

## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Invisible victims: How children's museums are strengthening families through partnerships with correctional facilities

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Email: [vhott@cmom.org](mailto:vhott@cmom.org)**Abstract**

A large and increasing number of children in the United States are systematically rendered invisible due to the effects of parental incarceration, forced to navigate a correctional system that does not often take their particular needs into account. This trauma can put children at risk of long-term developmental consequences that can be lasting across generations. Two children's museums, among others, are developing unique partnerships to mitigate this negative impact. The Children's Museum of Manhattan has an ongoing partnership with the NYC Department of Correction to reunite incarcerated parents at Rikers Island with their children for an afternoon at the Museum. Hands On Children's Museum in Olympia, Washington, is partnering with the Washington Department of Corrections to redesign the children's area of visiting rooms in three correctional facilities. Anecdotal evidence of strengthened parent–child bonds and improved behavior of parents during incarceration show that early indications of both efforts are positive.

In the United States, a large and increasing number of children are impacted by parental incarceration, with a persistent and disproportionate impact on under-resourced communities and people of color. To address the needs of these families and guided by their founding principles to nurture the potential of all children in their community, children's museums across the United States are developing unique programs and partnerships with carceral systems, whether in jails and prisons or in situ at museum locations. Children's museums are often part of the social service fabric of their communities, providing resources such as health information, parenting classes, or connections to city agencies when needed (Association of Children's Museums, 2019). They are devoted to serving all children, including in the context of those whose lives have been affected by the incarceration of a parent, thus becoming a critical player in the conversation of a complex criminal justice

system where incarceration is not only consequential to those detained themselves. In creating environments and experiences in prison visiting rooms or utilizing existing exhibits and child-centered spaces that are informed by the best practices developed by children's museums and the most rigorous research available on the developing child, families affected by incarceration can develop and strengthen their relationships, with opportunities to be viewed as a mother or father first, rather than an incarcerated individual, inside and/or outside the walls of a correctional facility.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Parental incarceration as a risk factor for children

Risk factors, as stated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), are characteristics of one's "biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precede and are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes, like behaviors, that impact health" (SAMHSA, 2019). Risk factors specific to childhood (ages 0–17) are called adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, and are defined as potentially traumatic events in childhood that undermine a child's sense of safety and stability and also may have lasting, negative consequences on health and well-being. Such events include experiencing and/or witnessing violence, substance use disorders, and instability from parental separation due to incarceration (CDC, 2022).

ACEs and other social determinants of health, including food and financial insecurity, residing in racially segregated housing, or frequent moving, may cause toxic stress for the child, thus negatively impacting their brain development and stress-response systems, further affecting executive function skills such as attention and memory (CDC, 2022). This is especially pertinent as parental incarceration disproportionately impacts people of color, those with low educational attainment, and those living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The most recent data on the subject, The Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Survey of Prison Inmates*, was conducted in 2016 (released in 2020) and provides insights into how children are impacted by incarceration, finding that roughly 1.25 million children in the United States under the age of 18 have a parent in prison (US Department of Justice, 2020). Moreso, data show that children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to be incarcerated themselves (Martin, 2017). Black and Hispanic children in the United States were observed to be 7.5 times more likely and 2.3 times more likely, respectively, to have an incarcerated parent in comparison with white children (Martin, 2017). Moreso, parental incarceration is often observed in conjunction with other stressors, such as economic instability, parental divorce, or parental substance use (Turney, 2019). Due to the prominence of recidivism, children of incarcerated parents are likely to experience increased instability and insecurity as their mother or father may cycle in and out of prison, depriving the child of the strong, close, personal relationships that are shown to mitigate the consequences of ACEs (La Vigne et al., 2018).

Additionally, children of people who are incarcerated are likely to experience more risk factors during their lifetime in comparison with those not involved in the carceral system (Turney, 2019). Furthermore, the hardship of separation exacerbates the stress and stigma that often accompany the incarceration of a parent, amplifying feelings of abandonment and rejection for the child. The cumulative impact can be devastating and lasting across generations. The most common consequence of parental incarceration is antisocial behavior, which is described as behaviors that go against social norms, dishonesty, lack of impulse control and inhibition, hallucinations and delusions, paranoia, hyper-activity, inability to concentrate, or impaired communication skills. Without resources and support during this time, these behaviors can lead to future criminal activity and difficulties in

academic environments (Martin, 2017). As summarized by La Vigne et al. (2018), “‘support’ can be as simple as acknowledging the unique nature of their [the child’s] loss in a manner that accepts rather than stigmatizes.”

Parental incarceration involves the removal of a mother or father from a child’s household and daily routine, leaving many unanswered questions in their absence. Custodial caregivers, often extended family, grandparents, siblings, or in some cases, foster care or child welfare employees, must then support this child in the case where the incarcerated parent was the primary caretaker. While children of incarcerated fathers are often placed with their mothers, children of incarcerated mothers are subject to uncertain living arrangements in the wake of detainment. Data show that one-third of US mothers were the sole child rearers of their children prior to incarceration (La Vigne et al., 2018).

Furthermore, incarcerated people self-report that their imprisonment impacts the ability to parent their children, make financial decisions for their families, and communicate with loved ones. Children of incarcerated mothers, rather than fathers, are more likely to become incarcerated, possibly due to the fact that mothers are more probable to be single parents, and that 39% of incarcerated women come from a single parent household. Additionally, if a child of an incarcerated parent is not placed with another parent or family member, they are likely to arrive in a foster care system, subject to increased changes and uncertainty as they question when or if they will see their parent again, and where or with whom they will reside within the future. Data suggest that one in eight incarcerated parents have a child in the US foster care system and will lose their parental rights (US Department of Justice, 2020).

