

HOME-GROWN SOCIAL CAPITAL

HOW HIGHER EDUCATION FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN
FACILITATES FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION



Susan Sturm and Vivian Nixon



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Susan Sturm is the George M. Jaffin Professor of Law and Social Responsibility and the founding director of the Center for Institutional and Social Change at Columbia Law School. Her work focuses on building “the architecture of full participation,” making education central for communities affected by the justice system, institutional change, and transformative leadership. She has researched and written extensively about multi-level change, and collaborates with a wide variety of higher education and community based organizations and networks, including Aspen Ascend Network, Hostos Community College, JustLeadershipUSA, the New York Reentry Education Network, and College and Community Fellowship. She is the principal investigator on Ford Foundation and Aspen Ascend grants, aimed at building multi-generational pathways to education in under-served communities, particularly those affected by incarceration, and developing learning communities to inform and support institutional and community transformation and build leadership needed to advance educational access and success.



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PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The **Center for Institutional and Social Change at Columbia Law School** (CISC) builds the capacity of networks, institutions and individuals to understand the multi-level systems that limit access and full participation, and to identify strategies and leverage points for catalyzing and sustaining change. CISC engages in collaborative action research projects with institutional and community leaders involved in systems change, particularly in the areas of education, justice, and community development. We foster collaborations across multiple institutions to develop frameworks, build knowledge, expand organizational capacities, cultivate leadership, and support broader institutional and public policy change. CISC brings a multi-disciplinary approach to this work through strategic visioning and inquiry, multi-method research, institutional capacity building, systems-level assessment, and education.

The mission of **Community and College Fellowship** (CCF) is to eliminate individual and structural barriers to higher education, economic security, long term stability, and civic participation for women who have criminal convictions (including those currently and formerly incarcerated) and their families. The services, programs and projects of CCF exist to eliminate individual and structural barriers to higher education, economic security, long term stability, and civic participation for women who have criminal convictions (including those currently and formerly incarcerated) and their families. CCF guides women seeking to reclaim their lives through the stages of higher education while promoting their leadership, self-advocacy, artistic expression, and long term success.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and the adults in their lives toward educational success and economic security. We take a two-generation approach to our work and embrace a commitment to gender and racial equity lenses. Vivian Nixon is an Aspen Institute Ascend Fellow, and CISC and CCF are members of the Ascend Network, a national network of organizations pioneering two-generation approaches for children and the adults in their lives.

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Photos courtesy of Community and College Fellowship.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States may be at a turning point in its approach to growing inequality and record-level incarceration rates. Over the last few years, new policies have begun to elevate education's role in breaking the cycle of cross-generational poverty.

Building educational opportunities for families and communities affected by incarceration requires holistic support for individuals and families; this goal cannot be achieved one person at a time because these educational pathways include challenges and barriers that are built into the settings people occupy. Many of these families live in communities that have experienced decades of educational disinvestment and public indifference to the daunting challenges associated with poverty. They must navigate systems and policies that discourage people from pursuing education and make prison more likely than college in some communities. They must also contend with the stigma of incarceration, often in communities that disproportionately bear the brunt of mass incarceration policies. Meaningful change requires transforming the institutions and communities that shape families' opportunity networks. But the multigenerational effects of incarceration and poverty make school- and community-wide change challenging.

Research suggests that a single-generation approach cannot on its own break the cycle of poverty in families and communities. Simultaneously addressing the educational needs of parents and children is a key strategy for alleviating poverty and strengthening communities.

THE ROLE OF MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES IN PROVIDING SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR EDUCATIONAL ADVANCEMENT

Access to social capital proves particularly critical (and often in short supply) for the educational success of people living in poor communities with struggling schools, low levels of educational achievement, and high incarceration rates. Changing these entrenched mobility patterns requires an understanding of how and why families and communities play such a pivotal role in educational success or failure.

This narrative is largely a story of social capital; relationships often formed outside of school provide crucial information, developmental opportunities, and personal supports needed to aspire to, access, and succeed in college. Social capital is the resources people derive from relationships, and it is transmitted through formal and informal networks of individuals who provide information and access to opportunity, and who convey social norms. These networks enable individuals to access economic

resources, increase their cultural capital through contacts with experts, and access institutional resources and opportunities. Education profoundly affects — and is affected by — access to social capital. Relationships provide the information, developmental opportunities, and social supports needed to navigate the educational pathway.

This study expands the two-generation lens to reflect the way women and men in communities affected by incarceration actually experience family relationships. Family can best be understood not as a fixed concept based only on biological or legal relationships, but rather as a dynamic concept informed by enduring relationships of commitment and support that serve as sustained sources of social capital enabling educational access and persistence. This lens draws on a growing literature supporting a community-centered, multigenerational definition of family. This expanded definition also grows out of interviews and focus groups with women enrolled in College and Community Fellowship (CCF), a program that provides academic support, social capital development, community building, and tuition aid to help justice-involved women successfully complete their college education. Through this inquiry, we learned about formerly incarcerated women's experiences of family, the mutual needs and barriers that they and their family members share, and where and how they get support as they pursue their education.

The women we interviewed define families and caretaker relationships in diverse ways that incorporate multigenerational, extended family, friends, and community members



who may or may not live in the same household, as well as other relationships with people who are in the same generation, such as siblings, cousins, housemates, and partners. This broader conception of family also reflects the realities of family structure in communities affected by incarceration, and illuminates the durable relationships that serve as sources of social capital within families and communities. Our research suggests that students who have experienced incarceration form ties and bonds that flow from experiencing trauma, rebuilding lives after prison, and sharing a commitment to giving back to their communities. This social capital can be mobilized to maximize the success of individuals within the network.

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF INTRA- AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Every woman interviewed described the pivotal role of relationships with extended family members in enabling them to pursue college, navigate transitions, and persist in the face of hardship. Relationships with extended family and organizational brokers powerfully contributed to a critical shift in women's expectations

about college. Each of the women described a pivotal moment when she formed a sense of hope that she could go to college, and an expectation that she would follow through on that hope. Relationships with others in their family or community were pivotal in facilitating that shift in identity from formerly incarcerated person to student.

The interviews also showed that the sharing of resources and support flowed in many different directions, not just from parent to child. Educational support moved from adults to children and from children to adults. Women also received inspiration and support from their children, as well as concrete help with schoolwork and homework. Women give and receive support between generations, and this knowledge-sharing strengthens lessons learned, especially around the importance of education.

As they have succeeded in their education and rebuilt their lives, many of the women interviewed have become a source of social capital in their families and communities. Also apparent in the interviews is the women's willingness to share their social capital far beyond their immediate families and communities through networks that facilitate the sharing of that social capital. What emerges is a strategy for leveraging the educational success of formerly incarcerated women who are themselves deeply embedded in and committed to their families and communities.

Community-based organizations play a key role in facilitating that success. They are acting as brokers of social capital, connecting women to each other and to key resources in the community, and scaffolding

the success of women as they move along the educational trajectory.

PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage preexisting social, professional, and cultural networks.

To fully realize the benefits of the strategies that are already being employed informally by people reentering the community, program models should promote the engagement of preexisting social, professional, and cultural networks for necessary supports. At the same time, these programs should generate new opportunities to build networks across socioeconomic segregation through peer relationships, mentoring, apprenticeships, and other bridging methods.

2. Refine family and community to include relation networks with social capital supporting education.

This research shows that physical or biological proximity is a poor proxy for identifying relationships with resources related to education. Social characteristics grounded in shared experience and commitments provide a strong basis for identifying relationships that provide social capital relating to education, particularly when individuals come from communities with low levels of education. Therefore we recommend that programs and policy explore new definitions of family and community that more accurately track the available social capital in relationship networks.

3. Foster strengths-based networks of women with convictions and their families.

To be effective, organizations must successfully foster the ability of women with criminal convictions and their families to identify their own strengths while bridging them to other closed networks that have been engaged

by program staff and leadership. These connections include local, state, and federal government; other nonprofits; private foundations; donors; corporations; and the faith-based community.

4. Offer gatekeepers professional development about cultivating social capital.

CCF participants said that a key factor in their well-being is their ability to increase social networks and recognize their own social capital. Organizations that aim to build social capital and social networks should offer professional development opportunities to staff in gatekeeping roles, from correctional officers to reentry specialists. Proper training increases social networks among employees, which translates to expanded networks for program participants.

5. Use policy and funding initiatives to foster multigenerational, cross-sector collaborations and networks.

Funders and policymakers are in a position to facilitate cross-sector collaboration by supporting networks designed with a multigenerational lens. They can also redefine “family” in key initiatives related to education to foster and support multigenerational relationships that provide social capital to families and communities affected by incarceration.

6. Pursue collaborative research designed to advance knowledge, effective practice, and policy innovation.

This report represents a small but growing body of research focused on the assets and strategies for building social capital in communities affected by incarceration. More

These findings will hopefully catalyze further research, activism, and policy aimed at building support for postsecondary education for formerly incarcerated women and men, [and] connect that support to families.

- Susan Sturm and Vivian Nixon

research is needed to understand multigenerational needs, interactions, and strategies related to education. This research should be done in close collaboration with people directly affected. Collaborative, multi-method research poses questions that reflect the interests, needs, and knowledge of those directly affected. It provides firsthand perspectives about the sources and strategies for building social capital in families and communities. In the process, this research builds collaborations and partnerships between researchers and community leaders.

These findings will hopefully catalyze further research, activism, and policy aimed at building support for postsecondary education for formerly incarcerated women and men, connect that support to families, and enable organizational brokers like CCF to facilitate the development of these resource networks. These strategies will build the homegrown social capital needed to rebuild families and communities affected by incarceration.

INTRODUCTION

The United States may be at a turning point in its approach to growing inequality and record-level incarceration rates. Leaders and policymakers who have been involved in this work for decades describe a new sense of energy and possibility. As communities, leaders, and policymakers grapple with the consequences of mass incarceration, advocates and policymakers are searching for effective ways to shift public priorities from incarceration to education.

Over the last few years, new policies have begun to elevate education's role in breaking the cycle of cross-generational poverty. Among many others, My Brother's Keeper, the Opportunity Youth Initiative, and the Young Men's Initiative focus long-overdue attention on improving the achievement of those left out of the American Dream.¹ The Department of Education, with the support of President Obama and Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, has made education for people with criminal histories part of its policy agenda. The overarching goal proposes that "by 2020 the U.S. would again have the world's highest proportion of college graduates and the most competitive workforce, and every American will complete at least one year of postsecondary education or training."²

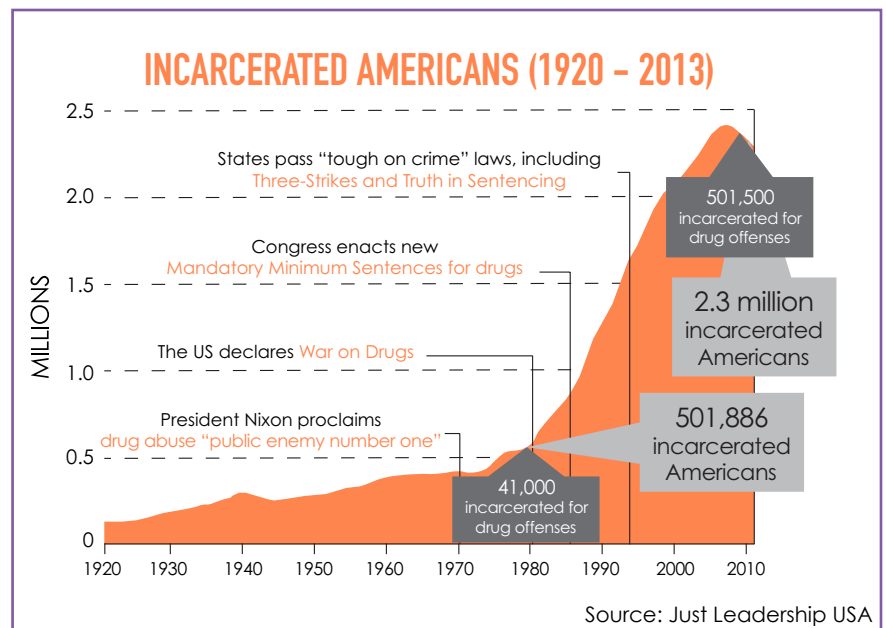
These initiatives must face the consequences of decades-long policies of under-investment in education and over-investment in incarceration.³ With policies that have produced the highest incarceration rate in world, the United States is now home to a critical mass of people of different races, classes, and backgrounds who have experienced direct contact with the criminal justice system. Many of the intended beneficiaries of these emerging innovations reside in communities with high incarceration rates and little hope of prosperity, success, and upward mobility, no matter how hard they work. The obstacles facing these communities, including policy barriers like the revocation of Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated students, inhibit opportunity and mobility for the next generation.⁴ Incarceration's reach has now grown too big to ignore; stratification researchers identify incarceration as a powerful "engine of social inequality."⁵

