



# COMMUNITY AND JAIL PRACTICES SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

## THE KENTUCKY LANDSCAPE

### About us

The Kentucky Social Welfare Foundation (KSWF), established in 1948, awards grants to organizations throughout the Commonwealth, with special consideration given to small-budget organizations striving to improve the quality of life for vulnerable Kentuckians residing in small communities and rural areas. **Learn more at [www.kswf.org](http://www.kswf.org).**



Kentucky Youth Advocates believes all children deserve to be safe, healthy, and secure. As THE independent voice for Kentucky's children, we work to ensure policymakers create investments and policies that are good for children.



To learn more about this project, visit [kyyouth.org](http://kyyouth.org).

### PROJECT SUMMARY

#### *Purpose and goals*

Parental incarceration is a shared sentence that deeply impacts children and can have lasting ramifications. In addition to the trauma of separation on children, families often experience financial hardships. Kentucky currently has the 11th highest rate of children who have had a parent incarcerated. Criminal justice policies and practices, such as over-policing in Black communities and disparities in the handling of offenses that intersect more with Black communities, have disproportionately impacted Black families across counties of all sizes in Kentucky, as Black parents are incarcerated at substantially higher rates than parents of other races.<sup>1,2</sup> Kentucky Youth Advocates and the Kentucky Social Welfare Foundation undertook this project to understand how jails currently interact with children and families impacted by incarceration and to learn about community interest in and capacity to increase the use of child-friendly practices.



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Research shows that maintaining and supporting parental connections during incarceration can reduce childhood adversity and contribute to successful reentry. Some jailers report that supporting healthy relationships between parents and children during a parent's incarceration has benefits for the child, the jail, and the community. However, there are challenges to jails implementing child-friendly practices. Through this work we have documented many ways communities are working to reduce the trauma for children and families and identified opportunities to strengthen support for children.

### *Stakeholders of focus*

This report is intended to inform community members who work with children and families impacted by incarceration, such as teachers, Family Resource and Youth Service Center employees, non-profit organizations, and faith-based groups, as well as other community leaders. We invite communities to learn about existing practices, assess their local practices, and explore opportunities to build or increase collaborative efforts with their local jail to support children and their caregivers impacted by incarceration.



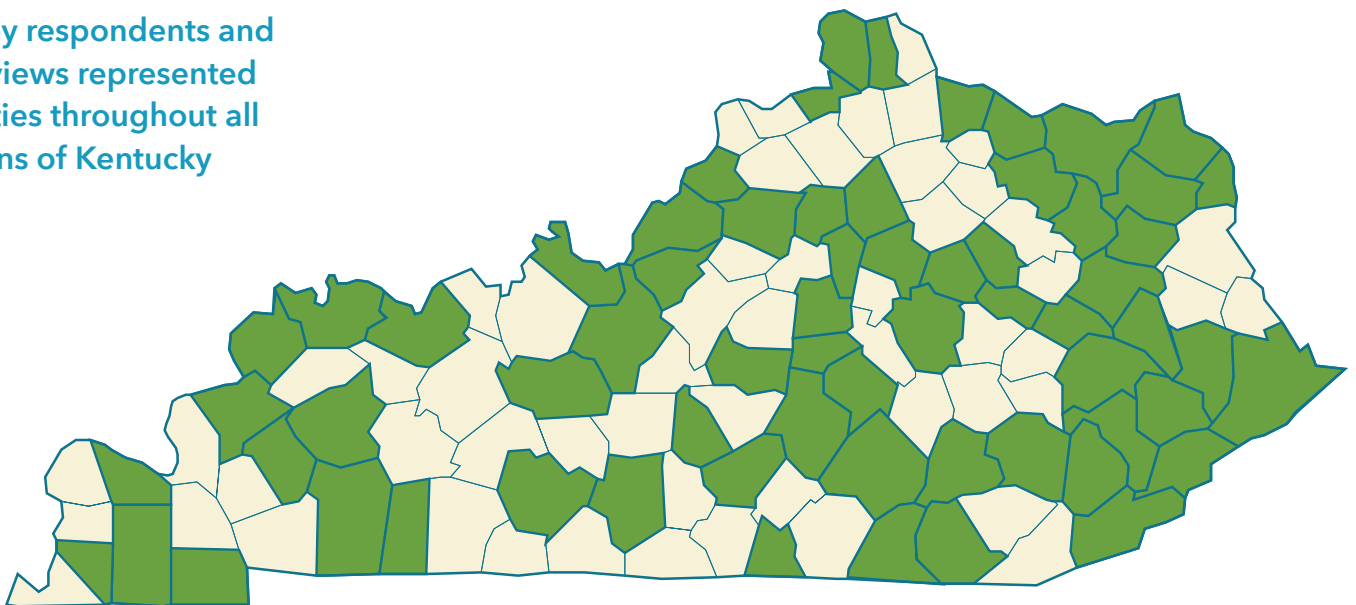
## **SURVEY OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS**

