

THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY STRENGTHENING GRANTS FOR INCARCERATED AND REENTERING FATHERS AND THEIR PARTNERS



Addressing Domestic Violence in Family Strengthening Programs for Couples Affected by Incarceration

With a record 7,225,800 people incarcerated or on community supervision (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010), a growing number of U.S. families are impacted by the cycle of arrest, incarceration, and reentry. Partners and children of a justice-involved person can be heavily affected by their family member's contact with the criminal justice system, with common challenges including attachment disruption, economic hardship, stigma, changes in family structure and living arrangements, and perhaps increased risk of exposure to domestic violence.¹

Quantitative data on families' experiences with domestic violence prior to and following incarceration are scarce, and rarely include the perspectives of both partners or follow families over time. The study described in this brief includes an implementation evaluation of family strengthening programs designed to meet the needs of incarcerated and released fathers, their partners, and children as well as a couples-based, longitudinal impact study of families affected by incarceration. While this study was not designed with domestic violence as a focal outcome, it has provided the opportunity to collect information about the incidence of domestic violence and the variety of domestic violence related activities provided for justice-involved couples. This information, specific to justice-involved couples, is not available elsewhere.

¹ Arditti, 2005; Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Hairston, Rollin, & Jo, 2004; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Nurse, 2004; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002; Phillips, Erkanli, Keller, Costello, & Angold, 2006

About This Research Brief

This brief presents findings from the evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners. It details the strategies grantees used to address domestic violence in the MFS-IP programs and describes baseline findings from the impact study on the prevalence of domestic violence among study couples prior to incarceration. The multiyear implementation and impact evaluation of the MFS-IP grants is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Administration for Children and Families/Office of Family Assistance

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, DC 20201



This brief discusses approaches to domestic violence screening, prevention, and response services for this population and draws on baseline data from the impact study on domestic violence prevalence and related attitudes and behaviors. This brief concludes with a discussion of lessons learned from the evaluation findings to date.

Although rates of domestic violence among incarcerated and reentering persons are largely unknown, some evidence indicates there may be a higher prevalence of domestic violence perpetration history and risk among men who are incarcerated or on community supervision than among men in the general population.² Advocates and researchers have suggested that couples may be at particularly high risk for domestic violence during the reentry of a partner who has been incarcerated.³

A number of individual risk factors for domestic violence are prevalent among incarcerated men, such as young age, histories of substance abuse, histories of childhood abuse, and personality disorders.⁴ Compounding these preexisting factors is the fact that incarcerated men often undergo psychological changes as a result of incarceration. As men adapt to the harshness,

Marriage and Partnership Among Incarcerated & Reentering Fathers

Research indicates that partner relationships play a central role in the lives of incarcerated and reentering men:

- Seventy-five percent of incarcerated men who participated in the national Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative evaluation reported being married or in a romantic relationship.
- The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 23% of state prisoners who are fathers are married.
- The Returning Home study (Visher & Courtney, 2007) found that 46% of a sample of released men in Ohio had lived with a spouse or intimate partner prior to incarceration.
- Eight months after release, reentering men in the Returning Home study who were married or in committed cohabiting relationships were half as likely to report engaging in drug use, committing a new crime, or both as those who were uninvolved or in non-committed relationships.

rigidity, and stress of the prison environment, coping strategies such as hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust, and psychological distancing that may impede healthy interpersonal functioning and promote abuse can become established.⁵

Numerous scholars have documented the relationship strains associated with incarceration and the increased conflict among couples affected by it.⁶ Several qualitative studies suggest that some incarcerated men compensate for incarceration-related role changes by using threats, harassment, and controlling behavior during visits and phone communications.⁷ Some female partners report that the incarceration offers a time for men to reflect on their behavior, make changes, and communicate more readily.⁸ However, there is also indication that for some, this good behavior perpetuates the cycle of domestic violence through a period of “loving contrition” during which atonement occurs and new promises are made.⁹

² Dutton & Hart, 1992; Hart, Kropp, Roesch, Ogloff, & Whitemore, 1994; White, Gondolf, Robertson, Goodwin, & Caraveo, 2002

³ Bobbit, Campbell, & Tate, 2006; Hairston & Oliver, 2007

⁴ Dutton & Hart, 1992; White et al., 2002

⁵ Haney, 2001; Herman Stahl, Kan, & McKay, 2007

⁶ Fishman, 1990; Hairston, 1995; King, 1993; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Tripp, 2003

⁷ Fishman, 1990; Nurse, 2002; Toepell & Greaves, 2001

⁸ Comfort, 2008; Fishman, 1990; Hairston & Oliver, 2006

⁹ Comfort, 2008

Upon reentry of the incarcerated partner, couples who have been separated by imprisonment face tremendous uncertainty.¹⁰ Among women who experienced domestic violence prior to their partner's incarceration, the return of a partner from prison may bring fears of violent behavior during the reentry period, whether they plan to remain in relationship with their released partner or not.¹¹ Data from focus groups with incarcerated or paroled men and partners of incarcerated or paroled men suggest that violence often occurs in the context of reentry-specific relationship conflicts, such as renegotiating household roles and authority; expectations of postrelease desistance; real or suspected infidelity; unresolved conflict from the incarceration; postrelease financial pressure; threats related to parole violation; and displaced anger from the experience of imprisonment.¹²

