



# Amachi

PITTSBURGH

Hands of Faith in Action

## What We've Learned from the Children

A Publication of Amachi Pittsburgh by


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“While we try to teach  
our children all about life,  
our children teach us what  
life is all about.”

~ Angela Schwindt

**Ronnell Anderson** is a junior at Slippery Rock University pursuing an English Professional Writing degree. Ronnell's interest in Amachi began during her senior year in high school. Since then she has been sharing her personal story as an Amachi Ambassador.

**Tirrell Harris** joined Amachi Pittsburgh at 13 when he was matched with a mentor. He is now an Accounting major in his second year at Carlow University. He is an Amachi Ambassador helping other children tell their own stories.

**Anna E. Hollis**, Amachi Pittsburgh Executive Director, is herself an Amachi mentor. She is passionately committed to Amachi's mission: “To empower young minds to overcome the challenges of parental incarceration.” She created the Amachi Ambassadors project to ensure young people's voices could be heard.

**Michelle L. McMurray** is the President and CEO of Mental Health America Allegheny County. She led the Amachi Pittsburgh focus groups on which this report is based.

**Timothy Morrison** joined Ronnell and Tirrell in summarizing the results of the Amachi focus groups during his time as a Coro Fellow and intern at the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation. He is now in graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley.

# Foreword

By Anna E. Hollis, Executive Director, Amachi Pittsburgh

Who better to teach us about life as a child of an incarcerated parent than the children themselves?

Recognizing the lack of understanding and consideration for this very special group of young people, it became evident to me that their stories needed to be told and their voices needed to be heard. Hundreds of home visits, conversations, and interactions with children and families revealed to Amachi Pittsburgh staff and mentors that the knowledge and understanding lacking in the community lay right within the very youth we were serving. They've been on the receiving end of our love and support but have much more to give than any of us could imagine.

This epiphany for us was common knowledge for the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, however. It was through Claire Walker's undying faith and confidence in our children and the generous support of this foundation that Amachi Pittsburgh was able to embark upon a special project, *Amachi Ambassadors*, designed to give voice to children of *promise*, enabling them to tap into their inner strength through the power of storytelling, to recognize their value, and to allow us to get a glimpse of their complex world and amazing spirits.

On we went, tracking down 21 incredibly courageous teenagers and listening to their stories one by one over five focus groups. I was awestruck. Each story was unique and full of challenges we didn't expect to hear. Yet all bore out the same truth that, through no fault of their own, children carry a tremendous burden of shame and feeling of abandonment, are left in a state of confusion, and are deeply impacted by the absence of opportunities to express themselves, gain understanding, and bring closure to what has been a most devastating experience in life. For some, this was the first opportunity to open up and share their feelings. And did they share! We found ourselves running out of time each session. I particularly remember lights being turned off as we were wrapping up one session at a local library. And to my surprise, many of the young men were even more open and expressive than the young ladies.

What struck me is how a sense of camaraderie among young people meeting for the first time instantly formed. Their guards came down almost immediately. A few knew each other from school or the community but didn't know they shared similar circumstances. I was moved by their amazing ability to find ways to cope in the absence of adequate support. I was moved by their hope for the future, by their

desire to become a "better man," a "better father," a successful woman, and by their desire to reach back and help younger children.

The maturity they demonstrated at such an early age was remarkable. Nearly every child made a conscious decision to hold one's peace and figure out a way to make sense of the madness rather than raising such a sensitive topic of discussion with the custodial parent because they believed it would be too upsetting for her (usually mom). That level of sensitivity and self-sacrifice on the part of children probably touched me more than anything else during our sessions. It was interesting how the boys at such a young age took on a sense of responsibility for helping to make ends meet. Girls expressed a desire to talk with younger children and help them sort through these difficulties, to nurture them. In a day and time when the younger generation is thought to be very self-serving, growing up with a sense of entitlement, these young people demonstrated incredible concern for their siblings and parents — even the incarcerated parents.

I found myself wondering whether some boys in our community experience challenges with authority figures because they become somewhat of an authority — the "man of the house" — at such a young age. I wondered



## Foreword *continued*

whether behavioral problems witnessed in schools are really the result of anger, resentment, and frustration at being robbed of a normal, happy childhood. Are many of the young girls in our community on a perpetual search for the love, affection, and attention fathers are to provide, but finding a counterfeit instead or even finding true love but in the person of her newborn child? What more can we learn if we delve a little deeper into their world?

