

Children of Incarcerated Parents: The Case For Intervention During Middle School

The Reasoning Behind Developing COCI's Middle School Program

Ken Wells, May 2020

Summary

Children of Incarcerated Parents (COIP) face unique challenges as they navigate the path to adulthood. Early adolescence is a critical period in which a child is most at-risk of developing negative behavioral, psychosocial and medical issues.

How Many Children of Incarcerated Parents attend middle school in the Houston Metro Area? A rough estimate is that more than 43,750 students in area middle schools have at least one parent who has been incarcerated at some point in their lives. This estimate represents 35% of the estimated 125,000 children of incarcerated parents in the Houston metro area being of middle school age. While these are estimates, they are likely conservative.

Where do they go to school? COIP are concentrated in high poverty, high unemployment areas and attend schools that experience higher dropout and discipline rates and lower academic achievement.

What unique challenges do Children of Incarcerated Parents face? Having a family member who has been incarcerated, especially a parent, has long been identified as one of the ten most damaging risk factors for children under the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study.

Recent research has shown that parental incarceration has an outsized impact on a child when compared to other risk factors because it:

- Is more frequently seen in combination with (and often causes or compounds) other risk factors
- Also carries a unique combination of trauma, stigma and shame.

Compared to other risk factors, it has been found to have an outsized impact on learning disabilities, behavioral conduct, developmental delays and ADD/ADHD.

It has been linked to mental and physical health issues like PTSD, depression and anxiety, as well as lower graduation rates and reduced lifetime earnings.

Texas law recognizes this group as being at special risk of dropping out. In 2019, children who had a parent who was incarcerated or were themselves incarcerated were added to the list of at-risk students for dropout prevention plans.

Statistically, COIP are less than half as likely to graduate from high school than their peers. They are much more likely to exhibit the precursors of dropping out, including:

- Increased absenteeism/truancy
- A higher number of suspensions
- Increased disciplinary actions
- Poorer grades

Why is intervention so important at the middle school level? Middle school is one of the most critical periods in a child's development, as puberty, a change in brain activity and a new focus on socialization hit all at once. It is the time when children find their own voice as individuals against a backdrop of peer pressure, the search for identity, and the outsized impact of bullying and antisocial activity.

This is when the following early warning signs are most likely to emerge:

- Depression and other mental illness
- Dropping out of school
- Antisocial and criminal behavior
- Negative peer influence

The brain enters a second phase of maturation in middle school marked by increased executive function, such as impulse control and goal setting, emotional regulation, and reducing the mass of neural connections. In a stable childhood, this is when the student develops his or her adult brain and healthy thought processes. In a child who has experienced trauma, this period can lock in dysfunctional patterns of perception and thinking that can be difficult to change in later life.

What can a middle school program for Children of Incarcerated Parents achieve? Because these children encounter so many of the risk factors (as measured by the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study) and are more likely to have experienced complex trauma, they are particularly susceptible to the challenges of middle school.

The well-documented social-emotional and learning challenges they face tend to emerge or worsen during this period, threatening their academic success. This is when they are most susceptible to falling into criminal behavior by peer pressure and antisocial behavior.

Fortunately, this is also the period when they are most influenced by positive intervention, role models and the introduction of social and emotional skillsets. Coping skills and building up core character strengths set the path for future success in high school, graduation and adulthood.

Full Analysis: The Case For Intervention During Middle School

The Population in Houston

An estimated 125,000 children in the Houston metro area either have or have had a parent in prison. Of that number, roughly 35%, or more than 43,750, are of approximately middle school age.

These numbers are imprecise because the data concerning incarceration, child demographics and student populations are unconnected. These are reasonable computations, however, based on national and state estimates that show:

- More than 5 million American children have had one or more parent in prison at some point and 477,000 of them live in Texas.¹
- The Houston Metro Area represents nearly 25% of the Texas population.²
- Roughly 35% of children who currently have an incarcerated parent are between 10 and 14 years old, approximately middle-school aged.³