Communities of color have borne the brunt of this emphasis on incarceration at the expense of education, as evidenced by the phenomenon of "million dollar blocks." The Justice Mapping Center has charted the concentration of incarceration rates in disadvantaged communities around the country, highlighting "the millions of dollars per neighborhood being spent to imprison residents of these communities."⁶

Researchers have documented the disproportionate incarceration of people of color, particularly black men.⁷ While people of color make up about 30 percent of the U.S. population, they account for more than 60 percent of those imprisoned.⁸ According to a report published by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, “African Americans were newly admitted to custody at a rate 5.7 times the rate for Whites. Hispanics were admitted 1.9 times and Native Americans 4.3 times the rate for Whites.” Admission rates for Native-American and African-American women were over six times and four times, respectively, the rate for white women.⁹

At the same time, disinvestment in education has reduced social mobility and limited access to social capital needed for educational advancement.¹⁰ Social capital is the resources people derive from relationships,¹¹ and it is transmitted through formal and informal networks of individuals who provide information and access to opportunity, and who convey social norms. These networks enable individuals to access economic resources, increase their cultural capital through contacts with experts, and access institutional resources and opportunities.¹² Education profoundly affects — and is affected by — access to social capital.¹³ Relationships provide the information, developmental opportunities, and social supports needed to navigate the educational pathway.¹⁴

In our culture, educational institutions and social policy rely heavily on family relationships to provide crucial aspects of the resources needed for educational success. Yet, many individuals belong to families that,



if traditionally defined, do not have the educational background and resources necessary to fulfill this role. In 2011, 62 percent of children under 18 lived in families where the highest level of education among adults was high school or less.¹⁵ Researchers have also documented a “geography of opportunity,” meaning that the quality and extent of educational resources and social supports turn on where you grow up.¹⁶ People of color are more likely to grow up in communities with low levels of educational attainment and high poverty that do not offer adequate opportunities to develop capabilities.¹⁷ Add to these challenges the fact that communities with high incarceration rates face considerable challenges in rebuilding family relationships interrupted by incarceration.¹⁸

Building educational opportunities for families and communities affected by incarceration requires holistic support for individuals and families; this goal cannot be achieved one person at a time because these educational pathways contain challenges and barriers that are built into the settings people occupy.

Many of these families live in communities that have experienced decades of disinvestment in education and public indifference to the daunting challenges associated with poverty.¹⁹ They must navigate systems and policies that discourage people from pursuing education and make prison more likely than college in some communities. They must also contend with the stigma of incarceration, often in communities that disproportionately bear the brunt of mass incarceration policies. Meaningful change requires transforming the institutions and communities that shape families' opportunity networks.²⁰ But the multigenerational effects of incarceration and poverty make school- and community-wide change challenging.

The resurging interest in two-generation approaches to social issues, fueled by philanthropy, offers a promising avenue for simultaneously supporting individuals and transforming the settings they occupy. Two-generation approaches focus on meeting the needs of children and parents together. They build on the insight that families play a central role in shaping children's well-being and mobility. Support for education within families offers the potential to grow social capital at home and in communities, embedding it in long-term relationships. A two-generation lens forces concrete reconfiguration of existing policies and strategies to link supports for family members, while providing the platform, capacity, and momentum for more transformative change at community and system levels.²¹

Much of the research on social capital relating to educational advancement has defined

individuals as the unit of analysis; research that does focus on families has often taken a deficits approach, examining differential educational outcomes based on demographic characteristics, such as being in a single-parent family without college education.²² Emerging research has begun to explore how organizational and policy design can influence access to resource networks, as well as resource-sharing patterns that go beyond traditional parent-child relationships.²³ Yet, little is known about how programs and policies designed to advance education for adults can serve to support the educational advancement of other family members, including children.

Organizations and researchers have started strategizing ways to more meaningfully integrate these services and systems.²⁴ As a leader in that work, Ascend at the Aspen Institute brings together community organizations, service providers, researchers, and policymakers to think critically about how a two-generation approach to education, economic security, and social capital can create opportunities for and address the needs of poor parents and their children together.²⁵

Ascend has spurred a national conversation around the two-generation strategy. Yet, activists and researchers have much work ahead of them. While several organizations throughout the country are focused on improving educational opportunities for vulnerable children and women with children, many of those efforts are pursued in isolation or, at the very least, are not strategically coordinated to fully reach their transformative potential.²⁶ Gaps exist in the literature and in the field concerning the multigenerational dynamics affecting

educational access, particularly for families affected by incarceration, and the role of organizations and networks that serve these families in brokering relationships that build a two-generation approach within their core organizational missions. Further, additional research is needed to understand more fully the impact of multigenerational relationships and the mechanisms accounting for positive outcomes on the lives of both women and their families.

This study takes a step forward in building knowledge about how social capital develops and flows within multigenerational families. It explores what families look like for people who have previously experienced incarceration and seek to pursue postsecondary education, and how multigenerational relationships affect educational access and advancement. To realize the promise of the two-generation approach, it is crucial to understand how families actually function in these programs' target communities, particularly in families where individuals with criminal justice involvement pursue postsecondary education. This inquiry seeks to understand the relationship between the educational development of different family members who care for one another. As a previous Ascend publication noted, these interrelationships provide the mechanisms by which families "build education, economic supports, social capital, and health and well-being" and thus "create a legacy of economic security that passes from one generation to another."²⁷

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on understanding family and community interactions involving women with criminal justice involvement who have pursued



postsecondary education. It also highlights how these interactions support educational persistence and success for those women and their families. It uses a strengths-based framework and explores the relationship and resources embedded in women's families and communities, and their relationship to multigenerational educational success.

The participants of the study are women enrolled in College and Community Fellowship (CCF), a program that provides academic support, social capital development, community building, and tuition aid to help justice-involved women successfully complete their college education. CCF typically serves about 180 active program participants; between 15 and 30 women each year earn postsecondary degrees with the support of CCF. Since 2000, CCF students have earned 286 degrees: 61 associate's, 142 bachelor's, 81 master's, one JD, and one PhD.²⁸ CCF has cultivated a community of women committed to the mutual success of women and their families, as well as a wide network

of organizational and government partners and networks that currently provide support to CCF's constituents.

Through a series of interviews and focus groups, we have gathered firsthand accounts of the processes by which formerly incarcerated women gain access to resources and relationships: tools that helped them navigate and persist in the face of obstacles and stresses. We interviewed 38 women who are enrolled in CCF; they were all pursuing their postsecondary education and have all experienced prison. We asked them about their family experiences, the needs and barriers that they and their family members share, and where and how they get support as they pursue their education.

The study shows the key role of relationships in enabling women to develop aspirations and concrete plans to go to college. Relationships also proved critical in obtaining information about how to navigate their own schooling and the schooling of the children they cared for, and the developmental opportunities that can help them thrive in school. In the process, these

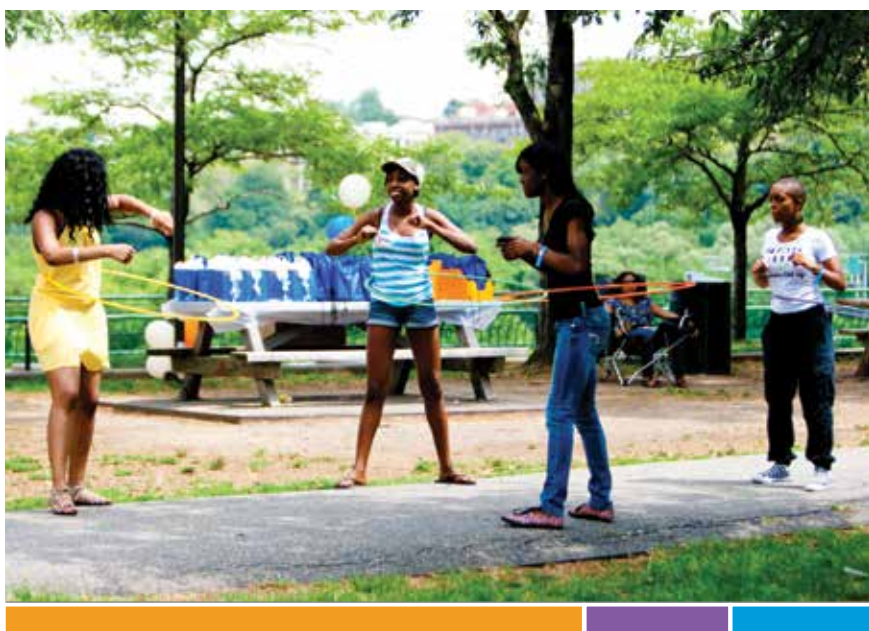
women become crucial sources of social capital for people in their relationship networks.

Our research also provides considerable evidence that formerly incarcerated students, transformed by their educations, provide crucial home-grown support for education to their extended families and community. Extended families play a particularly important role in shaping educational aspirations and trajectories. Community-based organizations (CBOs) serve as another critical support system as these women navigate the pathway to higher education. CBOs help the women marshal useful resources within their families, communities, and institutional environments, allowing them and their families to persist and succeed in their educational aspirations.

A MULTIGENERATIONAL LENS FOR UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

The research presented in this study examines the role of families as sources of social capital relating to education. That research led us to employ a definition of family that builds on and extends the two-generation approach, which offers a powerful response to conventional approaches to reducing poverty through education, employment, and social capital development. Most education programs that are developed as a strategy for poverty alleviation have focused on supporting a single generation, most often targeted to the K-12 student population.

Research suggests that a single-generation approach cannot on its own break the cycle of poverty in families and communities. Learning at home and in the community supports



educational engagement and success in school; the educational experiences of one generation thus affect those of another.²⁹ Lack of educational opportunities and viable educational pathways to family-sustaining careers for parents are central barriers limiting the educational success of their children. Simultaneously addressing the educational needs of parents and children is a key strategy for alleviating poverty and strengthening communities.³⁰

Ascend at the Aspen Institute has become the national hub for developing two-generation approaches, “which focus on creating opportunities for and meeting the needs of vulnerable children and their parents together.”³¹ This lens invites the development of policy and programs that consider how people in families interact with and affect each other’s development, as well as how they face common barriers that interfere with their ability to thrive and support each other.

We have built on this base of insight and research, and expanded it to reflect the way women and men in communities affected by incarceration actually experience family relationships. Family is best understood not as fixed concept based only on biological or legal relationships, but rather as a dynamic concept informed by enduring relationships of commitment and support that serve as sustained sources of social capital enabling educational access and persistence. This lens draws on a growing literature supporting a community-centered, multigenerational definition of family. It recognizes that family is not solely defined by biological or nuclear family relationships and that

more than two generations may live in one household. Moreover, the women we interviewed define families and caretaker relationships in diverse ways that can incorporate multigenerational extended family, friends, and community members who may or may not live in the same household, and other interactions among people who are in the same generation, such as siblings, cousins, housemates, and partners.

This broader conception of family also reflects the realities of family structure in communities affected by incarceration and highlights the durable relationships that serve as existing sources of social capital within families and communities. Our research suggests that students who have experienced incarceration form bonds that flow from experiencing trauma, rebuilding lives after prison, and sharing a commitment to giving back to their communities. This social capital can be mobilized to maximize the success of individuals within the network.

This redefinition of family also takes account the context of promoting and enabling educational access and success. We learned that the meaning of family depends upon the function that families are called upon to serve. More concretely, people in a variety of roles fulfill the family function of providing education-related social capital by providing ongoing information, support, and opportunities for educational development, including mentoring, providing mutual support with homework, tutoring, building a culture of college-going in the household, providing encouragement when students hit roadblocks, and celebrating accomplishments. These roles may be performed by parents, siblings,

extended family members, or kinship communities; they do not necessarily require living together or serving as a legal guardian. Indeed, children provide social capital to adults, as well as to each other.