Kentucky Youth Advocates surveyed community members and stakeholders around the state to assess local jail's practices and policies regarding parental incarceration. The survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey and was shared across various networks throughout Kentucky.

We received 207 responses from respondents from a variety of geographical and professional backgrounds. Respondents represented 65 out of 120 counties – including 60% of all counties with a local jail. While the survey sample was largely made up of people working at non-profit organizations, we also received a significant number of responses from formerly incarcerated individuals, Family Resource and Youth Service Centers (FRYSCs), and attorneys.

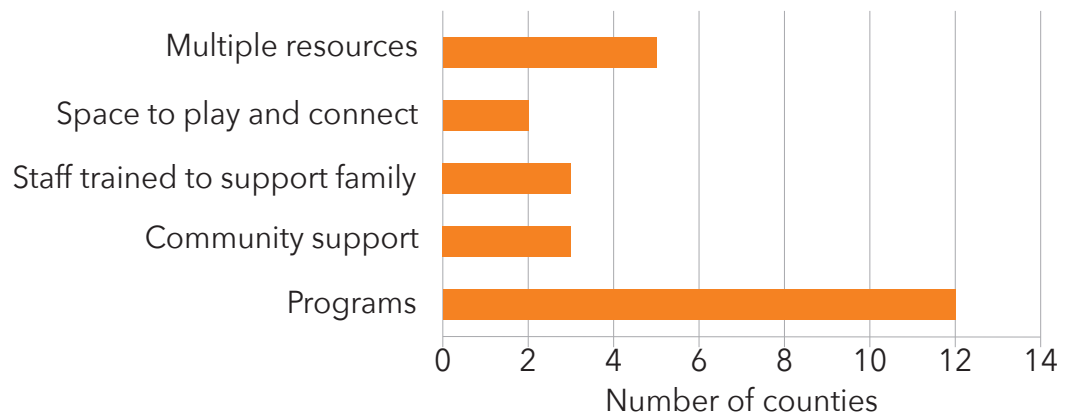
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**Survey respondents and interviews represented counties throughout all regions of Kentucky**