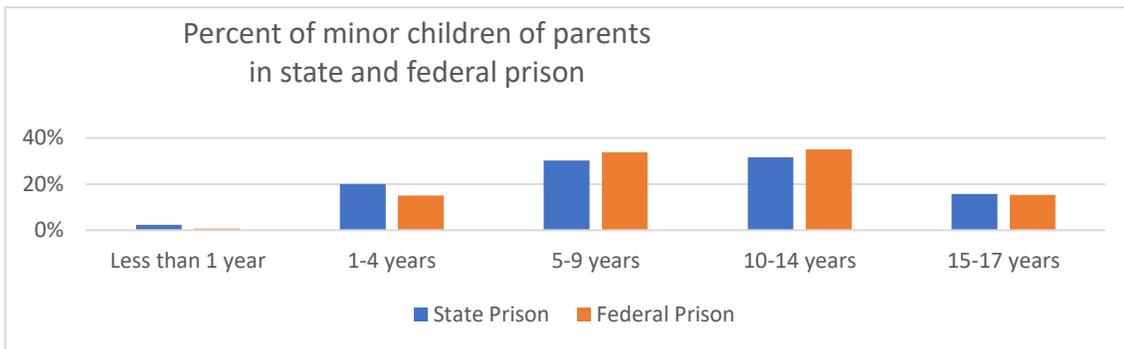


Figure 1 Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children, DOJ, 2010

The estimate that nearly 44,000 middle school students have one or more parents who is or has been in prison may be very conservative for three reasons:

1. The study only counted children of current inmates. As inmates are released and their children grow older, the number who are in middle and high school will grow at a disproportionate rate.
2. A study of Harris County Jail found that 92,000 children have a parent who is booked into the local jail every year. Since that is the first step in the trial, conviction and sentencing process, the cumulative effect over time implies 125,000 is very conservative.⁴

¹ Children of Incarcerated Parents, a Shared Sentence, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016

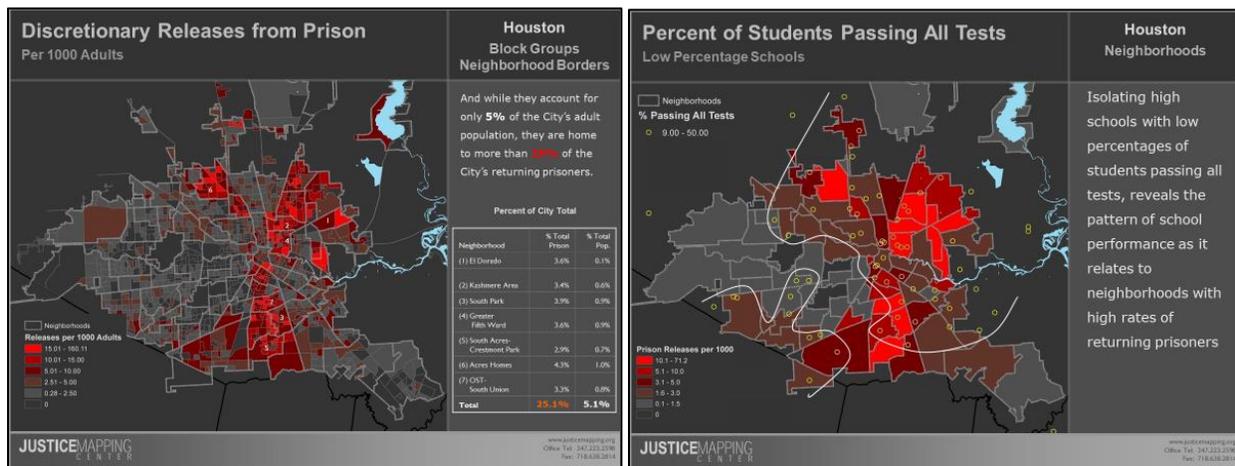
² American Community Survey, Texas Workforce Investment Council, 2015

³ Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children, Department of Justice, 2010

⁴ The Forgotten Families, Texas Children's Hospital/Baylor College of Medicine, 2019

3. The estimate of Texas children cited by the landmark study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation was based on 2012 data and have now been increased by 10%.⁵

Neighborhood Impacts: The areas where these children live may be more important than their total number, because it determines which schools they attend. The Justice Mapping Organization produced a map of Harris County showing areas where inmates live after release.⁶ The brighter shades of red indicate the highest concentrations. These areas also tend to have the highest unemployment rates, lowest income levels, and lowest school performance. One particularly graphic map shows the clear connection between concentrations of former inmates and lower school performance, as indicated by lower passing rates on standardized tests.



