

Research Brief

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Children with Incarcerated Parents: A Descriptive Analysis of Children and Families Served by Angel Tree in Maryland

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Purpose

The challenges children and families with incarcerated parents face are significant. Children with incarcerated parents are particularly vulnerable because they often face the trauma of loss and the economic and social challenges that parental incarceration can bring. In an attempt to help serve the needs of these vulnerable families, Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship, partners with over 10,000 local churches each Christmas to provide gifts to children in the name of their incarcerated parents.

Angel Tree serves approximately 500,000 children and 275,000 imprisoned parents annually around the U.S. In doing so, Angel Tree has amassed a large amount of information on this population that can better inform the field of the needs and circumstances of these families and inform Angel Tree practices and reach.

To that end, Angel Tree partnered with researchers in November 2007 to extract and analyze data Angel Tree has been collecting on its Inmate Christmas Participation form. Because this was Angel Tree's first attempt at excavating its data, a strategic decision was made to focus on the Maryland population it serves, with the understanding that this project will provide a template to use in other states and, perhaps, nationally.

The purpose of this report is to provide a preliminary description of the characteristics of children with incarcerated parents in Maryland, their caregivers, and their incarcerated parents who participated in the Angel Tree program between 2004 and 2006. These initial findings have been culled from a larger, more comprehensive study of the Maryland Angel Tree data, which is still being analyzed.

Background

National Estimates

Current estimates indicate that on any given day, roughly 1.5 million children in this country have a parent in prison. Nearly 10 percent of the minors in this country have a parent under some form of correctional supervision; most of these children are young, low-income, and minority (Mumola, 2000).

The average age of these children is eight years old. Parental incarceration disproportionately impacts ethnic minorities, such that African-American children are nine times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison, and Hispanic children are three times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison (Mumola, 2000).

Maryland Estimates

According to the National Institute of Corrections, as of 2007, the Maryland prison system had 27 state facilities housing 22,316 inmates.¹ Seventy-six percent of these inmates are African American, yet African Americans account for only 28 percent of the total Maryland population.

There is no way to know for certain how many of the adults in Maryland state prisons are parents to minor children because the state does not collect this data and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has not done state-level estimates.

The only estimate of the number of incarcerated parents with minor children in Maryland comes from a 2007 report to the Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families in Maryland. In this report national percentages of male and female state prisoners with minor children were applied to male

¹ This is only state prisons. Additionally, there are 30 jail facilities in Maryland's 23 counties, with a rated capacity of 13,670 inmates, and 75,698 probationers and 14,351 parolees under correctional supervision in Maryland.

and female state prison counts in Maryland to get an estimate of the number of inmate parents in Maryland state prisons and the approximate number of children who would be affected.

Nationally, 54.7 percent of men incarcerated in a state facility reportedly have an average of 2.04 children each; 65.3 percent of incarcerated women have an average of 2.38 children each. Applying these estimates to the Maryland population reveals that roughly 12,600 inmates in Maryland state prisons are parents to approximately 26,000 minor children.

Effects on Children and Families

Recent, reliable research has consistently demonstrated that two of the most significant consequences children and their caregivers experience as a result of parental incarceration can be categorized as family instability and financial instability (Garfinkel et al., 2008; Murray & Farrington, 2007; Phillips et al. 2006). These studies show:

- Temporary, informal care arrangements may permanently separate children from their incarcerated parent, family, and friends.
- Expensive and uncomfortable visits limit the contact between parent and child needed to maintain a relationship during incarceration.
- Dramatic reductions in family income and resource-strained caregivers result in significant financial hardship.

Despite the limitations of estimates, it is safe to conclude that parental incarceration impacts a large number of children, most of whom are young, poor, and minority. The scope of this problem and the potential effects on children and families points to the need for additional ways to identify children and families impacted by incarceration and to determine their characteristics and what private and public institutions can do to support this vulnerable population. The current study attempts to help fill this gap by mining a never-before-used database compiled by Angel Tree to gain more information on children with incarcerated parents in Maryland.

