From the Facilitated Group Discussions

AIR presents the stories from the group discussions pertaining to family reunification. For each of the seven topics, we describe the key questions posed to the groups. We then present a series of themes that emerged from the comments shared by the participants. Each theme (a bulleted statement in boldface) is supported by direct quotes from the participants. We identified themes if multiple individuals raised the same observation or concern. We present quotes from the participants that illustrate the themes. Each quote is from a single participant, but that characterization does not imply that we are highlighting a concern that only one individual raised during the conversations.

Family Reunification

> "Before my conviction, my family wasn't in my life cause I wasn't doing what I was supposed to. But now, since I've started this program after I got out of prison, they started getting back into my life. They're seeing that I was really trying to change . . . so I finally got my kids and my mom back in my life; [they are] proud of me."

We asked those participating in the group discussions how their family had changed since their conviction. We heard about many dimensions to the changes. Families were harmed in tangible ways, including estrangement while the family member was in prison. Being sent to prison created strains in relationships with family members, and sometimes there were divisions within families about whether to support the family member who was in prison.

How Families Changed

- **Participants shared how their incarceration harmed their family members, especially their children.** The participants, particularly female participants, described the impact of their incarceration on young children who went through traumatic changes to their living situations. As one participant explained,

  > because of my conviction or my criminal charge and then conviction, my daughter got taken through CPS [Child Protective Services] and then two and a half, three months after I got to prison, I was forced, because child protection didn't want to keep the case open any longer, I was forced to sign over custody of my daughter to her dad who was [an active addict].

  Another participant pointed to the effects of her incarceration on her daughter:

> My going to prison, and then the transfer of custody, and from this place to that place, foster care, all that kind of stuff, created a whole other layer of trauma. So now she is 14, and I'm still dealing with a lot of the mental health struggles that she's dealing with because of the time that I spent in incarceration.

Yet another participant shared that

> I was in an abusive relationship. So when I got arrested, my children had to go live with their father because he was the only person that was attached. Unfortunately, he was the abuser . . . and by the end of the first year of me being home, the roles had changed, and he was being arrested for abuse of my girls.

Among those responding to the poll questions, 41% said they participated—or were required to participate—in parenting classes.

- **Other harms associated with the incarceration of their loved ones included the loss of their homes and the emotional pain family members experienced during the period of incarceration.** Multiple participants explained that as a result of their conviction and incarceration, the home that their family was living in was taken away. That also led to degrees of estrangement that have lingered across time. As one participant described, "I learned in prison that they were losing the house and had to move due to my incarceration. In terms of communicating with family since then, incarceration has put a damper on that." Estrangement from family members was a common experience among the participants. One participant explained as follows:

  > I did a 15-year stint, and I have to say that I certainly lost most friends and family while I was incarcerated. And even upon release, those that rejected me during the incarceration still rejected me afterwards. My felony conviction certainly made me the black sheep of the family. Regardless of the accomplishments and what we do afterwards, that felony conviction follows us both in society and within our family.

  There were examples of family members who experienced emotional pain during the incarceration period. As one participant noted,

  > I'm the second out of seven siblings, and I'm the oldest brother. So, my being convicted and being sentenced to life and sending off to prison, definitely it had an impact on my family from my siblings, parents, cousins, grandparents, everybody. And it was particularly traumatizing to my father. He couldn't even come to visit me while I was in prison.

  As another participant explained, "There's a huge ripple effect. There's been a huge absence, as a hole in our family that can't be filled by anything other than, yeah, my convictions definitely affected my family makeup in a lot of ways."

- **The death of family members became more difficult when incarceration meant the individual could not attend the funeral.** One of the biggest changes experienced within families during their incarceration period was the death of a loved one. As one participant noted, "I was in there about seven years, and a lot of my family died off." The grief often is difficult to process while incarcerated. One participant described as follows:

  > Also, I missed some deaths in the family. And everybody here know that if there's a death in the family, the mental experience you go through, especially when you're down. I've seen some brothers; they just start fighting and get put in [segregation] because of the death of a loved one.

  When the death reduces the level of external support, it can be even more devastating. One participant described the death of a grandmother: "That was a very profound loss because up until the time she died, she wrote me almost every month while I was incarcerated until she just started to decline in the last year. So that was over 20 years." And the barriers to attending funerals can extend to the postincarceration phase. As one participant told us,

  > I had a 10-year sentence . . . because my mom had already had failing health and stuff, I knew that I wasn't going to see her again. But she did pass away while I was in prison, and I didn't get to go to her services. And then . . . two years later, my sister passed away. I didn't get to go to her services . . .. When I got out too, I lost a few people in my family, my brother and two of my nieces. And I didn't get to go to none of their services either because I'm still here because I'm technically still an inmate because I'm on home confinement. So they pretty much treat you like an inmate.

- **During incarceration, and once released, there were costs for some family members to stay engaged and be supportive.** This included costs incurred when families had to deal with unfinished business back home. As one participant described,

  > My family had to go and deal with property I had, so then they had to deal with boxing up stuff and putting stuff in storage and maybe some debt that I had that they had to pay off . . . so that was inconvenient.

