

**OKLAHOMA
COMMISSION ON
CHILDREN AND
YOUTH**

2024 | Annual Report

**Oklahoma Mentoring Children
of Incarcerated Parents Program**



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Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative

The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY) is committed to enhancing the well-being of children with incarcerated parents (CIP) and supporting their families and caregivers. By collaborating with state stakeholders, OCCY ensures comprehensive planning and service coordination to address the unique needs of these families. To foster long-term systemic change, OCCY prioritizes the involvement of individuals with lived experience of CIP. Key initiatives within the CIP partnership program include coordinating a statewide advisory committee, creating educational toolkits, conducting program evaluations, providing professional development opportunities, promoting fatherhood initiatives, and funding the Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program.

Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program

In accordance with Title 10A § 2-10-101 and Title 10A § 2-10-102, OCCY is charged with annually issuing a request for proposal to establish one-to-one mentoring for children whose parents are incarcerated and/or youth who are at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Entities eligible to apply to administer the program are limited to non-profit organizations. In accordance with Title 10 § A2-10-103, OCCY is required to publish an annual report describing the Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program and its effectiveness.

OCCY awarded Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma (BBBSOK) \$80,000 to provide one-to-one mentoring to children of incarcerated parents for the State Fiscal Year 2024 (SFY 2024). The OCCY award allowed BBBSOK to provide (or match) 80 children with individual adult mentors committed to meeting with each child consistently and regularly for at least one year. Per statute, services are delivered at a cost no greater than \$1,500 per mentor-mentee match.

OCCY has supported BBBSOK since SFY 2015. Since then, BBBSOK has served more than 4,700 matches. In the last 9 years, 453 matches have been supported by the OCCY. These mentors have changed the trajectory of those children's lives.

The Challenge

Due to Oklahoma's persistently high incarceration rate—the third highest of any democracy—children in this state suffer significant negative consequences.

Oklahoma's incarceration rate is nearly one-third higher than the national average¹, exacerbating these challenges. These consequences manifest in various ways, affecting children emotionally, academically, and socially, all evident in the classroom. Children with incarcerated parents often experience stigma and shame, leading to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

Many of these children live in single-parent households or with extended family members. They may face financial strain, lack academic support, and have limited access to educational resources such as tutoring or extracurricular activities. Additionally, they often struggle to establish and maintain relationships with peers, further hindering their social development.

Children with incarcerated parents often live in single-parent households or with other family members. They may feel the financial strain surrounding the family, lack the support needed in their schoolwork, or have no access to educational resources like tutoring or extracurricular activities. They may face difficulties establishing and maintaining peer relationships, further impacting their social development.

This lack of support can impede a child's ability to focus and engage in learning. Statistically, children with imprisoned parents face a higher risk of delinquency, dropping out of school, and developing mental health issues.² Research has found that kids with incarcerated parents are more likely than their peers to be placed in special education, be held back in school, receive poor evaluations from teachers, demonstrate increased delinquency, and drop out of school.³

Lacking the ability to effectively communicate their feelings, children with incarcerated parents can

present in the classroom as aggressive, defiant, or overly impulsive, disrupting the learning environment for other children and developing a negative reputation with teachers and administrators. Poor educational attainment further limits their future career opportunities, increasing the possibility that they will become involved with the criminal justice system as adults. Today, nearly one out of every 10 Oklahoma children have experienced parental incarceration during their childhood.⁴ Without positive intervention, many of these children will be incarcerated in the future.

Most of the children served by BBBSOK have a history of traumatic experiences in the home, such as poverty, single parenthood, or guardians who are unprepared for the rigors of parenting. Through no fault of the child, these problems can have long-lasting and detrimental impacts on his or her future.

Support for these families includes social services, counseling, and mentorship programs. By far, the cheapest and most easily facilitated program to profoundly impact children is mentorship. Mentors share knowledge, experience, and insights, often opening doors for hope and individual accomplishment. This personalized guidance can directly offset social development problems, improve communication skills, and decrease feelings of shame. Mentors also foster feelings of acceptance, resiliency, and adaptability – giving a child the ability to better cope with problems.

Through a one-to-one mentoring relationship, a strong relationship with a child can support the critical social and emotional development needed to help build resilience in that child while promoting mental health and well-being.