Sample and Methods

This study uses data from 2004, 2005, and 2006 Angel Tree applications from 31 Maryland correctional facilities to learn more about the children, their parents, and caregivers. The unit of analysis includes both individual children as well as individual prisoners with children age 17 and under.

The data were imported into a relational database, cleaned and restructured, or “stacked,” by the child field, resulting in 19,459 records that represent all prisoner-to-child relationships where a prisoner entered a child on an Angel Tree application.

Descriptive and inferential statistics are used to provide a summary and basic description of the sample’s key characteristics (e.g., prisoner’s age, child’s age, child’s caregiver, child’s residence, etc.) garnered from the Angel Tree Application.

Results

Children Served

There were 19,442 Angel Tree children served in Maryland between 2004 and 2006. This total does not represent the total unique children across the three years since 10 percent within a given year are also in at least one subsequent year. Table 1 reflects the count of unique children per year and represents no duplicated children within any given year.

Table 1: Unique Children per Year

2004	2005	2006	Total
7,511 ²	6,552	5,379	19,442

The majority (greater than 99%) of children had just one incarcerated parent. There were only 17 instances (across three years) where a child was reported as having two incarcerated parents (i.e., both mother and father).

Gender

Boys accounted for approximately 48 percent of the sample each year, and girls accounted for approximately 52 percent of the sample each year.

Age

The average age of a child served is 8 years old for both boys and girls in each of the respective data years. There exists no statistically significant difference in mean age for the children by gender for any data year.

Places of Residence

The majority of the children (77% average across data years) resided in Maryland. Washington, D.C., had the second highest residency rate for Angel Tree children (6% average across data years) and Virginia the third highest (3% across all data years).

Within Maryland, approximately 45 percent of the Angel Tree children resided in Baltimore City. Table 2

² 2004 and 2005 totals include children of parents housed in jails. After 2005, Angel Tree no longer operated its ministry in jails because of the short-term nature of the incarceration.

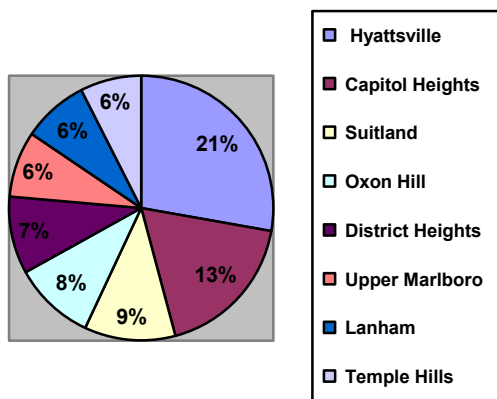
shows roughly 90 percent lived in the same 10 Maryland jurisdictions in each data year: Baltimore City (45%), Prince George's (11%), Baltimore (10%), Anne Arundel (5%), Wicomico (4%), Harford (4%), Montgomery (4%), Charles (3%), Washington (3%), and Frederick (2%)³.

Table 2: Percentage of Children by Year and Maryland County

Maryland County	2004	2005	2006
Allegany	0.9%	0.8%	1.2%
Anne Arundel	5.5%	5.8%	4.2%
Baltimore	10.9%	9.3%	10.9%
Baltimore City	45.0%	42.3%	44.7%
Calvert	0.6%	0.8%	0.8%
Caroline	0.5%	0.6%	1.2%
Carroll	0.7%	1.4%	1.1%
Cecil	1.2%	1.4%	1.1%
Charles	2.6%	3.1%	2.6%
Dorchester	0.8%	0.8%	1.1%
Frederick	2.0%	1.5%	2.0%
Garrett	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Harford	3.1%	2.4%	3.8%
Howard	1.4%	1.7%	1.7%
Kent	0.3%	0.4%	0.2%
Montgomery	2.9%	4.5%	3.5%
Prince Georges	11.8%	13.2%	9.4%
Queen Annes	0.5%	0.2%	0.3%
Saint Marys	1.3%	1.3%	1.4%
Somerset	0.9%	0.3%	0.9%
Talbot	0.3%	0.5%	0.5%
Washington	2.5%	3.2%	3.2%
Wicomico	3.8%	3.4%	3.8%
Worcester	0.4%	0.8%	0.4%

