



Using Family-Based Furlough Programs to Improve Reentry and Sustain Family Relationships

familybasedjusticecenter.org

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What are the systemic impacts of incarceration on children and parents?

The short- and long-term effects of separation due to incarceration can be devastating to parents and children and have long-lasting detriments to the family. It is well documented that children experience “a shared sentence” when one or both of their parents is incarcerated.¹ In the United States, one of every twelve children under the age of 18 has had a jailed parent at some point in their lives;² more than 5.7 million children have experienced this trauma. Incarcerated mothers are a rapidly growing demographic group of the incarcerated population; about 58% of women incarcerated in state prisons report having minor children, compared with 46% of men.³

Children experience a host of negative outcomes because of a parent’s incarceration. It interferes with the development and maintenance of a strong nurturing bond.⁴ Being separated from a parent who is incarcerated is recognized as an adverse childhood experience that may affect the well-being and life outcomes of a child over the course of a lifetime,⁵ including emotional and psychological problems, academic-performance problems, and financial instability.⁶

What are family-based furlough programs?

Furlough programs are designed to give people a temporary release from incarceration. These programs are used for medical treatment, work release, or in the event of a person’s family member dying or being seriously ill. Unlike these more common types of furloughs, family-based furlough programs are specifically designed to give incarcerated parents contact with their children outside of jail or prison on a regular basis and preserve the bonds between them.

¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2016) A shared sentence: The devastating toll of parental incarceration on kids, families and communities. Baltimore.

² Gotsch, K. (2018). Families and mass incarceration. sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/families-and-mass-incarceration

³ Maruschak, L. M., Bronson, J., & Alper, M. (2021). *Parents in prison and their minor children: Survey of prison inmates, 2016*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmcspi16st.pdf

⁴ Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth. (2010). Study of incarcerated women and their children. Oklahoma City. ok.gov/occy/documents/CIP%20study%202010.pdf

⁵ Hairston, C.F. (2007). Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation. assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-FocusonChildrenwith_incarceratedParentsOverviewofLiterature-2007.pdf

⁶ Martin, E. (2017). Hidden consequences: The impact of incarceration on dependent children. Washington: National Institute of Justice. nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/hidden-consequences-impact-incarceration-dependent-children

Examples of states that mention family or children as an eligible purpose for a furlough in code, statute, administrative code, or department policy.

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| Florida | Unspecified period to preserve and reestablish family ties | Fla. Admin. Code R. 33-601.603 |
| Illinois | Up to 14 days to visit family | 730 ILCS 5/3-11-1 |
| Iowa | Up to 55 hours to maintain family relationships | IAC Ch 20, p.1 201—20.12(904) |
| Louisiana | Unspecified period to maintain family relationships | LA Rev Stat §15:833 (2022) |
| Maine | Up to 72 hours to maintain or reestablish family ties | MDOC Policy 27.4 |
| New Jersey | Up to 24 hours to aid in family reintegration | N.J.A.C. 10A:20-4.34 |
| New York | Up to 7 days to maintain family ties or solve family problems | 7 CRR-NY 1901.1 |
| Federal Bureau of Prisons | Up to 30 days to establish or reestablish family ties | 18 U.S.C. §3622 |

Maine Department of Corrections (DOC) family furlough program

The Maine DOC family-furlough program focuses on fostering family reunification and maintaining the bonds that are often broken when a parent is incarcerated. Incarcerated parents who are eligible for the program are given “furlough passes” to visit their children; the time limit on these visits begins at four hours but can be extended after initial visits based on the needs of the family.⁷ The visits take place at a variety of locations (including homes in some cases). The DOC provides parents with planning support before, during, and after the visit to help decide how they want to structure their time while on furlough. They also offer support and counseling for parents to discuss the sessions and any difficulties they might encounter (especially on longer furloughs).

The program aims to encourage parents to engage with their children in ways that are difficult or impossible when incarcerated and to expose their children to their parents outside the prison confines.

Initially, many visitation sites were hesitant to host furlough participants; however, since its implementation a decade ago, the program has seen a 100 percent success rate in participant compliance with program rules and, to date, no one on furlough has failed to return as required. The program also offers assistance through hotel rooms,

⁷ Maine Department of Corrections. (n.d.). Furlough program (Policy No. 27.4). maine.gov/corrections/sites/maine.gov.corrections/files/inline-files/27.4%20Furlough%20Program.pdf

extended furlough times, and sometimes compensation for gas or lodging to family members who have to travel a considerable distance to the furlough facilities. A key component of the program's success has been building support among administrators prior to implementation, which has allowed the program to proceed even in the face of skepticism from the public. By working proactively with local leaders and establishments (hotels, restaurants, etc.), program leaders have been able to assuage concerns about safety before participants enter communities on furlough.

The program is based on a graduated approach to furlough releases. Before the furloughs start, the program offers onsite meals and special visits (increased frequency, outside normal visiting hours, for special events, etc.) for family members of program participants. Once off-site visits start, the graduated approach applies to visit length, scaling up from four hours to overnight to a full weekend, as well as frequency. After a visit, the program provides resources to help participants deal with the grief of a visit ending and the complicated emotions that may arise from the visits.