Oftentimes, children can maintain connection with their incarcerated parent through phone calls and contact visits—where no physical barrier is present between detained individual and visitor, but physical contact is limited and supervised (Law Insider, n.d.). However, there are many obstacles associated with this. Less than one-third of US individuals who are incarcerated receive a visit from a loved one each month (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). In the United States, visitation policies differ from state to state, with some limiting visit dates and times in addition to other barriers. When placing an incarcerated individual into a state prison, very few states consider the distance a family will have to travel to visit their loved one. A survey conducted in 2004 by The Bureau of Justice showed that two-thirds of visitors traveled over 100 miles to visit their incarcerated family member, and that 10% of visitors traveled over 500 miles (US Department of Justice, 2004). Local grassroots organizations work to serve families impacted by incarceration by providing access to resources that help with transportation and housing for visiting prisons, but families still face hardships in order to fund long trips or take time away from work to bring children to see their incarcerated parent.

While future research is needed on populations impacted by parental incarceration, there is notable and substantial risk that the child will be negatively impacted. However, child development is widely recognized as not being a linear or concrete process. Protective factors can support a child during this changing and challenging period. While not necessarily a victim of their parent’s conviction, millions of children are thrust into an intricate criminal justice system whose systemic societal mechanisms of support are not necessarily designed for families, let alone children. Therefore, children with an incarcerated parent are often informally referred to as “invisible victims” in popular culture and public health writings. This systemic invisibility exacerbates the negative effects of separation.

Therefore, through this complex system, parent, child, custodial caregiver, and more are thus propelled onto the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline,” as coined by the Children’s Defense Fund. While often convoluted and multilayered, this pipeline describes how the United States is an unequal playing field for minors, with the life trajectory of invisible, poor children of color, rather than their affluent white counterparts, more likely arriving at incarceration because of systemic forces of racism and poverty blocking access to the resources and opportunities needed to thrive in today’s world. These children are “already in the Pipeline to Prison before

taking a single step or uttering a word...They were not derailed from the right track; they never got on it.” (Children's Defense Fund, 2007, p. 3).

## Strengthening family connections

It is generally agreed that children should not be punished because of their parents' incarceration. This premise alone underscores the need to focus attention on techniques to improve the lives of such children. One way is to help them to maintain their relationship and keep their family intact—when advantageous for the child's health, safety, and well-being. Research shows that if children have a relationship with a parent who goes to prison, and that relationship is maintained during their parent's sentence, the child will have better outcomes in life and school (Cramer et al., 2017). Under certain circumstances, contact visits between a parent and child are observed to lessen the effects of parental incarceration on the child, reduce feelings of abandonment and anxiety, and allow them to physically see that their parent is safe, stable, and healthy (Cramer et al., 2017). Research also shows that these visits are most beneficial when reunion occurs in a place where children feel welcome and comfortable and transpires in conjunction with a family strengthening program (Cramer et al., 2017). Physical contact and privacy are key components of visitation that are routinely not permitted in situ at correctional facilities, but are observed to help family members emotionally cope and reconnect during this period of stress and separation. Therefore, programs that aim to create opportunities for privacy and closeness through negotiations with Corrections Officers, whose main priority is security, are most valuable for the incarcerated parent and child.

For parents, visitation benefits include a lower rate of recidivism and a more successful re-entry after release. When parents have opportunities to maintain their relationships with children while incarcerated, parental attachment is supported and a bond is maintained. Parent–child relationships can also help motivate people who are incarcerated to avoid disciplinary action and participate in correctional programming that supports their needs (Wang, 2021). Given the promising correlations between regular parent–child visits and reduced institutional misconduct and recidivism, visits could be an important motivator for improving parent outcomes during and after incarceration (Christian, 2009). A recent 2023 study investigating the effects of a parental support intervention on parent–child relationship and criminal attitude of parents in custody support such claims, finding that promoting positive parenting behaviors during incarceration has beneficial effects on relationship quality and criminal outcomes for the adult (Norman & Enebrink, 2023). Norman and Enebrink (2023) state that while future studies investigating the long-term outcomes on child health and parental recidivism are needed, their findings support the use of child development focused interventions on such populations, showcasing encouraging results for both the children and parents impacted by incarceration.

However, it is important to note that enforcing parent–child relationships is not appropriate in all situations. For example, children and parents who did not have a relationship before the parent was incarcerated may not benefit from forming a relationship after the parent is detained (Martin, 2017). It has also been found that noncontact visits, where there is a physical barrier (such as a plexiglass window) in between the detained individual and visitor, are stressful and potentially traumatic for children (Law Insider, n.d.). Structured interviews with 69 incarcerated parents enrolled in a family strengthening program found that if children misbehave during a noncontact visit, the parents reported lower ratings of closeness with their child, negating the possible benefits of the visits (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014).

## Children's museums offer solutions

Children's museums, backed by research, undeniably contribute to early childhood development at the most critical stage in life. They undergird health and well-being, responsible global citizenship, educational achievement, and the development of strong communities. Known as the “third space” in early learning, children's museums achieve what no classroom, home, or playground can do alone. Defined by the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) as “a nonprofit educational and cultural institution committed to serving the needs and interests of children by providing exhibits and programs that stimulate curiosity and motivate learning,” they create a space for family engagement, which is vital to supporting healthy, thriving children and communities (Association of Children's Museums, 2019).

The singularity of a children's museum differs from experiences available at other museums and in other public and private spaces. Under one roof, the equivalency of a science museum, history museum, art museum, playground, classroom, library, and family living room coalesce around child-initiated and educator-supported intergenerational learning that is expertly designed around research-based installations. Children's museums are unique community institutions where all children, regardless of circumstance, are valued citizens with the right to developmentally-appropriate and high-quality play-based learning experiences, with family, culture, environment, and society all recognized as critical components to a child's healthy development (Association of Children's Museums, 2019). Functioning today as popular local destinations, educational laboratories, supportive resources, and powerful advocates for children, each children's museum is distinctive in its community served and targeted programming, often working with community groups to identify and meet specific needs for their own children and families.