Few programs exist to support families in making this transition safely and successfully. One form of support often available to justice-involved families is batterer intervention programming. Batterer intervention courses are made available in many prisons and through community human services agencies, and participation in them is sometimes imposed as a condition of postrelease supervision. Evidence for the effectiveness of these programs remains inconclusive, however.¹³ Some community-based reentry programs have begun to recognize the importance of helping men through the reentry transition while supporting them in maintaining safe, healthy relationships with their partners and children. As part of the Safe Return Initiative, grantees in Tennessee, Minnesota, and Oregon implemented holistic reentry support programs in which domestic violence intervention was an integral component.¹⁴ Such programs have not yet been rigorously evaluated, yet practitioners and researchers argue that the time of incarceration and release presents unique risks and opportunities for justice-involved men, their partners, and children—making it an important point of intervention for family support, domestic violence prevention, and the cultivation of healthy relationship skills.¹⁵

Family-Based Services Provided by the MFS-IP Grantees for Couples Affected by Incarceration

Recognizing the importance of supporting families during incarceration and release, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded grants in 2006 for programs to strengthen healthy couple and coparenting relationships among families with an incarcerated or recently released father

Services Provided to MFS-IP Program Participants

The MFS-IP program models, service settings, and target populations varied, but all of the grantees delivered services to incarcerated fathers and their partners. Relationship or marriage education for couples was a core service provided by all grantees. Sites also offered other family-strengthening services, including these:

- relationship and family counseling
- parenting and co-parenting education
- case management
- mentoring and coaching services
- enhanced visitation options
- support in maintaining contact and communication during incarceration
- domestic violence services
- support groups
- education and employment services
- financial literacy services

¹⁰ Oliver & Hairston, 2008

¹¹ Fishman, 1990; Hairston & Oliver, 2006

¹² Oliver & Hairston, 2008

¹³ Bechtel & Woodward, 2008

¹⁴ Williams, 2006

¹⁵ Bobbit et al., 2006; Hairston & Oliver, 2007; Oliver & Hairston, 2008

(see *Table 1*).¹⁶ These grants funded voluntary couples-based services during incarceration and reentry. Grantees were required to deliver relationship-strengthening programming (with relationship or marriage education constituting the core service provided at all sites) and could also offer services to improve parenting and promote economic stability.

Impact and implementation studies, now under way, are designed to describe MFS-IP programs (including services delivered, organizational partnerships, and barriers and facilitators that affected success) and assess their effect on outcomes such as relationship quality and stability, family economic well-being, and recidivism. (For more information on the evaluation, see final text box, “Evaluation of MFS-IP Programs”).

Table 1. Funded Sites and Type of Grantee Agency

Site	Location	Type of Grantee Agency
Centerforce	San Rafael, California	Community-based nonprofit
Child and Family Services of New Hampshire	Manchester, New Hampshire	Community-based nonprofit
Indiana Department of Correction	Indianapolis, Indiana	State correctional agency
Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota	Sioux Falls, South Dakota	Faith-based organization
Maryland Department of Human Resources	Baltimore, Maryland	State human services agency
Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice	Minneapolis, Minnesota	Community-based nonprofit
New Jersey Department of Corrections	Trenton, New Jersey	State correctional agency
Oakland Livingston Human Services Association	Pontiac, Michigan	Community-based nonprofit
The Osborne Association	Brooklyn, New York	Community-based nonprofit
The RIDGE Project	Defiance, Ohio	Faith-based organization
Shelby County Division of Correction	Memphis, Tennessee	County correctional agency
Texas Arms of Love, d.b.a. People of Principle	Odessa, Texas	Community-based nonprofit

Partnerships with Local Domestic Violence Agencies

Drawing on an understanding of the potential for domestic violence among the couples served by the MFS-IP programs, OFA required that each grantee demonstrate plans to partner with a domestic violence coalition or expert consultant (see text box, “Funder Requirements and Supports Related to Domestic Violence”). The domestic violence organizations with which grantees partnered included statewide coalitions, local domestic violence agencies focused on providing services for victims and batterers, or both. Partnerships between MFS-IP grantees and their local domestic violence organizations often broke new ground, with domestic violence agency staff at several sites expressing early concerns about the idea of providing family strengthening services to justice-involved men and their families. Some prospective partnerships never crystallized because this hurdle could not be overcome.

Two challenges frequently arose among grantees that succeeded in establishing these partnerships. Domestic violence agencies that built referral agreements with MFS-IP grantees sometimes expressed frustration about the lack of referrals they received and doubt regarding the screening procedures employed by their grantee partners (see “Rethinking Screening Procedures” text box on p. 6). Domestic violence agencies that contracted with MFS-IP grantees to provide paid services to staff or participants (such as educational workshops) often

¹⁶ Funding was provided under the Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood provisions of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, P.L.109-171.

Funder Requirements and Supports Related to Domestic Violence

OFA required each applicant for Responsible Fatherhood Priority Area 5 funding to demonstrate a partnership with a domestic violence coalition or a plan for consultation with experts in domestic violence prevention. All applications for funding were required to describe how the proposed program approach would address issues of domestic violence.