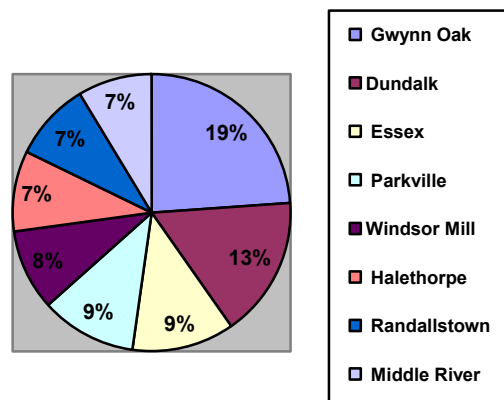
Prince George's County had the second highest residency rate in 2004 and 2005, and Baltimore County was second in 2006. Figures 1 and 2 break these counties down further by neighborhood and reveal that in Prince George's County, Hyattsville and Capitol Heights had the greatest concentration of Angel Tree children. In Baltimore County, the Gwynn Oak and Dundalk communities had the highest concentration of children.

Figure 1: Concentrated Neighborhoods in Prince George's County (2004-2006 Average)



³ Percentages reflect the average number of children in each jurisdiction across all three data years.

Figure 2: Concentrated Neighborhoods in Baltimore County (2004-2006 Average)



Incarcerated Parents Served

Between 2004 and 2006, 7,950 incarcerated parents participated in Angel Tree Christmas. The total of 7,950 does not represent the unique total prisoners across three years since approximately 20 percent within a given year participate in at least one subsequent year. Table 3 reflects the count of unique prisoners per year and represents no duplicated prisoners within any given year.

Table 3: Unique Parent per Year

2004	2005	2006	Total
3,036 ⁴	2,717	2,197	7,950

Gender

Incarcerated mothers accounted for between 14 and 18 percent of the population in each respective data year. Incarcerated fathers accounted for between 82 and 86 percent of the population in each respective data year.

Age

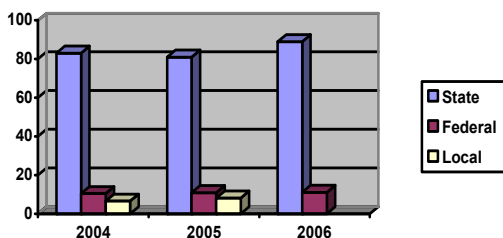
The average age of a parent was 34 years old for both men and women in each of the respective data years. There are no statistically significant differences of mean age by gender and/or by year.

Type of Facility

As seen in Figure 3, the vast majority of incarcerated parents who participated in Angel Tree Christmas were located in State facilities (83% to 89%). Only 10 to 11 percent came from federal facilities in any data year, and even fewer participated who were housed in local jails (only 6.5% in 2004 and 8.1% in 2005).

⁴ 2004 and 2005 totals include parents incarcerated in jails. After 2005, Angel Tree no longer operated its ministry in jails because of the short term nature of the incarceration.

Figure 3: Type of Facility where Angel Tree Parents were Housed, 2004 - 2006

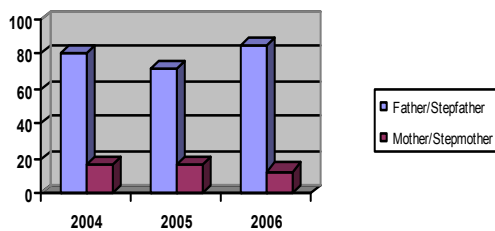


Further, the average number of years expected until release reported by inmates was three years for each respective data year.

Inmate's Relationship to Child

As seen in Figure 4, the majority of inmate participation came from incarcerated fathers or stepfathers.