BBBSOK strives to promote positive changes in scholastic confidence and competence, social acceptance and peer relations, the avoidance of delinquency, and improved parental relationships by matching youth aged 6 to 18 years (Littles)

¹Prison Policy Initiative. States of Incarceration: States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2024.html>

²Society for Research in Child Development. A Developmental Perspective on Children With Incarcerated Parents. Retrieved from <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cdep.12392>

³The Hechinger Report. Opinion: The Invisible Toll of Mass Incarceration on Childhood Development. Retrieved from <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-sentenced-at-birth-the-invisible-toll-of-mass-incarceration-on-childhood-development/>

⁴Annie E. Casey Foundation. Children who had a parent who was ever incarcerated: KIDS COUNT Data Center. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/9688-children-who-had-a-parent-who-was-ever-incarcerated?loc=38&loct=2#detailed/2/38/false/2043,1769,1696,1648,1603/any/18927,18928>

with volunteer adult mentors (Bigs). Having an adult mentor can buffer the adverse effects of single-parent homes, traumatic experiences, and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

BBBSOK's monitored one-on-one relationships have proven repeatedly to be a successful deterrent to poor choices, intergenerational incarceration, and dropping out of school. A recent study on the long-term outcomes of BBBS mentoring revealed that

Littles are 10% more likely than their un-mentored peers to attend college or trade school after graduating high school. They also experience 20% higher income between the ages of 20 and 25, with mentoring helping to close two-thirds of the socio-economic gap.⁵ The seemingly small but intentional actions our mentors take today will lead to significant advancements in economic mobility for Littles in the future.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Other dysfunctions in the home can generate traumas for a child, such as food insecurity, divorce or separation, physical abuse, addiction, parental incarceration, and emotional neglect. These Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) change the architecture of the child's brain, which can affect their decision-making, schoolwork, and future health outcomes. ACEs are linked to risky behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential, and early death.

ACEs are categorized into three groups: abuse (emotional, physical, and sexual), neglect (emotional and physical), and household challenges (incarcerated parent, mother treated violently, substance abuse or mental illness in the household, and parental separation or divorce). Exposure to ACEs can cause prolonged toxic stress, which can lead to a higher risk of learning and behavioral issues, obesity, heart disease, alcoholism, and drug use.⁶

The percentage of Oklahoma children impacted by ACEs is higher than the national average, with nearly one in five Oklahoma children under 17 saying "yes" to at least two of the questions on the test shown here. All children in the BBBSOK program whom OCCY funds support answered "yes" to question number five.

Take the ACE Test

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
4. Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
5. Did a household member go to prison?
6. Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
7. Were your parents ever separated or divorced, or did you lose a parent due to death or abandonment?
8. Was a mother or stepmother: Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
9. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
10. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?

⁵Bell, A., & Petkova, N. (2024). The Long-Term Impacts of Mentors: Evidence from Experimental and Administrative Data. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4868302>

⁶American Academy of Pediatrics. Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Lifelong Consequences of Trauma. (2014) Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nccped.org/resource/collection/69DEAA33-A258-493B-A63F-E0BFAB6BD2CB/ttb_aces_consequences.pdf

