

Design and Implementation of a Resource Management System for Assisting Internees' Families

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Abstract

According to the Bureau of Justice, approximately 2.2 million Americans are incarcerated today. This Research Project discusses the challenges prisoners and their families face and the importance of resources that can be made available to help make their post-incarceration transition easier. Incarceration only traumatizes the prisoner, but traumatizes his/her family as well. In this case, the family members, as the hidden victims of the criminal justice system, are neither acknowledged nor given a platform to be heard. It is important to consider the hidden victims because they receive little support and face a host of challenges. Technology can play a vital role in providing families with required supports. In this project, an attempt was made to design and implement a system to facilitate access to the available resources for inmates and their families. The project looks at the effect of incarceration on families, their challenges, and their needs through the scope of available data. The second part of the project describes the process of developing an application and its outcome in facilitating the clients. The effectiveness of the project is measured in terms of the use of the application (website) by clients. The result of this project can be helpful to families and individuals who are confined and useful to the officials concerning inmates and their families.

Keywords: Internees and family essentials, resource availability, technology effectiveness

I. Introduction

According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, there are approximately 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States. Andrea Strong stated, when a person is sentenced to prison, the entire family serves the time (Strong, 2013). Incarceration forces the family members to deal with unprecedented struggles (Griffin, 2017). Also, they must learn how to navigate through the difficulties of visiting the person in prison, understanding the prison system, handling their affairs, supporting each other mentally and financially, and discovering available resources.

There are several traditional approaches that may be useful, but they are inefficiently used because of the less-than-optimal use of technology. However, this technology exists, and can enable prisoners and their families to locate and take advantage of resources and support which, in turn, will empower prisoners to stay productive, receive encouragement, seek legal assistance, and, upon release, to reconnect with society.

Statement of the Problem

As the overuse of jail becomes more common, and its growing impact extends to the children, families, and communities outside its bars, people must also manage the financial, economic, and emotional effects (Agtmael, 2017). The government should do more to help the family members of incarcerated people. Prison is tough on inmates, and it can be just as tough for family members. Loneliness, social rejection, and financial strain can weigh you down and make you feel like you’re the one serving time. The incarceration of a loved one can be overwhelming, and most times a person does not know where to turn (Prison Fellowship, 2019). Some people don’t know what to expect after a loved one has been arrested, and how to cope before, during, and after sentencing. Most importantly people don’t know how they can assist their loved one through the incarceration process.

Statement of the Objective

The main objective of this research project is to bring awareness to resources that can be made available to incarcerated individuals and their families, and to provide a system for family members and prisoners to effectively utilize available technology to stay connected and productive, receive encouragement, seek legal assistance, and reconnect to society. The impact of mass incarceration is not limited to those serving time behind bars. While inmates experience the direct effects of confinement, their families live their lives in what Codd (2008) describes as the shadow of the prison. Until recently, research efforts have considered the impact of families interfacing with the criminal justice system. The methodology in this research project will consist of the development of a system to facilitate resources for inmates and their families. In the upcoming sections, we will describe the main stages of implementation and testing and the outcome of facilitating clients through the application process.

II. Background

According to a 2018 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), nearly 2.2 million adults were held in America's prisons and jails at the end of 2016. That means for every 100,000 people residing in the United States, approximately 655 were behind bars. More people are behind bars in America than there are living in major cities such as Philadelphia or Dallas (Drew Kann, 2018).

According to researchers, incarceration is heavily concentrated among men, racial and ethnic minorities, 20- and 30-year old. Among men, the highest rate is for black males aged 20-34; among women, the highest rate is for black females aged 35-39” (STATES, 2008). There are approximately 2.2 million people serving time behind bars in America. While men make up close to 91% of this population, the number of women behind bars is skyrocketing (Camhi, 2018).

Between 1980 and 2016, the number of women incarcerated has increased by more than 700 percent, from 26,378 to 213,722, according to The Sentencing Project (World Atlas, 2018). Women’s incarceration demands more attention because it affects the entire family (Van A.P., 2017). Research consistently shows that women are more likely to enter prison with a history of abuse, trauma, and mental health problems. Women have different physical health needs, and the health systems in prisons, designed for men, often fail to meet their basic health needs (Sawyer, 2018). According to Anderson, women’s incarceration often leaves behind children and can create barriers upon their release.

Women make up 50.8% of the US population and 6.7 % are confined. The percentage of male inmates in federal prisons is 93.3%. The table below breaks down the amount and percentages of males and females in federal, state, and local jails.

