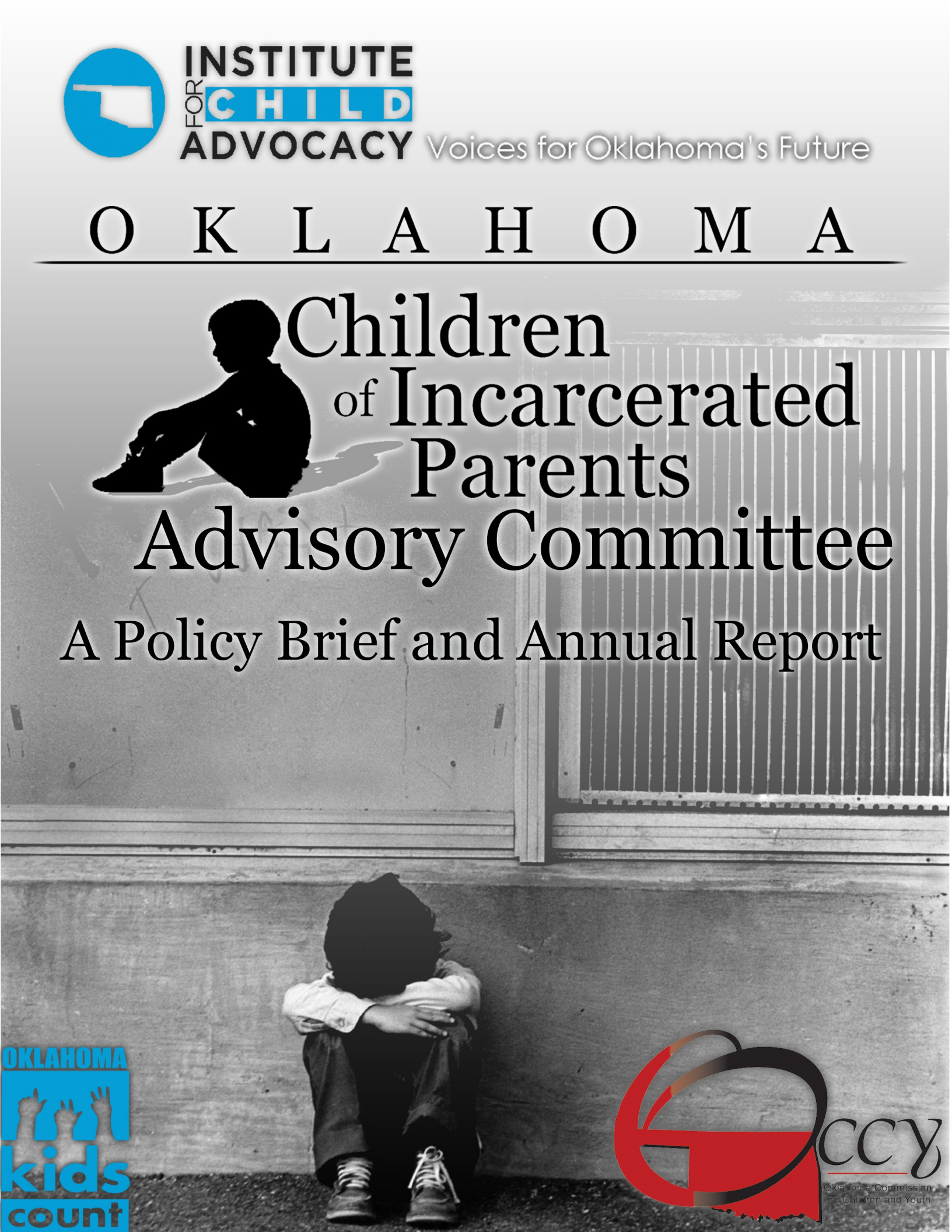
INSTITUTE FOR CHILD ADVOCACY Voices for Oklahoma's Future

OKLAHOMA

Children of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee

A Policy Brief and Annual Report



OKLAHOMA kids count

OCCY Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth

Introduction

Amy was five years old when the police came to her door and arrested her mom. "I was really scared… everything was crazy." Amy's mom asked a neighbor to look after her until her grandmother could come and get her. It's been two years and Amy has only seen her mom twice. The place she is staying is three hours away from the prison. "I wish I could see my mom more. It will be one more birthday before she comes home." Amy is one of the **35,000** children effected by parental incarceration in Oklahoma.

On any given day in Oklahoma, there are an estimated **26,000** children with incarcerated parents. Over a year's time, therefore, the number is closer to **35,000** children impacted by parental incarceration. This number does not include children whose parents are incarcerated in county jails, federal prisons, and halfway houses.

A snapshot in time

On any given day, almost **4,000** children in Oklahoma have a mother in prison. More than **2,200** of those children previously lived with their mother. This is disturbing enough but it does not truly represent the number of children over the course of a year. Over the course of a year, **6,000** children have a mother in prison and **3,300** previously lived with their mother. This number also does not include mothers who are incarcerated in county jail, federal prisons, or halfway houses. It is clear that the children in Oklahoma continue to be impacted by maternal incarceration. In many cases the mother was the sole adult living in the home prior to incarceration. These figures do not include the thousands of children effected daily by paternal incarceration.