Figure 4: Prisoner Relationship to Child, 2004 - 2006

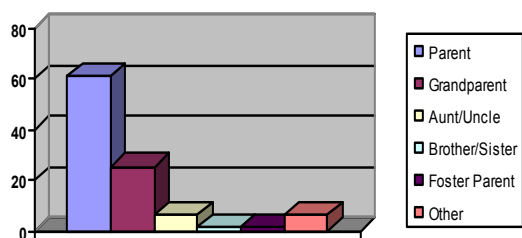


On average, each prisoner had approximately two children (as reported on the Angel Tree application). The mean number of children per prisoner by year and/or gender of the parent varies little and is not statistically significant.

Caregivers Served

Sixty-one percent of children were living with the other parent, 25 percent had grandparents as their primary caregivers, just over 1 percent were reported to be in the care of a foster parent or sibling, 6 percent were reported to be living with aunts/uncles, and 6 percent lived with a friend or other (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Caregiver Relationship to Child, 2006



Changes in Residence

In 2005, 27 percent of children and caregivers had a different zip code from the one reported in 2004.

This number increased to 30 percent from 2005 to 2006.

Race/Ethnicity

Angel Tree has not had a question about race or ethnicity on its inmate application⁵, so we examined the "language spoken in the home" question from the inmate application form as a proxy, albeit a weak one. English was reported as the language spoken in 96 percent of caregiver homes and Spanish in 4 percent of caregiver homes. Approximately 1 percent reported having a bilingual household. No other language options were provided on the application.

Discussion

We have found that the Maryland demographic picture of children and families with incarcerated parents is similar to the national picture in terms of age, gender, parent-child and caregiver-child relationships, though a more detailed analysis by parent gender, type of facility, etc., is needed. Arguably, one of the greatest benefits of this database was our ability to find where the children are living in Maryland. It is now possible to target those areas of concentration to determine what services are currently being offered and what additional supports could possibly be put in place.

With Baltimore City home to almost half of the children and caregivers in the Maryland Angel Tree database and because we know seven in 10 incarcerated persons return to Baltimore County or City upon release (La Vigne & Kachnowski, 2003), it is essential to have services linking these families to resources they need in these areas.

The 2007 report to the Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families in Maryland did a scan of local programs and found that the state's support of this population falls into two primary practice/service categories:

1. *Mentoring*: Examples include Big Brothers and Big Sisters Amachi (central Maryland), the Center for Children, Inc. (Southern Maryland), the Institute for Interactive Instruction (Prince George's County) and the U.S. Dream Academy (Baltimore City and Washington, D.C.).

2. *Visitation Support*: Project SIT (Wicomico County), Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (state-wide), and the Turn About Program (Baltimore City).

⁵ However, it is adding a question for race/ethnicity to its 2008 Christmas application.

A more comprehensive scan of targeted programs and other services—particularly in high concentration areas—with an investigation of the number of children being served by the current programs and an evaluation of their effectiveness would be a useful next step in supporting Maryland’s children and families with incarcerated parents.

Angel Tree practices have also been informed by this research. With the estimate of 12,600 parents housed in Maryland state facilities and the knowledge that 89 percent of this study’s sample came from state facilities in 2006, we can estimate that the Angel Tree inmate participation rate is low—approximately 15 percent. To better serve a greater portion of its target population, Angel Tree can further explore the following:

- How it can reach and engage more incarcerated parents overall and those with children living in areas of high concentration;
- How it can target high concentration areas to provide year-round services that go beyond Angel Tree Christmas;
- How it can increase the participation of churches serving the children and caregivers in high concentration areas.

Conclusions

Reliable research on children with incarcerated parents has been limited, in large part because many institutions that come in contact with these children

have no way of identifying them as having an incarcerated parent. This has led to a lack of visibility of their needs and a lack of reliable data and research necessary to inform policy and practice that can support them. The Angel Tree database has the potential to help fill this gap because it is the largest known national database dedicated solely to this population. The current study shows the usefulness of this very preliminary data in answering key questions about children with incarcerated parents, which can help inform and shape the work of local communities.

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Acknowledgments

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