It was impossible to capture the totality of what we have learned in a single report but we are proud to present the most salient messages in our first publication, "What We've Learned from the Children." What an honor and privilege it was to sit in the company of such courageous young people and to be entrusted with their open hearts. It was an honor and privilege to sit alongside

our esteemed facilitator, Michelle McMurray, whose warmth enabled each youth to communicate with ease, and whose skills and expertise guided focused discussions. Michelle tirelessly combed through hours and hours of transcripts to identify prominent themes and produce our report. A follow-up review of the transcripts and subsequent contributions to the final version were made by Tim Morrison, PCGF intern, and most importantly, Amachi Ambassadors Ronnell Anderson and Tirrell Harris, two very bright college students who both have experienced parental incarceration. Tirrell also contributed by participating in one of the focus groups.

As clear as each of the Amachi Ambassador's voice is the truth that the strength of Amachi Pittsburgh is in the very young people we serve. Our power is in their stories. And our mission and vision will be

realized through our ability as a community to raise them up. The potential to shift a paradigm, dispel myths and stigmas, confirm the value of children of promise, contribute to understanding among those who touch their lives — their own parents, teachers, law enforcement officers, court officials, social workers, health care providers — and, yes, to inform policies that directly impact their lives are all possible and lie in their ability to emerge as champions of their own cause. It is our hope that this report not only serves to empower our children but also serves as a launching pad for children of promise to play a key role in continuing the great work of Amachi Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation.

Very Sincerely,



# What We've Learned from the Children

In the fall of 2010, Amachi Pittsburgh, supported by funding from the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, undertook a project to understand better the feelings, ideas, and experiences of children of incarcerated parents. We conducted a series of focus groups with youth, giving them the opportunity to tell their own stories and for us to find out more about their needs.

National estimates suggest that over two million children have at least one parent serving a sentence in a state or federal correctional facility. Locally, in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, there are an estimated 8,500 children with an incarcerated parent. Despite their growing numbers and information gathered about the risks and challenges they face — emotional, social, and economic — little is known about the personal experiences of children of incarcerated parents as seen through their eyes. Most of the data collected to date has been from the perspective of the parents, caregivers, service providers, researchers, and other professionals. As a result, childrens' voices are

absent in the formation of policies, procedures, and programs that directly impact their lives.

Through this project, we hope to make a contribution to the growing body of knowledge about the problems experienced by children of incarcerated parents and potential solutions to address them. This report is the result of our belief that these children hold immense promise and should have a voice in decisions about the services and policies that shape their lives.

Twenty-one youth ages 11 to 17 participated in five focus group discussions. All of the youth were African American or bi-racial and the majority were part of the Amachi Pittsburgh program. These youth provided a wealth of information about their experiences. As we expected, each young person told a unique story. However, certain themes did arise out of the focus group discussions. The following sections are a summary of the most salient findings within each of the five themes that were identified.

## THEME 1 Families Struggle to Communicate

Youth frequently cited breakdowns in communication within their family units after parents' incarceration as having a significant impact on their ability to deal with their parents' absence. Youth learned about their parents' incarceration in different ways. It was most common, however, for the truth to be concealed until many years had passed or to receive only

superficial information. In Donna's case, she was 5 when her dad was incarcerated but she didn't find out until much later: "[My mom] used to say that my dad was away at work. Yeah, and for Christmas, she would put his name on presents instead of hers, and then finally, I guess one year, we were 10, she just told us."

The youth felt that hiding the truth from children actually makes things worse. Sydney explained, "I think if some kids were told about the

issue a lot younger or when it actually happens and ways to prevent the feelings and help and support...that would help people better understand instead of automatically blaming it on themselves." Stories like this illustrate what is described in the literature as the "conspiracy of silence," whereby it is believed to be better to shield children from the truth of their parents' incarceration. With self-imposed silence, entire families may be unable to express a desire for certain social supports

and they may feel isolated, not knowing the extent to which their experiences are shared by others. It is important to note here that, after learning of their parents' incarceration, the youth also demonstrated sensitivity to the impact of parents' absence on their caregivers, which led to avoidance of asking questions or initiating discussion to spare the caregivers pain or anger.