These multigenerational families serve as a support network for women in their reentry experiences, which include rebuilding family relationships, caring for multiple members of the family, pursuing education, navigating employment, securing housing, and serving their communities. What distinguishes these relationships as familial in nature is a sustained level of commitment, along with continuity and resilience of these relationships. Understanding what family actually means to formerly incarcerated women helps us better support women in their educational access and success and facilitate their social capital and economic security.

Yet, the biological, two-generational frame has limited the availability of support for nontraditional families that provide multigenerational support for education. The biological and legal definition is often used in policies and programs to define eligibility for benefits, guardianship, and participation related to education. Berger & Bzostek (2014) contend that family does not necessarily function as a cohesive unit between a married couple, although social policies assume that it does. Existing family policies tend to target specific categories of families and use family definitions based on “consuming unit,” “assistance unit,” or “tax filing unit” that may not capture the everyday reality of adults and children.³² In a similar vein, social policies with respect to child support, custody, visitations, school, and health care are based on an

outdated family model. Revising policies would be the next step in accommodating a growing number of nontraditional, multiple-partner, complex families.³³

This project shows the value of expanding the lens by sharing insights and experiences from women who are directly impacted by criminal justice and other government systems about how they and their families (as they define them) navigate their education pathways. Through an Ascend grant, we have expanded this research to include participants in organizations serving youth, men, and fathers to advance their education. These organizations are part of a network that aims to make education central for individuals, families, and communities affected by criminal justice involvement. Through this research, we plan to provide concrete knowledge about how policymakers and program leaders can support families with a multigenerational strategy that will both improve programmatic outcomes and expand educational opportunities for the family members of those they serve.

A SOCIAL CAPITAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CROSS-GENERATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ADVANCEMENT

Education, particularly postsecondary education, is key to building an intergenerational cycle of opportunity.³⁴ It provides the wherewithal to learn, solve problems, and critically engage the world. It facilitates social citizenship and political participation. It also has become a prerequisite for most decent-paying jobs.³⁵

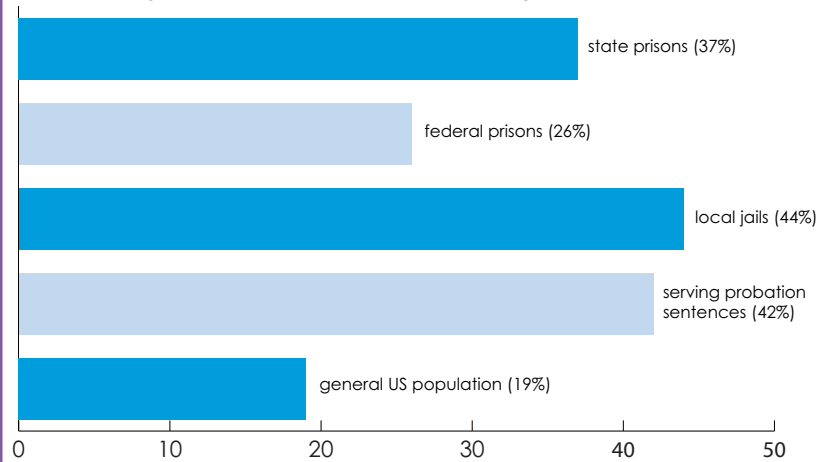
Education's influence on economic and social status is particularly visible among those who have not experienced quality education. Low levels of educational opportunity and achievement correlate strongly with poverty rates. According to a Child Trends study, "Among adults living in poverty, almost two-thirds have a high school diploma or less and only 10.4 percent of them have a bachelor's degree or higher. By contrast, 39.5 percent of adults living above the poverty line have a bachelor's degree or higher."³⁶

The Relationship of Education and Criminal Justice Involvement

Education bears a significant relationship to families' involvement with the criminal justice system, particularly families of color. People without a high school education are far more likely to become enmeshed in the criminal justice system. An estimated 37 percent of people incarcerated in state prisons, 26 percent in federal prison, 44 percent in local jails, and 42 percent serving probation sentences have not completed high school or its equivalent, compared with

PEOPLE WITHOUT A HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO BECOME ENMESHED IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Percentage of those in criminal justice system without a high school education compared with general US populations



Data Source: US Bureau of Justice Statistics

19 percent of the general U.S. population 16 and older.³⁷ Among those incarcerated in state prisons nationwide as of 2004, only 17 percent have completed any postsecondary education, compared with 51 percent of the general population, and a mere 2 percent have a college degree.³⁸

Children of parents with less than a high school degree face significant likelihood of experiencing parental incarceration. A 2009 study shows that 15 percent of white children, 17 percent of Hispanic children, and 65 percent of African-American children whose parents had not completed high school experienced parental incarceration by age 17.³⁹ Half of the people in prison have children under the age of 18, and 45 percent of those parents lived with their children at the time they were incarcerated. Close to 2.6 million children (roughly one in 25 minors) had a parent in jail or prison in 2012. One in nine African-American children has a parent incarcerated on any given day.⁴⁰ U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics show that African-American, Hispanic,

and Native-American parents face an increased risk for incarceration compared to their representation in the population as a whole.⁴¹

Just as lack of educational opportunity increases the likelihood of poverty and incarceration, access to high-quality education plays a critical role in reducing recidivism and facilitating mobility. Education's transformative role becomes particularly apparent for people who have had criminal justice involvement. A recent Rand study that conducted a meta-analysis of high-quality research found that "on average, inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43 percent lower odds of recidivating than inmates who did not."⁴² According to the National Research Council, "While 66 percent of incarcerated non-degree earners nationwide are likely to return to prison within three years of release, the likelihood drops to 5.6 percent for Bachelor's degree recipients and less than 1 percent for Master's degree recipients."⁴³ Increased educational attainment, associated with increased human capital, skill development, and literacy, in turn, correlates with increased income and decreased crime rates.⁴⁴ Postsecondary education also provides greater access to supportive social networks and positive norms,

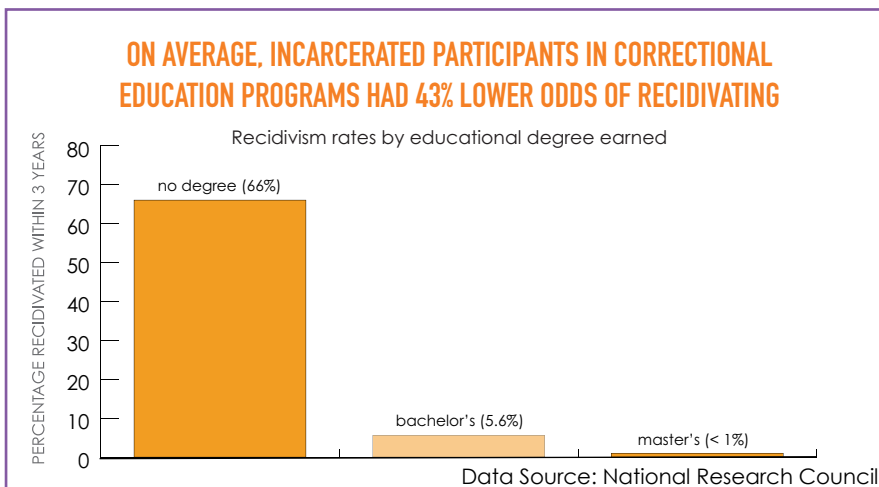
which social capital theory predicts would increase positive social behavior.⁴⁵ College completion provides an effective means of overcoming the stigma associated with criminal records.⁴⁶

The Role of Community and Family in Educational Access and Success

Access to high-quality education in the United States correlates strongly with place, race, and parental education. Data show that parents' education, in particular if they have postsecondary education, is a strong predictor of economic mobility.⁴⁷ Where you live strongly predicts whether you will have access to high-quality education and whether you will be on the track to enter and complete college.⁴⁸ Overall, the wealth of neighborhoods contributes to largely static mobility patterns for whole communities.

Those opportunities are also racially stratified; African American and Latino students are far more likely to go to schools with fewer resources, lower rates of graduation, and an absence of college-going cultures. The Education Trust found that African-American and Latino students "are still attending college at lower rates than their white peers." They are also "more likely than white students to begin college in either a for-profit or community college, where their chances of earning a degree are lower."⁴⁹

About 69 percent of Native-American high school students graduate in four years, compared with about 83 percent of white students. Only 52 percent of Native students who graduated in 2004 enrolled in college immediately after high school, compared with 74 percent of white students. Of all Native students who enrolled in a four-year institution



in the fall of 2004, only 39 percent completed a bachelor's degree by 2010, compared with 62 percent of white students.⁵⁰

Efforts to change these entrenched mobility patterns require an understanding of how and why families and communities play such a pivotal role in the experience of educational success or failure. This narrative is largely a story of social capital; relationships often formed outside of school provide crucial information, developmental opportunities, and personal supports needed to aspire to, access, and succeed in college. Research demonstrates the critical role of social capital in helping people navigate educational pathways, beginning with early childhood education and continuing through postsecondary education.⁵¹

Relationships, particularly relationships among people who interact regularly, are the primary mechanisms influencing human development.⁵² They influence how people see themselves and how they interact at critical junctures, thereby shaping their trajectory. Relationships profoundly affect expectations for educational achievement — whether a person grows up thinking of college as a natural step in their life's progression, and that educational success is within their grasp. Relationships provide the opportunity to develop habits and skills conducive to educational success. Research has also shown that relationships are critical to accessing the timely and usable information needed to transition to the next educational milestone. Students' success depends upon information tailored to their situation about matters affecting their college-going choices, including financial

aid, deadlines, requirements, and graduation rates.⁵³ Social capital also proves crucial to educational success: It can provide access to material resources necessary to cover the expenses associated with education and to weather life's predictable stresses.⁵⁴

A recent study comparing the experience of students at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, with the experience of students at nearby Southern Connecticut State University underscores the critical role of expectations: "Students do better in school when their families expect it, when their teachers expect it, when their friends expect it, and when they themselves come to expect it."⁵⁵

Researchers have also drawn a distinction between parental expectations for college and direct parental involvement with students' college planning. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a) argue that "parental support is necessary for predisposition of students of color to college, but their definition of parental involvement includes more direct guidance with students' college plans (such as guidance regarding appropriate courses and applying to colleges). Parental involvement among first generation parents of color is often hampered because parents, who have not attended college, have more difficulty offering specific and tailored advice for students with college plans."⁵⁶ Ample research demonstrates the positive impact of parents' education on their own and their children's well-being.⁵⁷ College education increases earnings, improves parenting practices, and offers social network opportunities that accrue economic and social benefits.⁵⁸

Access to social capital proves particularly critical (and often in short supply) for the educational success of people living in poor communities with struggling schools, low levels of educational achievement, and high incarceration rates. In addition to the universal challenges built into our current system of educational advancement, people in under-resourced communities must learn to persist in the face of traumas and stresses that inevitably accompany poverty and contact with the criminal justice system. Poor health, inadequate housing, trauma from exposure to violence, and the consequences of parental incarceration comprise some of the major barriers to educational success.⁵⁹ People facing these challenges are disproportionately people of color and immigrants, who must also contend with racial stratification and bias that pose additional hurdles limiting educational success. Research also shows that relationships of trust at critical junctures — and the resources they provide — enable people to persist in the face of those barriers.⁶⁰

Understanding Complex Families as Core Providers of Social Capital

Theorists, empiricists, and policymakers have determined that families are a core provider of the social capital enabling education persistence, resilience, and success. As Patrick Sharkey argues in his book *Stuck in Place*, “human lives are linked together in various complex ways, but most notably through

families.”⁶¹ Recent scholarship documents the idea of linked lives, meaning that “advantages and disadvantages accumulated over a lifetime — the human and cultural capital acquired, the physical and mental health status of an individual, the resources that an individual obtains and works to protect” are “transmitted, at least in part to the next generation.”⁶²

Much of the research and policy linking education, family, and social capital focuses on the nuclear family as the baseline for research and policy. An intact family has frequently been defined as two married parents and their children. Through this lens, families that depart from the two-parent, married prototype have deficits in their ability to support children and achieve economic stability. Broad trends reveal a stark relationship between family composition and indicators of well-being. Single-parent families are more likely to experience poverty and low levels of educational completion.