Figures 2 & 3 Justice Mapping Center

Why Dedicated Programs For Children of Incarcerated Parents Are Needed

The challenges faced by COIP has been called a hidden epidemic in America. As one overview put it, “If having an incarcerated parent was classified as a chronic health condition, it would be the second most prevalent chronic condition in the United States for children under the age of 18 – just behind asthma. In fact, the percentage of American youth with an incarcerated parent is about 10 times higher than the percentage of youth diagnosed with diabetes.”⁷

Children who have one or more parent who has been incarcerated during their lifetime represent a uniquely challenged at-risk group. One of the early recognitions of this came with the release of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) in 1998, identifying 10 categories that challenged the health and wellbeing of adults.⁸ One of them was incarceration of a family member.

⁵ Kids Count Data Center, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

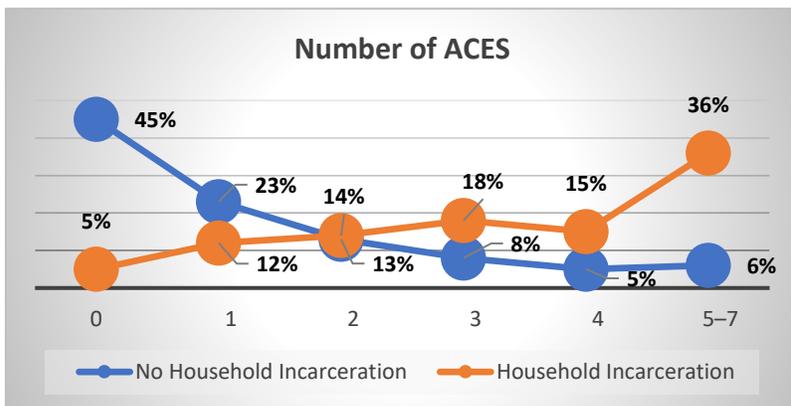
⁶ <https://www.justicemapping.org/>

⁷ A Hidden Epidemic: Parental Incarceration and What To Do When It Affects Your Patients, Pediatrics Nationwide, 2019

⁸ CDC-Kaiser ACE Study, 1998, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/about.html>

A large body of research has emerged since then to quantify the negative consequences that parental incarceration has on a child and later as they grow to adulthood. Exposure to household incarceration during childhood has been shown to be somewhat of a wild card, in that it goes hand-in-hand with other risk factors and it may increase the damage of those other factors.

A study of more than 80,000 Americans compared the number of ACEs for people who had a family member who was incarcerated with the ACEs for people who did not have an incarcerated family member. It found that more than half of the people who had someone at home go to prison experienced at least four other ACEs risk factors.⁹



There is also evidence that, for a child experiencing multiple ACEs, having a parent in prison tends to exacerbate the negative impact of other ACEs more than almost any other factor. Dr. Kristin Turney performed regression analysis on different ACEs and health outcomes and found that parental incarceration had as much or more impact than other ACEs on educational obstacles like:

- Learning disabilities
- Behavioral conduct
- Developmental delays
- ADD/ADHD.¹⁰

There are myriad reasons for the outsized impact that parental incarceration has on other health, wellbeing and educational factors. One clear factor is that the circumstances leading to incarceration may involve forms of abuse, drug and alcohol use and the mental health of a parent. Another factor is that parental incarceration adds elements of shame and uncertainty on top of ACEs risk factors.

Children of Incarcerated Parents Are An At-Risk Group Under Texas State Law

In 2019, the Texas Legislature added COIP as a category of at-risk students under the dropout prevention requirements. *Texas Education Code* Section 29.081 lays out dropout prevention measures for high school students in public or charter schools and identifies the factors that put a student at risk of dropping out. Before 2019, the definition included 13 criteria, such as pregnancy, homelessness, expulsion, etc. SB 1746 added one additional criterion, having been incarcerated or having a parent or guardian who was incarcerated, within the lifetime of the student.

Effective dropout prevention recognizes that early intervention is important. Leading causes for students dropping out are poor grades in core subjects, low attendance, failure to be promoted to the

⁹ Adverse childhood events: incarceration of household members and health-related quality of life in adulthood. Gjelsvik A, Dumont DM, Nunn A, Rosen DL. *J Health Care Poor Underserved*. 2014

¹⁰ Stress Proliferation across Generations? Examining the Relationship between Parental Incarceration and Childhood Health, Kristin Turney, 2014

next grade, or behavioral problems. These factors have root causes that emerge earlier in a child's schooling and build over time.