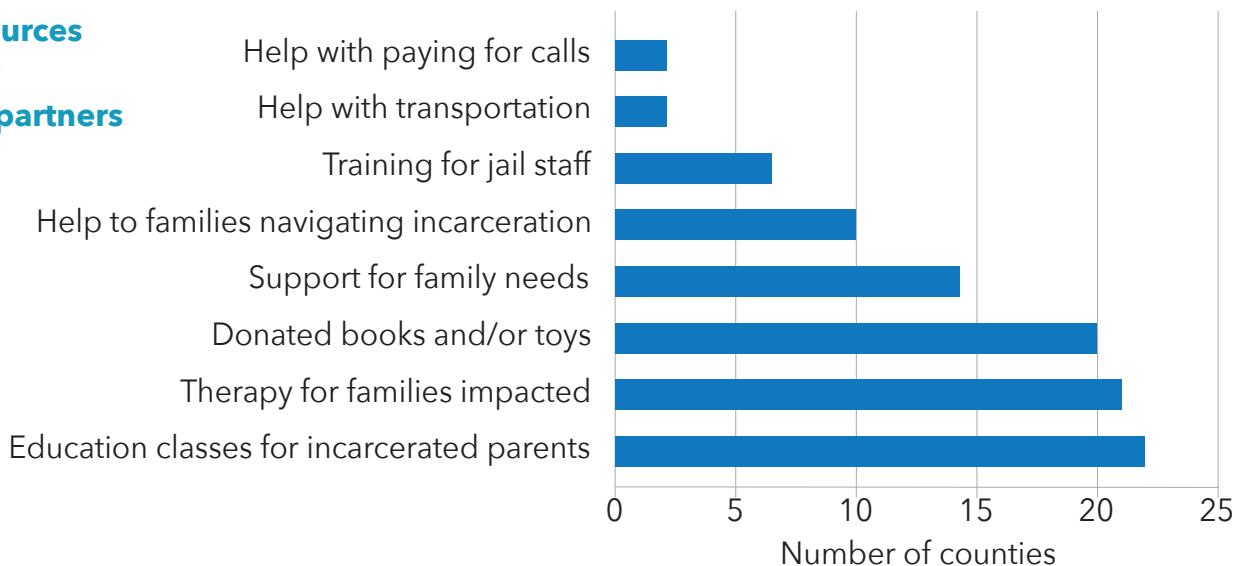



The first set of survey questions focused on the ways county jails currently allow incarcerated parents to stay connected with their children. We specifically asked if the jail offered in-person visits, had child-friendly waiting rooms, and if families had to pay for video or phone calls with incarcerated loved ones. Respondents from 30 counties reported having in-person visits; however, only seven of those counties allowed visits where physical contact without the obstruction of a divider or wall was allowed. This is despite numerous studies identifying the importance of physical contact during visits, especially when offered with child-friendly waiting rooms and support for the family.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, respondents from only seven counties reported child friendly waiting rooms. Regarding the cost of calls, only six counties were reported to not require families to pay for phone or video calls, which suggests a significant financial burden for families. In Kentucky, a fifteen-minute phone call between an incarcerated individual and their family costs an average of \$11.30.<sup>4</sup>

### Counties reported to have resources provided by jails



### Counties reported to have resources provided by community partners





In addition to questions about methods for staying connected, we asked respondents whether information is provided to incarcerated parents about the importance of and how best to stay connected with children. Respondents in 13 counties reported that parents received information, most often when initially incarcerated. However, 31% of respondents said that incarcerated parents were offered no information on how to maintain connection with their children. Survey respondents called for more information to be provided to incarcerated parents about staying connected and addressing challenges that arise. One respondent identified the importance of informing parents, sharing that, “With the teens that I work with, it is up to the incarcerated parent to stay in contact with state caseworkers to obtain permission to contact children.” Helping parents understand that responsibility and navigating communication with the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) would support the parent being able to stay connected with their child.

National reports developed with experts in the corrections field have identified the value of jails supporting families with an incarcerated loved one through methods such as training staff on the value of supporting family connections and offering targeted classes or programming. This survey sought to understand how Kentucky jails are implementing such practices. Twenty counties were identified as having jails that offered resources to incarcerated parents, usually in the form of programming and with some staff training and offering spaces for parents to play and connect with their children.

The second set of questions revolved around supports provided to both incarcerated parents and their families by community groups and organizations. In 36 counties, respondents reported that community supports are available. The most common supports were educational opportunities for incarcerated parents and therapy for impacted families. Of the counties that had community supports available, 26 offered multiple meaningful supports to families. However, very few counties identified as helping families pay for the costs associated with visiting, such as transportation or phone/video calls. In total, only 4 counties were reported to have support for jail visiting costs. Beyond the specific supports offered, some respondents shared the challenges of consistent and clear ways to connect families to the resources. See below for community member insights.