The two-generation approach grows out of a realization that this two-parent, nuclear family lens oversimplifies and under-appreciates the complex family structures that operate in every community, and particularly in low-income communities and communities of color. As William Tierney, a respected educational researcher, observed: “Researchers have based their definitions on the 20th century ideal of a nuclear family: a mother, a father, and two or three children. Although such a definition was never appropriate for numerous groups, it is increasingly problematic in the 21st century.”⁶³

Students do better in school when their families expect it, when their teachers expect it, when their friends expect it, and when they themselves come to expect it.

- S. Mettler

To capture the complexity of contemporary families, scholars have begun to examine complex families in which one biological parent of at least one biological child lives outside the home, and the parent who lives in the same home is either single or repartnered, which is more prevalent among the socio-economically disadvantaged.⁶⁴ Marriage rates have declined substantially, and in communities of color and poor communities, two-parent, married families have become the minority. Drawing on the nationally representative SIPP data (between 1984 and 2008), research shows that Hispanic children experienced the greatest decline in two-biological-parent families and the highest level in sibling complexity.⁶⁵ African-American children continue to experience the highest level of family complexity living in single-parent homes. A racial gap remains between unmarried women: In 2010, 36 percent of white babies, 72 percent of black babies, and 53.4 percent of Hispanic babies were born to unmarried women.⁶⁶

An exclusive focus on parent-child relationships, however, obscures other important interactions that occur within families, including the role of grandparents, siblings, extended family, and constructed families. In African-American, Latino, and other immigrant cultures, extended families nested in communities of caring and struggle have deep and enduring histories.

The pervasive impact of incarceration on families and communities underscores the limits of the biological parent as the organizing family narrative. Incarceration necessarily interrupts the traditional parent-child relationship. Frequently, grandparents



and other family members step in when parents, particularly mothers, are separated from their children because of incarceration.⁶⁷ Preliminary research the Center for Institutional and Social Change (CISC) is conducting with fatherhood initiatives suggests that education can operate as a strategy for connecting noncustodial parents with their children and, in the process, advance educational goals and supports for both.⁶⁸

The biological parent framework also deflects attention from identifying the sources of social capital development and revitalization that now exist in families and communities. Specifically, resources and relationships that facilitate educational advancement demand consideration as significant sources of social capital. Families with the same composition viewed through a biological or legal lens may comprise widely divergent kinds of relationships and contain members with various challenges and support needs. Researchers have noted how little we actually know about the ways extended families operate and about the mechanisms that facilitate



the mobilization of social capital in families, particularly those related to educational advancement in particular.⁶⁹ We do know that siblings, grandparents, and other extended family members can and do share social capital with “proximal” children, and these relationships can be equally important to facilitating young people’s educational advancement. We also know that in immigrant communities and communities of color, relationships of trust are particularly important in the transmission of information and support to first-generation college students.⁷⁰

The relationship between families and social capital in poor communities and communities of color also must be rethought to better reflect when, and in what sequence, people in those communities pursue their education. Many of the programs seeking to increase high school and college completion assume that parents’ educational level is static, that college students are between the ages of 18 and 22 (or 25), and that adult education is primarily vocational and remedial. Yet, many adults over the age of 22 or 25

pursue college careers.⁷¹ In reality, for incarcerated people coming from communities that did not afford them easy access to college, prison has sometimes offered their first opportunity to pursue education in a meaningful way.⁷²

Thus, many adults with low levels of education are in a position to pursue their own education at the same time as the children in their lives. This reality suggests that adults and students are likely to face overlapping challenges and milestones, providing promising opportunities for multigenerational approaches to educational advancement. St. Pierre et al. describe the approach as a set of programs that adopts “a strategy which recognizes the multi-generational, multi-dimensional aspects of family poverty, and which sets out to attack it on several fronts simultaneously by using key features of child and adult centered programs.”⁷³ King et al. define dual-generation strategies as those that “stress simultaneous services to children and their parents, providing them with quality developmental opportunities of demonstrated effectiveness and the supports needed for them to take full advantage.”⁷⁴ Ascend similarly explains that two-generation approaches “focus on creating opportunities for and addressing needs of both vulnerable children and their parents.”⁷⁵

A multigenerational approach provides simultaneous support for education, social capital development, and economic security for children and their families. It also recognizes the impact that family members have on each other, particularly when it comes to educational expectations. In families and communities of color, family

members and other relationships of trust play a particularly important role in providing the information and support necessary to succeed in education. Students of color and first-generation low-income students often get their information and college knowledge from non-parental relationships. Research by William Tierney found that “Siblings can play an important role in students’ college choice process, in particular when an older sibling has attended college.”⁷⁶ Peers, especially those who are high-achieving, can provide significant support and information about college application, enrollment, and persistence.⁷⁷

Family Involvement Must Be a Core Program Component

Many programs seeking to increase the involvement of parents of first-generation college students in supporting their children’s education continue to treat parental education as static and fixed. As an Ascend report observes:

Programs that provide education and skills training to adults often view children as a barrier to participation, rather than designing models that engage whole families. Meanwhile, programs focused on children often see parents as merely facilitators of children’s education, rather than seeking opportunities for parents to increase their own education attainment and marketable job skills.⁷⁸

Efforts to include family involvement generally operate as an add-on to existing programs. Evaluations of these programs find that they have limited success in engaging parents of first-generation students. Parents without direct exposure to college find it difficult to support their

children in pursuing a college degree because of lack of knowledge, confidence, and time. Studies have shown that parents who have not themselves attended college are less likely to believe in their capacity to provide effective support for their children, and this expectation undermines their involvement.⁷⁹

These more static approaches to family involvement also fail to account for the growing knowledge about the importance of context in shaping whether social capital can be mobilized to support educational success, particularly in communities lacking robust relationships of support. Researchers such as Mario Small, Patrick Sharkey, and Robert Sampson have demonstrated that organizations and spaces play a significant role in facilitating the development of social capital. Strategic use of organizational brokers and network catalysts can facilitate access to social capital for individuals and intensify the impact of actors in a position to bridge relationships.

Family members, including grandparents and siblings, who have experienced and recovered from the impact of incarceration and attained educational success are well-positioned to play these bridging and brokering roles. Research also shows that civic and community-based organizations in a position to broker relationships help build collective efficacy by mobilizing action for shared purpose.⁸⁰ Collective efficacy in turn enhances the capacity of individuals and families to support educational success as a community endeavor.

To be effective, multigenerational strategies for educational advancement must understand

and support families as they actually function in their communities. These strategies must also identify the sites and sources of social capital that exist within complex families and communities, so that they can be supported and enhanced. As part of this effort, it is crucial to explore the patterns of education-related interaction within and across generations and among families and communities — where they happen, how they develop, and what they enable. This line of inquiry will push forth the development of a strengths-based approach to tackling the significant challenges facing communities that have endured decades of disinvestment in education and over-investment in incarceration.

This research provides a basis for better understanding the common struggles, family interactions, and strategies of a group of women who have experienced postsecondary educational success under extremely challenging conditions and against the odds, given their demographic background and histories. The study also provides an opportunity to consider the social capital networks and interactions of women who have successfully pursued postsecondary education post-prison and to re-theorize family, community, and social capital development with a strengths-based approach, informed by the experiences of people engaged deeply in rebuilding their lives and the experiences of their families and communities. Their experiences in supporting — and being supported by — family and community members are instructive in developing and testing new strategies for pursuing multigenerational educational advancement.

FINDINGS

We first provide data showing the kinds of families the women described and how they define and experience those relationships, particularly as they relate to educational access and success. We then describe the shared histories of struggle and trauma that the women had to overcome to enter and persist in college. Finally, we explore the ways that social capital related to education flows through the family relationships.

DIVERSE AND COMPLEX FAMILY SYSTEMS AND EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

The women participating in the interviews described their families as varied and complex. Of the 182 people who were active CCF program participants in 2013, 71 percent were single, 11 percent were married, 75 percent had children, 53 percent had children under the age of 18, and 50 percent were single mothers. The demographics of the group participating in the interviews were comparable. Most of the women interviewed were in complex families and relationship networks that were not captured by the conventional labels of single mother or married parent.

Most of the women interviewed — about 64 percent (25 out of 38) — had children and were not married.⁸¹ Twelve out of 38 women (about 32 percent) were married, and 10 of the 12 married women were living with their husbands. The husbands of two of the 12 married women were currently incarcerated. Three of the 10 women living with their husbands were also in multigenerational or blended families and were living with grandchildren or stepchildren. The following table summarizes the

configuration of relationships among the 38 women who participated in the study:

Single woman, no biological children	1
Biological child and foster children under 18 in household	2
Biological child and nephew under 18 in household	2
Single mother with biological children under 18 in household	6
Mother with children under 18 and partner in household	4
Grandparent with caretaking responsibilities for child under 18	10
Married with spouse and children under 18 in household	7
Single living with adult children	1
Married with adult children/stepchildren not in household	2
Biological children under 18 not in household	3
TOTAL	38

Of the 38 women interviewed, 12 were grandmothers who either lived with their children and grandchildren or had significant caretaking responsibilities for their grandchildren. Grandmothers and siblings emerged in many of the interviews as playing particularly important roles in the lives of the women and their biological children. The grandmothers we interviewed described strong relationships and regular caretaking interactions. Some were providing direct childrearing support for their grandchildren. For example, many of the grandmothers picked up their grandchildren from school every day or cared for them while their mothers worked or attended school. As one grandmother described, “I have informal care . . . they’re there with me; they’re with their mom, whichever. Either way I’m with them every day on a full-time basis.” For some, this role involves providing direct childrearing to help support children with incarcerated parents:

I have a five-year-old granddaughter. Her father is incarcerated, and I try to make up for her father not being there. [My granddaughter] stays with us during the week, and she goes home on the weekend.

Many of the women talked about the central role their own mothers played in keeping their families together while they were incarcerated:

My mom was a phenomenal mom when I was incarcerated. She made sure my children came to see me every two weeks . . . She took my kids places. She did things with my children. She made sure they knew that I was still their mom. And anything that needs to be done, they still had to ask me could they do it. So I know that you can be a mom from inside.

Other women described grandparents as integral parts of the support structure in their lives and the lives of their children:

Their grandparents have impacted them in many different ways. My mother-in-law is with them practically every day because they stay with her when school is out. So we see her often. My mom is still alive, and they see her every now and then. And each grandparent spends a lot of time with my children. These grandmothers saw themselves playing important roles akin to parenting. For them, “parenting is parenting, whether you’re a grandparent or not.”

We also learned that the biological relationships did not necessarily predict women’s level of interaction or caretaking responsibilities. Seventeen of the 38 women interviewed had child care responsibilities for children with whom

they did not live. Many had children who were in foster care while they were incarcerated. Four women lived with or cared for nieces or nephews. Five women reported having significant child care responsibilities for people to whom they were not biologically related, such as foster children, godchildren, or neighbors:

They feel like I'm their grandmother, so their real father and their biological grandmother don't pay them any attention . . . I know that when they come to my house, they think I'm grandma, and they think my son is their father, and they think my mother is their great-grandmother . . . We have two extra children.

Extended family members — mothers, aunts and uncles, and siblings — also played a role in providing child care for women while they were juggling work and college. Siblings emerged as important sources of support for women in both caring for their children and in providing access to information and support for women's educational development. This support was also described as critical to women's ability to stay in school:

My sister keeps my daughter, and my niece is there to keep my daughter company since they're the same age. And it just works out perfectly. Again, I can't stop saying how blessed I am and how fortunate I am to have the circle of family and friends that I have.

These interviews suggest that the “single mother” category oversimplifies the experience and support structures these women have. Of the 24 women who fit the category of single mother, about one-quarter function as “single parents” — they did not have others they considered part of their “family”

or constellation of ongoing supportive relationships and were really on their own in supporting their children. These women also reported that they found it quite difficult to persist with their education and to support their children over time.