A study of dropout prevention done for the Texas Education Agency identified a number of best practices, including:

- Fostering safe learning environments, through programs that encourage “conflict resolution, and can include social competence, problem recognition and evaluation, goal setting, planning, expecting challenges, controlling anger, and expressing emotion.”
- Family engagement and mentoring to impact student behavior and build caring, trusting relationships.
- School/Community collaborations to bring outside resources to assist at risk students.¹¹

The Reasons That Children Of Incarcerated Parents Are At-Risk

A number of studies have pointed to specific educational challenges facing COIP:

Graduation Rates – Having a mother who was incarcerated reduced a student's chances of earning a high school diploma by 55.8 %. Having an incarcerated father reduced the chances by 53.1%.¹²

Absenteeism/Truancy – Children whose mothers had been incarcerated were 3-4 times more likely to have a significant number of absences when compared to their peers.¹³

Suspensions - A study of children aged 9-14 who had a currently incarcerated mother found they were 49% more likely to be suspended for behavioral problems.¹⁴

Disciplinary Action – Students with a parent in prison were 3.5 times more likely to be disciplined. Having a parent who had been released from prison were 2.5 time more likely to be disciplined, indicating that the impact of incarceration lasts beyond the actual event.¹⁵

Grades – The study that looked at disciplinary actions also found that this population had significantly lower odds of receiving good grades than their peers (a 40% decreased likelihood).

School-related challenges – A review of studies by the Economic Policy Institute identified a number of problems that link directly to poor academic performance.¹⁶ There was a greater likelihood that a child with an incarcerated parent would experience the following:

¹¹ Best Practices in Dropout Prevention, Report Prepared for the Texas Education Agency by ICF International and the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2008

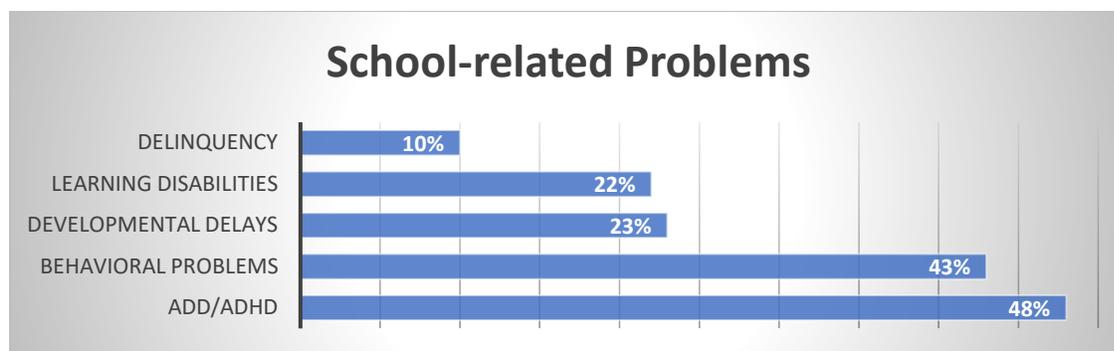
¹² Incarcerated Mothers and Fathers: How their Absences Disrupt Children's High School Graduation, Huynh-Hohnbaum, Bussell & Lee, 2015

¹³ The effects of maternal incarceration on adolescent children, Trice & Brewster, 2004

¹⁴ Vulnerability of children of incarcerated addict mothers: Implications for preventive intervention, Children and Youth Services Review, 2005

¹⁵ School-based outcomes among youth with incarcerated parents: differences by school setting, Shlafer, Reedy & Davis, 2018

¹⁶ Mass incarceration and children's outcomes, Economic Policy Institute, 2016



The Need to Focus on Middle School

Middle school is a critical period of development, self-discovery and transformation. It is a period of trial-and-error, when students will make mistakes and must develop the skill of bouncing back from adversity. The brain, body and hormones undergo changes that are beyond the control or understanding of a middle-schooler. Since every other middle-schooler is also undergoing those changes, schools can be a gumbo of emotions and behaviors, and some children struggle to survive this period. Special concerns include:

- Mental and emotional health and bullying**– In early adolescence, students identify their own independence and the context of that independence. This makes them particularly sensitive to social pressure, self-esteem, and control/lack of control. This period also coincides with heightened risk of mental illness, including depression and anxiety, self-harm and eating disorders. Puberty plays a big role. Prior to the start of puberty, only about 2% of children experience depression. In the 2-3 years after puberty that jumps to 8%.¹⁷ Further, children who undergo early puberty, a risk for children who live in poverty or undergo childhood trauma, are more likely to experience mental problems and those problems tend to be more pronounced.¹⁸
- Peer Pressure** – Students are most susceptible to peer pressure during middle school years. Studies have shown that this susceptibility peaks at around 14. After 14 a person begins to develop an ability to resist peer pressure.¹⁹ The support of peers is very important to middle school students. When peers have a negative impact, harmful associations and risky behaviors result, such as skipping class, substance abuse and criminal acts. For example, gang involvement peaks at about 5% by the age of 14 and then begins to fall again.²⁰ This can also be the critical period when role models and friends can have a profound positive impact on students. The point is, friends and supportive adults have long-term impacts at this stage of a child’s development.
- Bullying** - Because early adolescents’ self-image is so interconnected with the way they are viewed by their peers, they are extremely susceptible to bullying. Studies indicate that around

¹⁷ Depression During Puberty, VeryWellMind, 2020

¹⁸ The risks of earlier puberty, American Psychological Association, 2016, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/03/puberty>

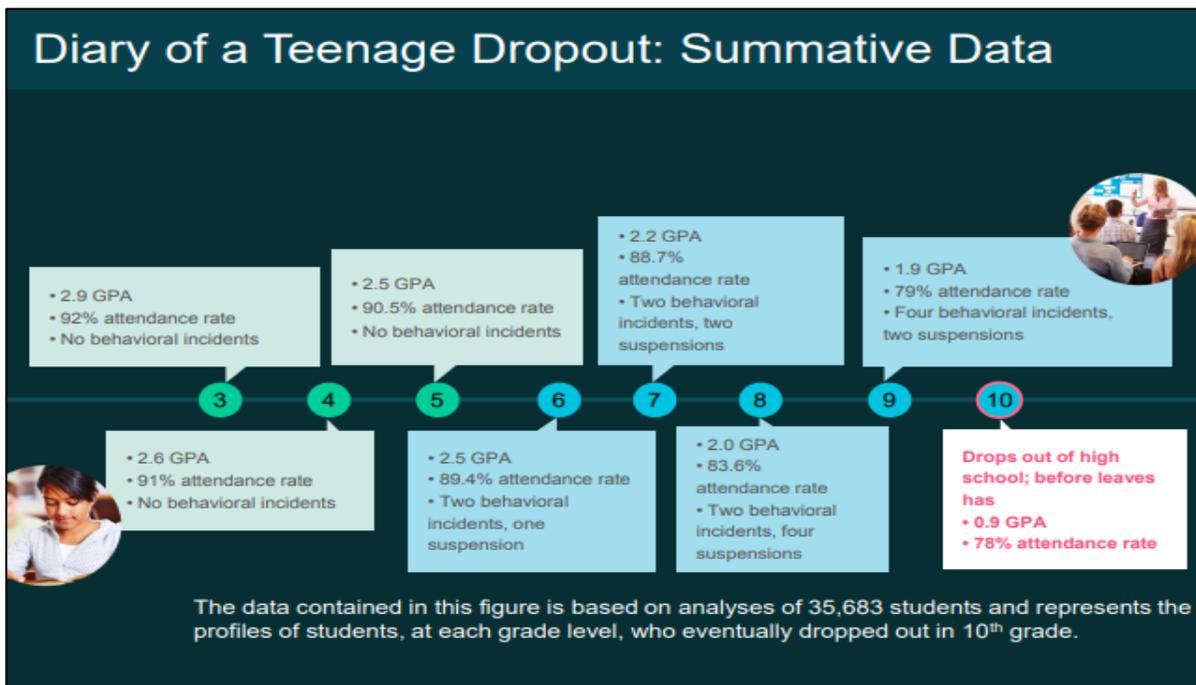
¹⁹ Age differences in resistance to peer influence, Steinberg L, Monahan KC.. Dev Psychol. 2007

²⁰ Gang Membership Between Ages 5 and 17 Years in the United States, Pyrooz, Sweeten. Journal of Adolescent Health, 2015

30% of students experience more than occasional involvement as a bully and/or victim of bullying.²¹

- **Dropout Prediction** - Middle school is when many of the predictors of later dropout risk emerge. According to one study, “Middle school indicators suggest that at the end of sixth grade, those students who exhibit any of the high-yield indicators suffer a 50% chance of graduating.” Those high yield indicators are less than 80% attendance, or a failing grade point average across math, English, social studies, and science.²² The study authors recommend that schools aggressively attack the problem at the middle school level through the ABC approach: Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance.