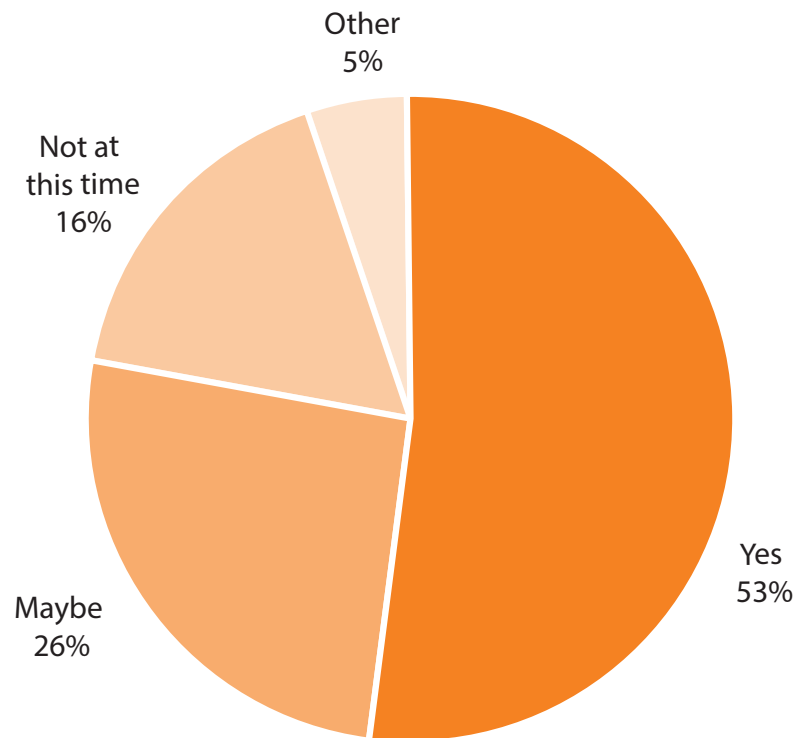


“I know that some of these resources are available from varied agencies on a case-by-case basis. But I do not know of any of these resources being provided regularly by any one organization.”



“I know of some organizations but am still unsure how to provide that information to my families. I am often unaware of which of my families are affected by incarceration to get them resources and supports.”

**The majority of respondents were interested in doing more to help local jail improve visits for children**



Finally, the third set of questions focused on community and jail interest in improving practices around parental incarceration. Of all respondents, 53% said they wanted to support their local jail in doing more to help children of incarcerated parents, and 26% said they would be interested if funding was available or other partners were interested.

Of counties with community interest, we also looked at counties with jail interest. Seven counties indicated that there were already partnerships between community organizations and the local jail, eight believed that their jail would be interested, and 18 said the jail would be interested if funding was available.

### **Findings**

From these survey results, several major takeaways emerged. First, there is a general lack of clarity around what work is being done in local jails and by community members. This lack of understanding cut across every profession, including attorneys and jail staff who regularly interact with families impacted by incarceration. The survey suggests that children and families would benefit from enhanced partnership and communication among jails, community providers, and others that interact with and support families.

While there was a lack of clarity about existing processes and programs, there was also a lot of community interest in maintaining parental connections during incarceration. A parent who was formerly incarcerated underscored the way family connections and the relationship with her child encouraged positive outcomes.



**“The survey helped me to recognize how little I know about the current state of such efforts within our jail...This would be an outstanding community partner discussion, educational opportunity, and so forth.”**

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Finally, we learned that community partners are vital in leading and sustaining this work. The dedication and leadership of a community partner drove the positive work in many counties. See Action Steps section for recommendations for community action.



“Please support anything that would make visiting or talking to children easier...My child was my motivation to do better and he needed me more than I realized during the time I was away.”



## INTERVIEW OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS

Kentucky Youth Advocates also conducted 9 interviews with key stakeholders working in jails or in partnership with jails to gain a deeper understanding of practices in place in different parts of the state. The interviews were conducted by phone or via zoom, and the questions focused on current practices, what drove the implementation of those practices, and interest in expanding supports for children with incarcerated parents. See Bright Spots section for a description of some Kentucky communities with supports for children and families in place.

Conversations with jailers, jail staff, and community leaders showed the wide variation in how jails approach supporting children with an incarcerated parent and their families but also some common themes. Across all conversations, people recognized the impact on children of having a parent incarcerated and were open to supporting children. Beyond that recognition, the practices in counties varied greatly in terms of practices at the jail and community involvement in supporting children.

Four counties with representatives we spoke with had extensive supports in place for children and families. In one county, the jail offered many programs, encouraged community engagement, and shared the critical value of having incarcerated people being able to stay connected with family. Another county's jail was heavily involved in work supporting children and families, driven by an interest in reducing recidivism – or preventing people from returning to jail.