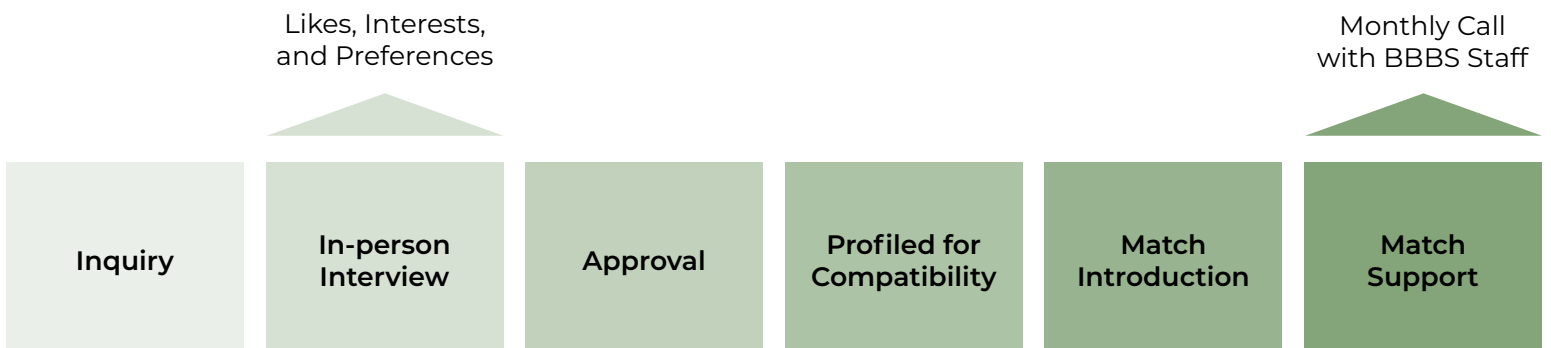
Big Brothers Big Sisters Mission

The mission of BBBSOK is to create and support one-to-one mentoring relationships that ignite the power and promise of youth. The goal of BBBS has remained the same for over a century – to match one caring, stable, and positive adult role model with one at-risk or high-risk child. Matches are based on shared interests, personalities, child needs, and volunteer abilities. BBBSOK requires at least one year of involvement in the program. BBBSOK’s program offers children one of the most significant protective forces in their development: a nurturing adult who cares enough to build a relationship with them, encouraging trust and resilience.

What BBBSOK Match Costs Cover

- in-person or video interviews with the volunteer, child, and their parent/guardian
- extensive background check for volunteers and collection of references
- staff salary for client assessments, match profiling, match introduction, and monthly match support conversations

How a Match is Made at BBBSOK



OCCY Funding Impact on BBBSOK

Funding from OCCY has allowed BBBSOK staff to recruit dedicated volunteer mentors, thoroughly vet them to ensure all child safety standards are met and match these mentors with children of incarcerated parents. BBBSOK's professionally trained specialists provide support from the start and maintain the integrity of the match by offering ideas and outside resources to the Big and the parent/guardian. This support is key to the longevity of the match and helps the friendship to grow into a lasting, fruitful relationship. BBBSOK asks Bigs to commit one year to the program. Most matches last well beyond that year.



Meet Real Oklahomans

Little Brother Kevin faced many challenges in his early years and continues to work to overcome several struggles today. When Kevin was growing up, he was emotionally abused by his father and was exposed to the domestic violence of his mother. Kevin's father has since gone to prison, and all contact has been severed. With no other male role model, Kevin's mom, Amy, reached out to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma to find Kevin a Big Brother.

Kevin is on the Autism spectrum, has ADHD, and has trouble controlling his temper. Amy hoped a Big Brother could help Kevin learn to manage his emotions, become more social, and broaden his horizons. BBBSOK found the perfect mentor for Kevin in Big Brother Thomas. With his own children grown and out of the house, Thomas was looking for an opportunity to give back to his community and positively impact a child in need.

From their first outing, Thomas was dedicated to building trust with Kevin. The pair began meeting frequently, and their outings quickly became the highlight of Kevin's week. Since being matched with his Big Brother, Kevin has grown emotionally, is no longer isolating himself at home, and is developing new skills.

About once a month, Thomas takes Kevin to the grocery store with a modest budget to shop for

the family. Kevin has learned the importance of household contribution, meal planning, and financial responsibility through these seemingly simple outings. Now that Kevin is 16, Thomas has introduced a new activity in their rotation. The two have started golfing so Kevin can practice driving the golf cart and get more comfortable behind the wheel in a low-stakes environment.

Amy is pleased with the development of the relationship and takes great comfort in knowing that her son has a caring adult with his best interests at heart. Kevin is completing school virtually, which has been challenging for both of them. As Amy searches for alternative schooling options, Thomas and their program specialist provide resources and letters of support to assist her.

Kevin and Thomas are a prime example of how Big Brothers Big Sisters matches are tailored to each Little. This program is not a one-size-fits-all mentoring project. Thomas has made a life-changing impact on his Little Brother by meeting Kevin where he is.

Kevin, Amy, and Thomas are real people who live in Oklahoma, though their names have been changed for anonymity. Similar inspiring and life-altering stories play out across our state every day because of the support of Bigs like Thomas and consistent funders like OCCY.

Outcome Data for OCCY-Funded Matches

Through connections with their Bigs, Littles overcome shyness and self-doubt, build trusting relationships with peers, and improve their academic performance. BBBSOK utilizes instruments that Big Brothers Big Sisters of America developed to monitor program effectiveness. These include surveys that monitor the strength of the relationship between the Big and Little, measuring outcomes like connectedness, safety, the importance of the match relationship, and the child's feelings about his or her Big. Other performance outcomes and measurement tools are administered in a pre-test/post-test format. They are given at the initial match introduction and annually at the anniversary of the

match. These tools work as a direct measurement of academics, relationships, and risky behavior. Staff assess the child's positive outcomes through the survey responses.