Another study tracked the impact that behavior and performance in middle school had on average 10th grade dropouts.



²¹ Together Against Bullying, <https://www.togetheragainstbullying.org/tab/targets/middle-school-ages/>

²² On track for success: The use of early warning indicator and intervention systems to build a grad nation, Bruce, M., Bridgeland, J. M., Fox, J. H., & Balfanz, R. (2011).

The Mind of A Middle Schooler

While much attention is currently being paid to neonatal and early childhood brain development, early adolescence triggers the second big wave of development:

- The prefrontal cortex, which controls executive functions like impulse control, attention span and decision making, matures.
- The brain prunes neural links, making the brain more efficient.
- There is more coordination between parts of the brain and nervous system. For example, the limbic system, which is involved in emotions and seeking risks and rewards, is present at birth, but the growth of executive function helps regulate emotions and desires as the brain matures.²³

Dynamic mapping of human cortical development



Source: "Dynamic mapping of human cortical development during childhood through early adulthood," Nitin Gogtay et al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, May 25, 2004; California Institute of Technology.

In short, adolescents are developing their adult brains. Stressors like trauma or poverty can delay that development. Trauma has been shown to physically change the brain capacity and activity for the prefrontal cortex and limbic system.²⁴ Therapists would recognize the effect of this in trauma victims who struggle with impulse control, goal setting, and poor emotional regulation or flat affect.

For early adolescents, trauma and poverty may delay or even halt brain development. Without intervention, an adolescent who sees the world in terms of "fight or flight" may undergo permanent structural changes that will last a lifetime.²⁵

Special Impacts For Children of Incarcerated Parents During Middle School

The changes that early adolescents go through and the risk factors facing COIP can make middle school a particularly hazardous period. During this period, COIP are particularly susceptible to what has been called a "unique combination of trauma, stigma and shame."²⁶

Not surprisingly, this is when many school-related problems like truancy, slipping grades and behavioral issues start to emerge. It is also the period in which the impact of peers becomes such an important

²³ Maturation of the adolescent brain, Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment, 2013

²⁴ Burden of Environmental Adversity Associated With Psychopathology, Maturation, and Brain Behavior Parameters in Youths, JAMA Psychiatry, 2019

²⁵ The Teenage Brain: The Stress Response and the Adolescent Brain, Current Directions in Psychological Science, 2013

²⁶ New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, The Osbourne Association, https://cantasd.acf.hhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Initiative_CIP_Stats_Fact_Sheet.pdf

predictor of future issues. A study of childhood indicators of future antisocial behavior found that between the ages of 12 and 14 child social ties and peer antisocial behavior were the top two predictors of serious delinquent or criminal behavior later in life. Prior to the age of 12, those were not significant predictors at all.²⁷

The impact is especially pronounced if the parent goes to prison while the student is in middle school. In a study of children with a father in prison, if the first parental incarceration took place when the student was between the ages of 11-14, the child's chances of completing high school were found to be 83% lower than if the father is incarcerated before they were born.²⁸

Conclusion: The Importance of a Middle School Program

The same factors that make early adolescents susceptible to antisocial peer behavior and can lead to maladaptive thought processes also make them very open to positive role models and adopting health behaviors. As they develop a sense of self, they are absorbing the behaviors they see around them and internalizing their experiences.

Programs that address fundamental skillsets can be very important at this age. For example, studies that focus on building positive mindsets show real impact in middle school. Beyond that, developing “a self-transcendent sense of purpose better predicts academic regulation, performance, and persistence among high school students.”²⁹

The impact of programs can sometimes be difficult to assess at the start of middle school, especially because there is such variability in individual maturity levels. It is the start of the path to adulthood, however, so beginning that path in a positive direction is critical. “Adolescence thus forms a critical bridge between childhood and adulthood and is a critical window of opportunity for positive, life-altering development.”³⁰

With the proper intervention, a program for middle school Children of Incarcerated Parents can be that “critical bridge” over the tumultuous waters of early adolescence.

²⁷ The Antisocial Behavior of the Adolescent Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Developmental Perspective, Eddy & Reid, 2002

²⁸ Sins of our Fathers (and Mothers): Impact of Parental Incarceration upon Education Outcomes, Habecker University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2013.

²⁹ The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth, National Academies Press (US); 2019

³⁰ Et, National Academies Press