



2025 | Annual Report Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program



**OKLAHOMA
COMMISSION ON
CHILDREN AND
YOUTH**

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Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative

The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY) continues to advance coordinated, statewide efforts to support children of incarcerated parents and the families and caregivers who care for them. Through cross-agency collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and alignment of public and private partners, OCCY works to strengthen awareness, improve service coordination, and expand protective supports for children impacted by parental incarceration. Central to this work are lived experience, data-informed planning, and community partnerships. Key components of OCCY's Children of Incarcerated Parents initiatives include statewide advisory coordination, resource and toolkit development, partner education, program evaluation, professional development, and targeted mentoring investments through 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 issuing a request for proposals every three years to establish one-to-one mentoring for children whose parents are incarcerated and/or youth 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 State Fiscal Year 2025 (SFY 2025). The OCCY award allowed BBBSOK to provide (or match) 89 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 Oklahoma's SFY 2015. Since then, BBBSOK has served more than 5,325 matches. In the last 10 years, 493 matches have been supported by OCCY. These mentors have changed the trajectory of those children's lives.

The Challenge

Not only does the United States continue to have the highest incarceration rate of any other democracy in the world, **but Oklahoma’s incarceration rate is nearly one-third higher than the national average.**¹

Because of that statistic alone, children in this state suffer significant negative consequences in their young lives and far into their futures. Manifesting in a variety of ways, these consequences affect a child emotionally, academically, and socially – all of which show up in the classroom. When children experience the stigma and shame of having a parent in prison, they often struggle with feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, high anxiety, and depression. These challenges can lead to behavioral issues, fewer peer connections, strained relationships with teachers, and declining academic performance.

Children with incarcerated parents often live in single-parent households or with other family members. They may feel financial strain within the family, lack the support needed for their schoolwork, or have little or no access to educational resources such as tutoring or extracurricular activities. They may face difficulties in 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 an imprisoned parent have an increased risk of delinquency, dropping out of school, and 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 has 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. Despite the child’s lack of fault, these problems can have long-lasting, 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. When compared to unmentored youth, Littles are 46% less likely to begin using drugs, 52% less likely to skip school, and 33% less likely to become violent.⁵

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

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

² Society 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>

³ The 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/#:~:text=A%20diverse%20body%20of%20research,increased%20delinquency%20and%20drop%20out.>

⁴ Annie 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>

⁵ Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. A Future Built on Mentorship: Why Mentoring is the Essential Infrastructure our Future Needs Now. Retrieved at: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnbpcapjcgiclfndmkaj/https://live-new-bbbsa.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/A-Future-Built-on-Mentorship.pdf>

⁶ Bell, A., & Petkova, N. (2024). The Long-Term Impacts of Mentors: Evidence from Experimental and Administrative Data https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4868302

economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

BBBSOK's monitored one-on-one relationships have consistently proven to serve as 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 20% more likely than their un-mentored

peers to attend post-secondary education or trade school after graduating from high school. They also experience 15% higher income between the ages of 20 and 25, with mentoring helping to close two-thirds of the socio-economic gap.⁶ 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) alter the architecture of the child's brain, which can affect decision-making, school performance, 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.⁷

The percentage of Oklahoma children affected by ACEs is higher than the national average, with nearly one in five Oklahoma children under 17 answering "yes" to at least two of the questions. All children in the BBBSOK program who received OCCY funding answered "yes" to question number five.

⁷American Academy of Pediatrics. Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Lifelong Consequences of Trauma. (2014) Retrieved from https://www.aap.org/en-us/documents/ttb_aces_consequences.pdf

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?

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 checks 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





Photo description: A Big mentor teaches a Little how to play a guitar, with the Big demonstrating hand placement while the Little holds the instrument.



Photo description: A Little in a football uniform holds a football and smiles at the Big who is also wearing a football uniform.

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 professionally trained specialists provide support from the start, maintaining 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 relationship grow into a lasting, fruitful one. Most matches last well beyond that year.

Meet Real Oklahomans

Bigs often serve as one of the only stabilizing forces in their Little's lives, showing up through challenges and hurdles, as well as wins and accomplishments. Take, for instance, Little Brother Eric and Big Brother Brady.