Webinars on preventing and responding to domestic violence issues in fatherhood programming were offered to MFS-IP grantees by OFA's contractor, the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, in Year 1 and Year 3 of programmatic funding. Roundtables and workshops on domestic violence were included in OFA-sponsored grantee meetings throughout the grant period. Grantees were also provided with domestic violence fact sheets, how-to guides, case studies, and other related resources developed by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center.

Assistance provided to grantees focused on topics such as

- developing domestic violence protocols,
- working with domestic violence agency partners,
- training staff to be aware of domestic violence issues,
- addressing gender norms and attitudes associated with domestic violence, and
- addressing situational violence among participating fathers.

All MFS-IP grantees were strongly encouraged by OFA to create a domestic violence protocol. Assistance with the development of domestic violence protocols was ranked as one of OFA's five highest-priority topics for technical assistance provision.

experienced challenges related to their own lack of infrastructure for corrections-based service delivery and lack of familiarity with the protocols and constraints associated with providing programming in correctional facilities.

Yet grantees that were familiar with the domestic violence field were often able to navigate these partnerships successfully. It was important for MFS-IP program staff to be able to speak the language of their partner agencies, understand their perspectives, and build interpersonal trust with individual domestic violence service providers. In addition, involving domestic violence agency partners during the program planning stage proved crucial to securing their full buy-in and ongoing investment in the program. Grantees with

successful partnerships had sought and incorporated the guidance of domestic violence agency partners in every aspect of program approach, including staff training requirements, program eligibility criteria, screening and recruitment procedures, and service delivery protocols.

Strategies to Address Partner Violence Risk in Family Strengthening Services among MFS-IP Grantees

The implementation study documented grantees' approaches to assessing and managing domestic violence risk among their prospective and enrolled participants. The provision of family strengthening services to incarcerated and reentering men and their families is a fledgling field, and as such, the approaches described below do not represent recognized "best practices," nor have they been rigorously evaluated. The MFS-IP grantees' strategies are presented here as a step toward identifying existing approaches for the benefit of future research and practice.

Domestic Violence Protocols. Staff working in MFS-IP programs widely acknowledged the importance of addressing domestic violence among justice-involved couples in family strengthening programs, and OFA strongly encouraged all programs to develop a domestic violence protocol. Approaches to this protocol took a wide variety of forms, including

- memoranda of understanding with community-based domestic violence agencies that outlined the services (e.g., training, receipt of referrals) that each agency agreed to provide for a grantee; or

- descriptions of educational content on domestic violence to be delivered to participants; or
- descriptions of the procedures to be used to screen or assess for domestic violence risk, provide appropriate services to individuals identified as being at elevated risk, and respond to incidents of domestic violence that might occur during program participation.

The third (and most comprehensive) approach to protocol development was taken by grantees that worked closely with a community-based domestic violence agency or coalition during the program design and early implementation phase or involved a domestic violence partner in a paid consulting role at some point during the grant period.

Screening for Partner Violence Risk.

Sites also took a wide variety of approaches to screening prospective or newly enrolled participants for domestic violence risk, and the goals and application of screening (e.g., to exclude prospective participants, to refer them to specialized services, or to inform additional safeguards) varied by site. Grantees in three sites did not conduct any formal or systematic screening for domestic violence. Among the remaining nine sites, procedures for detecting domestic violence risk included the use of correctional information systems, informal in-person screening of prospective participants as part of program intake, and formal screening using standard tools followed by referral for clinical assessment by a community-based domestic violence agency.

Correctional agencies (and grantees that had very close working relationships with their correctional partners) often relied on correctional information systems for information about prospective participants’ domestic violence risk. This approach identified persons whose correctional database records reflected a criminal conviction for domestic violence, a current restraining order, or a history of domestic violence perpetration that had been disclosed to a corrections employee. Most sites specifically consulted the correctional database for information on domestic violence risk. One grantee made the unverified assumption that any men referred to the program by correctional staff had likely been deemed suitable for the program from the perspective of domestic violence risk.

Rethinking Screening Procedures for Detecting Partner Violence

Most sites that screened prospective participants for domestic violence risk at the time of enrollment observed that (as of the beginning of Year 5 of implementation) they had not identified anyone at elevated risk for domestic violence. This led some to question whether their programs did not recruit such persons or whether their screening procedures were not adequate.

Several program staff suggested that men with a legal record of domestic violence or a current protective order against them might have self-selected out of relationship and family strengthening programming and were therefore not represented in the pool of program applicants who were screened.

Other staff speculated that prospective participants might not be willing to self-disclose current or past abusive behavior when asked about it at the time of enrollment. They noted that program applicants’ decisions about disclosure might be affected by factors such as the concern that disclosure would affect their program eligibility, the fear of legal or disciplinary consequences, and the lack of interpersonal trust established with program staff at the time of enrollment.

Interviewees at several sites noted that when domestic violence issues *were* self-disclosed by a participant, it always seemed to occur later, when participants had been involved in the program for some time. By this point, it was observed that stronger, more trusting relationships had often been built between participants and staff.

Some interviewees suggested that if they had to design their screening procedures over again, they would eliminate domestic violence screening at the time of enrollment in favor of screening later in the program cycle. Others stated that they would consider using a different screening tool that did not require self-disclosure of abusive behavior but rather focused on risk factors for abusiveness (such as the Propensity for Abusiveness Scale [Dutton, 1995]).