  Maintaining contact during the incarceration period also was an expense for families. In addition to phone calls ("If you don't got no money, you ain't talking to your family"), postage, and the provision of cash so their incarcerated relative could support themselves in prison, there also was the expense related to traveling back and forth for visits. As one participant explained,

  > My mom, after 15 years of visiting—she was the only one that continued to do that. And sometimes in facilities that were hours away, she would spend more time in the car driving to and from than the actual visiting taking place.

In addition, there was the chance that welcoming the person back into the family home could involve incurring costs. One participant shared that

> I don't have my license anymore, and my family really has to take me everywhere. It's just more stressful and more arguments because I have to beg them, or I have to bribe them in order to take me to the things that I have to go to. And if I don't go to the things, then I get in trouble for it.

Finally, in some families there were costs associated with wanting to support the returning family member when others in the family were opposed. As one participant explained, "There's some family that want nothing to do with me. Some family fight with other family because this one supports me, and they don't think the one should, so it's tough."

- **Even after their release, many persons continued to have only limited contact with family, sometimes by choice and sometimes as a condition of their sentence.** For some persons, the efforts they made for personal growth and healing could be threatened by being around family and friends who were themselves struggling with addiction and mental illness. As one participant explained, "I was always the mess up, and I just reunited with my brother after 12 some years, and I just found out the rest of my family has fallen apart as I've pulled myself together." A female participant described the difficult choices she needed to make to maintain her own recovery: "My parents are addicts. They are still addicts, so I don't really go around them because I want to live a better life." Other forms of estrangement are the result of decisions by the legal system. For example, one participant noted, "I have three kids that I don't get to see because I was incarcerated, and I don't have any assistance to help me get a lawyer to be able to get help with getting my kids back right now." Another participant was not permitted to be in contact with her mother: "I had a financial crime, and it was against my mother, and so I have supervision for five years . . . technically on paper she's considered my victim, so I can't have any contact with her." Among those responding to the poll questions, 36% shared that their charges prevented them from reuniting with their family.
- **The postrelease period often required a significant adjustment for family members as for the individual just released.** Not everyone had assistance in reuniting with their family, and some adopted a perspective to understand what it must have been like for their family back home. As one participant put it,

> Your family didn't leave; you left them. And that perspective really helped me. So, when I'm coming home, I'm meeting kids that weren't even born or little children that are now grown adults. And so when they have fear of me, I understand it.

Another participant reflected on what it feels like when the family has not changed but you have: "What I've learned is most family only see you how you left them. And I was very

young when I got incarcerated and to me it seemed like you grow, you change, you make the adjustments." Yet another shared the experience of how family members might experience their return to the family:

> The whole family dynamic was different when I got home, and on top of that they all had a look their eye, like, who came home? Is this a new man that came home or is this the old trouble-making monster that we used to know? Which was crazy in their eyes. We hadn't talked about this in the last 18 years.

Improvements to Family Relationships

- **For many individuals, improvement in familial relationships occurred across time.** Participants could point to substantial improvements in the relationship with their family, but they noted it took time and effort. One noted that "I had no contact whatsoever and now I talk to all of my family. I have my sister back in my life, my father and my kids. So, it's been a big, huge change for the better." Another participant attributed the improvement to the fact that "they respect me and who I am now. But it took me a while to get there." Another participant agreed, getting into trouble led to a situation when family members "didn't want nothing to do with me. And now they love me. And it's through with the hard work you put into it and just about being patient and the time. You just got to be patient. It will come along."
- **To rebuild relationships with family, many credited the work they accomplished in treatment programs and their own growth and recovery.** Many participants could draw the contrast from how bad the situation had become to how much better it is now. One participant noted as follows:

  > When I was out there using and going back and forth to prison, my family had nothing to do with me. But today, I have the best relationship . . . So, it's just so awesome to be clean as well as criminal free and have my family support.

  There is a recognition that earning back the trust of family members is a process. And for many participants, the key was being in recovery from substance use that was critical. As one participant explained,

  > My family's been way more accepting because they've seen that I went in there and I worked on myself and got myself taken care of. The stuff that they say to me and the way that they treat me and look at me now is way different.

  Being in recovery, as many noted, "ultimately gave us all an opportunity to kind of rebuild our family, rebuild our relationships."

- **Reconciliation and forgiveness are key elements in the process of rebuilding relationships with family members.** There is an appreciation about the ways that family relationships are transformed. As one participant described it,

  > It's just so good for my parents not to look at me and try to figure out if I'm high or not. It's like they can look at me and walk out of the room and smile and not be in disgust.