Oklahoma Policy Helping Children of Incarcerated Parents

Since the Oklahoma Legislature passed House Bill 2300 and Senate Bill 1991 in Fiscal Years 2011 and 2012, The Oklahoma Children of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee has focused on improving outcomes for Oklahoma's children of incarcerated parents, and to safeguard children from suffering as a result of their parent's actions. Over the past several years we have identified through research that children suffer from parental loss, unstable living situations, separation from siblings, stigma and shame, and experience an increase in poverty.

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee has several projects underway:

- Distribution of the Oklahoma Children of Incarcerated Parents Resource Toolkit
- Expanding community partnerships by collaborating with the Office of Planning & Coordination, the Department of Corrections, the Comanche Children of Incarcerated Parents Board, and Lawton Public Schools to support the Lawton Children of Incarcerated Parents Teen Conference
- Helping coordinate the Muskogee Children of Incarcerated Parents Community Forum
- Connecting with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Oklahoma Federal Prison and youth organizations like 4-H Youth Development to enhance programs and visiting opportunities that can be beneficial for children with incarcerated parents
- Continue partnership with Oklahoma Drug Endangered Children (ODEC) and help broaden the use of the C4DEC Data system that will capture children's information at the time of parental arrest
- Implementation of the Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents program
- Continuing the UR-1 pilot with the Western Oklahoma Family Care Center.

In 2014, the Oklahoma Children of Incarcerated Parents Mentoring Program provided one-on-one mentoring through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma's Amachi program to **145** children and youth, identified by the Office of Juvenile Affairs (OJA), as high risk for incarceration or currently in OJA custody. Through the mentoring relationship and on-going case support by the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma (BBBSOK) staff, the children achieved significant outcomes which decreased the likelihood of future incarceration.

BBBSOK Amachi Outcomes:

- 92% of Amachi children reported higher self-confidence
- 54% of Amachi children reported being able to avoid delinquency
- 68% of Amachi children reported having improved academic performance

2014 Oklahoma Study of Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children

In 2014, Dr. Susan Sharp conducted a study of 367 women prisoners housed in 3 Oklahoma Correctional Centers: Mable Bassett, Eddie Warrior and Kate Barnard Community Correctional Center. The most common types of offenses were drug or alcohol and property crimes. More than 1 in 4 of the women surveyed had a parent in prison during their own childhood. About 1 out of 20 reported a grandparent had been in prison during their childhood.

Parent/child contact in jails and prisons

Regardless of the circumstances, a child's life will be changed forever by parental incarceration. Children have the right to see and talk to their incarcerated parents when it is appropriate and safe. Staying connected helps both the child and the incarcerated parent maintain a healthy relationship.

Dr. Susan Sharp's study looked at the level of contact between Oklahoma's women prisoners and their children. The majority of the women in the study who had children were living with their children at the time of incarceration. 83.5% of the women reported they were still allowed contact with their children. However, the type and amount of contact varied greatly, ranging from very consistent contact to almost no contact. Visitation (face to face contact) was the most complex, with 37.8% of the women in the study whose children had never been to visit.

According to the 2014 Oklahoma Study of Incarcerated Mothers and their Children, 10% of the children were in foster homes or agencies. The average age of these children at the time of parental incarceration was only four years old. Children placed in the child welfare system face more challenges trying to visit their parent(s) because the correctional system, child welfare and the foster parent must coordinate the visits.

Prisoners Under Construction

The key to improving child outcomes is identifying the specific barriers in meeting their needs and working to remove them. However, Oklahoma is lacking in systematic tracking of children whose parents are incarcerated. Through Dr. Sharp's study we know mothers reported problems their children had experienced, both before and after their mother's arrest. Among the children who were living with the mother immediately prior to incarceration, the problems most frequently reported were school issues, and trouble with friends and guardians. The number one problem was depression. Bad grades were a commonly reported problem too.

Also, financial burden was an issue. With parental incarceration comes a financial burden for the other parent or caregiver who is providing for the child. Most often the family does not apply for state assistance because of concerns about the parent having to pay for child support while they are incarcerated and after they are released. This results in children not having some of their needs met.

Prison can help keep parent/child relationships alive

According to the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, 62% of parents in state prisons and 84% of parents in federal prisons are held more than 100 miles away from their last residence. Visitation and phone calls are extremely costly to the family, and these costs serve as barriers when trying to maintain contact with an incarcerated parent.

Oklahoma has some programs that help keep families united. The Girl Scouts of Oklahoma has helped hundreds of girl scouts maintain familial ties with their incarcerated mothers through the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program. The Oklahoma Messages Project sends DVD messages to children from their incarcerated moms and dads. The Angel Tree Ministries provides gifts during the holidays to many children with an incarcerated loved one in all 77 counties.