Table-1: Incarcerated by Gender in the U.S.

PRISONS	MALE	PERCENTAGE	FEMALE	PERCENTAGE
FEDERAL PRISON	209,700	93.3%	15,300	6.7 %
STATE PRISON	1187,032	90.2%	128,968	9.8 %
LOCAL PRISON	554,730	90.2%	60,270	9.8%

Researchers are agreed that the number of prisoners depends on different factors including living environment, social status, economy, and family structure. The following is a brief discussion on these issues.

Living Environment: Investigations ranked states in terms of the highest incarceration rates. The ranking includes Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama (Simerman, 2018; Collins, 2018).

Drug: In the 1970s, the number of people in prison began to rise. Congress and state legislatures made changes to prison and sentencing laws that have mandated prison time for lesser offenses. They also ensured longer sentences for violent crimes and repeat offenders. President Ronald Reagan coined the phrase “war on drugs.” That “war” included the enactment of mandatory minimum sentences and laws for drug crimes and violent offenses (Duncan, 2017). According to Adler, the “war on drugs,” which was a largely political crusade, helped to trigger the mass incarceration trend of the last 40 years. The three-strikes laws made more than half of states enact third offense mandatory sentences of 25 years or more.

Prison and Economy: The privatization of the prison system generates huge profits for corporations, who then influence political decisions about crime and punishment (Duncan, 2017). The federal and state governments enter into contracts with these groups and their pay is dependent on how many people are currently incarcerated in the facility, so the emphasis is on profit instead of rehabilitation, according to Casey Anderson. Thus, the higher the recidivism rates, or the likelihood that a convicted criminal will re-offend, the more beds they fill and the more money the corporations make. This leads to the mass incarceration trend.

Effects of Incarceration on Families: The impact of mass incarceration is not limited to those serving time behind bars. While inmates experience the direct effects of confinement, their families live their lives in what Van A. P., (2017) describes as the shadow of the prison. Until recently, research efforts have considered the impact of families interfacing with the criminal justice system. Some effects on the family include:

- **Financial Impact:** The financial impact of incarceration on families is well documented. These families experience extreme financial hardship. The financial burden of incarceration is greatest when families try to maintain their relationship with the imprisoned person. The impoverishment of families supporting prisoners has been described as ‘a shadow punishment for the family members.
- **Family and Social Stigma:** The experience of stigmatization among family members of those incarcerated is one of many effects on the family. The stigmatized person is treated as an ‘other’ and is subjected to hostility and/or lack of support. A key characteristic of stigmatization is secrecy, which can lead to further distress. In fact, in many cases, family members of incarcerated individuals are faced with hostile, disapproving social attitudes related to incarceration that can exacerbate the distress of losing a family member to imprisonment.
- **Children:** Parental incarceration serves as a significant risk factor for a host of negative consequences, particularly concerning emotional and behavioral factors, physical care and custody, and contact with the parents. The extent to which a child is affected by parental incarceration depends on several factors. These factors include the age at which separation occurs, the overall health of the family, and the level of disruption caused by the incarceration.
- **Emotional and Behavioral Effects:** The Osborne Association (1993) reports that children with an incarcerated parent experience a wide range of emotional consequences, such as fear, guilt, sadness, anger, anxiety, and loneliness. Also, they may express low self-esteem, depression, and/or engage in social withdrawal. Without intervention, children’s emotional responses can manifest behaviorally, possibly in the form of physical and/or verbal aggression, withdrawal, hypervigilance, or sexualized behavior (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Furthermore, children impacted by parental incarceration frequently develop school-related problems, such as disruptive classroom behavior and/or deterioration in academic performance.
- **Parental Contact:** Without adequate access to the incarcerated parent, children may face a disruption in the parent-child attachment, which can adversely affect the child’s development. Nevertheless, it is estimated that half of all incarcerated parents do not receive any visits from their children, while the other half receive infrequent visits.

III. Methodology

The main objective is to develop a system to manage resources for inmates and their families. This system includes the active elements which are subject of action and reaction during the operation of the system. These elements are classified into three categories: Inmates, Family/Caregivers and Children.

Researchers have identified essential needs for inmates and their families. In order to implement a system to match the client’s needs to available resources, it was important to understand and study their needs. Figure 1 represents the active entities and their needs. This system shows a breakdown of the most essential needs of inmates, children, family members and caregivers.