  As they explained the changes in those relationships, many participants credited their efforts to focus on reconciliation, seeking forgiveness, and making contributions to others. For example, one participant explained as follows: "If you can stay in touch with them during that period of time . . . letting them know. And always be on . . . the reconciliation end, because at the end of the day, you left them." Another participant reflected, "I love having the respect of my children, and my grandchildren, so I asked them for forgiveness for . . . going to prison and being absent out of their life." Another participant emphasized how important it was that "if I want to walk in true forgiveness and be healed and be whole, I have to make sure that I'm stable, that I'm whole and that I am together internally." As an example of giving to others, one participant described,

  > And so now we [are] in such a good place and healing and because of some of the things that I've done by getting my degrees and doing hospice care work and . . . also a project coordinator for the main prisoner advocacy coalition.

- **Among those who participated in the group discussions, a few experienced effective family reconciliation and mediation programs.** When we asked about formal programs that may have assisted in rebuilding relationships with family, we heard more about requirements that were in place rather than effective outcomes that resulted. As one participant noted, "I went through the whole CPS process, like they still legally have to go through the motions while you're incarcerated, even if they know that there's no chance of reunification there." Another participant explained, "CPS did come in and visit me and required me to do the Kids First program, which was offered once a month in the county." Yet another participant was required to take a class on the impact of crime on victims but expressed concerns at being taught "not to ask for forgiveness to people that we have wronged because they say you've already taken too much from them." This was a concern because

  > I have this apprehension that maybe because they're not hearing anything from me, that they maybe think I don't care or I'm not sorry or something like that, that I don't know if they know what the system has told us or anything that way. So, I worry that that might be an ongoing injury with them, but anyway, that's one of those things I see as a sticking point maybe [preventing] possible reconciliation.

Others pointed to the need to address their own PTSD before they could work on reconciling with family. For example, one participant explained, "If you have PTSD, you're going to have problems relationally." Another participant offered more details:

> I think that's one of the biggest impediments with me and my family, is they have all these questions about incarceration they want to know, and there's no way to put in the words what I've been through and what it's like to come home. So, I think understanding my own mental impact of incarceration is a big impediment of me and my family reuniting.

- **Some women must go through multiple steps to reestablish their parental rights and reunite with their children.** Many people described going home as a straightforward way to reconnect with family. Yet, for many women who were incarcerated, there are legal steps involved with being able to see and/or live with their children. As one mother described,

  > For me, my kids were adopted while I was in jail, but it was really what was best. I am now able to rebuild my relationship with them. I have Sunday phone calls with them every week now. And that's all because I'm on this program, and I'm making a point to better my life now.

  Another mother stressed that

  > I think my main focus while I was incarcerated was that nothing or no one was going to stop me from getting my daughter back when I got out. And that was my vision. And I made it a reality when I got out, and it happened. So, she's with me now.

  Others noted that "not very many people who get their kids taken away because of their convictions, do they get them back. And it's a huge uphill battle—a lot of times a very costly battle." Having stable housing was a crucial piece of being able to reestablish legal rights to their children, and as one mother noted, "I tried to get housing when I got out to get my kids back, and they said I couldn't have housing because I didn't have my kids."

- **For men separated from their children while incarcerated, rebuilding those relationships took time.** Fathers had fewer legal barriers to reestablishing the connections with their children, but they were no less affected by emotional distance in those relationships. As one man noted,

  > I missed some important dates in my children's life. Proms, graduations. I missed one of my babies, their first walking experience. It took 15 years to redevelop the relationship that I had . . . I had to humble myself and admit my wrong and start from that point on.

  Another father described the anger his daughters expressed about his time away:

> Then they told me that they was angry with me because of all of their special days I wasn't there. And now that I've gotten out, now the reality of that has set in and now the emotion of that is set in. Not just for me but also for them. And so that's caused some great distance.

Another father described how much harder it was for his older children:

> I have three girls, a 22-year-old, a 16-year-old, and a 12-year-old. They don't understand. And I have two boys that are with my mom, but the older ones . . . it was embarrassing to them. They didn't want to talk to me when I was in jail, because they said it was weird, and that's the hard part.

- **The younger the children were at the time of the incarceration, the greater the impact on the parent–child relationship.** The emotional distance that parents experienced in the relationship with their children was greater when the children were younger at the time of their incarceration or when the period that the parent was away was longer. One mother described her circumstances as follows:

  > But after I was incarcerated, my children, they were very little at the time. They were like two and three. They wound up in child protective services and in foster care . . . I was incarcerated for too long to try to regain custody of my children, and my rights were terminated to my two older children, who they'll be seventeen and eighteen in November of this year, so they're almost old enough to seek contact again. But it's been, you know, over a decade."

  Another parent explained, "My oldest really resented me for getting in trouble and leaving. But they were small when I went in, and, now, they're grown up; she's in college, she's a freshman in college right now." For women who gave birth to children while they were incarcerated, they were not able to bond with their babies, which has an impact on their relationship after release. One mother described the birth of twins while she was incarcerated: "By the time I came home, they were already four years old. And, so, they just have a special bond with my mom." Another mother gave birth while she was in prison, and as she explains, "And it was a struggle with that relationship because I felt like I didn't bond with him, and he wouldn't know me as his mom. And it was really hard. At one point, 18 years passed, and I didn't see him."