In the late nineteenth century, the first children's museums were established as an alternative to existing museums in which the “impressive, magnificent exhibits in vast halls tended to quell the eagerness of a child” (Schofield-Bodt, 1987). Initially created as an experiment to welcome the inquisitive minds of children into the museum world, these first children's museums were designed to be experiential, rather than object-oriented, sources of learning (Cohen, 1989). Anna Billings Gallup, the Curator of Fine Arts at the Central Museum (later renamed Brooklyn Museum) was the driving force behind these early concepts as she spearheaded the effort in the United States (Schofield-Bodt, 1987). Gallup encouraged museum professionals to now “stand ever at attention and develop a technique in service that will implement a child's own power” (Schofield-Bodt, 1987).

Following the turn of the 20th century, children's museums worldwide began opening in response to Gallup's work and the progressive education movement, calling for dynamic and varied methods of early learning that prioritize community engagement and educational theorist John Dewey's philosophy of learning by doing (Cohen, 1989; Swigger, 2019). Childhood began to be recognized as an important life stage, and the establishment of new child labor laws and growth of an emerging middle class in the United States provided an audience for the field to emerge (Schofield-Bodt, 1987). With efforts to broaden children's horizons, these early museums sought to educate young children through hands-on experiences with real objects. While collecting objects remained an important pillar of their work, the priorities of early children's museums began shifting from traditional museum methods to using these pieces as teaching tools for learning (Schofield-Bodt, 1987). By keeping pace with the ever-changing world and needs of children, children's museums soon adapted their programming to prepare children for the technologies of the 21st century, thus incorporating parent–child workshops, curricula for even younger visitors, and expanding activity-oriented experiences. Today, there are more than 300 children's museums worldwide (Association of Children's Museums, 2019). Echoing their foundational ethos to best serve children and families in our rapidly changing society, these institutions are expanding the breadth and depth of their impact and broadening



the age groups and communities they reach in an effort to provide valuable learning experiences for every child, regardless of circumstance or socioeconomic status (Vora, 2023).

A defining feature of the children's museum is play, and the recognition that play is the best way for children to learn (The LEGO Group, 2023). When a child plays, they are learning about themselves and their surroundings, supporting the development of executive function skills, social-emotional abilities, and improved literacy—all in service of preparing children to enter school ready to learn (The LEGO Group, 2023). Given that from before birth to the first day of kindergarten, a person's brain develops at a faster pace than at any other stage of life (Pritzker, 2015), children's museums are perfectly positioned to provide enriching and supportive resources—whether through interactive exhibits, artful public programs, outreach initiatives, open-sourced curricula, early childhood classes, or parent workshops—during this period of immense growth. Through the combination of daily life experiences, play, and caregiver interactions, early childhood lays the foundation for all future learning and the development into stable, successful, and healthy adults, and children's museums are there to encourage and educate families during this time (First Things First, 2018).

Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children (Ginsburg, 2007), and by reframing daily interactions as educational opportunities that support foundational life skills, children's museums give parents and caregivers opportunities to reinforce critical child-centered learning. They empower families to make playful learning an everyday feature of their lives, building appreciation for children's museums as not only parenting resources, but catalysts for school readiness and future learning. (Association of Children's Museums, 2019). Moreso, children's museums present a unique opportunity for intergenerational learning in a museum setting. Through interactive exhibits and programming, younger generations are observed to strengthen their relationships with older adults, helping to break down negative aging stereotypes and reduce ageism (Thompson Jr & Weaver, 2016). Young children involved in intergenerational mentorships are also shown to exhibit increases in school attendance and improvement in life skills (Henkin & Butts, 2012). These types of intergenerational experiences help to develop and strengthen family relationships, making space, place, and experience indivisible in a children's museum and as essential to learning as the educators and researchers themselves.

While most academic research has centered on science museums and learning outcomes regarding children over 7 years of age, few studies have investigated the effects of children's museums on early learning (Puchner et al., 2001). Puchner, Rapoport, and Gaskins (2001) examined conditions that facilitate learning in a children's museum, finding that children remained at exhibits longer and displayed increased learning when scaffolding—how adults support a child's development by encouraging learning—was observed, indicating adult participation is most supportive of child learning in this non-institutional, non-classroom setting (Puchner et al., 2001). Additionally, Tan et al. (2021) conducted a randomized controlled trial to examine the educational effects of regular children's museum visits on cognitive development, finding that children in the treatment group (regular children's museum visits over the course of two semesters) exhibited higher scores on an evidence-based intelligence scale than those not visiting a children's museum (Tan et al., 2021). As the field is rapidly expanding, both studies describe an urgent need to investigate the short- and long-term educational effects of children's museums worldwide. ACM Executive Director Arthur G. Affleck remarks that “Children's museums are the fastest growing sector of the museum community because there is an increased recognition of the power of the hands-on, interactive, and playful learning exhibits and experiences they provide” (Haider, 2023).

Children's museums are establishing themselves as vital platforms for meaningful early life experiences for children, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many children worldwide experienced the negative effects of isolation and consequential learning loss (Doan-Nguyen, 2023). The closures of schools and childcare centers have disrupted the

learning of nearly every child in America, with historically under-resourced, low-income communities of color bearing the brunt of this impact, forced to shoulder a disproportionate burden in supporting their children and closing the achievement gap. Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Temple University professor of psychology and Association of Children's Museums collaborator, remarks on the timely criticality of the field, stating that “children's museums are a safe haven for them [children] to deal with their emotions as they re-enter the social world” (Vora, 2023).