Program Spotlight: Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota

When Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota (LSSSD) developed an application for MFS-IP program funding, its staff reached out to the South Dakota Network Against Family and Sexual Violence. In challenging but collaborative conversations, they agreed on eligibility criteria, a screening and assessment strategy, and a treatment protocol that would sufficiently protect domestic violence victims and those at risk for domestic violence.

The approach used was based on the “Duluth Model”:

- focus on victims’ needs and concerns and do not blame them,
- hold perpetrators accountable and offer them opportunities for change,
- work to strengthen coordination and improve criminal and civil procedures to keep victims safe, and
- understand domestic violence as a product of societal conditions that support men’s use of power and control tactics over women and seek to change those conditions.

Eligibility. LSSSD and its partner coalition agreed to exclude men with any prior conviction for domestic violence and anyone subject to a restraining order by their partner.

Screening and assessment. Case managers conducted standardized screenings separately using the Family Secret Questionnaire for women and the Propensity for Abusiveness Scale for men. If either screening suggested elevated risk for domestic violence, couples were referred to a local domestic violence service provider for a clinical assessment.

Treatment and services. Women identified as being at elevated risk for domestic violence victimization were offered individual support and referred for services. Male partners identified as being at elevated risk for perpetration were required to participate in batterer intervention before they could begin MFS-IP family strengthening services. LSSSD contracted for batterer intervention courses for prospective participants living in state correctional facilities. These sessions brought domestic violence perpetrators together with a focus on peer-to-peer modeling and group discussion:

“The opportunity to talk with other guys and process this is a real fundamental thing. They’ve never done this before, and it’s probably the scariest thing they’ve ever done: tough guys sitting around talking with other tough guys about hurting and being vulnerable.” –Partner Organization Staff Member

In-person screening for domestic violence was undertaken by sites without access to correctional databases, as well as two sites that wished to supplement correctional data with one-on-one screening. Screenings were typically conducted during initial intake meetings with prospective participants. Screening questions were designed to capture whether the male enrollee:

- had a criminal history of domestic violence,
- was the subject of a current restraining order that would prevent contact with the proposed program partner, or
- had a history of abusive behavior with the proposed program partner.

Two sites used an initial, in-house screening process as a basis for identifying potentially at-risk participants for a full clinical domestic violence risk assessment by a community-based domestic violence agency. A third site conducted a full in-house clinical assessment for domestic violence risk using clinically trained program staff.

Although most sites focused screening on male participants only, several conducted a separate screening with female partners designed to identify domestic violence victimization. In these sites, a couple was considered to be at elevated risk for domestic

violence if either partner reported a history of abuse in the relationship. No programs made formal attempts to detect the potential for women’s use of violence among participating couples, and all sites focused primarily on intimate partner violence (rather than other forms of violence within the household, such as child abuse).

Couples at Elevated Risk for Partner Violence: Program Inclusion and Exclusion. In a few sites, certain categories of participants who were seen as being at high risk for domestic violence issues were excluded from participating. For example, some sites excluded men who were convicted of a domestic violence offense, who self-disclosed domestic violence

perpetration during the program intake process, or who had active orders of protection filed against them. At another site, a case-by-case determination regarding program inclusion or exclusion was made jointly by the project team depending on the particular situation with respect to domestic violence risk. One interviewee at an agency that excluded some participants deemed to be at high risk for domestic violence was concerned that providing relationship education to domestic violence perpetrators without first providing them with batterer intervention services could be potentially harmful to victims because the coursework could provide perpetrators with more tools with which to manipulate their partners.

Many sites did not exclude prospective participants on the basis of domestic violence screening results, but viewed the screening as a way to help ensure that couples at elevated risk for domestic violence received appropriate services while participating in MFS-IP programming. Some program staff at sites that did not exclude participants with documented domestic violence issues mentioned that they believed that most of the men wanting to enroll in the program would be returning to their families upon release regardless of whether they received relationship and family strengthening services. They suggested that in that situation, it was safer for such families to be enrolled in the program and receive program supports than not to participate at all.

Direct Services for Participants Dealing with Domestic Violence. Sites that allowed participation among couples with known domestic violence issues sometimes placed special conditions on their participation. For example, depending on the characteristics of each situation, staff at one site could choose to make a participant's enrollment in MFS-IP services contingent on attendance at counseling or classes. Three grantees required all men identified as being at elevated risk for domestic violence to participate in batterer intervention programming before beginning (or resuming) MFS-IP programming. While one site contracted to provide this treatment using MFS-IP grant funds, other grantees noted that it was provided via referral to partner agencies, such as the state department of correction or the state department of health and human services.

Interviewees at 9 of the 12 sites stated that optional, individualized support for participants dealing with domestic violence was available from program staff. Among grantees that delivered other forms of individualized support (such as counseling or case management), it was stipulated that support related to domestic violence would be offered by program staff as needed in the course of their regular work with participants. Although most sites had not delivered such services to any participants as of the beginning of Year 5 (due to failure to identify anyone at elevated risk), interviewees noted that the types of assistance stipulated by their program policies included initiating separate and confidential case management sessions with each member of an affected couple, helping past and potential victims to develop safety plans outlining a course of action to be taken in the event that violence recurred, and supporting participants in making decisions related to safely continuing or ending their relationships.