- In 2014, Girl Scouts of Eastern Oklahoma Beyond Bars program served **680** children. They also added Okmulgee, Bartlesville, Seminole, and Ada to their service area.
  - o **450** children participated in community service
  - o **380** children participated in Special Interest troops (group therapy)
  - o **400** children participated in anger management sessions
  - o Of the **522** children who had negative school behavior, **475** children showed improvement in grades and attendance and no suspensions
  - o **200** children were referred for individual counseling

- In 2014, Oklahoma Messages Project sent DVD messages and books from incarcerated moms and dads to **881** children to maintain a healthy connection with their parents. They also launched Outdoor Adventure Days for children of incarcerated parents with **49** kids attending.

- In 2014, New Hope, a community-based program in Tulsa, served **417** children with incarcerated parents through after school programs, case management, residential camps, day camps, and family support. New Hope provides transportation as needed for these children to attend the after school programs and community-based groups. They receive referrals from school counselors.

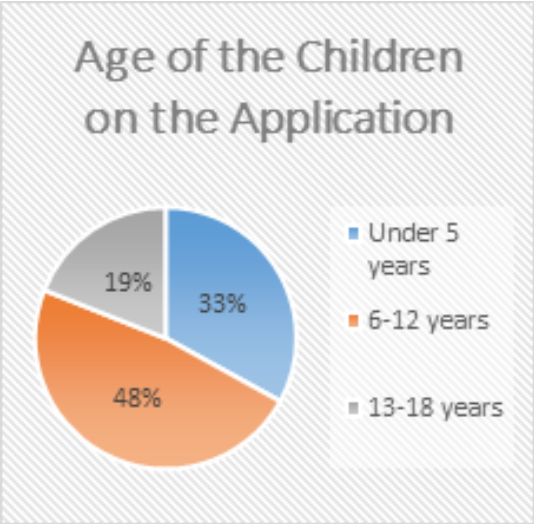
- In 2014, around **150** Oklahoma children, with incarcerated parents, attended New Day Camp 1 & 2. Next year, practicum students from Saint Paul School of Theology will attend New Day Camp 1 to learn more about children of incarcerated parents.

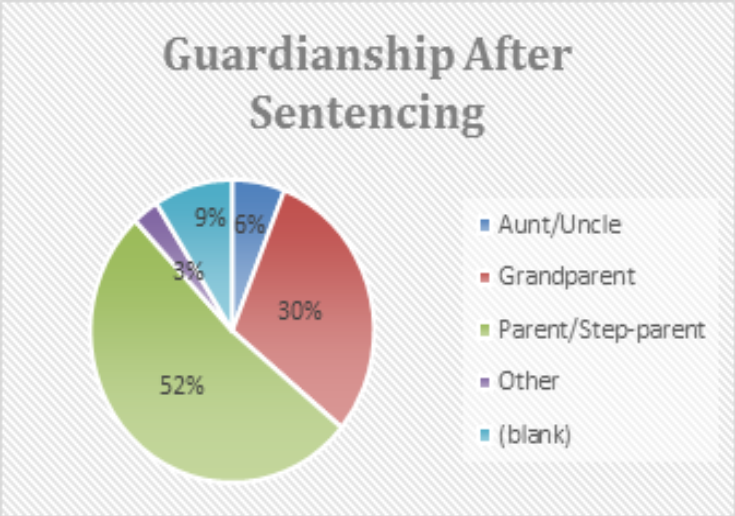
- In 2014, **11** children attended the Little Light Christian School, a private non-profit elmentary school specifically serving children with incarcerated parents. The school curently has several children on their waiting list and many people asking for a pre-school.

- In 2014, Big Brothers and Big Sisters served **535** children in the Amachi program for children of incarcerated parents. Children in the program are assessed across multiple developmental areas and risk indicators including; increases in self-confidence and academic achievement and decreases in delinquent behaviors such as skipping school or using drugs. BBBSOK also implemented a new youth outcome development program for each child to set goals to ensure positive outcomes to meet the child's specific needs.

- In 2012, the Angel Tree Ministries program provided **6140** Oklahoma children with an incarcerated parent with a Christmas gift. The definition of a parent figure is very loose and in some cases included grandparents or aunts/uncles that were incarcerated who requested gifts for these children.

2012 Project Angel Tree Data:





Recommendations:

1. Early and focused intervention is needed to prevent adverse outcomes in adulthood among children of incarcerated parents.
   - Parent-child contact needs to be improved with child-friendly visitation areas at the facilities
   - More child-parent programs to maintain strong relationships
   - Provision of transportation for children to visit
   - Skype and email could be used to foster more contact
   - Train school teachers in an effort to reduce stigma and improve children's learning outcomes
2. Financial and emotional needs of children with incarcerated parents.
   - Systematic tracking of children with incarcerated parents so information about available resources can be accessed by caregivers
   - Children be assessed for educational and mental health needs
   - Legal assistance with the child support requirement waived or lowered during incarceration
   - Closely examine the financial assistance needed to support children with incarcerated parents
3. Provide more training, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and re-entry assistance in order to reduce recidivism and increase the stability of these families upon release of their parents.
4. Modify Sentencing Policies

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