



PROJECT WHAT!

RESEARCH SUMMARY

A Program of Community Works

March 2007

INTRODUCTION

Who are we?

We are a group of youth, ages 15-20, from different parts of the Bay Area. We go to different schools and like doing different things for fun. We have faced different struggles and had different successes in our lives. One thing we have in common is that all of us have had a parent incarcerated at some point in our lives, which is the reason we are working with Project WHAT!

Who is Community Works?

The mission of Community Works is to provide arts and education programming to populations impacted by incarceration in order to build community and give voice to their experiences.

What is Project WHAT!?

Project WHAT! stands for "We're Here and Talking: 2.4 Million of Us." 2.4 million is the estimated number of children across the nation with a parent in prison or jail. Our purpose is to help youth in this situation. Our main objective is to create a training curriculum for social workers and teachers so that they may improve their services to children with incarcerated parents. We believe these services, if improved, will boost the overall quality of life for children with incarcerated parents.

OVERVIEW OF OUR PROJECT

Our Research Question

Project WHAT!'s research question is: How can the services provided to youth with incarcerated parents be improved?

Why is this project important?

We chose to look at this issue because it is personal to our lives and we want to make a difference in the lives of others who deal with similar issues. It was important that we did this research rather than adults because we are the ones who experience it and adults don't know how we feel. We have first hand experience since we all have had incarcerated parents.

METHODOLOGY

How was our research team selected?

Most of us found out about the project through an adult who recommended that we become a part of it. We applied and then interviewed for the job. We started the project in April 2006 with nine youth researchers and currently have five youth researchers. We meet one to two times a week.

How did we select our research question?

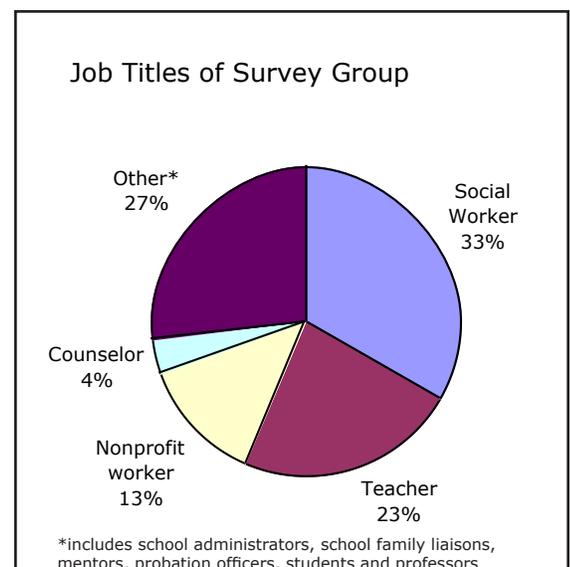
We came up with our topic and related issues and then worked on how to turn it into a question.

How did we select our sample?

We decided to focus on two groups of service providers who we thought would make the biggest impact: teachers and social workers. Teachers and social workers have a lot of communication and interaction with youth. We also thought the voices and perspectives of other youth were important.

How did we decide on our research methods?