Finally, interviewees at all sites (even those that did not provide individualized services) stated that referrals to outside resources were available to participants who self-identified to staff as needing domestic violence-related assistance.

Domestic Violence Education and Prevention Activities. Many grantees incorporated brief domestic violence education and prevention activities into their regular program components. Unlike services or courses specifically for those identified as being at high risk for domestic violence, these activities were offered to all participants in MFS-IP programming.

Instructors and participants at some sites reported that information on domestic violence was already a part of their parenting and relationship education curricula. For example, the parenting curricula used in several sites included content on the impact of family violence and other forms of abuse on children's well-being, and encouraged men to understand how their own childhood experiences might be shaping their current relationships with their partners and children. (According to participants, examining the issue of domestic violence from the perspective of children's experiences compelled them to pay more attention to the subject.) Program staff in another site noted that their relationship education curriculum integrated safety concerns into every aspect of the course content.

Arguing for the importance of offering some form of domestic violence education or prevention to all participants in corrections-based family strengthening programs, one staff member suggested, "Even if they didn't commit a violent offense to get here, just by being in a prison they're being steeped in violence."

At other sites, program staff added new educational content related to domestic violence to their existing parenting or relationship education classes. These educational sessions were delivered in a prison setting during the male partner's incarceration and were variously delivered to couples jointly, men only, or men and their partners separately. One site provided a one-session, couples-based domestic violence workshop which emphasized men's roles in domestic violence. The workshop was delivered at correctional facilities during the program's regular evening class time, in between completion of the relationship education course and initiation of the couples-based parenting course. Staff in another site delivered brief information on domestic violence at the beginning of all couples-based relationship education seminars. This included information on what constitutes domestic violence and its impact on partners and children. Participants were asked to reflect on whether domestic violence issues were present in their relationships and to discuss these issues with their family services specialists (grant-funded staff persons providing individual services) as needed.

Several grantees worked with outside experts to provide educational sessions during their relationship education workshops. For example, one site contracted with a domestic violence service provider to attend its couples-based relationship education workshops and present a two-hour lesson and activity on domestic violence and child abuse to all couples. Another site worked with a local domestic violence agency to arrange regular presentations on domestic violence during its fathers-only parenting classes. Domestic violence agency staff also delivered brief domestic violence education as part of caregiver activity sessions that were offered to women who brought their children for child-friendly visitation hours with incarcerated program participants.

"There's a certain hardness you have to have in prison, but we can show them a different way of dealing with situations [while] still presenting themselves from a masculine standpoint... how to be manly without resorting to violence."
--Program Staff Member

A few program staff proposed that, in addition to program content that was specific to domestic violence, some aspects of parenting and relationship education work might help to prevent domestic violence perpetration among participating men. Some speculated that by helping participants to develop a positive relationship to masculinity in their family roles, they

could help them to avoid the violence that had previously been a part of their identities as men. Others suggested that skills such as communication and conflict resolution that were stressed in relationship and parenting courses could provide participants with alternatives to violence in their relationships. Finally, some grantees asserted that a stronger understanding of what

constitutes a healthy partner or parenting relationship could help victims or perpetrators to better understand abusive relationship dynamics and seek help when needed.

Baseline Snapshot of the Occurrence of Domestic Violence among Couples Affected by Incarceration

The MFS-IP impact study enrolled 2,010 incarcerated fathers who self-reported being married or in a committed relationship at baseline, and it also recruited their partners in the community. All couples participating in MFS-IP programming at the five impact sites (Ohio, Indiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New York) were recruited, along with control or comparison couples selected based on site-specific strategies.¹⁷ These sites represented a mix of program approaches, with two serving large numbers of couples in prison-based relationship education seminars and three delivering a more comprehensive set of family-strengthening services to a smaller number of participants. This sample is not representative of all couples, or even of all couples where the male partner is incarcerated. These data are taken from a sample of couples who were interested in participating in family strengthening services and illustrate factors that should be taken into consideration when planning family strengthening services for justice-involved couples.

The baseline data reported here are from 1,480 treatment and comparison couples. This type of matched-pair data allows for a much better understanding of couple dynamics than would a sample of fathers in prison and an independent sample of mothers whose partners were incarcerated. As in other couples-based studies, such as the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, the Building Strong Families Evaluation, and the Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation, fathers' and mothers' responses to the same question were not always identical.¹⁸

Baseline Family Characteristics Reported by MFS-IP Study Couples		
	Men	Women
Relationship Status	1,480	1,480
Married	26%	23%
Committed romantic partner	69 %	61%
Coparenting only	5%	16%
Romantic relationship with partner prior to incarceration	84%	81%
Parental Status		
At least one child under 18	87%	81%
Mean number of children	3.1	2.5

Characteristics of MFS-IP Couples' Relationships. The baseline survey data indicate that most couples were in long-term relationships that predated the current incarceration: 84 percent of men and 81 percent of women reported that they were in a relationship with their survey partner prior to the incarceration. The average length of the relationships was 7.5 years as reported by men and 6.9 years as reported by women.

A history of cohabitation was very common among participating couples, whether married or unmarried: 63 percent of men and 59 percent of women reported having lived with their survey partner at some point in the six months prior to the incarceration.