In two other counties, efforts to support children and families were driven by active community partners and embraced by the jail. In one location, a program focused on working with incarcerated mothers with children to deepen and repair relationships during and after incarceration. Another county worked with the jail to hold in-person contact visits over the holidays for families to interact in a comfortable, home-like setting.

In summary, the interviews also provided insight into the many ways efforts to support children with an incarcerated parent can come about and be addressed. Many counties had meaningful practices in place, yet the approaches to the work were incredibly distinct based on the needs of families identified by community leaders.





# ACTION STEPS TO DEEPEN SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



## Learn about local practices

Local jails and community organizations can connect and discuss challenges and solution ideas, with the goal of improved communication and understanding of needs.



## Identify project opportunities within existing resources

Many examples exist for supporting children and families impacted by incarceration, ranging from providing information to more intensive efforts like collaborations that support in-person visiting.



## Seek alternative funding for jail programming

Because of the many challenges to staying in touch with family members, alternative funding for jail programming could avoid families paying high costs for phone calls.



## Initiate a conversation with your local jailer

Community partners and organizations often came up with ideas for projects to strengthen supports for families and children and found jailers to be open to partnering.



## Identify multiple pathways for sharing information

Community partners can provide easily accessible information to families about supporting connections between children and incarcerated parents.



## Community members can offer training

In partnership with jails, qualified community members could train jail staff on the value of supporting familial connections while a parent is incarcerated.



## Collaborate to support contact visits

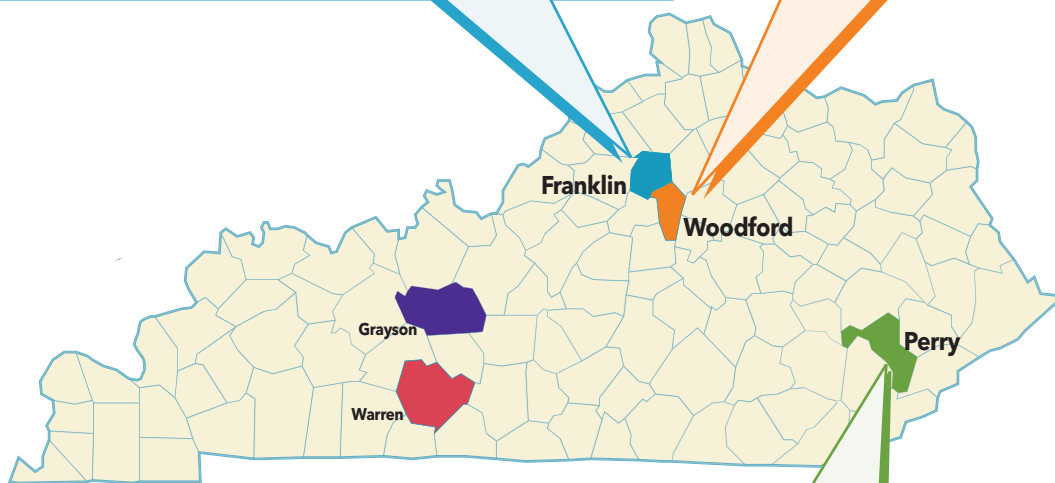
Partner with the local jail to offer spaces for parents to play and connect with their children, especially around holidays.

# BRIGHT SPOTS: KENTUCKY COMMUNITIES TAKING ACTION

Through the survey and conversations with community members, jailers, and jail staff, we were able to identify incredible work and enthusiasm behind keeping kids connected with their parents during incarceration across the state. These bright spots take on many forms, and many were implemented at little to no cost. Factors like having dedicated community partners, commitment to family connection from a jailer, and dedicated reentry supports can reduce the trauma of parental incarceration.

Community partners at the Wanda Joyce Robinson Foundation in **Franklin County** have developed strong connections with the staff at the jail, and together, they have implemented innovative ways to bring some normalcy to the lives of children impacted by incarceration. For holidays, such as Christmas, the foundation hosts gatherings for families, and incarcerated loved ones can spend time with their children in a comfortable and inviting setting, exchange gifts, and share a holiday meal. The foundation also supports children in being able to visit family or stay connected by phone with financial support by helping families cover the high costs of calls and the expenses of travel.