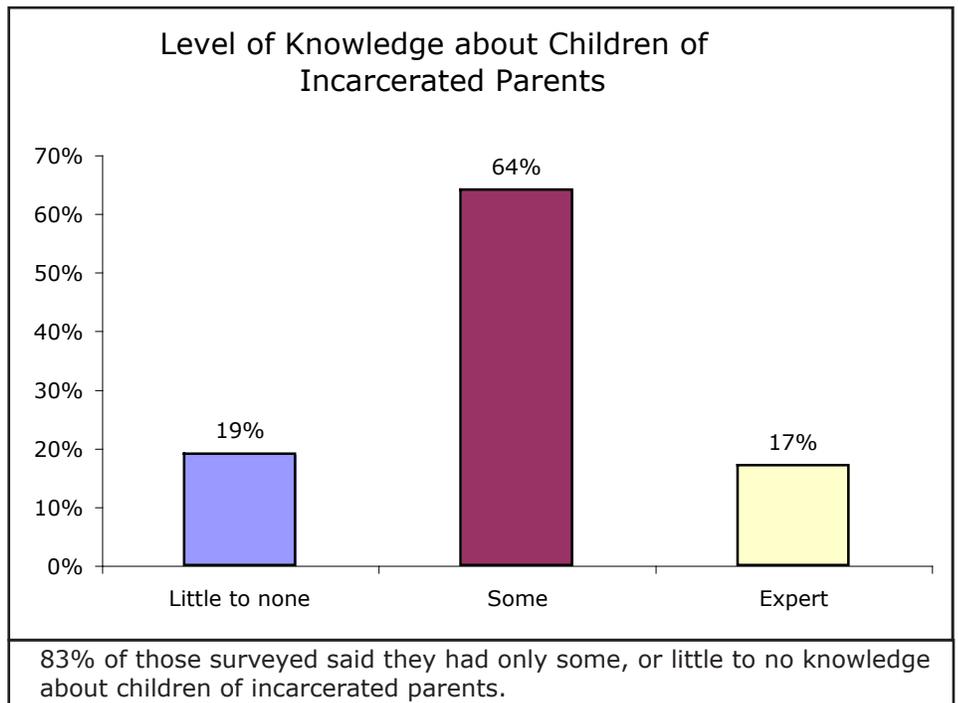
In order to decide which research methods to use, we first learned about the pros and cons of a



number of different methods, including interviews, photo voice, focus groups, surveys, and observation. We chose surveys to get the concrete numbers that often appeal to policy makers. We chose focus groups to get good stories and quotes. In the end, the group felt the surveys and focus groups would provide us with the best information needed to fulfill our purpose.

What information did we collect?

We collected more than 150 surveys, targeting two groups of service providers—social workers and teachers. The surveys were collected mostly using Survey Monkey, an online survey tool. We asked our teachers to fill them out, and also emailed a bunch of social workers, teachers, counselors, and other people who work with children of incarcerated parents, asking them to take our survey. The survey questions included demographic information, how much they knew about the issue of children of incarcerated parents, and what they needed to know to do their jobs better. We also conducted one focus group with youth, one with teachers, and one with social workers. Questions we asked service providers include questions about their beliefs and what resources or training they need. Questions we asked youth include: did they ever have problems at school because of their parent’s incarceration, and were they comfortable talking about the situation with their social worker.



How did we analyze the data?

We read through all the focus group transcripts and picked out what seemed most important. We put the data with similar themes together, then came up with findings that made sense based on our data. Finally, we picked the most compelling quotes to be our supporting evidence. For the surveys, we took the data that was most striking to us and we put it into graph form to use in our report.

FINDINGS & SUPPORTING DATA

FINDING ONE: There are barriers to service providers giving good services, including the need for more resources.

Supporting Data #1:
 [Social Worker] “Sometimes there’s a lot of distance involved. [The caregivers] work here in the City or they live in another county

and the parent is away, far away, so a lot of coordination efforts have to be made to even consider a visit.”

Supporting Data #2:
 [Teacher] “When I was teaching kind of the more straight history courses I noticed that... difference, that it was more difficult to make that [personal] connection with students when you talk about the causes of the Civil War, they’re not responding to you in a way that invites a more personal kind of sharing.”

FINDING TWO: Students who are struggling academically need more support from teachers.

Supporting Data #1:
 [Teacher] “It’s also made us recognize that some of our students are dealing with these issues that we don’t have the training or the expertise to handle directly ourselves...”

Supporting Data #2:

[Teacher] “Oh, I bet there’s two or three or four young people in here who have a parent who’s incarcerated, how can I respond... I think it’s not on teachers’ minds so I think the best training would be for student teachers to hear from young people who could share, ‘this is my experience in high school.’ ”

FINDING THREE: People treat youth differently because of a parent’s incarceration.

