how Project S.E.E.K. influenced the life course of its participants.

Through key informant interviews with former Project S.E.E.K. participants, several important themes emerged.

- Incarceration matters—parental incarceration had a significant impact on the lives of the children and caregiver.
- Children and caregivers experienced mixed emotions, including disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss pertaining to their family member's incarceration.
- Communicating with an incarcerated parent was important but could be challenging.
- There was a conspiracy of silence where children were not given information on their parent's incarceration; some children also experienced shame and stigma pertaining to their parent's incarceration.
- Parental incarceration often led to financial instability for the remaining family members.
- Children and caregivers reported a variety of experiences during their family member's incarceration and transition back into the community.
- Project SEEK provided skill building and support that helped to minimize the negative effects of incarceration.
- Respondents had a low to medium risk of involvement with the justice system.
- Long-term outcomes included both successes and challenges for children and their caregivers.

Study results lead to several recommendations for service providers, caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, the Department of Corrections, and other policy makers. For service providers and others interested in replicating the Project S.E.E.K. model, respondents suggested that programs use former Project S.E.E.K. participants, or children whose parents were incarcerated as mentors. Other suggestions include providing phone cards to participants so that cost of telephone calls did not prohibit communication with incarcerated family members, providing employment assistance and other tangible needs. Providers also should recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with children of incarcerated parents and their complicated feelings. Communication with incarcerated parents is important. We recommend that caregivers support children in writing letters, making phone calls and visiting their incarcerated parent. We also recommend that the Department of Corrections provide additional resources for family strengthening policies and practices within corrections facilities. Additionally, policy makers should provide more systemic support for mental health care and struggles with addiction, which may help families to avoid incarceration or prevent recidivism.