However, the work of children's museums is not just about leveling the playing field, it's about recognizing and celebrating the potential of every child. Curated environments, installations, and experiences are the tools that drive learning outcomes, which translates into why creating opportunities for *all* children and families to access these resources, including those who have been systematically deprived of such privileges of play and familial engagement—namely those impacted by parental incarceration—are critical for these institutions to serve its diverse and varied audiences.

## CASE STUDIES

Over the last decade, children's museums have recognized the need to support families impacted by incarceration and are developing partnerships that use research-based programs and curated spaces to mitigate childhood trauma, strengthen familial bonds, and combat recidivism. This is evidenced by the growing number of programs created by children's museums throughout the United States that support families touched by the criminal justice system. The following case studies are two examples of such. Children's museums reflect the people they serve and do so by proactively responding to critical issues in their local communities. Each children's museum has its own unique strengths and assets, which inform how they approach partnerships—a necessary link to serving children and families impacted by a complex carceral system.

### Children's Museum of Manhattan and New York City Department of Correction

The Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) was founded in 1973 in response to education cuts made during New York City's deep fiscal crisis. Originally known as “Growth through Art and Museum Experience” or G.A.M.E., founding Director Bette Korman and a team of educators and artists first opened the Museum's doors to bring the learning power of the arts to children and families across the city. Today, CMOM has evolved from its grassroots beginnings into a nationally recognized leader in arts education with five decades of research-based, hands-on expertise in early childhood development. CMOM's mission is to be the steward of early childhood and to help the youngest citizens grow and develop into their best selves (Children's Museum of Manhattan, [n.d.](#)). Understanding that cultural access is critical to children's health, safety, and well-being, and further aware of the uneven distribution of early childhood resources across New York City, CMOM aims to ensure equal access to its programs and exhibits.

Guided by this mission to put children and families first and to address the absence of opportunities to maintain a familial connection during incarceration, in 2018, CMOM created a first-of-its-kind program in partnership with the New York City Mayor's Office and the Department of Correction (DOC) to unite mothers incarcerated at Rikers Island with their children for an afternoon of play, learning, and bonding at the Museum once a month when it is closed to the public. This initiative provided parents who are incarcerated with opportunities to reconnect with their young children through facilitated programming in a supportive,

non-institutional setting (pictured, [Figure 1](#)). Please note that all figures feature individuals who have consented to the public use of their images.

The DOC and CMOM, spearheaded by Chief Program Officer Leslie Bushara, first discussed the importance of physical space, environment, and how a children's museum with trained educators is a natural place for children and families to connect and bond. However, these initial conversations routinely returned to the challenges of creating a family-friendly environment at New York City's largest jail, Rikers Island, with obstacles including restrictions, travel hardships, and incarcerated parents expressing concerns for the safety of their children visiting them in custody serving as arduous obstacles. This led to the team exploring the possibility of bringing incarcerated mothers to CMOM.

The driving force behind each of these beginning conversations was a commitment to maintaining the connection between children and parents, and how this might influence positive behavior (federally defined as “exemplary compliance with the institutional disciplinary regulations”) in incarcerated parents (Devendorf, [2023](#)). This meant utilizing existing exhibits and creating an environment for deep connections to occur, developing an array of activities that embrace different learning styles and abilities, and removing barriers wherever they exist for children and families who would be left without the resources and opportunities to preserve their relationship.

Working closely with the DOC, the NYC Mayor's Fund, and CMOM's Board of Directors, the first mothers arrived at CMOM in April 2018. Former NYC First Lady Chirlane McCray, who attended the initial program (pictured, [Figure 2](#)), remarks that:

Women in prison have unique needs and challenges while they are incarcerated. The majority of women on Rikers Island are parents and often also primary caretakers of a loved one, which means a woman's imprisonment has a profound effect on their families and communities.

(City of New York, [2018](#))

In 2022, Robin Hood's Fund for Early Learning (FUEL) entered the partnership. Robin Hood, New York City's largest poverty-fighting philanthropy with a mission to elevate all New Yorkers out of poverty and a devotion to creating a city where every child can equitably achieve a bright future (Robin Hood, [2016](#)), echoed and amplified CMOM's program, providing philanthropic support and an organizational commitment to breaking the generational cycle of poverty and incarceration. Today, early success of the program and Robin Hood's



**FIGURE 1** Reunited mother and daughter playfully bonding during a Children's Museum of Manhattan visit.





**FIGURE 2** Former NYC First Lady Chirlane McCray and program participants at circle time during a CMOM Rikers session.

leadership have led to an expansion that provides children's museum visits for fathers incarcerated at Rikers Island and the installation of CMOM learning hubs at all eight family centers on-Island, which serve 50,000 visitors annually.

Now, the program runs for 19 sessions from fall to spring, with leadership from CMOM's Director of School Programs & Community Outreach, Suzy Mirvis. The program features twice monthly sessions that alternate between mothers and fathers who arrive at the children's museum in civilian clothes, and once their shackles are removed, greet their children, families, and custodial caregivers in CMOM's signature early learning and literacy exhibit, *PlayWorks*<sup>TM</sup>. CMOM's *PlayWorks*<sup>TM</sup> exhibit was designed by Leslie Bushara with a national advisory board of child development academics and evaluated through a research partnership with Barnard College to provide experiences that allow parents and children to engage together in learning, to make visible to parents and caregivers how children learn through play, and to create an environment that supports the skills needed for school readiness (Rhodes & Bushara, 2015).