Supporting Data #1:

[Youth] “My dad’s a drug dealer and where I’m from, it’s like, they know my dad, so I’ll be walking down the street and the police pull me over, and run my name and everything, and they’re like, ‘your dad’s this and this’... Just cuz my dad do that doesn’t mean I do that.”

Supporting Data #2:

[Youth] “I know that I’m scared to say that my mom’s in prison because I wouldn’t want people to look at me differently just because of who my mom is. Because that’s not who I intend to be.”

FINDING FOUR: A parent’s incarceration can impact a young person’s school life.

Supporting Data #1:

[Youth] “My dad was at Solano in Vacaville, so I went there with my Grandmother and my Auntie... it was a Sunday, and I was hecka mad, so then I went to school hecka mad, got in trouble, and teachers

was like, ‘that’s not an excuse to get in trouble.’ But I was just like hecka mad the whole day, then I got suspended for like three days, cuz I got attitude with all my teachers.”

FINDING FIVE: Fear of social workers can create a bad

“I know that I’m scared to say that my mom’s in prison because I wouldn’t want people to look at me differently just because of who my mom is. Because that’s not who I intend to be.”

relationship between youth and social workers.

Supporting Data #1:

[Youth] “Personally I do not trust my social worker because I felt that anything I shared would be used against us... So I would always tell the social worker, “Oh we’re doing cool, I don’t want to talk to no one. Later. I’m good. I’m eating...”

FINDING SIX: Having a relationship with the incarcerated parent is often important to youth.

Supporting Data #1:

[Youth] “Visiting my parent [is important] because they recently made a rule for me and my sister that we’re not allowed to see him anymore... I want to see him face

to face. I want to see him.”

Supporting Data #2:

[Social Worker] “There’s stigma attached to jail and prison, you know, for parents being there... regardless of what the circumstances are, most children want to see, be, and talk with their parents. You know, get the hug regardless of the circumstances.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- We learned the importance of being open and unbiased to everyone’s opinion when collecting data.
- Data Analysis is very difficult!!!

- It is important to put a lot of effort into making focus group participants (especially other youth) feel comfortable so they will share information with us.

- Our data would be even stronger if we had also done a youth survey in addition to the service provider surveys.

SUMMARY

Based on our research, Project WHAT! makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations for Teachers and Schools

1. Teachers should attend trainings to learn about the impact of parental incarceration on children and how to support students

with incarcerated parents. Teachers should earn professional development credits for these trainings.

2. Teachers should assign two to three confidential assignments per year in which students can share issues related to their personal life.

3. School counselors should learn visiting procedures and transportation options.

Recommendations for Social Workers and Child Welfare Departments

1. More resources need to be allocated for social worker trainings on how to support children of incarcerated parents.

2. Family members taking care of children of incarcerated parents should be provided with funding so that the children can live with familiar people.

3. Social workers and child welfare departments should consider sibling relationships: extra resources should be available to support placements together.

4. The child welfare department should create a position for a specialist to support social workers. If possible, hire people with personal experience with the issue. The specialist should:

- Learn jail/prison visiting procedures
- Help arrange transportation, including transportation vouchers

child welfare departments, and other venues. We have already presented our work at four conferences (three in the Bay Area and one in Seattle). We will continue to speak out publicly and provide youth-led trainings. By doing all of these things, we hope to improve services to youth with incarcerated parents, help people, and create change.

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If you want to learn more about Project WHAT! OR if you're a youth in the Bay Area who has had or currently has a parent

in prison or jail, and you are interested in working with Project WHAT! please contact us at:

Project WHAT!

 c/o Community Works
1605 Bonita Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94709
510-845-3332

www.community-works-ca.org

NEXT STEPS

Now that we have this information, we are using it to develop a resource guide for youth with incarcerated parents and a training curriculum for service providers. Besides developing the resource guide and training curriculum, we will conduct trainings for service providers at conferences, schools,

THANK YOUS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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