In addition to these annual evaluation tools, BBBSOK program specialists collect anecdotal data from the Big, Little, and parent/guardian through regularly scheduled match support conversations (performed monthly for matches that have been together for under a year and quarterly for matches that have been together for over a year). BBBSOK is trained to evaluate and monitor these conversations to assist in ways that lead to the longevity of the match.

SFY 2024 Outcome Data Survey Results for New and Existing OCCY-Funded Matches

Littles reported the following outcomes:

Academic Outcomes

- 96% Improved their educational expectations
- 79% Improved their academic performance
- 77% Improved their goal-setting skills

Littles indicated high educational aspirations; their academic performance and goal-setting skills have remained steady or improved since being matched.

Behavior Outcomes

- 97% Avoided contact with the police or juvenile justice system
- 91% Avoided substance use
- 89% Avoided disciplinary action at school

Littles said that they avoided involvement with the police, substance use, and disciplinary action at school.

Strength of Relationship Outcomes

- 97% Say their relationship with their Big is important to them
- 94% Feel close to their Big
- 94% Say their Big helps them solve problems

The outcomes above directly result from the strong relationships built between Bigs and Littles. Littles say their relationship with their Big is important to them, feel close to their Big, and say that their Big has good ideas about how to solve problems.



OCCY-funded BBBSOK Match Lengths

Since 2015, OCCY has funded 453 one-to-one youth mentorships. BBBSOK is still supporting matches from this very first grant. The longest OCCY-funded match has been together for more than seven years. A closed match does not equal a failed match. A

match may close because the Little ages out of the program or the Big moves out of the area. Often, these relationships continue in some way that positively impacts the Little.

Since 2015, the Average Match Length Has Been 19 Months

- 62% of the matches made it beyond their one-year match anniversary
- 25% of the matches made it to their two-year match anniversary
- 58% of the matches were closed either because the Little graduated from high school, aged out of the program at 18, or for another reason outside the control of BBBSOK, such as a party moving out of the such as the Big or Little moving out of the service area.

FY 2024 OCCY-Funded BBBSOK Match Demographics

Bigs

- Male 49%
- Female 51%

Littles

- Male: 49%
- Female: 51%

Race / Ethnicity

- American Indian: 4%
- Asian: 8%
- Black: 16%
- Hispanic: 15%
- White: 73%
- Other: 1%

Race / Ethnicity

- American Indian: 6%
- Asian: 3%
- Black: 39%
- Hispanic: 11%
- White: 49%
- Other: 6%

Age

- 19-25: 49%
- 26-30: 19%
- 31-40: 20%
- 41-50: 6%
- 51-60: 1%
- 61+: 5%

Age

- 6-10: 33%
- 11-13: 40%
- 14-18: 27%

Counties Supported by OCCY Funds

- Canadian: 1%
- Cleveland: 31%
- Oklahoma: 21%
- Payne: 13%
- Tulsa: 29%
- Washington: 5%

We Have More Work to Do

In 1904, the original mentoring model for BBBS was founded in New York City with the hopes of reducing the number of children interacting negatively with the judicial system. Today, youth living in compromised situations need help understanding the implications of poor decisions, building their self-esteem, and staying on track with their education. Many refinements and generations later, BBBSOK continues to seek innovative ways to serve the

Oklahoma children who need it most. **At this time, over 120 children with incarcerated parents are waiting to be matched with a willing volunteer.** Funding from OCCY will enable BBBSOK to continue positively impacting hundreds of lives. It will also enable Oklahoma's children to become productive workforce members, parents, volunteers, and community leaders.

The Journey Ahead

OCCY remains dedicated to supporting and strengthening Oklahoma's families and communities by addressing the profound impact of incarceration on children and families. Through innovative public and private partnerships, OCCY raises awareness and advocates for policies that foster healing, hope, and resilience. By amplifying the voices of parents and individuals with lived experiences, OCCY ensures that solutions are compassionate and effective.

Moving forward, OCCY will continue its commitment to expanding mentoring programs statewide,

ensuring that children of incarcerated parents receive the guidance, support, and resources they need to succeed. Increasing funding for the Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program is a critical step toward breaking the cycle of incarceration and creating brighter futures for these vulnerable children.

Now is the time to act. Together, we can build a stronger, more supportive Oklahoma where every child and family can thrive.

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