¹⁷ The impact study design and information about the five programs selected as impact sites is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/rb.shtml>

¹⁸ Zaveri & Hershey, 2010; Hsueh, Principe Alderson, Lundquist, Michalopoulos, Gubits, Fein, & Knox, 2012; McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, Teitler, Carlson, & Norland Audigier, 2003

When asked about their future intentions, 92 percent of men and 87 percent of women who were in a relationship prior to the male partner’s incarceration reported that they intended to continue their relationships following the male partner’s release. Many planned on cohabiting: 83 percent of men and 75 percent of women stated that they planned to live together once the male partner was released.

Physical and Emotional Abuse Perpetration and Victimization. As part of the impact survey (and unrelated to sites’ domestic violence screening activities), participating couples were asked about their attitudes toward domestic violence as well as their experiences of abuse perpetration and victimization during the six months prior to the male partner’s incarceration.¹⁹

Both men and women in the study sample overwhelmingly disagreed with statements endorsing domestic violence. In response to the statement, “It is sometimes OK for couples to get a little rough physically, like pushing or hitting,” 56 percent of men strongly disagreed and another 41 percent disagreed. Women felt somewhat more strongly: 68 percent strongly disagreed with this statement, while an additional 30 percent disagreed.

Exhibit 1. Physical and Emotional Abuse Reported by MFS-IP Study Couples		
	Men	Women
Any physical abuse		
Perpetration	38%	46%
Victimization	45%	39%
Any emotional abuse		
Perpetration	34%	33%
Victimization	34%	36%
Severe physical or sexual abuse		
Perpetration	9%	6%
Victimization	10%	17%
Frequent emotional abuse		
Perpetration	10%	12%
Victimization	13%	17%
Frequent physical abuse		
Perpetration	6%	10%
Victimization	14%	13%

Despite their disapproval of physical violence, however, many study couples reported physical and emotional abuse in their intimate partnerships during the six-month period immediately prior to the current incarceration (*Exhibit 1*).²⁰ Both members of each study couple were asked to complete a shortened version of the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2)²¹ during independent interviews. These items elicited information on the number of times each respondent had perpetrated a given behavior and the number of times he or she was victimized by his or her survey partner in that manner during the six months prior to the male partner’s incarceration.

The rates of perpetration and victimization shown in *Exhibit 1* are notable, particularly for a six-month period with a single reference partner. Female study participants were more likely

¹⁹ The data collection effort, which included both intervention and control/comparison group members, was completely separate from sites’ screening and response efforts with members of the intervention group. To protect respondents from risk associated with completing the interview and facilitate accurate reporting, the survey items reported here were answered via Audio Computer Assisted Self Interviewing, which allows the respondent to enter answers directly into the computer and then locks the module so that the interviewer cannot see the answers. Respondents were assured that their answers would not be provided to anyone outside the research team.

²⁰ Questions on physical and emotional abuse during the six months prior to the male partner’s incarceration were only asked of couples who reported being in a relationship with one another prior to the incarceration.

²¹ In the CTS2 the Psychological Aggression and Sexual Coercion subscales were shortened, and the Injury and Negotiation subscales were omitted.

than their male counterparts to report severe physical or sexual abuse victimization (17% compared with 10% for men) and less likely to report perpetrating severe physical or sexual abuse (6% compared with 9% for men). Because a shortened version of the CTS2 was used, this study is not able to address any difference in the consequences of abuse perpetrated by men versus abuse perpetrated by women. However, other studies indicate that the impact of partner violence on women victims is greater than among men (e.g., National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2011).

In addition to victimization and perpetration questions, male partners were asked whether they felt they needed and had received “services or a course for men to learn how to avoid hurting or abusing their partners” during their incarceration. Whereas 23 percent of men believed that they needed such services, just 16 percent reported having received them. (Similar questions were not asked of female partners.) Men who were incarcerated for violent crimes were no more likely than those incarcerated for nonviolent offenses to report perpetrating any domestic violence in the six months prior to their incarceration.

Couple-Level Measures of Abuse. To better understand violence within couples (in addition to the individual victimization and perpetration information presented in *Exhibit 1*), we created couple-level measures of physical violence that combined reports from each member of a study couple, as described in the text box “How Is Partner Violence Measured?” below. Based on these composite measures, in 34 percent of couples who were in a relationship during the six months prior to incarceration, no violence was reported²². Twenty-one percent of couples reported unilateral violence and 45 percent evidenced bilateral violence during that same period. (The term “bilateral violence” refers to situations in which each member of the study couple had reportedly used some form of violence against the other during the six months prior to the incarceration. It does not imply equivalence or symmetry in the use or experience of violence by each partner.)

Female partners in couples reporting bilateral violence reported feeling less safe than their male counterparts: 78 percent of men in such couples stated that they “always or “often” felt safe in their relationships, compared with 67 percent of women in couples reporting bilateral violence. Couples in which there was bilateral violence were less likely than all other couples to agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Most people can learn to communicate better with their spouse.” Small but statistically significant differences were also apparent on measures of substance abuse and social support. Men in couples in which both partners used violence reported higher alcohol and marijuana use and less support from family members (other than their romantic partners) in the six months prior to incarceration than men in couples that did not report bilateral violence.

Future analysis of the dynamics of violence within MFS-IP study couples will include examining congruence and incongruence in partners’ reports of abuse perpetration and victimization.

