
Amachi In Brief

by Chelsea Farley

Across the United States, an estimated two million children have at least one parent who is incarcerated (a number that has increased by more than 50 percent since 1991).¹ To address the needs of this vulnerable group of young people, P/PV has developed an unusual mentoring program. Known as the Amachi initiative, the program partners faith-based organizations with public agencies and nonprofit service providers to identify the children of prisoners and match them with caring adult volunteers.

In June, P/PV published its first report on the Amachi program—a study of Amachi’s development and implementation in Philadelphia, written by Linda Jucovy. The report describes Amachi’s history and purpose, its key program components, and notable challenges and successes.

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Targeting High-Risk Youth

In a time when many programs are embracing a generalized youth development approach (designed to benefit all youth), Amachi effectively targets a group of young people who are particularly at risk.

Linda Jucovy’s report details the substantial challenges faced by children with incarcerated parents. These children are often shuffled from one care-giving arrangement to another. They may be separated from siblings, and many are involved with the foster care system. As Jucovy notes, there is “a particular form of grief and loss that comes from having a parent who is alive but unreachable.”²

Children of prisoners are at higher risk for a slew of emotional and behavioral problems, including depression and anxiety, poor academic performance, drug and alcohol abuse, and juvenile delinquency.³ Children of prisoners are six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated at some point during their lives.⁴ Clearly, Amachi targets a group of young people who are very much in need of guidance, support and love.

The Amachi Partnership

Originally conceived by P/PV board member John Dilulio (now at the University of Pennsylvania) and brought to life by W. Wilson Goode (former mayor of Philadelphia and senior advisor at P/PV), Amachi incorporates program elements found to be essential in P/PV’s previous mentoring research. Program infrastructure and expertise are provided by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBS). BBBS oversees screening, matching and

training of mentors, and provides mechanisms for monitoring and supporting matches. Amachi's organizers also work closely with local justice institutions to identify and make contact with children of prisoners. And Amachi turns to churches for recruiting its volunteer mentors. Forty-two Philadelphia churches have signed on as active Amachi partners, each committing to recruit 10 volunteers and to regularly collect and submit data about matches.

The collaboration between secular and faith-based institutions has proved to be remarkably effective and well managed. Amachi provides a distinctive structure for partnering organizations. It supplies practical tools and knowledge that churches need to implement organized, successful mentoring programs. As one pastor put it, Amachi "brought its own support. It gave us resources, manpower, to extend what we were doing. Amachi did the organizing for us."⁵

Recruiting Mentors

One of Amachi's early successes has been the recruitment of large numbers of qualified, motivated mentors, especially mentors from the African American community. The Amachi strategy first engages and involves pastors, who can, in turn, recruit volunteers from within their congregations. Pastors make general announcements during services or at church meetings, which appeal to the congregation's values and sense of mission. But, perhaps more importantly, pastors speak directly with individual congregants. This allows them to identify and recruit people who might make especially good mentors—those with a track record of community service or relevant work experience (teachers, counselors, etc.). Pastors also select congregants on the basis of personal experience and personal characteristics ("loving," "warm," "a good parent").

Thus far, Amachi's recruitment strategies have resulted in high percentages of African American volunteers. For most mentoring programs, only 15 to 20 percent of adult volunteers are members of a racial minority group; in Amachi's first two years in Philadelphia, 82 percent of mentors were African American and 8 percent were Latino. Significantly, 34 percent were African American

males—a group that traditionally has been underrepresented among mentors. However, Amachi's overall male/female ratio was similar to that of other mentoring programs; 42 percent were male, 58 percent female. Amachi volunteers also tended to be older than those in other mentoring programs.

Early Results

Data collection has been central to the Amachi effort, providing ongoing feedback for volunteers, as well as tracking of program results. While there is still much to learn about the effect of the Amachi program on children's lives, early indications are promising.

An indepth analysis of Amachi's first 556 matches found that mentors and mentees spent their time together in ways consistent with P/PV's past research about effective mentoring programs: "fun" activities were emphasized. Mentors and mentees often spent time just "hanging out" together. They also attended sports events, movies, concerts and theater; they went to church services or other church activities, ate meals together and worked on homework. (See Table 1.)

Mentors had committed to spend at least one hour per week with their mentees. On average, Amachi's mentors and mentees met fewer than the required four times per month (averaging two visits per month instead). But mentors spent more than the expected number of hours with mentees (an average of 7.3 hours per month).

Through November 2003, Philadelphia's Amachi program had matched a total of 726 children with mentors. Almost half of these matches (339) were still active at that time. Two hundred and six matches extended beyond the one-year mark (research shows that one year is a vital benchmark for mentoring relationships). The majority of matches that end before one year are cut short because of changes or disruptions in the child's life (often families move, or a caregiver decides not to allow the relationship to continue). Amachi's most recent data show that 176 matches have lasted for more than two years.

The length of these matches is a good indication that the Amachi program has recruited solid, committed volunteers, and that the program structure works to

Table 1:
Number and Percentage of Mentors Reported Engaging in Given Activities
During a Sample Month*

	Number	Percentage
Total Matches with Contact	253	—
School work	22	9%
Playing sports	16	6%
Sporting event, movie, theater	52	21%
Eating a meal	99	39%
Attending church services	52	21%
Attending other church activities	41	16%
Just “hanging out”	139	55%
Other	146	58%

Source: Amachi Year Longitudinal Report, April 1, 2001-March 31, 2003.

*Data are for the month of December 2002.

Table originally published in Jucovy, 2003, p. 28.

support lasting, effective mentoring relationships. Survey data also supports this notion. BBBS conducted surveys after Amachi matches had been active for one year. Ninety-three percent of mentors and 82 percent of caregivers reported that their mentee had increased self-confidence. About 60 percent of mentors and caregivers said the child had an improved “sense of the future.” A majority also reported better academic performance and improved behavior in school.

Amachi’s Expansion

In May of 2002, Amachi expanded into New York City, partnering 12 Brooklyn congregations with BBBS of New York. Amachi has since added 22 additional sites in various cities across the country.

In September, the Department of Health and Human Services provided \$9.1 million for programs that mentor children of prisoners. Ten of the 52 funded programs had already implemented the Amachi model. An additional \$50 million has been promised in the 2004-2005 budget; if this figure holds, it is estimated that 30,000 children of prisoners could be mentored in 2005 and beyond.

With America’s prison population growing (and the number of women in prison increasing at the fastest rate), more and more children are losing parents to incarceration. These children face uncertain futures. Amachi helps to mitigate the risks. By providing consistent, caring relationships, Amachi hopes to influence young lives, improving prospects for the future and—potentially—reducing rates of crime and incarceration in years to come.

Endnotes

- 1 Child Welfare League of America, <http://www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated/>
- 2 Jucovy, based on personal communication from Arlene F. Lee, Director, Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners, Child Welfare League of America, Inc., April 16, 2003
- 3 Child Welfare League of America
- 4 Senate Report 106-404: Departments of Commerce, Justice, and the State, the Judiciary and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2001. September 8, 2000, p. 56
- 5 Jucovy, 2003, p. 22

To view Linda Jucovy’s report in its entirety, please visit our website: www.ppv.org.

P/PV *In Brief*

P/PV is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs and community initiatives.

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