However, many “single mothers” in the cohort had relationships with other members of a group they regard as family, and those relationships figured prominently in the network of support upon which they relied. Five of the 16 were in stable relationships; eight were single grandmothers with significant relationships with their children or grandchildren. Most reported relationships with family members who provided significant support:

I'm a single mom, so it's tough, but I have a lot of family around me who help me, support me. So I take advantage of that for paving the way of going to school and doing whatever I'm supposed to do.

A significant subset of the women who would be classified as single mothers described a richer and more diverse set of relationships that provided key forms of support:

Her father is my son. And I try to make up for him not being there — take her places, do things with her on the weekend. . . . And it's really hard. My mom helps me out. My daughter helps me out; my other son helps me out. So it's like everybody helps out with this. It is a team.

My entire family lives really close. So she has older cousins, she has younger cousins, and I have family support — a lot of it. It's a double-edged sword, but I have a lot of family support around [my daughter] and around other issues as well.

Many of the women interviewed also served as a resource for other family members who were at different stages of their education. Twenty of the 38 people for whom we have reliable information were in situations involving multigenerational child care responsibilities. Other women who are not themselves grandmothers described important roles being played by grandmothers, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, and stepparents. These extended family relationships played critical roles that mirror those assumed to be performed by the nuclear family.

Many of the women described relationships of support in which they influenced other family members but did not assume a caretaking role. Some of the relationships were long-distance. One woman had a high school-aged daughter in another state and a close relationship with her sister's family in another state.

It is important to keep these various levels of relationships in mind when developing strategies for a multigenerational approach. Some strategies and supports, like in-person meetings and activities, may be appropriate for primary or dual caretakers, whereas informational supports may be more beneficial for those who have meaningful long-distance relationships.

Evolving Family Relationships

The interviews also showed that family relationships were not static; they evolved over time. As women developed their own educational success, strength, and support structures, they described dramatic shifts in their roles as mothers and family members, enabling them now to provide support to their children, grandchildren, and family members



that they were not in a position to provide when they were younger:

Although I do have two other kids, I wasn't really there because I had a drug problem. So I wasn't there actively. This is really the first time me being an active parent, so I'm just trying to go with the flow. If somebody suggests something to me, I take it into consideration. Is this appropriate for him and his age and what's going on with his life?

I felt like I was a bad parent to [my older daughter] because I used to drink, and alcohol was number one in my life. I don't drink anymore, and I feel like with [my son] this is my second chance to be a good parent, and I really, like, want to be a good parent.

Educational persistence and success went hand-in-hand with family re-engagement; education also provided a vehicle for noncustodial parents to connect with children. This pattern is evident in current CISC research concerning the role of education in enabling fathers to reconnect with their children after incarceration.

Peers and Community-Based Organization Staff Are Included in the Definition of Family

Finally, many of the women interviewed included under the rubric of “family” key relationships with peers or people in community-based organizations that provided significant support, including CCF:

[My daughter] grew up with us in CCF. She used to come with me to my theater group meetings, so all of the women that I know at CCF that are in the theater group with me, when I'll go to an event or something, if she is with me, they'll grab her and say, “Hey, what's going on? What you doing? You being good?” It's like she has a whole bunch of mothers. And she's really close to the ones that I'm close to.

A lot of my, I'm going to say friends, [are my source of support] because it's been many years since I've been in prison, and a lot of people who I know are members of CCF now were also my bunkies in prison, and I know they have children. And I know they're going through the same things.

What distinguished these relationships as familial in nature was the level of commitment, along with their continuity and regularity and the resilience of the relationships. Women described the involvement of extended family members as critical to their ability to stay in school and still care for their children. They also described overlapping educational needs and challenges that they shared with their family members.

OVERLAPPING STAGES OF EDUCATION FOR WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS

The women interviewed are at many different stages in their educational careers. The following table reports the highest educational level attained by the participating women:

Enrolled in or completed master's program	10
Completed BA	3
Completed associate's, enrolled in BA program	2
Enrolled in BA program	12
Completed associate's, not currently enrolled in BA program	1
Enrolled in associate's program	7
Some college credit	3

Most of the women interviewed also had responsibilities for family members enrolled in or planning to enroll in school. The figure below presents the stages of education for the family members that the women cared for, supported, and influenced: pre-kindergarten, elementary and junior high school (kindergarten through eighth grade); high school (ninth through 12th grade); transitioning from high school (leaving high school), transitioning to college (intending to or in the process of enrolling in college); and college (currently enrolled in college).

Women reported caring for children who were as young as a year and

a half as well as supporting family members who had been out of school for years but are thinking about returning to college. About half of the women reported some overlap between their own educational level and that of a family member they interacted with on a regular basis. Five of the women had siblings who had graduated from college.

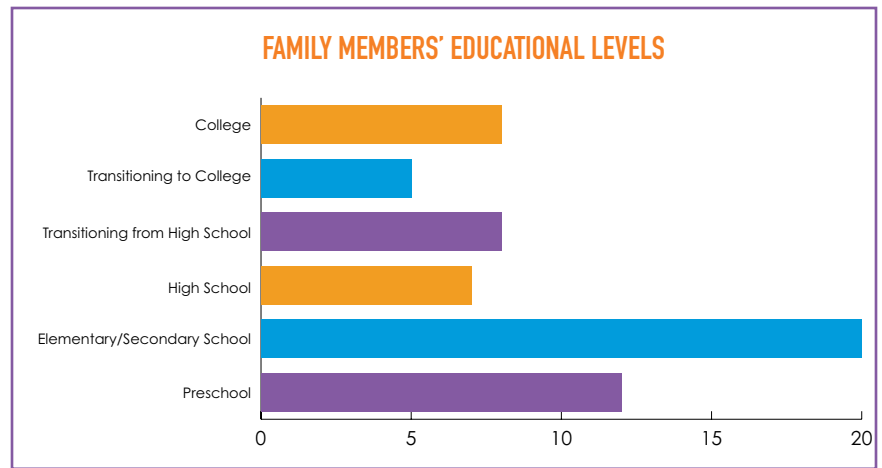
Shared Histories of Family and Community Struggle and Trauma

At first glance, the women's experiences echo the challenges and deficits emphasized in both the demographic data and the policy discourse. They share a common experience of families facing huge hardships, often linked to limited resources and support because of underinvestment in the communities they face.

Most of the woman interviewed described serious challenges in their own backgrounds or communities that contributed to their involvement with the criminal justice system. Many described families of origin that were complex and extended; they themselves grew up in families that would be called "single-parent," and many experienced the incarceration of a family member. One woman summarized this pattern:

My life was my life because of my history and my family's life. . . . I have a big family. Everybody went to jail almost. The only ones who didn't were my sisters. All the boys went to prison and me.

For some women, their families communicated a theme of growing up with a sense of inevitability, hopelessness, and limited exposure to possibilities for transforming their lives and communities. Most of the



women interviewed grew up in communities with struggling schools plagued by low graduation rates, high levels of interaction with the criminal justice system, and few, if any, students who went on to college. Many left high school as teenagers and became involved in activities or relationships that led to their criminal convictions and some period of incarceration. Most of the women participating in the study entered prison without a college degree. At least two had started college before prison, but left before completing a degree. Some had not completed high school before entering prison.

One of the women, now in college, communicated the relentlessness of the negativity and low expectations communicated by family members, teachers, and peers while she was growing up:

Everything in my life has always been like, "You ain't never going to amount to nothing; you won't be nobody." Nothing positive, all negative. And that, for a long time, that's what I was. I was nobody; I was nothing spectacular, and I was not doing the greatest of things.

A theme running throughout the interviews involved significant and



... this community is ... one of the highest places where people are incarcerated and coming back into the community as well. And I think that the community is very, very powerful in capturing negativity as opposed to positivity ... There still is a lot of drug use, a lot of robberies, at least a lot of people who are on public assistance. It's a community that doesn't have a lot of hope.

The women also described a series of interrelated challenges: poor health care, housing, and access to transportation, and a general acceptance of limited resources to support a decent quality of life in the community. Many women described various kinds of trauma that they experienced before and during prison, including sexual abuse, exposure to drug involvement, and violence.

POST-INCARCERATION CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH POVERTY

The barriers and challenges described in the interviews illustrate the patterns documented in the scholarly literature. Most people returning to their communities from prison or jail face significant and well-documented challenges, including insufficient income and access to employment, gaps in academic skills and preparation, physical and mental health concerns, unstable housing, disrupted family relationships, and parole compliance.⁸² Recent studies estimate the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated adults at 60 percent, and 89 percent for those who violate the terms of their parole or probation.⁸³

recurring experiences — in school, with police, or in other contexts — that left them with a sense that, in part because of their race and their low-income status, their well-being and ability to thrive did not really count.

After Catholic school, I went to public school, which was shell-shock for me, and then I went to the local high school. I dropped out of high school at 11th grade. I believe that

Financial barriers

Not surprisingly, financial barriers posed an overarching difficulty for all the women participating

in the study. Financial constraints prevented women from meeting basic family needs, as they juggled multiple responsibilities with limited resources and support, impacting their educational performance and goals. For example, lack of financial resources precluded a single mother of two children from having a computer at home, which required her to stay late to use the college's computer. This impacted her educational experiences and family responsibilities: "That was one of the reasons I used to get home at 1:00 in the morning. I have to take transportation back home, and some of the trains stopped running. So it was really a challenge in getting home at 3:00 in the morning, getting home so late, kids sleeping, with a few hours to go to work the next day." In addition, a family's financial challenges affect children's educational performance, particularly in single-mother households with no family support.

Housing

Many of those interviewed reported having difficulties finding housing after prison. At least three of the women interviewed lived in shelters; some lived in temporary homes ("three-quarter homes"); others experienced non-habitable conditions, including no heat and hot water during the winter; some had to move from one place to another, in search of affordable and habitable housing while caring for children and being enrolled in school. Lack of housing precluded some women from focusing on their education. One of the women who previously lived in a shelter shared her experience:

You can't concentrate in school and classwork if you're not sure where you're going to sleep at or rest at

the following day and things like that. And I know from experience because I was faced with that years ago before I actually became employed. I lived in a shelter.

Unstable housing undermined women's and children's health and education, particularly when the women were single mothers who cared for small children in unsafe housing conditions with no family support.

Women reported sometimes feeling overwhelmed in their educational pursuits as they tried to balance their primary caretaking responsibilities, schoolwork, health issues, and job(s).

Challenges Related to Caring for Children

The interviews identified challenges connected to the well-being and struggles facing the children they cared for, many of which mirrored the challenges that they had faced in their own childhood. Many of those with responsibility for children described significant challenges with the quality of the elementary and secondary schools their children attended. They faced recurring problems caused by the schools' low expectations for their children, lack of support, and the absence of a college-going culture. Some women reported that their children were diagnosed with such learning disabilities as ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, and dysthymic disorder, and one child was diagnosed with autism. Learning disabilities posed challenges to children's academic performance and consequently had an impact on their mothers' educational goals as they strove to provide quality educational opportunities for their children.

Women with young children need help caring for them and planning

for preschool. Quality child care surfaced as a pervasive challenge. Some women worried about the expense of child care:

I have to look for child care. . . . But, oh God, I can't afford it."

One woman described her struggle with various child care centers because of their lack of quality care:

In the day, I watch my son because last semester I was doing work-study, and I put my son in the child care center a block away from me. And he was sick . . . throughout the whole semester. So I decided this semester I'm not going to do the work-study, and I'm not going to put him in the child care center.

She was unsure who would watch her son during her upcoming summer semester. Grandparents underscored the absence of child care options for their grandchildren as well.

Fragile Health and Mental Health Status

Women also identified health, mental health, and financial hardships that placed considerable stress on their families. Most experienced significant health issues (including drug and alcohol addiction) and difficulty finding adequate access to health care. Many women reported seeking therapy/mental health counseling to make sense of past and ongoing traumas, which included substance, physical, and sexual abuse; domestic violence; and disconnection from children and family members. Several women struggled with ongoing depression. One woman reported that she had found it necessary to work through her "negative behavior" to succeed in school. She spoke of the mental health support

she received as making a critical difference to the success of her higher education career. Another woman struggled to stay in school after her mother passed away.