The importance of the exhibit and children's museum setting cannot be overstated as the DOC must have confidence in the safety of the physical environment in order for this partnership to occur. This includes ensuring the exhibits are accessible for all ages and abilities, as well as guaranteeing that Correction Officers stationed around the perimeters of the floor can maintain sightlines on all participants at all times. 10–15 Corrections Officers remain on the premises for each off-Island CMOM program. During this ongoing monthly program at CMOM, families participate in art, music, and circle time storytelling activities, enjoy a meal, and explore the exhibitions—all of which are designed to support early learning and the development of a healthy bond between parent and child. Before the program begins, custodial caregivers and children are welcomed inside an exhibit on a different floor of the Museum to participate in activities and play-based learning. Educators use this time as a “warm up” to talk with the families very casually about their feelings and help them get comfortable with

the idea of a children's museum and playing together as a family. Educators also facilitate a sensory-based art project to promote positive fine motor and socioemotional skills and coping mechanisms. These types of activities are observed to not only strengthen physical abilities, but help children to validate and express their inner sensations, which is particularly important as parental reunion may cause anxiety (Doering, 2021). CMOM also uses these art projects, which children and caregivers may take home following, as introductions to small conversations, again to ensure comfortability. CMOM also recognizes that the custodial caregivers are the children's primary caregivers at that moment and works with them as they would any parent—no matter their relation to the child.

CMOM educators create themed art-making activity stations for each session (pictured, Figure 3). The activities are open-ended and continue throughout the program to allow families to decide which activities they want to participate in, when they want to explore the exhibit area, and when to take breaks for refreshments. CMOM has noticed that each family unit remains together throughout the program, with the custodial caregivers interacting just as much as the parents in custody. Therefore, CMOM's intentional use of child-based free play has created the opportunity for children to explore themselves and the world around them and for families to connect and bond together. An overarching theme guides each week's program activities, often incorporating a holiday celebration from that month. From “Let's go camping!” in September, to spooky Halloween creatures in October, to practicing Thanksgiving gratitude in November, each program is designed to provide stimulating and engaging intergenerational activities—all grounded in the science of the developing child and whole-family engagement.

For example, in emulating the activities of a summer camp, families created beaded friendship bracelets together in September 2023. This specific activity gained immense popularity as children could lace alphabet beads to spell their parents' names and then wear their cherished craft home or to school to remind them of their special time together. This activity encourages creativity and social skills as children collaborate with their family members. At the end



**FIGURE 3** Families embrace and participate in art activities at the Children's Museum of Manhattan's Rikers Program.

of one session, one mother shared that “I will remember bonding with my child and feeling normal for right now.” A father stated, “I love the art projects. They make this experience feel like more than a memory, and it is something to look forward to.” Another father said, “I’ll never forget this feeling of seeing my kids play freely. Nobody felt locked down here. I felt so comfortable at CMOM.”

In order to participate in the off-Island program, parents must have no reported infractions within the last month and be involved in re-entry programming while in custody. If a parent signs up, but then receives an infraction within the month-long timeframe, they will not be eligible. Collecting demographic data on participating parents from the DOC initially proved more challenging than anticipated. Each facility at Rikers Island has a different method for tracking and submitting this data to CMOM. To correct this, CMOM created a tracking template and distributed it to each of the facilities. Recently from October 2022 through December 2023, CMOM welcomed 228 children ranging from 2 months to 17 years old. In accordance with CMOM’s focus on early childhood, most children were under the age of 5, and 38% of the children were ages 0–3. However, CMOM often sees older children participating with younger siblings or alone to reunite with their parent. The 2022–2023 program served 85 unique families experiencing parental incarceration, with an average of 7–8 families per session. CMOM has observed mothers who routinely return to the Museum for the program, while most fathers are unique each month. However, past research conducted by Dr. Steven Holochwost (Science of Learning Institute, Johns Hopkins; City University of New York) has demonstrated that even one visit to CMOM makes a difference, finding that when parents attend CMOM’s programs, and as they attend more often, they realize important gains in knowledge of their child’s development and confidence in their ability to promote it. The 2022–2023 year also welcomed 105 caregivers—mothers, fathers, older siblings, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. There were four children whose caregivers were either foster care or Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) employees.

In addition to demographic data, CMOM gathers informal, anecdotal data from both the parents in custody and the custodial caregivers. At the end of each session, after the children and caregivers depart, CMOM educators sit with the parents in custody for a debrief that includes a questionnaire. During these debriefs, a mother reflected that “I did bad, I know I did bad. Seeing my kid makes me want to be better. Seeing my kid reminds me that freedom is a blessing and that there is hope ahead. A light at the end of the tunnel, you know?” A father shared, “I definitely downplayed the whole situation and didn’t realize how much of an impact [being incarcerated] would have on my emotions...this program was made to build connections and I definitely feel more connected to my child.” Another shared “I haven’t seen my boys in months. It’s important for them to see me as a dad. This [program] gave me hope to do better for my sons.” DOC Officers have even begun participating, with one Officer recently stating “this program makes the women want to be better, want to do better with their time [at Rikers]. It’s an incentive and an inspiration.”

Simultaneously, CMOM surveys the custodial caregivers, which also initially proved to be more challenging than expected. In the early weeks of the 2022–2023 program (first since the COVID-19 Pandemic closure in March 2020), CMOM sent surveys via email after each visit to all custodial caregivers. Very few people responded to the email survey, and CMOM realized it needed a different strategy. CMOM staff has since pivoted to call custodial caregivers individually to talk through the survey questions with them. The questions focus on gathering information about how the children are feeling before and after the visit, and if there have been any behavioral changes at school or home. CMOM asks caregivers if they feel more or less connected after the visit, with an overwhelming majority of responses to date reporting “more connected.” A grandmother from the Bronx attending as a custodial caregiver shared that “I want to tell the whole world about this. I think this is a

beautiful program for members of the community; and for the children, seeing their parent is priceless.”