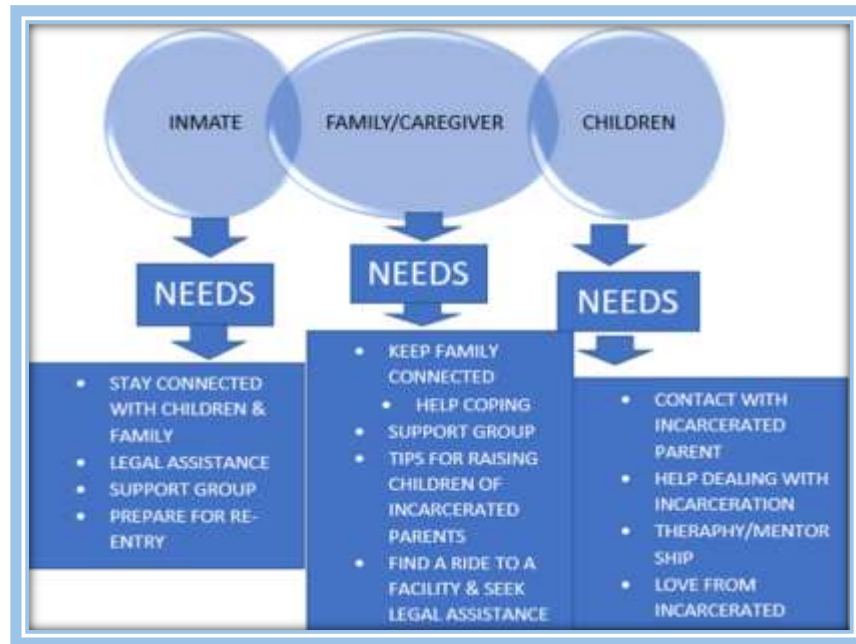


Figure-1: Active Elements Structure

Resources to meet the needs of the client are available. Figure 2 represents the available resources to match the needs of inmates, children and their families.



Figure-2: System Resources

The system for this research project contains needs and resources, and functions required that map the needs and resources for facilitating entities. The system contains a website as an interface to clients. Based on the need of the client, inputs in the system output will be produced. Figure 3 indicates the function for matching resources and the outcome of the systems matched list. Researchers’ alternative work indicated the most essential factors for inmates’ children and their families/caregivers.

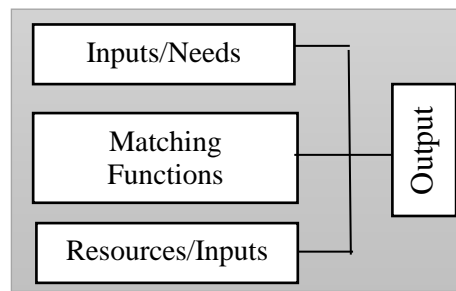


Figure-3: System Functions

The most essential needs for inmates and their families are communications, reducing recidivism, seeking legal assistance, help to deal with incarceration, and mental group sessions. The implementation of the system is concerned with the realization of the required functions to match the needs and resources for the clients. To accomplish this goal, a website was designed containing proper functions that match the needs and resources for clients. The website displays available resources and the clients can express their needs where the website searches for the most appropriate resources to meet their needs.

VI. Implementation & Evaluation

The designed website facilitates family members of prisoners and effectively utilize available technology to stay connected and productive, receive encouragement, seek legal assistance, and reconnect to society.

This section describes the main stages of implementation and the outcome of facilitating clients through the application process. In the design of the website, all the factors that have proven effective and user-oriented were considered. A web hosting service is a type of Internet hosting service that allows individuals and organizations to make their website accessible via the World Wide Web. Blue hosting will provide web hosting for the website. There are three versions of web hosting: Shared, VPS, and Dedicated. The shared version was selected to meet the website's needs. Currently, the domain name of the website is "www.SupportTheBars.com?/org?". The implementation of this project and the design of the website are based on the fundamental elements that were described in the previous section with the emphasis on the needs of the family and available resources.

The website consists of 4 parts/sections. Section 1 represents additional mentoring and therapy resources for children and families. Prisoners' resources are displayed in Section 2. The main resources for children and families are in the third section (Section 3). Figure 4 also consists of a survey that allows the user to provide feedback about the website. The final section (Section 4) displays employment opportunities and quotes to help prisoners stay positive and transition back into society.



Figure 4: System Functions Structure

As indicated, the main function of the website is to provide resources for inmates and their families. Section 1 of this main website includes three columns (cells).