²² The terms “no violence,” “unilateral violence,” and “bilateral violence” are based on dyadic analysis that takes into account both the male and female partners’ reports of victimization and perpetration. The couple measures differ in magnitude from the individual-level measures because they include reports made by either partner.

How Is Partner Violence Measured among MFS-IP Participants?

The MFS-IP survey was designed to facilitate candid, accurate reporting of domestic violence and other forms of abuse while protecting respondents' safety. Several characteristics of the survey design were important to enhance survey clarity and participant safety:

1. Questions about partner violence and other abuse focused on specific behaviors, rather than general terms, to avoid labeling participants' experiences in (sometimes stigmatized) terms that they themselves might not have used. For reporting purposes, the reference period was the six months before incarceration, and behaviorally specific individual-level measures were combined into the following categories:
 - *Any emotional abuse*—One or more incidents in which one partner threatened to hurt the other partner or children, family members, or loved ones; tried to keep the other from seeing or talking to friends or family; or tried to keep money from the other, took money from him or her, or made him or her ask for money
 - *Any physical abuse*—One or more incidents in which one partner shoved, hit, slapped, grabbed, threw something at, beat, choked, slammed, kicked, burned, or beat the other; used a knife or gun on the other; or forced him or her to have sex by hitting, holding down, or using a weapon
 - *Frequent emotional abuse*—Six or more incidents of emotional abuse
 - *Frequent physical abuse*—Six or more incidents of physical abuse
 - *Severe physical or sexual abuse*—One or more incidents in which one partner beat, choked, slammed, kicked, burned, or beat the other; used a knife or gun; or forced him or her to have sex by hitting, holding down, or using a weapon

In addition to the individual-level measures of violence listed above, reports from each member of a study couple were analyzed together to produce composite couple-level indicators, including:

- *No violence*—Neither member of the couple reports any physical abuse perpetration or victimization
 - *Unilateral violence*—One or both members of the couple reports female-on-male physical abuse in the relationship and neither member reports male-on-female physical abuse OR one or both members of the couple reports male-on-female physical abuse and neither reports female-on-male physical abuse
 - *Bilateral violence*—One or both members of the couple reports male-on-female physical abuse in the relationship and one or both members of the couple reports female-on-male physical abuse
2. Surveys were administered to each member of the study couple separately. Interviews were conducted by different interviewers at different appointment times at locations where only one member of the couple was present.
 3. Each member of the study couples was asked the same questions about partner violence and other forms of abuse. This approach was designed to capture instances of violence and abuse in relationships more comprehensively than relying only on the individual report of one member of a couple.
 4. Consistent with the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) approach, survey items were constructed to ask about perpetration and victimization for each behavior in close succession in order to increase reporting of victimization.
 5. A condensed version of the CTS2 was used that shortened subscales on coercion and omitted subscales on injury and negotiation.
 6. Items dealing with partner violence and other sensitive issues were answered by participants using an audio computer-assisted self-interviewing system that allowed them to read the sensitive questions to themselves on a laptop screen and simultaneously hear them read aloud through headphones. Participants entered their answers directly into the computer in a self-locking, password-protected module that ensured that their answers could not be seen by the interviewer.

Providing Responsible Support to Couples Affected by Incarceration and Domestic Violence

The prevalence and severity of domestic violence evident among the baseline impact study sample of 1,480 couples strengthens earlier researcher and practitioner assertions that justice-involved couples are at elevated risk for domestic violence. Survey responses from incarcerated

men and their partners, interviews with service providers, and input from domestic violence experts all suggest important ways in which domestic violence risk needs to be addressed in programs serving these couples.

Build Stronger, More Stable Partnerships with Domestic Violence Agencies. Experiences among MFS-IP programs suggest that in many sites, the funding requirement that grantees demonstrate partnerships with their local domestic violence agencies resulted in collaborations that might not have been pursued without the requirement. With these partnerships came stronger domestic violence protocols as well as the addition of various forms of domestic violence education to programs that might not otherwise have incorporated them. However, overall the programs' mixed experiences in addressing domestic violence call attention to the need for more explicit guidance on domestic violence protocol development and stronger partnerships to inform domestic violence response strategies among organizations serving justice-involved couples. It is crucial that the efforts of agencies with expertise serving justice-involved couples be thoroughly informed by colleagues with expertise in domestic violence prevention and response—and vice versa. Based on the difficulties many MFS-IP grantees and their domestic violence agency partners reported in these partnerships, it seems clear that more investment is needed in developing stable and mutually trusting collaboration. In a partnership developed outside of the MFS-IP initiative, the Center for Urban Families (a nationally recognized fatherhood organization in Baltimore, Maryland) and the House of Ruth (a Baltimore agency serving domestic violence victims) participated in a year-long, intensive process designed to identify areas of common ground and work through differences so that both agencies could better serve incarcerated and reentering fathers and their families. Collaborations such as this one, which foster an open learning process between agencies serving justice-involved families and agencies serving domestic violence victims, could help practitioners from both fields to work most effectively with this population.