Working with DOC to collect data on the parents in custody also proved more difficult than anticipated. However, in February 2023, CMOM was informed that the DOC hired a Program Evaluator for the Office of the Commissioner, Office of Management, Analysis and Planning (OMAP) to observe the program firsthand to gain a more holistic understanding of the session and of the behavioral data the DOC needs to provide in order to effectively evaluate the impact. In June of 2023, the DOC's program evaluation found that for incarcerated mothers, participation in CMOM site visits is correlated with improved behavior at Rikers as fewer uses of force and infraction were reported before and after CMOM visits. They observed that visitation allows mothers and children to maintain their connection in a suitable environment that may foster and strengthen the relationship, benefiting both mother and child. Therefore, it was concluded that visitation during incarceration “is essential for successful reentry and increases positive outcomes between mother and child following the mother's incarceration.” There is an urgent need for formal, scientific evaluation in the field, as well as direct involvement from incarcerated populations in the planning and implementation stages. Therefore, in the coming years, CMOM hopes to conduct an analysis of possible intervention effects on parent–child relationship quality, child health, and criminal attitude of incarcerated parents.

As of June 2024, CMOM has installed permanent museum-quality exhibit learning hubs at the Rose M. Singer Center (known as “Rosie's”) and George R. Vierno Center (known as “GRVC”) and will be completing installations in the remaining six family visitation facilities at Rikers Island in the coming months. CMOM's exhibits team has created a unique design package for all the sites, including adding puzzles, books, and sensory toys to the hub installations in order to deepen the experience for families and provide additional ways to connect. Everything from paint colors to child-friendly wobble chairs are implemented and chosen by CMOM, all in service of creating a child-friendly and welcoming design to soothe anxiety or reunion-related stress and facilitate playful, scaffolded engagement. Due to DOC regulations and delays, the installations are taking longer than anticipated, but the successful opening of both Rosie's and GRVC has been effective and celebrated by all partners involved.

CMOM is devoted to scaling the program and broadening its impact nationally raising awareness through traditional press, conferences, and convenings. Most recently in June 2024, CMOM shared this work at the Aspen Ideas Festival in Aspen, Colorado. The panel included Jessica Seinfeld (Founder, Good+ Foundation), Richard Buery (CEO, Robin Hood), Anne Penson (Director of Reintegration Services, NYC Dept. of Correction), and Earlonne Woods and Nigel Poor (Co-founders, Ear Hustle Podcast). Leslie Bushara presented the program at the Fair and Justice Prosecution (FJP) Panel in April 2024, joining elected prosecutors from around the country. In March 2023, CMOM joined Robin Hood and the DOC to present at the South by Southwest (“SXSW”) EDU conference in Austin, Texas. CMOM is also advising children's museums in Brooklyn, Chicago, and Massachusetts on how to implement similar programs. Such participation in conferences and convenings is impactful beyond the panel—they provide opportunities for CMOM to share ideas and connect informally with others in the field, broadly advocating for these invisible victims who have been rendered irrelevant and inhuman for being associated with the criminal justice system.

For these reasons and more, early indications of CMOM, Robin Hood, and the DOC's efforts are remarkably positive. As these three surprising partners—a children's museum, a powerhouse funder dedicated to eradicating poverty, and a city agency—intersect with efforts to reduce childhood trauma and recidivism, families affected by incarceration are given the resources to strengthen parent–child bonds, reduce the trauma of separation on the child, and motivate detainees to improve behavior and feel welcomed in their community upon re-entry.



## Hands On Children's Museum and Washington State Department of Corrections

Inspired by the work being done at CMOM to support families impacted by incarceration, the Hands on Children's Museum's (HOCM) partnership with Washington Department of Corrections (WADOC) had opportunities for expansion. A cornerstone value at Hands On Children's Museum (HOCM) is community partnerships, believing that "communities are enriched when diverse groups work creatively together to educate our children" (Hands on Children's Museum, [n.d.](#)). One example is the ongoing local partnership with agencies that work directly with "kinship families." Kinship care is when a close family member or friend cares for a child, rather than the custodial parent (Children's Bureau, [n.d.](#)). Kinship care is often the result of court-separated families. Hands On Children's Museum serves as a venue for support groups and also provides play-based, staff-led care for children who come to the museum to play while their caregiver participates in the support group. In addition to facilitated play-based learning, the program also includes a healthy dinner. It is core to the mission of HOCM to support families in difficult circumstances with opportunities and resources the museum provides to the community (Hands on Children's Museum, [n.d.](#)).

Another community partnership that supports this mission is the decades-long partnership between HOCM and WADOC. HOCM regularly provides programming for family days and holiday events that take place in WADOC visiting rooms. These special programs and events allow families to strengthen their bond through play that supports communication, memory building, and cooperation. The importance of the family day programs is evidenced by the overwhelming support shown by the incarcerated parents in prisons where the Museum offers activities. In 2013 and in 2015, the Museum was the recipient of fundraisers held by the incarcerated population at Cedar Creek Corrections Center to show their appreciation for the programs offered.

Just a few years later in 2017, the Museum was approached and asked to redesign family visiting rooms in nearby prisons. When the Hands On team evaluated the meeting room, they saw that the "children's area" consisted of a worn rug, a dated mural, and a few tubs of broken toys. Of course, these children's museum professionals knew they could improve this space. As experts in designing safe, clean, and stimulating experiences for young children and their families, HOCM staff are well-positioned to create a space like this in a prison. Unfortunately, the state determined that they did not have the funding to complete the work at the time. In 2019, Adrienne Testa, who was on the original Hands On Museum evaluation team and working toward her MFA in Museum Exhibition Planning & Design, picked the project back up. For Adrienne's graduate thesis project, she worked directly with Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW) to redesign the children's area in their visiting room. The research question was as follows: How can play experiences, modeled by children's museums, but designed for prison visiting rooms, improve parent/child relationships and outcomes for families impacted by incarceration? As part of this research, Adrienne looked to the current state of prison visiting rooms and the impact of parental incarceration on families.