Additionally, while some youth had regular communication with their incarcerated parents, it was more likely for communication to be infrequent. And though it appeared to help the children's relationships with their parents, it did not guarantee that relationships would develop or be maintained. Other barriers intervened, like embarrassment or negative feelings about their parents or poor relationships between incarcerated parents and caregivers. Boys were more likely to express indifference about having relationships with their fathers.

The things that helped children develop relationships were effort, sincerity, and consistency on the part of their parents. Kevin told us, "He came back and I was like, 'Alright, why are you here?'...I was planning on being mad and not talking to him, because I wanted him to feel guilty but he really was sincere." Keisha suggested, "[The incarcerated parent should] not let the kids sit there and wonder what happened and why is this happening to my dad or my mom...but just tell them, 'Sweetie, the reason why I'm in jail is because of this, and don't worry. I still love you.'"

## THEME 2 Youth Experience Major Changes After Parental Incarceration

Children experience a diverse degree of life changes after the incarceration of a parent. Most frequently acknowledged changes are physical residence and family structure, behavior, and financial condition.

As a result of losing a parent, a family must shift from a double- to a single-income household, and when the incarcerated parent was the sole provider, the family must rely on public assistance. Often this results in relocation or change in caregivers. A child may make multiple moves before he or she is finally placed with a permanent caregiver. Ashley explained that after the incarceration of her father, "They took us to CYF, and we were with our uncle first [but] they didn't let him take us because he was on 99 years of probation. So then we moved with our Uncle Jimmy...and then my grandma took us in." Furthermore, moves often coincide with changes in school, which may impact academic performance and attendance as well as present new and challenging environments when children are already under great stress.

Youth also acknowledged changes in their behavior after the incarceration of their parents. Michael explained, "My dad was arrested when I was about 8... I started acting out in school, fighting my siblings and fighting at school." And Tia talked about her lack of trust of others saying, "I just don't like getting too attached to people. And then if I do get close to somebody, I'll try to ease out... I wonder why they're around...I try to leave before they leave."

Lastly, several of the focus group participants observed that their caregivers experienced financial hardship after losing the support of the incarcerated parents. "Sometimes she [my mom] will cry," said Justin, "because it would be hard for her to like pay the bills or something." Justin went on to describe the increased demands on his contribution to the family, adding, "I got a job to help out my mom, because I know it's tough on a woman, especially with money, when one person has to take care of three people...I even buy my sister some things to take a load off of her." Interestingly, the girls were much less likely to describe family financial pressures or personal expectations to help provide for their families.

## THEME 3 Support is Critical

The most important need identified by both the boys and girls was support. Most of the youth felt that having someone with whom they could share their thoughts and feelings was vital to coping with their parents' incarceration. Some youth described a network of family that provides support. In some circumstances, the custodial parents are their primary sources of support. However, in most situations, the incarcerated parents and at-home caregivers alone have been unable to adequately support their children. For these youth, siblings and other family members become the people they depend on for support. Tia conveyed the importance of family this way: "She's my cousin, but I call her my sister, because we've been there all through our life...So I tell her everything. She tells me everything. Like we won't tell anybody. It's like we have it locked inside our heart, and only we have the keys to it." Boys commonly identified male

role models or father figures who provided guidance to them. As Henry said, “I got over [having an incarcerated parent] because I had people in my life that acted like older brothers.” Emmanuel echoed this statement stating, “[My older brother] always taught me right from wrong growing up.”

### **Mentorship**

Mentors often filled the void left by the incarcerated parents’ absence or lack of support from caregivers. A few of the benefits of this relationship noted by youth were having people to spend time with, talk to about feelings, and attend special events. One young man recounted the impact of his mentor on his life with the following example: “I haven’t known [my mentor] as long as some of the others in my life, but he’s made the biggest impact on me. He took me to my first football game, my first basketball game. My grandad or anybody’s never done anything like that for me.” The youth also identified qualities of a good mentor including the ability to relate, a positive lifestyle, and a genuine desire to spend time with them — the platform on which the mentor-mentee relationship is built. Henry summed it up this way: “A good mentor is someone that just naturally wants to spend time with you.”