Strengthen Domestic Violence Screening Approaches. Only 9 of the 12 programs in the MFS-IP initiative conducted any formal screening for domestic violence risk—and 8 of the 9 programs that did screen for domestic violence identified few or no couples as being at elevated risk. The contrast between the results of sites' domestic violence risk screening procedures and the high prevalence of domestic violence reported among the impact study population indicates a pressing need to reexamine screening needs and approaches. This study did not evaluate the effectiveness of screening approaches; however, the experiences of MFS-IP grantees and others working with justice-involved families suggest that asking incarcerated men to self-report illegal abusive behavior to program staff in a correctional setting may be unrealistic. Approaches that identify domestic violence perpetration risk via factors associated with perpetration (e.g., family of origin dynamics, power and control issues) could be more effective than relying on incarcerated or reentering men to self-disclose illegal violence against a partner through behavior-focused screening (e.g., self-reported use of violence against a partner). In addition, MFS-IP grantees' experiences suggest that asking participants about domestic violence at the time of the first intake visit, before trust or rapport has been established with program staff, is not ideal. The development and testing of domestic violence risk screening and assessment tools relevant for this context and population (such as the Propensity for Abusiveness Scale²³ and the recently developed DVPSQ²⁴) will help the programs that serve

²³ Dutton, 1995

²⁴ O. Williams, personal communication, April 23, 2012

justice-involved couples to screen effectively. Although the goals of screening vary—such as excluding high-risk individuals from programming or providing them with specialized services—it is clear that successfully identifying the presence of domestic violence risk is crucial to providing couples-based services safely. The fallibility of screening procedures highlights the need to provide some domestic violence related services (such as education and resource information) to all participants, regardless of screening results.

Respond to Men’s and Women’s Use of Violence. Organizations serving justice-involved couples must be prepared not only to detect and respond to men’s abusiveness toward their partners, but also to identify, understand, and respond to women’s use of violence as well. Practitioners at Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County (Michigan) have implemented both community-based programs (RENEW) and prison-based programs (Meridians for Incarcerated Women) for female domestic violence survivors who have used force in their relationships. These programs address the contextual and gendered nature of intimate partner violence.²⁵ Through efforts like these, future service providers may be better able to understand women’s use of violence as well as their unique intervention and service needs.²⁶

Increase Understanding of Domestic Violence among Incarcerated and Reentering Men and Their Partners. These initial findings call attention to the substantial gap in prior research on domestic violence among incarcerated and reentering men and their partners. Quantitative and mixed-methods research on couple relationship dynamics before, during, and after incarceration is essential to enable both policymakers and practitioners to respond to the complexities of men’s and women’s use of violence in this context, including myriad issues unique to couples navigating one partner’s criminal justice system involvement. This gap will be partially addressed by the MFS-IP impact evaluation, which will continue interviewing couples at 9, 18, and 34 months post baseline, following many couples through the release and reentry process. The evaluation will be able to assess whether domestic violence risk changes for each member of the couple as partners are released, return to the community, and, at least for some, reunite as a family. The evaluation will also be able to determine if couple relationship education and other indirect interventions might affect the risk for domestic violence.

The shortening or omission of the coercion, negotiation and injury subscales of the CTS2 in the MFS-IP impact evaluation, which was not designed with domestic violence as a focal outcome, presents a notable limitation with regard to understanding differences in men’s and women’s experiences of abuse. As stated previously, findings from the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), a large, population-based study funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, show that women are much more likely than men (81% versus 35%) to report significant impacts on emotional and physical health as a result of relationship violence (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2011). In addition, the CTS2 itself (perhaps the most widely used measure of partner violence) has many known limitations, including its focus on conflict-related violence and the fact that it does not yield rich information about the context for violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Future studies of domestic violence among justice-involved couples must be prepared to thoroughly explore gender differences in the use and experience of partner violence, its context and consequences for both members of a couple.

²⁵ More information on program content is available from <http://www.biscmi.org/wshh/> and www.csswashtenaw.org/renew.

²⁶ Larance, 2006, 2007

Finally, given the substantial risk of domestic violence and the potential for couples-based programming to improve relationships for couples experiencing separation through incarceration, additional efforts to document and evaluate innovative approaches to supporting relationships and managing domestic violence risk among couples navigating incarceration, reentry, or community supervision are essential.

Acknowledgments

This brief was guided in its development by an expert panel consisting of Creasie Finney Hairston, Dean of Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago; Joe Jones, Founder and President of the Center for Urban Families, Baltimore, Maryland; Anne Menard, Executive Director of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (funded by the Administration for Children and Families/HHS); and Oliver Williams, Executive Director of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community and Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. We are deeply grateful for their thoughtful input and guidance.

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National Evaluation of MFS-IP Programs

Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the National Evaluation of Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

Implementation Study: Implementation interviews were conducted with each grantee yearly through fall 2010. Interview respondents included program staff, community partners, and participants. The implementation evaluation focused on program context, program design, target population and participants served, and key challenges and strategies.

Impact Study: Survey data collection with incarcerated men and their partners is currently under way in five impact sites selected from among the 12 grantees. Beginning in December 2008, couples participating in MFS-IP programming and a set of similar couples not participating in programming were enrolled in the national impact study and completed the first of four longitudinal surveys designed to collect information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes. Baseline data collection is complete, with follow-up data collection expected to continue through approximately April 2014.

This brief and other publications related to the MFS-IP evaluation are available from the HHS ASPE Web site: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP>. A program overview and evaluation summary, as well as links to publications of interest and other Web resources, may be found at the national evaluation Web site, <https://mfs.rti.org>.

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