Adrienne also surveyed parents incarcerated at WCCW and learned from staff and families about their visiting experiences. An evaluation with the aim of gathering information and feelings from prisoners about the visiting room was performed prior to beginning the design of the children's area. The evaluation was a paper survey distributed and collected by WCCW for the prisoners who visit with family in the visiting room. Twenty-eight responses were collected. The survey for prisoners focused on the experience of having a child visit them. Some questions were more logistical, such as how many children visit at a time and age of the child. Other questions were more based on the emotions of the parents and children during the visit. Questions that ultimately had a very practical application to this project were about what the women wanted the space to be (e.g., fun, beautiful, educational, and calming) and what



experiences they were interested in seeing provided in the space (e.g., dolls, blocks, art, and sensory play).

Additionally, Adrienne prototyped several different unfacilitated interactive experiences with families in the visiting room and collected feedback. Using research on the state of prison visiting rooms, feedback from incarcerated families and corrections staff, and known best practices for children's museum design, Adrienne developed a model for a redesign. Without funding to implement the model, the project was shelved, but shared widely among staff at WADOC. In 2022, Department of Corrections staff reached out to Hands On to explore restarting the work that had begun several years before. Their idea was to redesign and remodel three prison meeting rooms to serve as a pilot project for all of the state's prisons.

HOCM contracted with Adrienne, the exhibit design team at FRAME Integrative Design Strategies, a museum design and planning firm in Seattle, as well as contractor FORMA, a regional general contractor who has familiarity with both HOCM and work at the Department of Corrections, to formalize Adrienne's initial model and redesign three family meeting rooms in the State, including a nearby work release facility, a women's correctional facility, and a more remote higher security prison. Just like in a museum, it is critical for all of the end-users of a space to have buy-in on the design process and ideas. The team recognized early on that in order to create a successful experience for families in the redesigned rooms, the staff in charge of maintaining the rooms would need to be involved in the design process. Initially, HOCM showed staff at WADOC three options for each visiting room, including a low-budget version that did not include construction and consisted of mostly off-the-shelf furniture. They were also shown a version of a more immersive space with custom fabrication and changes to the ceilings, floors, and structure of the spaces, and an option that was in between. The WADOC teams enthusiastically preferred the more immersive museum-like option. Although the three corrections centers unanimously agreed on this, they each have their own specific policies and procedures for their visiting rooms. At this stage in the project, it was critical to understand each facility and population's different needs. To gather this information, people from FRAME, Forma, and HOCM toured each facility and met with corrections officers who work specifically with families in the visiting room. Due to this short timeline of the project, the team relied on Adrienne's previous evaluation work at WCCW and literature review to inform the needs that the parents have for visiting their children.

There is a lot of overlap between designing a space for a children's museum and a space for children in a prison. For example, both spaces need to be safe, sturdy, and easily sanitized. However, prisons have more constraints for security reasons. For example, sightlines for Corrections Officers need to be maintained at all times. Where you might create a private nook for a mother and child to read a book together in a museum, that idea is not compatible with a prison visiting room. In addition, consideration must be given to prohibited materials and places that could be used to hide contraband. Each design decision made throughout this process needed to be approved by the WADOC staff.

Understanding the context for family visits was critical to the redesign process. Many families travel great distances to visit their loved one in a Washington prison. In Washington, proximity to family is not often considered when placing someone in a state correctional facility. Additionally, visits can be very emotionally fraught and even awkward as children are reunited with their incarcerated parent. As HOCM and FRAME began development on the redesign, they leaned on the fundamental guiding principles of emotional support and family strengthening. Designing spaces for children sends strong messages about how and whether they are valued. The design team felt that the children visiting their parents should feel valued and their incarcerated family member should be able to spend time with them in a space that illustrates that value. This project acknowledges that there are difficult emotions around arrivals and departures. Museum staff helped develop parallel play opportunities that transition into cooperative play, which allow for gradual and growing engagement between parents and

children. The design of the spaces gestures to experiences for memory making and storytelling, which create opportunities for parents and children to talk about their past, present, and futures. Also, the spaces are themed to represent a sense of place in the natural and cultural context of the kids' travel to the facility. Children will see bridges, boats, and lighthouses when they visit Aberdeen, WA. They will drive through the forest and see the coastal beach when they visit Forks, WA. And same for WCCW—it is near a maritime village town. The graphics and colors for the spaces come from the environments these facilities are located in. The desire of the design team is that the place-based, themed environments will make children feel comfortable and grounded. Another outcome of the project was the design of goodbye kits with a self-contained art or science project that can be given to the child at the conclusion of their visit and used at home as a positive reinforcement of their time spent together.

While this project is still underway (conclusion expected in fall of 2024), we believe the benefits outweigh the challenges this initiative will have for children and their incarcerated parent. The hope for the future of this pilot project is to demonstrate the difference that thoughtful design can make in strengthening family visits and pave the way for future funding to redesign nine additional prisons in the state. Most importantly, we are grateful for the opportunity for the Department of Corrections and the Hands On Children's Museum to continue their partnership, which promotes healthy family relationships and underscores the value of interactive play in prisons.