Both women and their family members need emotional support to overcome the effects of past incarceration. Incarceration took an emotional toll on women, their children, and other family members. As one woman stated, "When we are incarcerated, our children are incarcerated with us." One woman commented that while her oldest children had never struggled emotionally in school, her youngest daughter had several behavioral issues affecting her education. She felt it was because her daughter was young when she was incarcerated, and the separation affected her the most. Another woman noted that her son is "still mad; he's still angry" and recently told someone he was depressed. The effects of incarceration are not limited to the parent-child relationship. One grandmother commented on her grandson's behavior:

Me not being there in the early years hurt him. . . . I don't think he developed as much as I would have liked him to because [his mother] didn't know what to do as a young mother.

Educational Needs and Barriers Shared with Family Members

Several points of intersection between the educational needs of CCF women and their family members emerged from the interviews. Women and family members all have overlapping needs for academic support, particularly in reading and math. Both groups struggle with foundational concepts and identifying resources for help.

Some women have had success seeking support from their professors, but others have not. For example, when one woman turned to her professor for help, she said:

She was talking over my head. . . . I went to her office and by the time, when she finished talking with me, I was looking out the window because I wasn't understanding her; and I don't think she understood why I didn't understand.

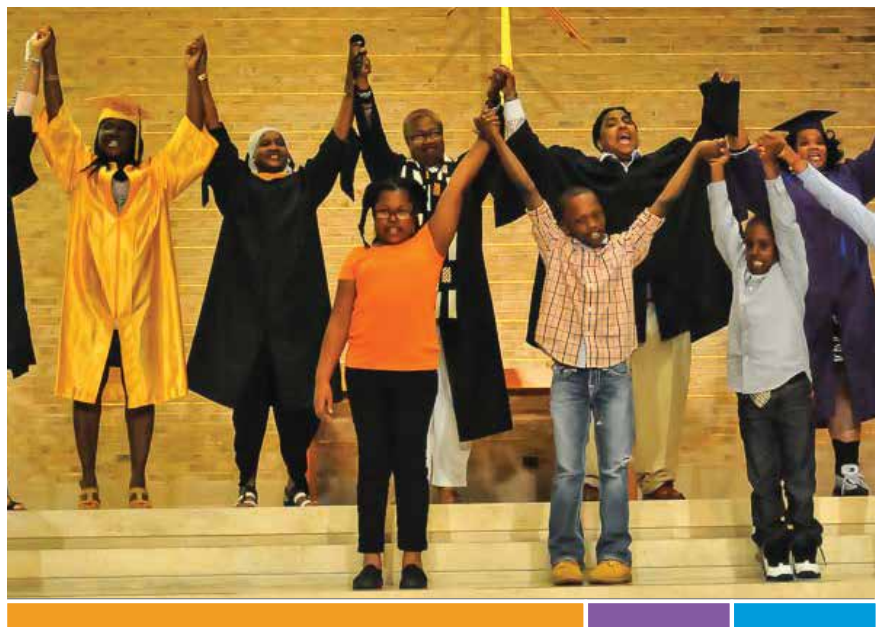
While many women identified tutoring programs at their school, many were unable to take advantage of the extra help because the tutoring is scheduled at a time when they need to take care of their children or work. Some have relied on their grandchildren and children to tutor them. Others have found for-profit learning centers or reached out to professors and other students. But many women are currently searching for more consistent academic help.

Similarly, while some women reported that they felt their children's school or other sources of support provided academic help, many were uncertain about the resources available for support. For example, after acknowledging her daughters' struggle in reading and math, one interviewee expressed frustration about the organization of her children's school. She said, "It's so much fighting going on over this way that the teacher . . . she can't teach." Another woman said her daughter is failing two subjects, but when she tried to communicate with the teachers, "they [didn't] really have time for talking." Other women reported that their family members were struggling to read or complete classes at grade level. All of the women with responsibilities for

school-age children expressed their desire for tutoring and academic support for their family members.

Some CCF women and their family members have shared the need for support around transitioning into and succeeding in college. Many had family members preparing to attend, struggling to apply to, or already enrolled in college. Several women described the difficulty they had beginning college. One woman struggled with not having the skills to pass her GED. After taking the test twice and failing, she said, "I gave up on myself, and I was very honest and I said, 'I can't do this.'" Eventually, she turned to the teachers at her daughters' school, and they helped her pass the test before her college program started. Many of the family members of the CCF women also need support around beginning college and managing responsibilities, academic advising, and financial aid. They also have similar academic needs.

Women frequently identified the difficulties they had navigating large higher education bureaucracies. One woman described her registration experience:



My first semester when I went to go register and everything, it was so discouraging. It was so crazy [There were] long lines [and] student confusion [and] go here, go there, do this or do that And so I didn't even register.

Several women identified problems with their colleges accepting former college credits. Many of the women expressed dissatisfaction with the academic advising at their schools. After explaining that she had picked her courses herself ever since she started school, one interviewee said, “[The colleges] have too many students per academic advisor.” Many women reported turning to sources for advising outside of their colleges, like CCF.

Women with responsibility for family members transitioning into college reported similar educational challenges. Many family members need help with financial aid. One woman reported that her niece recently dropped out of college because she had trouble with her loans; another woman reported the same for her daughter. One interviewee said that her daughter's college was too expensive, so she was transferring next semester to the school the CCF woman currently attends. Other women said that their children need academic or advising support in college. One woman mentioned that her daughter is thinking about attending graduate school.

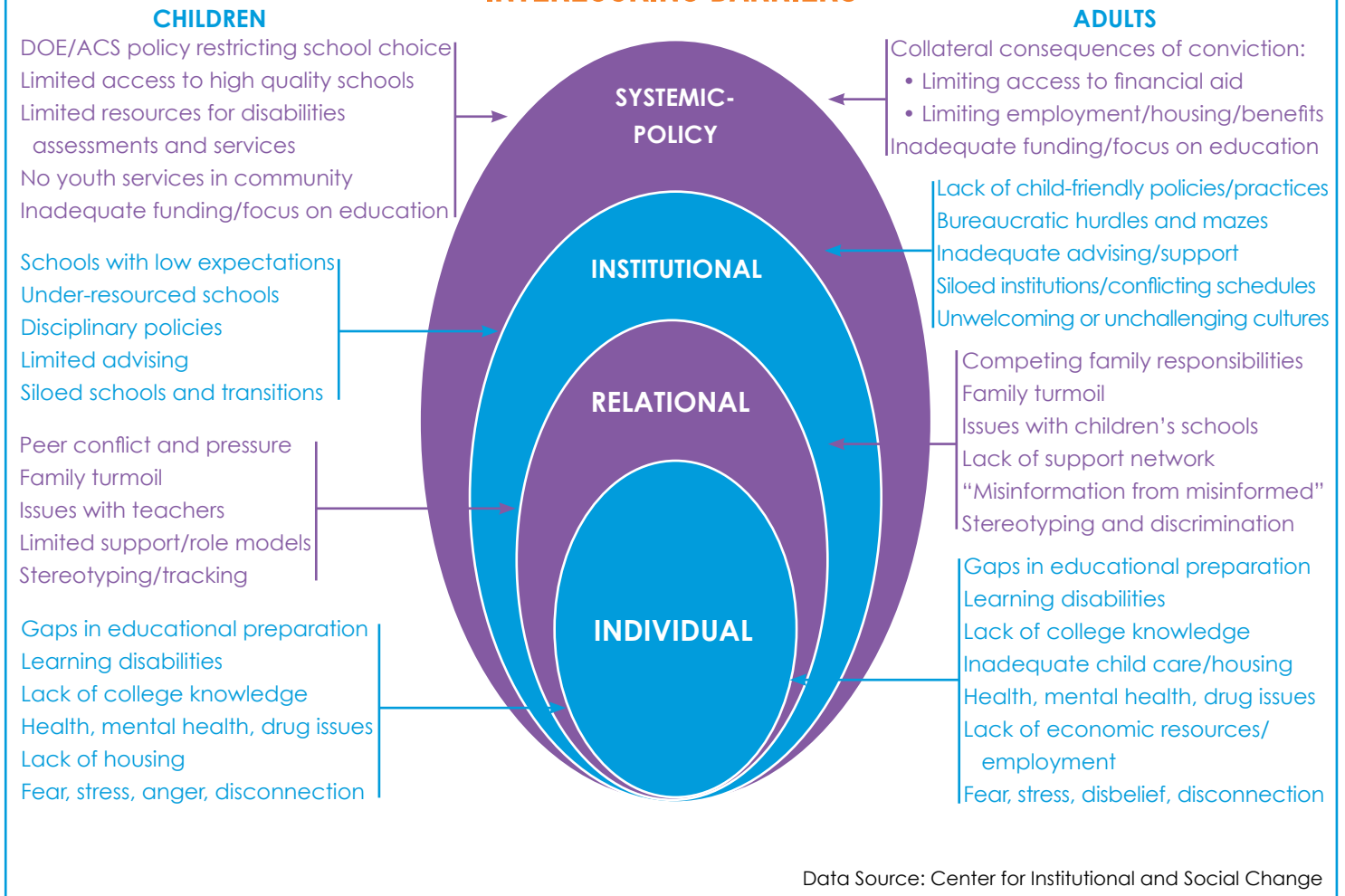
Finally, women and their family members need help with meaningful educational planning overall. Many women described themselves and their family members struggling with transitions in their educational careers. While they recognize the importance of selecting the right

school or networking with the right people, many of them wanted or needed more support navigating next steps. Women also struggled to navigate their family members' transitions from one educational stage to the next. Many of the women also described difficulties and opportunities stemming from their children's school placement and choice. The women responsible for children who were transitioning or had just transitioned into high school reported the difficulties of navigating the high school selection process. Women responsible for young children were struggling to find preschools. One commented on how expensive top preschools were; the other said she had not thought much about where to send her son, and she did not know where to find out information about preschools. Finally, women described family members that needed help with transitioning to college.

Justice-involved women and their families thus face a set of overlapping and interlocking barriers, operating on multiple levels, which are summarized in the diagram on the next page.

The “Interlocking Barriers” chart that follows highlights the multilevel arenas where adults and children experience similar challenges and struggles. For example, at the relational level, adults experience “misinformation from the misinformed.” Many of the women interviewed reported interactions with people in gatekeeping positions, such as admissions and financial aid officers, who gave them incorrect information about the impact of their criminal involvement on their eligibility for resources and programs. CCF has found that many of the women with criminal involvement it serves “falsely

INTERLOCKING BARRIERS



assume that they are not eligible for need-based federal or state student aid (TAP and Pell Grants).⁸⁴ Adults and children alike received limited guidance on programs that would encourage them or family members to strive for college. This contributed to the lack of college knowledge and aspiration among both adults and children at the individual level.

Similarly, adults and children attended "siloed institutions" in which offices addressing different functions had little or no knowledge of each other, let alone relationships with the institutions that students were coming from or going to next. For example, high schools and high school equivalency programs did not understand or have relationships with college programs that could

smooth the pathway and provide realistic goals for college readiness. This pattern affected the educational aspirations of both adults and the children in their families.

Health issues and mental health challenges associated with poverty and incarceration also figured prominently in the cross-generational landscape. Trauma seemed like an everyday occurrence for many of the women interviewed and the children in their lives. Yet, the educational institutions charged with serving them generally lacked the awareness or wherewithal to offer a trauma-informed approach. In their accounts, women frequently recounted disengagement or punishment of boys and girls in their care, in reaction to the behavioral

manifestations of trauma. Access to understanding and care to support these women and their family members depended upon the availability of relationships with people committed to the success of the women and their families.

Resiliency and Success Despite Barriers

But the story of struggle and trauma, though certainly part of the shared experience, is not the overarching narrative of the formerly incarcerated women we interviewed. Nor do their educational outcomes correspond to those that would be predicted based on the challenges they face. These women are experiencing a level of educational success and leadership that would not be expected based on their demographic categories, opportunities, and experiences. Their commitment and struggle related to education binds them together, as one woman recounted:

Education for us, and I like to speak for all the women of CCF, is our lifeline. Education to us is every breath that we breathe. That's how much it means to us. And that's what we have in common. And that's what has linked us, beside the pain in everything that we suffered. And we support each other because of it. And I think that's our common bond, that we want to learn.