When the mentorship experience was positive, it encouraged positive changes in the youth. Sydney said, “I’m willing to do more things...we go ice skating a lot now.” Tiffany revealed, “I do work a lot harder now [at school].” Tia acknowledged, “[My mentor] helps me trust people and not want to pull away” — validating what has been found in the academic literature: Mentor programs refine

or repair interpersonal attachment skills for children of prisoners.

### **Community Activities**

Many participants cited examples of healthy, supportive distractions such as sports, shopping, church, and school that help them deal with challenges associated with having incarcerated parents. Sydney explained, “I don’t really feel like I belong at home because I don’t have really a dad and I don’t get along with my mom, and then when I’m at school and I’m on the track team...I feel like I belong there.” Regarding school, Andre said, “You’re going to need an education to survive in the world, if not...how are you going to be able to survive, to provide for your kid when you get one?”

## **THEME 4** **Youth are Often Treated Differently Because of Their Parents’ Incarceration**

When asked whether or not they thought people looked at them differently because their parents were incarcerated, the youth had mixed opinions. While some youth explained that it’s “typical” in certain circles to have fathers or father figures behind bars, others did not express comfort with the topic. The majority of youth believed that on some level they were judged by others or concerned about being treated differently, most often by their peers, and preferred not to answer questions about their parents’ absence.

School was described as an especially difficult place. As Kyonna explained, “When you’re in school, you really do feel alone, like I’m the only person — I mean, I’ve never met anybody else whose parent

got locked up. I thought that was just me.” Ashley continued, “As I was older, I started to feel left out, and like ‘take your dad to school day,’ everybody’s dad was there...It just felt weird.”

Despite the fact that other people seem to view them differently, most of the youth did not internalize the stigma. Perceiving their experience of having an incarcerated parent as “normal” seemed to serve as a buffer. In fact, some of the boys who were compared by others to their incarcerated parents felt motivated by the judgment. Michael said, “I’ve got to be a stronger person than he was. I’ve got to be a better person than he ever was.”

## **THEME 5** **Youth Want to Share Their Experiences**

This theme captured the youths’ belief that they could make positive changes for children of incarcerated parents by sharing their personal experiences with other youth who had similar experiences as well as people who make decisions about policies and programs that affect them. They believed that it would help other children to hear words of encouragement from people who have been through something similar. With regard to influencing policies and programs, one young man said, “I think we should just teach them more about what’s happening in the community and how one parent can affect your household and affect the kind of person you become.”

# Implications of Findings

Much of what was learned from the focus group interviews is supported by current literature on children of incarcerated parents. However, the youth who participated in the interviews gave a level of depth and meaning that is scarcely observed in the reports that have been compiled to date. The specific experiences of children of incarcerated parents are extremely varied. Nevertheless, similarities exist and indicate the need for further discussion, if not action, aimed at eliminating obstacles to successful development of these youth. The following are suggestions that arose from the focus groups:

- Caregivers should be forthcoming with information about incarcerated parents' absence and may need support in conveying difficult information to young children. However, it is necessary to understand how cultural beliefs, social, emotional and economic stressors, or other factors influence caregivers' reluctance to communicate openly with their children.
- Mentoring programs can buffer the negative effects of parental incarceration. To further protect children who are already vulnerable and sensitive to the loss of important adult figures in their lives, mentors should understand the unique impact of separation and loss and learn skills and behaviors that enhance trust. Programs should emphasize multi-year commitments.
- Children of incarcerated parents need support and should have opportunities to share their experiences in venues that encourage open expression without the fear of being humiliated or otherwise treated differently. Establishing peer-to-peer mentoring programs or peer support groups could assist children in coping with the loss of parents due to incarceration while simultaneously reducing the impact of the associated stigma.
- Youth with incarcerated parents are able to insightfully articulate their needs. Policy makers and program developers might consider convening youth advisory panels from which they could seek input on the formation of policies and services that are designed to impact the welfare of children of incarcerated parents. Additionally, scholars who wish to better understand the experiences of children of incarcerated parents should include their perspectives in research.

This summary is based on two reports available in the media room at [www.AmachiPgh.org](http://www.AmachiPgh.org):

*"What We've Learned from the Children" by Michelle L. McMurray*

*"In Our Own Words" by Ronnell Anderson and Tirrell Harris with Tim Morrison*