



Volunteers of America: Look Up and Hope Program

A promising model for reducing the negative impact of parental incarceration on families of color.

According to the latest figures from the United States Department of Justice, children of color are disproportionately affected by parental incarceration. In 2008 the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that over 70% of U.S. children with a parent in prison were African-American or Hispanic, and that 1 in every 15 African-American children had a mother or father behind bars.

Unfortunately, to date, relatively few programs specifically targeting incarcerated parents or their children have demonstrated their effectiveness with families of color. One of the more noteworthy exceptions is Volunteers of America's national multi-site pilot project to strengthen families affected by maternal incarceration, Look Up and Hope.

Launched in 2009, Look Up and Hope, takes a uniquely long-term and family-centered approach to supporting children with a mother in prison. It provides incarcerated mothers, their children, and their children's caregivers with up to 5 years of comprehensive wraparound services, including home visits and intensive individualized support from a family case manager called a "family coach."

During its first 3 years of pilot-testing, Look and Hope has achieved successful outcomes with the majority of families involved with the program, most mothers involved in the program appear to be improving their parenting skills and meeting their personal goals (e.g. achieving employment, remaining drug free). Their

children are performing well in school and are active in afterschool activities, and their families are becoming more financially and emotionally stable. While participants of all races and ethnicities have clearly benefited from their involvement in Look Up and Hope, the program's results have been especially impressive with its families of color.

According Wilder Research's latest annual Look Up and Hope evaluation report, by mid-2013:

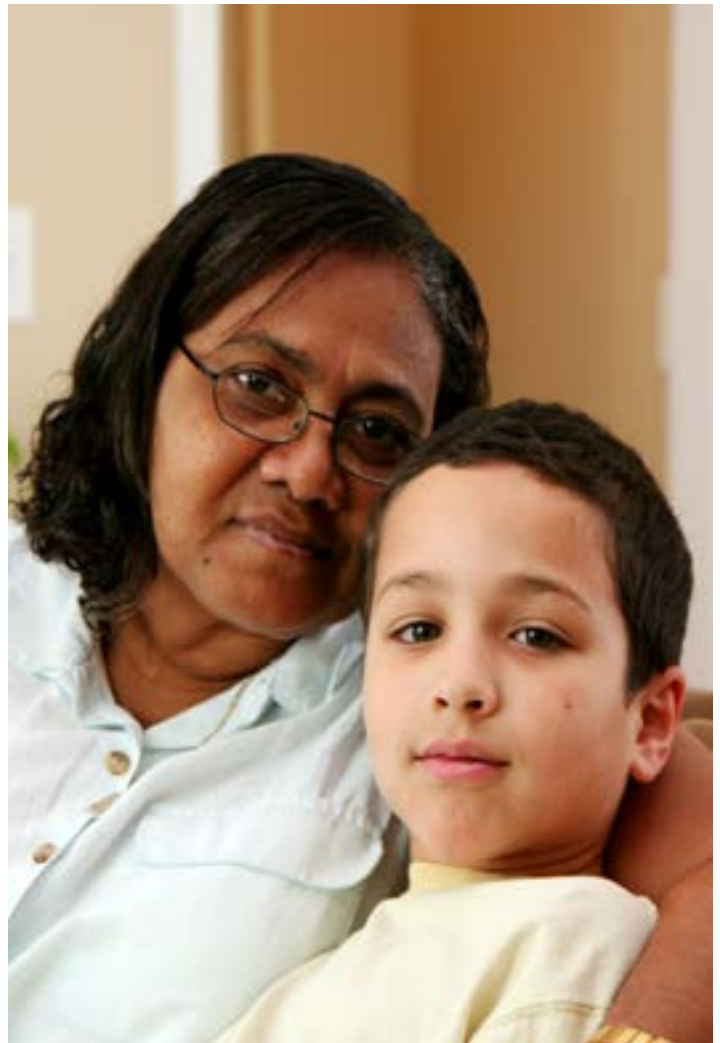
- Over half of the incarcerated mothers of color (52%) enrolled in the program reported positive gain in their employment status (e.g., finding a new job or moving to a better job with higher wages)
- Over three quarters demonstrated improved parenting knowledge or skills (e.g. by performing well under staff observation or on standardized tests of parenting knowledge)
- 72% of women of color enrolled in the program reported that there were successfully addressing addiction issues and/or remaining drug free upon their return to their community
- 65% reported that they were increasing their contact with their children's caregivers (implying improved levels of co-parenting and communication)
- Over one third were successfully reunified with their children and families post release.

In every single one of these outcome areas participating women of color and their families outperformed their white counterparts by several percentage points—suggesting that the program may be especially well suited to address the needs of African-American, Latino, and American-Indian system-involved families.

The Look Up and Hope program’s developers attribute the program’s success with families of color to several important factors:

- First, and foremost, participation in the program is purely voluntary, and the program’s Family Coaches are very careful to identify themselves as independent advocates and supporters of the family (as opposed to officials with some public agency). This has been invaluable in winning the trust of African-American and Native American families, who sometimes prefer not to work with official representatives of the judicial or child welfare systems.
- Second, all three of the pilot sites currently involved in the program have placed a strong emphasis on hiring racially and ethnically diverse and culturally competent family coaches that families of color can relate to. Most notably, the site in the Dakotas, which has a high percentage of American Indian families participating in the program, has an American Indian staff representative with strong ties to local tribal organizations who helps guide work with local Indian families.
- Finally, unlike many other parenting or family strengthening programs targeting families with a parent in prison, the Look Up and Hope program does not try to prescribe or promote any particular family structure or organization. Instead, Look Up and Hope seeks to strengthen and support existing family systems of all kinds—whether they involve single parent households, multigenerational, grandparent-led households, or extended networks of “kinship caregivers.” This flexibility in defining families has allowed the program to work successfully with families from many different heritages and backgrounds and has opened up new avenues for supporting caregivers and children who may not qualify for other, more conventional types of public support.

As Look Up and Hope enters its fourth year, Volunteers of America and Wilder Research will continue to analyze the program’s outcomes by race and to explore how the program’s unique features may be influencing the success of participating families of color. If the preliminary findings reported here remain consistent over time, it seems clear that Look Up and Hope could serve as an important model for other service providers struggling to support families of color who seek to overcome the challenges and hardships of parental incarceration.



Sources:

Lauren E. Glaze. *Parents in Prison and their Minor Children: A Special Report* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008).

Stephanie Nelson-Dusek and Krysten Lynn Ryba-Tures. *Look Up and Hope Third Annual Progress Report*. (Wilder Research, 2013).