What also emerges from these stories is that many of these women are embedded in — and provide critical supports for — social capital networks that facilitate their access, persistence, and success in college in the face of tremendous obstacles, and these networks cut across generations. Family, broadly defined, is an important element of these social capital networks. Most women identified family

as the most important source of support and resources in pursuing their postsecondary education. But family for those interviewed did not correspond to the conventional nuclear definitions of family, and the conventional roles of adults and children did not define who provided critical dimensions of support.

MULTIDIRECTIONAL AND MUTUAL MOBILIZATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL RELATED TO EDUCATIONAL ADVANCEMENT

The previous discussion about family composition and structure lays the foundation for exploring how these families, defined to reflect women's experience, share social capital relating to educational advancement for themselves and for their family members. By expanding our focus to explore the interactions between women and the full range of people to whom they connect regularly, we were able to explore the various forms that social capital development and mobilization take.

The Pivotal Role of Intra- and Intergenerational Support

CCF women consistently described the power and importance of education for themselves and their family members. As one woman explained, "I'm just very, very serious about my education and my children's education . . . because I know you can't go [anywhere] without it."

Every woman interviewed described the pivotal role of relationships with extended family members in enabling them to pursue college, navigate transitions, and persist in the face of hardship. Trusted family and community members were able to provide them with information about higher education in ways they could hear, and at times when were ready to act on that information. Some women described relationships that

provided them with information about the application process for college or about how to navigate their children's educational environments. Women described the sharing of crucial forms of social capital in their extended family relationships.

Relationships with extended family and organizational brokers powerfully contributed to a critical shift in women's expectations about college. The women each described a pivotal moment when they formed a sense of hope that they could go to college, and an expectation that they would follow through on that hope. Relationships with others in their family or community were pivotal in facilitating that identity shift from formerly incarcerated person to student.

For example, women described receiving encouragement from parents, siblings, cousins, peers, and children that enabled them to shift their own expectations about college, and then to communicate similar college-going expectations to others in their families.

[M]y mom, in particular, she always expresses to me how she's happy that I'm in college and . . . she is very encouraging of me going to school. And so I let her know that these were my grades for the first semester . . . and I'm just going to do better. And I want you to know that I'm going to do better.

Women described playing a similarly encouraging role with their own family members:

We're planting the seed. And now that I'm back in school, it's helping my son to get back in school; it's helping my daughter to think about going to school. My daughter said



to me, "Well if you can do it at 48, I definitely can do it at 29."

As women experience higher education for themselves, they describe ways in which that experience has enabled them, often for the first time, to become concretely and actively involved in supporting the educational success of family members. Some women were preparing for college at the same time as another family member, and they discovered that they were better able and committed to advancing their family member's education as a result of their own educational advancement. As one interviewee powerfully explained:

I was a motivator for [my daughter] to go to college because I've always told her (we both had kids young) . . . education is empowering, and we can come [out] of those low-level entry positions. And with an education, we become more intelligent. So as a matter of fact, she just emailed. She said, "If you didn't give me anything else, thanks for determination and motivation." So I inspired her to do everything that I didn't do with my life. So she



[My sister] never really expressed that she wanted to go to college, but being that I'm in college now, I talk to her about college. And I tell her, 'Oh I learned this, and I got this on my paper, and this professor is really good, and I really don't like this class.' So I put her into the conversation, and she has been saying about a year now . . . that she's going to go to college. . . . She's going to register.

Some women identified important mentoring relationships with their nieces, nephews, and in-laws. For example, one interviewee reported that she encouraged her nephew to complete his GED while he was in a drug program. Largely because of her encouragement, he is planning to enroll, with her help, in the college she attends. Two women have daily supportive relationships with their daughters-in-law who attend college.

Other sources of familial support the interviewees identified included husbands, godmothers or goddaughters, aunts and uncles, and a stepfather. Some women described long-lasting relationships of informal support with individuals and groups that extended beyond family ties. Two women identified long-term mentoring relationships they formed through reentry organizations, particularly CCF. One woman described an ongoing relationship with a woman she met through a networking event at CCF a few years ago. The mentor has encouraged her to go to college, directs her to various academic support services, checks in with her frequently to discuss school, and is helping her find child care. Another woman described turning to two women she had originally met at CCF and another reentry organization for advice and support about her education, her career, and

hasn't had a life like mine at all. And education, indeed, has been a part of that . . . The same thing with my grandson.

In addition to influencing their parents and their children to achieve their educational goals, CCF women influence siblings and extended family members. At least five women have siblings they have encouraged to go to school. One interviewee explains:

her children's education over the span of several years.

The interviews also showed that the sharing of resources and support flowed in many different directions, not just from parent to child. Educational support actually moved from adults to children and from children to adults. Women also received inspiration and support from their children, as well as concrete help with schoolwork and homework. Women give and receive support between generations, so that intergenerational knowledge-sharing strengthens lessons learned, especially around the importance of education.

The intergenerational support system included family members who served as academic counselors and tutors. For example, several women spoke about their siblings and cousins — who are not in a traditional family relationship — providing the necessary educational guidance and support. A CCF woman discussed the importance of the support a sibling gave as an academic counselor and tutor:

She was able to get me on the right track if something was going on with the papers or whatever. . . . My sister is very prompt, good in writing and everything, but she always tried to show me where I went wrong with the papers and whatever, and what needs to be changed and what I needed to go about doing it.

Similarly, another CCF woman's cousin offered emotional and academic support while she was pursuing school full-time, doing an internship, and simultaneously caring for her child. Feeling overwhelmed, the young woman stayed connected with her cousin, who encouraged

What emerges is a strategy for leveraging the educational success of formerly incarcerated women who are themselves deeply embedded in and committed to their families and communities.

- Susan Sturm and Vivian Nixon

and supported her as she juggled competing demands:

I was speaking to my cousin, who's also like an academic advisor to me at times as well. And she's like, "Just don't think about it; just do it! Just go, like, just do it. You're young; you're strong; you can do it."

The intergenerational support was similarly visible in the relationships between aunts and their nieces/nephews. CCF women's siblings also provided educational support and tutoring to the CCF women's children. Another CCF woman explained that her sister was involved in her daughter's education and shared in the caretaking responsibilities while she was enrolled in college full time.

KEY ROLES PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC ACCESS AND SUCCESS

The data revealed a variety of roles at work in the intergenerational support system. About a quarter of the women had shared caretaking responsibilities for family members, meaning that they shared the responsibility of supporting children with another person like a daughter or, in one woman's case, an ex-spouse.

Many of the women we interviewed serve as academic role models. One woman described her relationship with her daughter: "I just got an email

from her. But it looks like my baby's going to college. She said that I'm her inspiration and that I'm the best role model ever." Another woman described how she encouraged her younger sister to pursue college education to help her advance in her career:

My younger sister, she's not into school right now because she's working seven days. But I think she's just throwing her talents away. Because she's very smart. . . . So I'm trying to help her; I'm trying to talk to her, so she can encourage herself, so she can at least do her associate's.

The women also lay the foundation of the college-going culture at home. CCF women are determined for their children to finish high school and pursue college. They instill college motivation in their children. Many of them act as role models for their children by working hard in college and bringing their children to college classes and graduation ceremonies. For example, one CCF woman spoke about how she cultivates the college-going culture in her household:

Every time I graduate I take them to the graduation, so they can see it. . . . So I'm pushing it to her to keep going to school because that's the first thing.

Mutual cross-generational mentoring included not only educational support but also the sharing of knowledge and skills learned in school. Many women spoke about using their own knowledge and experience to advise people coming up behind them about how to plan their schedule, get financial aid, and navigate the system. A number of CCF women noted that their children or grandchildren helped them in their educational pursuits by

tutoring them in reading and writing and helping them with computer skills and email communication. Women with college-aged family members described applying lessons learned or using their networks of support to help family transition into or thrive in college. For example, one woman is helping three of her children enroll in her college. Another woman reports helping her daughter and nephew enroll in her college. One mother, with the help of her long-term mentor, worked with her daughter to develop a list of colleges to apply to for the upcoming year, and then helped her with the applications. At least four women report using the information they have received from CCF and other organizations to help their own children navigate application and enrollment processes.

Another woman illustrated an example of mutual cross-generational academic support between grandparent and grandchild:

And I think we've inspired one another. We do homework together; we do research together. She loves for me to check her papers, and I'm not the best at writing a paper, but I do write better than she does. And I love for her to do math because she's good at math. She does very well at math. So she helps with the math. And so I think that turns my grandchildren on — watching us do homework. It helps inspire them to do their homework.

Sharing educational experiences, when family members go to school and college simultaneously, reinforces mutual success. One of the women reported how sharing her college-going experience within her family motivated her son to pursue college education:

His girlfriend goes to school in the college I go to. So she's going and I'm going. . . . and my daughter, the 18-year-old, wants to go straight to college. . . . So I said [to my son], "You're going to be the only one, the black sheep of the family not going to school?" So he said he's going. So that's what motivated him, and his girlfriend's on top of it.

Finally, some women enrolled in college report creating routines and accountability for each other that encourage persistence and success. They regularly do homework with the children they care for, create ongoing learning experiences, and mutually support each other's progress. We learned of women who work closely with their grandchildren to cultivate excitement about reading. Similarly, one CCF woman who took care of her five-year-old granddaughter regularly discuss their schoolwork:

And me and my granddaughter have conversations. She says, "So how was school, grandma?" And I ask her, "How was school for you?" And when I tell her, "Fine," she says, "So what did you do?" . . . So that stops me. OK, let me stop and say to her, "So today this is what I did in school." If I tell her I had a test, she says, "So how do you think you did on your test, grandma?"

These routines developed around homework, school, and learning build mutual accountability about keeping up and doing well.

LEVERAGING HOME-GROWN SOCIAL CAPITAL

As they have succeeded in their education and rebuilt their lives, many of the women interviewed have become a source of social capital in their families and communities. We have identified



several patterns that enable formerly incarcerated college goers to leverage their social capital.

A common theme among the women interviewed is the desire to "pay it forward." Many of the women spoke directly about how the support from others who came before them is contributing to their success, and how they want to give back to the community and bring others along:

I found a passion of wanting to help people and be a beacon of light to them. Because from past history through incarceration and myself with drug use, having no clue and being hopeless, [thinking] that I would never be clean, that I would be worth nothing. And so it's really intriguing to me when I first meet someone in this field that I work in and they're hopeless; life is meaningless; they don't have a clue; they don't believe in themselves. And so what I do is I just give the information, and I educate them so that they can be able to learn it for themselves. And this flower that came in, that had driveled away, starts to blossom. So that's what I love.



Also apparent in the interviews is the women's willingness to share their social capital far beyond their immediate families and communities, and the existence of networks that facilitate the sharing of that social capital. What emerges is a strategy for leveraging the educational success of formerly incarcerated women who are themselves deeply embedded in and committed to their families and communities.

The women interviewed are a part of a larger community in New York City that they described as robust and containing long-standing relationships. Many of them formed relationships of mutual support during their time in prison, some of them afforded by opportunities to pursue college while in prison. Many of the women said this set of relationships has facilitated the sharing of social capital among women in the network and their families. That sharing of resources was further facilitated by a shared sense of community-mindedness among the women interviewed. Most of them expressed with great fervor a commitment to give back to the community and to

do what they can to make life better for the next generation. Many of the women are involved in work relating to social service, leadership, or public service.

CCF has cultivated a community of women committed to the mutual success of women and their families, as well as a wide network of organizational and government partners and networks that currently provide support to CCF's constituents. Some of these partners also provide educational and other kinds of support to families and children.

Many women saw themselves as an integral source of information and support for other formerly incarcerated women and emphasized their commitment to networking and helping women in need. Some had or were currently volunteering or working for organizations like the Women's Prison Association. Others network and provide support in more informal ways. One woman explained, "Being incarcerated for so many years and so many people coming to me asking me for advice, 'How do you do this? How do you do that?' And I've learned how to communicate with people. I've learned how to research. On my own I've learned how to help people . . . And I really have a passion for it; I really love it." She further explained that she attends seminars through reentry organizations to find out how to help women who are transitioning back into their communities. She is working to build an organization now. She wants to "set up a support system for people who come out to sit down and talk about what they're going through, what they're feeling, what happened. Support systems and groups are a network; you share

information.” Her experience is similar to what many other women described.