Figure 5: Sections-1 of System Website

When the client clicks on Section-1, Cell-1, he/she will be directed to the Angle Tree Mentoring as indicated by the following link. <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/about/angel-tree/mentoring/#>

Cell-2 includes a video including testimonial interviews with the users of the main website and availability of the facilities.

Cell-3 will link to <https://writeaprisoner.com/> that provides a variety of services including counseling, educational, employment, housing and legal advising.

Although prisoners, caregivers/family and their children, all experience-incarceration, their needs are totally different. Figure 6 shows the type of services including communications, legal assistances, support groups, and preparing for re-entry.



Figure 6: Section-2 of System Website

The next section of the website emphasizes resources for children. Children are a vital piece of this puzzle. The first resources provided for children are ways of helping them deal with incarcerated family members. The section is divided into two cells. The first cell includes a few resources which are essential for the children of incarcerated parents. The second cell focuses on the family caregiving resources. These cells contain resources which provide comfort and emotional stability. However, there are physical, educational, and health needs that require states and federal direct involvement. Ignoring the needs of children will create long term and next generation problems.



Figure 7: Section-3 of the System Website

Survey and Results: The website was evaluated by conducting a survey that is based on two parts. The first part is an online survey listed on the website and two live video recordings received from viewers. Participants were asked if they liked the website and if they found it to be useful or not.

Participants also had the opportunity to provide additional feedback and had the opportunity to provide additional feedback. Web survey is normally the faster way of collecting related data. Based on 150 viewers 145 viewers participated in the survey. Based on the surveys and video footage, 95 % of viewers liked this website and deemed it useful to society.



The image shows a survey form with the following content:

- Check the box that applies:
This website was very helpful.
This website was not helpful.
- Did you like this webpage?
 Yes
 No
- Enter your name
- Do you like this web page. Enter your comment and let me know what you like.
- Please provide additional resources below, if not displayed on the website
- Send Reset

Figure-8: Survey Section

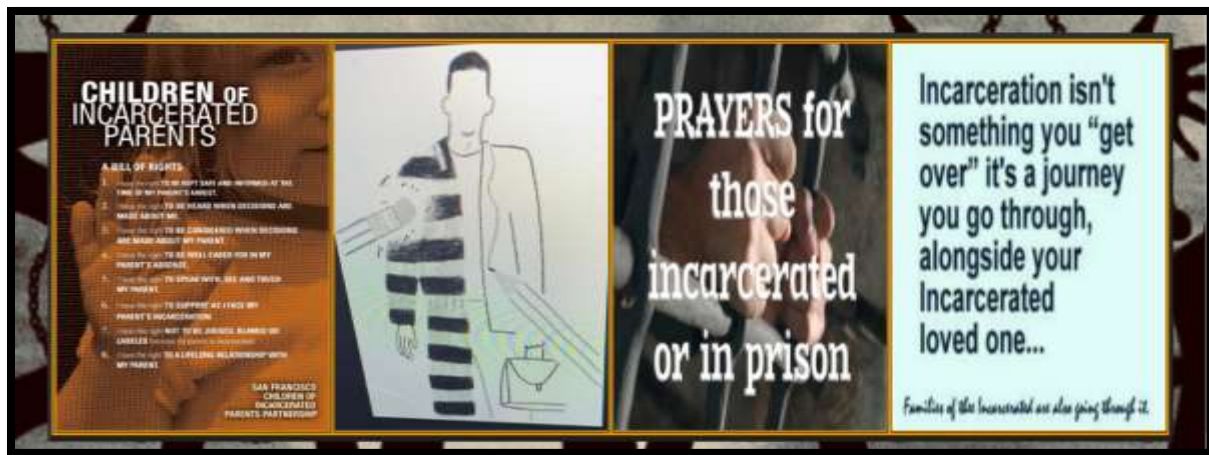


Figure-9: Part of the system operations

V. Conclusions

The overall objective of this research project was to bring awareness to resources that can be made available to incarcerated individuals and their families. An interactive website was created and divided into three categories to meet the needs and match available resources to inmates, family members/caregivers and their children. The website was successful, according to the viewers who participated in designed surveys and a participant who provided positive feedback in a short video clip. More than 95% of the users stated that the website will help many families during their transition. They also stated they loved the website and it was very easy to access and use. Based on feedback from users, the website was deemed useful to society. To achieve a faster response time for clients, Families Doing Time should hire more employees. Families Doing Time will help minimize the effects on incarcerated individuals and their families as it continues to grow in the future. The project was implemented using HTML and will be maintained by Families Doing Time. In the design of the website we considered all the factors that have been proved to be effective and user oriented.

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