## DISCUSSION

Creating a partnership with a correctional institution or working to improve the lives of families impacted by incarceration is not a simple undertaking. Projects like the ones highlighted in this article are conducted with empathy, emotional intelligence, and the ability to balance the needs of families with the needs of the corrections institutions. Museum professionals embarking on this type of work may want to prepare by seeking out trauma-informed training or professional development opportunities. Often, the priorities of a prison or jail do not align with the priorities of a children's museum. Museum professionals will find that they need to be flexible, patient, and open to communication patterns that might be different than what you'd find in a museum workplace setting. For example, scheduling a tour of a facility or prototyping in the walls of a prison/jail may take months to arrange and require detailed information about the agenda and supplies. Not all correctional facilities prioritize their visiting or family programs, so those facilities may not be the best fit for reaching families impacted by incarceration. Reaching out to nonprofit organizations or experts (such as family counselors) who already work with families may be a better fit for a project or partnership. Furthermore, finding organizations that are already working with families impacted by incarceration will help museums discover what needs are not currently being covered or what type of support is most needed. However, it is important to note that the projects in this paper require the support of state departments of corrections—an obstacle that will not be possible to overcome in some states.

Museum professionals, designers, and educators recognize that considering their audience is the first step to creating a successful experience. While both of the initiatives covered in this article worked closely with corrections staff to ensure approval on the projects, it is critical, when possible, to listen to the parents and families who are experiencing incarceration. For many museum professionals embarking on this work, this component may be the most difficult and uncomfortable part. It is important to recognize that this work involves communicating with people who have had their freedoms and privileges stripped and are experiencing a traumatic event in their lives. It is of the utmost importance to leave preconceived notions at the door and know that the role of the museum professional is not to judge or wonder why

an individual is incarcerated—it is to listen, observe, and help them find ways to build meaningful connections with their children. While these are some guiding principles for building a museum/prison partnership to support families, there is much more to be discussed with more specificity.

At the most recent Association of Children's Museum (ACM) *Interactivity* conference, the largest gathering of children's museum professionals in the world, several museums came together to present a session about their museum and prison/jail partnerships and tools for creating programs that support families impacted by incarceration, notably including CMOM and HO�M. While working together to create the session presentation, the museums recognized that even though they were in different states, leading varying types of projects, they had many commonalities in their approach to the work and had overcome obstacles in similar ways. Most institutions had developed similar curricula and experiences for their programs as other children's museums, despite the distance and differences between efforts. This ACM session urged museums to seek out partnerships in their communities that support families impacted by incarceration, identify the strengths of their own organization, and work within existing structures and systems to contribute to breaking the cycle and reducing the impacts of intergenerational incarceration. At this time, a group of children's museum professionals across the United States are uniting to develop a toolkit for creating partnerships that support families impacted by incarceration. There is a deep desire in the children's museum field to develop these projects—despite the differences in corrections institutions and museums—as the needs of the families have commonality, which makes a toolkit for use throughout the United States a worthwhile and much needed endeavor.

## CONCLUSION

Children's museums recognize the needs of children and families in their communities and focus on supporting their visitors through play and learning. Play and learning are only one piece of the puzzle for serving communities with evolving and complex needs. Ideally, children's museums are partnering with organizations already working to support families impacted by incarceration, and then providing supportive and uplifting resources through their unique institutional position. Each community that has a children's museum is different, and prisons/jails in different states are vastly distinct. County and city jails vary from state prisons. Even within one state, the county correctional facilities function separately from one-another. Thus, children's museums must play active roles in advocating for their constituents, ensuring that every child, regardless of circumstance, can access their resources and interactive, hands-on exhibits and programming.

The greatest goal of these partnerships and programs is to break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration. In a safe, fun, and playful environment, are parents building stronger connections with their children? Do those strengthened relationships reduce risk factors for children who have an incarcerated parent, and do the parents in turn have more successful re-entry into their communities after their release? Untangling these threads is a complicated task, but with the growing number of children's museums approaching this type of work, museum professionals and academics may be able to build a body of research that supports the success of existing efforts. However, many children's museums do not have research departments or the funding that they receive may not require a research component. Through anecdotal and evaluative evidence, both the CMOM and HO�M case studies point to the beneficial effects of reuniting parents and children impacted by incarceration in environments designed especially with their needs in mind. Yet, there is a deficiency in scientific data and evaluation of the present case studies due to the internal research capacities of children's museums, emphasizing the need for further research and analysis

in this area. Thus, such programs and initiatives should be replicated with scientific evaluation of possible effects on parent–child relationship, child health, and parental recidivism.

The work to break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration does not begin or end with children's museums. What should be posed to people working in the museum or justice fields is that children are not necessarily agents of change, and that a lot of early childhood investments are investments in adults. A child's need for a stable, secure relationship with a caregiver underscores their future healthy development of a myriad of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Maintaining family connections when appropriate for children and parents incarcerated is a crucial step in supporting these families, reducing the trauma of incarceration, and reducing nationwide recidivism. Former Director of Early Childhood at Robin Hood, Kelvin Chan, PhD states that programs like these are “the first step towards building protective factors that are so necessary to end the intergenerational transmission of trauma, injustice and inequity” (Swartz, 2023).

Children's museums, through their role as a city resource, are a melting pot of early learning and child-centered opportunity, and a space designed and activated exclusively for children and families, are part of a larger, powerful, and necessary conversation around social justice. These institutions are advocates for all children, including those that are systematically rendered invisible in a correctional system that leaves them without the resources and opportunities to thrive. They are making a difference that truly matters. While disrupting the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and reducing recidivism may be a complicated and complex challenge, many people, organizations, and agencies are needed to come together for a solution. Children's museums, such as the Children's Museum of Manhattan in New York City and Hands on Children's Museum in Olympia, Washington, are essential players in this conversation and must expand partnerships, programming, and outreach to support the needs of children and families impacted by incarceration.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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**Leslie Bushara** has been a leader in early childhood development throughout a 30-year career at the Children's Museum of Manhattan, where she serves as Chief Program Officer and has overseen the development of many key programmatic initiatives. Leslie served on the executive committee for the Association of Children's Museums and has been honored with the 2013 White House Champions for Change and the 2017 NY State Association for the Education of Young Children Champions for Children, among others.

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