Community-based Organizations Can Help Broker Social Capital

Community-based organizations play a key role in facilitating success. They act as brokers of social capital, connecting women to each other and to key resources in the community and scaffolding the women’s success as they move along the educational trajectory. As Mario Small argued in *Unanticipated Gains*, “people’s social capital depends fundamentally on the organizations in which they participate routinely,” and “through multiple mechanisms, organizations can create and reproduce network advantages in ways their members may not expect or even have to work for.”¹⁸⁵

The women interviewed identified several ways in which CCF builds their social capital and facilitates their roles as brokers of social capital. All of the women mentioned the community meetings. Many women explicitly discussed turning to CCF for academic advising. One woman who is transitioning into a master’s program is consulting with CCF advisors to explore degree programs and schools and talk through application and testing requirements. Women also discussed information and classes as well as participation in the Theater for Social Change. Through CCF, a number of women found mentors who became crucial sources of academic and career support.

The engine of social capital development for communities affected by incarceration can come from making higher education

possible for formerly incarcerated women and their families. The engine is also fueled by cultivating organizational brokers who are in a position to support women in effectively sharing the social capital with their families and communities.

CONCLUSION

This research shows how formerly incarcerated women can become crucial sources of social capital for their families and communities. The families of formerly incarcerated women have been able to support these women in navigating social and legal systems post-incarceration, and, in turn, have enabled these same women to support educational access and success in their families and communities.

Our research has identified possible ways to provide more intentional support for cultivating social capital in multigenerational families to support education. We have observed the tremendous value in cultivating and supporting peer support and brainstorming by those already playing those roles. Our research also noted programmatic opportunities for integrating multigenerational family members in learning activities, including orientations, college visits, and graduations.

CCF program participants have shown us that families who include postsecondary education aspirations as part of their strategy for overcoming poverty and incarceration develop new sources of social capital. Families dealing with the challenges of criminal conviction depend on networks of individuals with similar experiences and challenges, while scaffolding those supports with new relationships formed in school, at work, in faith communities, in activist organizations, and in bridge programs like CCF. This research shows that strong social networks that offer mutual support and aid social interactions, along with the sharing of knowledge and

resources, have a tremendous impact on the ability of women with criminal convictions and their families to access education and persist into and through college.

A critical step in expanding this multigenerational impact, exemplified by CCF's increased focus on supporting families, involves finding ways to have programs currently designed for one generation embrace a multigenerational mindset and strategy. Many programs now designed for one generation are already strapped for resources, so the successful integration of a multigenerational mindset will require new configurations that facilitate collaborations and partnerships.

Strong Anchor Organizations Can Sustain Multigenerational Partnerships

Larger systemic issues also play a role in enabling or preventing healthy collaborations and communities. Housing, public buildings, recreational facilities, parks, and other public spaces that are safe, well-resourced, and offer locations for social and political dialogue are essential to sustaining long-term, cross-sector work. CCF has played this intermediary role throughout its 15 years serving as a core institution for women who have been involved in the justice system and who are looking to redefine themselves and redirect the trajectory of their family's future. Multigenerational strategies might be further cultivated by identifying anchor institutions in communities, such as community schools or colleges or housing projects, that could collaborate with organizations like CCF to provide cross-generational interactions, such as tutoring or college counseling,

that could be provided to family members.

Economic opportunity that allows community members to participate fully in the life of the community is also essential. CCF participants have indicated that incentives and stipends, while not the primary motivation for engagement, are helpful in allowing them to participate fully without the added concern of the cost involved in education itself. Incentives also allow them to participate in CCF's community-oriented activities. Documenting their role in providing social capital to families and communities offers a justification for allocating these resources.

Engage Participants as Thought Partners

CCF's model brings together the full range of resources that all participants have to offer. The focus groups conducted as part of this research illustrated that the women who have developed the resilience to persist and support their families have creative and practical ideas for how to build on their experiences. As demonstrated by both the peer-to-peer exchanges that happen informally and formally and the educational components, such as conferences, coalition meetings, and graduation celebrations, effective programs can unite diverse audiences with different economic status around common concerns. This fosters networking across groups and boosts benefits to all participants. Inclusivity helps bridge social capital and also demonstrates that so-called "disadvantaged" populations are quite resourceful — useful in explaining why investments in these populations are necessary and well spent.

PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage preexisting social, professional, and cultural networks.

To fully realize the benefits of the strategies that are already being employed informally by people reentering the community, program models should promote the engagement of preexisting social, professional, and cultural networks for necessary supports. At the same time, these programs should generate new opportunities to build networks across socioeconomic segregation through peer relationships, mentoring, apprenticeships, and other bridging methods.

2. Refine family and community to include relation networks with social capital supporting education.

This research shows that physical or biological proximity is a poor proxy for identifying relationships with resources related to education. Social characteristics grounded in shared experience and commitments provide a strong basis for identifying relationships that provide social capital relating to education, particularly when individuals come from communities with low levels of education. Therefore, we recommend that programs and policy explore new definitions of family and community that more accurately track the available social capital in relationship networks. These policies could be based on actions and outcomes related to educational support and success.

3. Foster strengths-based networks of women with convictions and their families. To be effective,

organizations must successfully foster the ability for a strong social network of women with criminal convictions and their families to identify their own strengths while bridging them to other closed networks that have been engaged by CCF staff and leadership. These connections include local, state, and federal government; other nonprofits; private foundations; donors; corporations; and the faith-based community.

4. Offer gatekeepers professional development about cultivating social capital. CCF participants said that a key factor to their well-being is their ability to increase social networks and recognize their own social capital. This is the way in which CCF staff supports and interacts with them for strength-based planning. Organizations that serve their constituents with the goal of increasing their independence through the building of social capital and social networks should offer professional development opportunities for staff in gatekeeping roles, from correctional officers to reentry specialists. Proper training increases social networks among employees, which translates to expanded networks for program participants.

5. Use policy and funding initiatives to foster multigenerational, cross-sector collaborations and networks. Funders and policymakers are in a position to facilitate cross-sector collaboration by supporting networks designed with a multigenerational lens, and by redefining families in key initiatives related to education to foster and support multigenerational relationships that provide social capital to families and communities affected by incarceration.

6. Pursue collaborative research designed to advance knowledge, effective practice, and policy innovation. This report represents a small but growing body of research focused on the assets and strategies for building social capital communities affected by incarceration. Up to now, much of this research has either involved small samples, or large-scale studies have focused on identifying needs and deficits of people in nontraditional families. More research is needed to understand multigenerational needs, interactions, and strategies related to education. This research should be done in close collaboration with people directly affected. Collaborative, multi-method research serves multiple purposes: It enables research to pose questions that reflect the interests, needs, and knowledge of those directly affected. It provides firsthand perspectives about the sources and strategies for building social capital in families and communities, and thus draws on the multiple roles of directly affected communities as researchers and as resources within and across communities closest to the issues. In the process, this kind of research builds collaborations and partnerships between researchers and community leaders.

These findings will hopefully catalyze further research, activism, and policy aimed at building support for postsecondary education for formerly incarcerated women and men, connect that support to families, and enable organizational brokers like CCF to facilitate the development of these resource networks. These strategies will foster the homegrown social capital needed to rebuild families and communities affected by incarceration.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

This study grew out of the participation of CCF's director, Vivian Nixon, as an Aspen Ascend fellow. A research team from the Center for Institutional and Social Change (CISC) at Columbia Law School collaborated with CCF on research designed to gain a full understanding of the pathway into and through education for justice-involved women and their families, as well as the opportunities for leveraging the resources, relationships, knowledge, and networks already present in the families and communities they inhabit. Research questions and interview guides were developed collaboratively, informed by the experience of CCF staff and formerly incarcerated leaders and by the literature on social capital networks, complex families, and the experiences of communities affected by incarceration. The study also considers strategies for educational advancement for first-generation students and students of color.

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 38 women who have participated in CCF's programs. Each interview lasted about an hour and a half. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and systematically coded using a set of codes identified collaboratively with CCF leadership. CISC researchers prepared analytical memos, removing all identifying information. These memos were shared with Vivian Nixon, and we then jointly generated themes and core findings from the data.

Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy for selecting interviewees was "purposeful" or "theoretical" sampling, the dominant sampling strategy used

in qualitative research, where the aim is to illuminate and understand rather than to predict or determine causation.⁸⁶ Specifically, we selected a sample that was likely to maximize variation.

CCF and CISC wanted to ensure that women with various types of families and caretaking responsibilities were included in the initial interviews. Accordingly, we did not communicate that we were looking for a particular kind of caregiver (e.g., mothers and grandmothers). Instead, we asked for interview participants that "are currently enrolled in CCF programs, who have children or care for children, 18 years or younger." We advertised the opportunity through CCF's listserve, at CCF's office, and at a CCF community meeting. The first 15 women who replied were chosen and contacted to arrange an interview time.

Interview and Focus Group Process and Protocols

The research questions that guided this inquiry focused on understanding how women experience family, relationships of support, and community as they attempt to navigate their own educational advancement and to support those they care for. Three main objectives guided the pilot interview process. The first objective was to gather substantive and in-depth information on how women defined their families, what their mutual educational needs were, and what networks of support they turned to in order to meet those needs. The second objective was to involve the women in a brainstorming process about how CCF could support a meaningful multigenerational approach to

education. The third objective was to use the information to inform the next data-gathering phase of the project and suggest tools and strategies for future research.

In order to support these objectives, CISC and CCF collaboratively developed an interview protocol, organized around four buckets of inquiry: (1) How do women experience family? (2) What mutual needs and barriers related to educational advancement do family members share? (3) What are the relationships, spaces, and strategies that support educational advancement for women and their families? (4) How do those relationships provide support, and what are the program and policy opportunities to enhance the impact of those relationships? The specific interview questions were designed to solicit information from the interviewees that provided insight into these larger questions.

We asked the CCF women we interviewed to describe their families and the interactions with people they support and take care of and with the people who take care of and support them. We asked about these interactions of support in general and with regard to education, as well as how these women have navigated barriers, turning points, and challenges they have faced in their educational pathways and in the pathways of the children they care for.

Confidentiality

This study was conducted in accordance with the Human Subjects approval process. All participants were informed about the benefits and risks accompanying participation in the research, in accordance with the protocols

approved by the Columbia Institutional Review Board for this project. We took particular care to protect the confidentiality of all interviewees. When necessary to preserve confidentiality, we omitted potentially identifying information, such as the gender or status of the interviewee, or aggregated data.

Coding and Analysis of Interview Data

We followed a standard qualitative-data coding and analysis procedure involving overlapping phases, beginning with “open coding,” which entailed assigning descriptive codes to each line of the transcribed interviews; then “axial coding,” whereby codes were aggregated into larger concepts and themes; and, finally, conceptualization, which involved an iterative process of mapping and remapping concepts and themes, their properties and dimensions, and their interrelationships, until a coherent narrative tightly linked to the data emerged.⁸⁷

To indicate the weight of evidence for any given finding, we chose to use adjectives such as “most,” “many,” and “some” to convey the prevalence of a theme (i.e., a coded account, experience, or view) across the interviews rather than reporting exact percentages of people mentioning the theme in their interview. References to particular themes are technically countable, but reporting percentages would lend a false precision to the data; in addition, percentages do not take into account the strength of people’s statements. Instead, we use “most” to denote the vast majority of interviewees. We refer to “many” to indicate about half of the interviewees. “Some” people means that, although the theme was not

representative of the referent group as a whole, it was shared by more than a few people, suggesting a noteworthy pattern. Every finding presented in the report had multiple sources of support. No quotation was included if it expressed a unique point of view.

Study limitations

Several important limitations of the research include the lack of a control group, the relatively small pool and sample size, and the self-selection of participants in CCF's program. We interviewed 38 out of 182 (20.87 percent) active CCF participants. These limitations prevent this research from demonstrating causal linkages between the strategies used by CCF or the women and the educational and other outcomes they achieve. We also do not claim to have interviewed a representative sample of women with criminal justice involvement. The interviews were, of course, volunteer, and those who volunteered to participate in the study are likely to be among the more active and engaged students and CCF participants. We did not have the opportunity to interview women who were no longer active in CCF or in pursuing their education.

ENDNOTES

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