By age nine, Little Eric had already experienced many traumas that affected his well-being and self-confidence. When he joined our program, he lived with his grandparents, had no contact with his incarcerated father, and his mother was living in a halfway house recovering from substance abuse. During this time, Eric witnessed his grandfather's decline and death from cancer, compounding his sense of loss and instability.

Big Brother Brady is a strong match for Eric, having grown up with a parent who struggled with sobriety. This shared experience allowed Brady to relate to Eric in a meaningful and authentic way.

Over time, Brady became a constant source of support and comfort as Eric navigated both setbacks and progress. Eric has since reunited with his mother and his siblings, a positive change that still brought

emotional challenges. Eric is definitely happy, but the transition has been difficult.

More recently, Eric was diagnosed with autism, opening the door to new tools and coping strategies for Eric, his family, and his Big Brother. With this new understanding, Brady has been able to support Eric's better communication, confidence, and ability to try new things.

Having a Big Brother has improved Eric's self-esteem and given him a trusted support system that helps him face once-overwhelming situations. Eric and Brady recently celebrated their second match anniversary and are excited to see what new adventures are in store for year three!

Eric and Brady 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 Brady 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 uses instruments developed by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America to monitor program effectiveness. These include surveys that monitor the strength of the relationship between the Big and Little, measuring outcomes such as connectedness, safety, the importance of the match relationship, and the child's feelings toward 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 at the match's anniversary. These tools provide direct

measures of academics, relationships, and risky behavior. Staff assesses 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.

Outcome Data Survey Results for OCCY-Funded Matches

Littles reported the following outcomes:

Academic Outcomes

- 92% improved their educational expectations
- 84% improved their goal-setting skills
- 80% improved their academic performance

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

Behavior Outcomes

- 100% avoided contact with the police or juvenile justice system
- 94% avoided disciplinary action at school
- 92% avoided substance use

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
- 92% 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 their Big has good ideas for solving problems.



Photo description: A Big and a Little stand in a park. The Big points into the distance, and the Little looks in the same direction.

OCCY-funded BBBSOK Match Lengths

Since 2015, OCCY has funded 493 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 because the Big moves out of the area. Often, these relationships continue in ways that positively impact the Little.

Driving Measurable Success

BBBS Littles Are

20%

More Likely to Enroll in College

Being a BBBS Little Closes

2/3

of the Economic Gap

BBBS Littles Earn

15%

More Over their Lifetime

FY 2025 OCCY-Funded BBBSOK Match Demographics

Bigs

- Male 45%
- Female 55%

Little's

- Male: 45%
- Female: 55%

Race / Ethnicity

- American Indian: 4%
- Asian: 6%
- Black: 20%
- Hispanic: 16%
- White: 68%
- Other: 1%

Race / Ethnicity

- American Indian: 12%
- Asian: 0%
- Black: 45%
- Hispanic: 15%
- White: 44%
- Other: 4%

Age

- 19-25: 39%
- 26-30: 21%
- 31-40: 25%
- 41-50: 7%
- 51-60: 3%
- 61+: 5%

Age

- 6-10: 37%
- 11-13: 33%
- 14-18: 30%

Counties Supported by OCCY Funds

- Cleveland: 21%
- Oklahoma: 35%
- Payne: 9%
- Tulsa: 32%
- Washington: 3%

We Have More Work to Do

In 1904, the original mentoring model for BBBS was founded in New York City to reduce the number of children who were 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 140 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 members of the workforce, parents, volunteers, and community leaders.

The Journey Ahead

OCCY remains committed to strengthening coordinated, evidence-informed supports for children and families impacted by parental incarceration. Through partnership development, program oversight, stakeholder engagement, and targeted investments such as the Oklahoma Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program, OCCY continues to advance strategies that promote stability, connection, and positive youth outcomes. OCCY will continue to monitor program performance, support cross-system collaboration, and elevate

effective practices that demonstrate measurable benefit to children and families. Sustained partnership, responsible resource allocation, and continued stakeholder engagement remain essential to this work. OCCY appreciates the continued attention and support of state leadership in advancing improved outcomes for Oklahoma's children.

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