Key considerations when developing a family-furlough include:

- **Determining eligibility (disqualifying charges, actions, or criteria, etc.)**
- **Determining the catchment area for allowable offsite activities (e.g., 5, 10, 15 miles).**
- **Establishing a comfortable response time for the agency.**
- **Developing partnerships and MOUs, if needed.**
- **Defining the duration of passes and overnights.**
- **Outlining the process for earning extended passes or furloughs.**
- **Ensuring the approach is family-centered, avoiding the punishment of children or families for minor infractions by the parent.**
- **Taking an individualized approach and avoiding “all or nothing” policies.**

Maine family furlough participant: Jacinta's story

Jacinta Hunt was a participant in Maine's family-furlough program as well as the subject of an award-winning documentary about her experiences with the criminal-justice system and its effects on three generations of her family. She was first incarcerated at 14 and became pregnant at 15; all of her early interactions with her daughter were at a correctional center or rehab facility. When she learned that she would be eligible for the family-furlough program, she began working with prison administrators to learn how to approach the visits as a mother and how best to protect her daughter from trauma when Jacinta had to leave at the end of the visits. During her furloughs, she was able to be in the community with her daughter and father for the first time in years.

Jacinta stressed how important it was to be able to be present with her daughter without the presence of correctional officers constantly in the back of her mind; it gave her time to have important conversations with her daughter and work through issues that arose from their separation. She also greatly appreciated the support and counseling provided by prison administrators throughout the program. While she feels that she benefited from being able to spend longer stretches of time with her daughter through the furlough program, she stressed that the program itself would be far less effective without the strong support provided to her by allies and family inside and outside the prison.

After Jacinta's release, she went back to school and is now working as a director of programs to help formerly incarcerated people through their reentry processes.

[Earnshaw, Jessica, dir. 2020. *Jacinta*. Documentary. Hulu.
[hulu.com/movie/jacinta-40d2182d-5227-47d8-a8b2-b5e827ceed05](https://www.hulu.com/movie/jacinta-40d2182d-5227-47d8-a8b2-b5e827ceed05)]

Nashville's "Father's Day Out" and "Mother's Day Out" jail furlough programs

In Nashville, the Davidson County Sheriff's Office has developed a family-based furlough program in partnership with volunteers that is designed to encourage and support the parent-child relationship. The main goal of the Father's Day Out (FDO) and Mother's Day Out (MDO) programs is to build and strengthen the bonds between incarcerated fathers and mothers and their children throughout the parents' time in the justice system. FDO and MDO are structured similarly to Maine's family-based furlough program: qualified parents (eligibility criteria include not having committed a violent crime, having passed a background check and potentially a drug test, and having a child in Nashville schools) are deemed able to leave the jail once a week and meet their children at a nonprofit facility in Nashville.

The FDO and MDO model was developed to alleviate the negative impacts of prolonged separation between parents and children. As such, it aims not only to bring parents and their children together in the same physical space, but to nurture and preserve the

emotional bonds between them that may be strained or severed by a parent's incarceration. To help strengthen these ties, the program requires parents to complete pre-meeting education sessions that address attachment, bonding, child behavior, and development. The classes also educate parents on the effects of adverse childhood experiences and how to minimize negative impacts and support their children's social-emotional learning. After their weekly meeting with their children, the participating parents meet back in the jail to give feedback on their interactions and discuss whether the education sessions were useful.

Nongovernmental organizations are important partners in the administration of these programs. CrossBridge, a Nashville-based nonprofit, provides spiritual and recovery services for the incarcerated parents and also offers transitional housing to those needing additional assistance after leaving the jail. And they host and cater the weekly FDO and MDO meetings and provide street clothes for the parents, allowing them to interact with their children without a constant reminder of their incarceration. The Family Center, another local nonprofit, delivers parenting classes in the jail that highlight lessons that can be practiced at the weekly FDO and MDO dinner meetings. Free Hearts, an organization built by previously incarcerated women, provides chaperone and activity services during the meetings.

Nashville's program targets parents with a history of substance use disorders (SUD). Though it does not exclude other incarcerated parents, it gives preferential placement to those who participate in the CrossBridge drug-education and support programs, which are offered in the jail weekly and are led by facilitators who have lived experience with SUD and incarceration. Parents transitioning out of jail may apply for housing at Restoration House, a structured-housing and SUD-recovery program run by CrossBridge, and are eligible for 60 days of rent to be paid through housing vouchers.

Both MDO and FDO are grant-funded pilot programs. The FDO pilot was recently completed, serving approximately 30 fathers and 60 children. Feedback from fathers, staff, and guardians of the participating children was overwhelmingly positive. These pilots provide opportunities to continually improve this model based on new knowledge and experience.

Conclusion

Though these family-based furlough programs differ in their operational details, all have potential to benefit incarcerated parents and their children. Other correctional agencies are authorized to provide furlough programs for rehabilitative purposes that would allow the agency to create family-based furloughs like the ones described here. Models such as Maine and Nashville provide a starting point for other jurisdictions to develop their own programs using their available resources to maintain family relationships and protect children who have incarcerated parents.

For more information, an FBJC webinar on this topic can be found at familybasedjusticecenter.org/mp4/Preserving%20Bonds%20Webinar.mp4.