The **Woodford County** jail partners with community organizations to help create special moments between incarcerated parents and their children. They host a yearly father-daughter dance where fathers can spend quality time with their daughters in a setting that makes them feel special. The girls are provided with hair, makeup, and dresses, while their fathers are provided with suits.

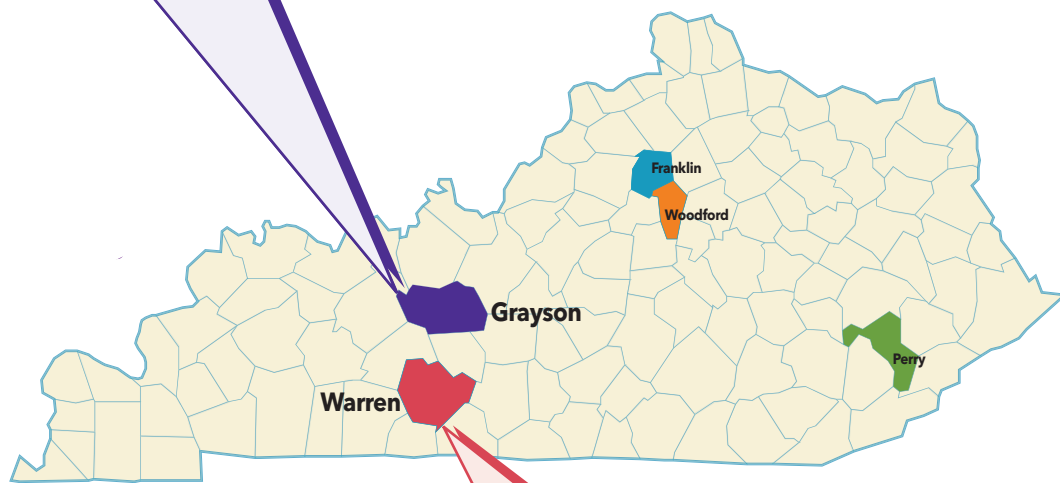


In **Perry County**, Save the Children runs an early childhood program aimed at keeping young children who have an incarcerated parent connected through letters and art activities, while also providing visiting support to parents. This comprehensive support helps minimize the trauma of parental incarceration on young children, while also ensuring the impacted family has its needs met and the parental bond can be maintained throughout incarceration.



# BRIGHT SPOTS: KENTUCKY COMMUNITIES TAKING ACTION

The **Grayson County** jail values family as a part of helping incarcerated people become a better version of themselves, and that approach permeates its work and practices. In everything from the mission statement of the jail that emphasizes preventing recidivism to how they encourage communication – including physical contact – between incarcerated parents and their children demonstrates a culture of seeing those who are incarcerated as people with families that are also impacted by the incarceration. While Grayson County Jailer Jason Woosley acknowledges some challenges to address, he shared, “I’m a big believer in contact and face-to-face visits, even if they are behind glass,” because of the “bigger benefit” from that type of contact compared to video visits for children, families, and the person incarcerated.



The **Warren County** jail helps families stay connected by offering comprehensive reentry service. During incarceration, parents are encouraged to write letters to their children to maintain the connection, and they are provided with resources on reconnecting with their children upon release. Additionally, Warren County offers concrete supports to help parents reenter society. They work to secure housing in the community where the parent is from, sign the parent up for programs like Medicaid, and ensure the incarcerated individual has all the documentation needed to reenter society.

<sup>1</sup> Kovera, M. (2019). “Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System: Prevalence, Causes, and a Search for Solutions.” *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 75, no. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Data from Kentucky Department of Corrections, processed by Kentucky Youth Advocates.

<sup>3</sup> Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., and Sandstrom, H. (2017). *Parent-Child Visiting in Prisons and Jails: A Synthesis of Research and Practice*. Urban Institute.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/state\\_of\\_phone\\_justice.html](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/state_of_phone_justice.html)

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, B., Fontaine, J., Cramer, L., Reisman, A., Cuthrell, H., Goff, M., McCoy, E., and Reginal, T. (2019). *Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails: Reducing Barriers for Families while Maximizing Safety and Security*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the National Institute of Corrections (NIC).

<sup>6</sup> Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., and Sandstrom, H. (2017). *Parent-Child Visiting in Prisons and Jails: A Synthesis of Research and Practice*. Urban Institute.