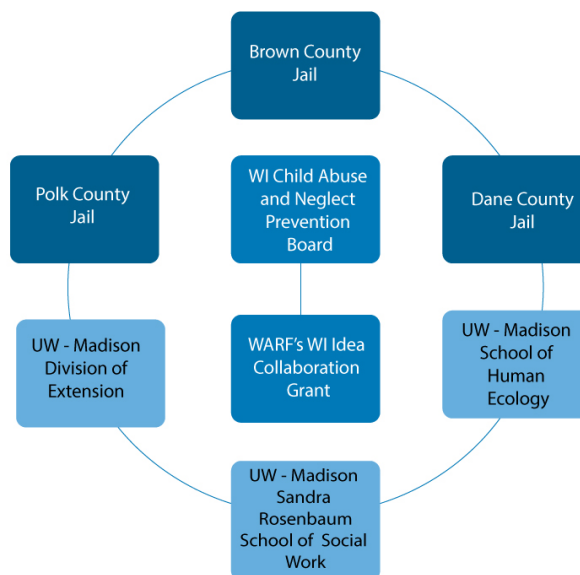


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## BUILDING READING AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH JUSTICE-INVOLVED FAMILIES: FINDINGS FROM AN EVALUATION OF *MAKING READING MEMORIES*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (CANPB) joined efforts with the University of Wisconsin-Madison's WI Idea Collaboration Grant program to support the implementation and evaluation of Making Reading Memories (MRM). MRM is a core strategy of the UW-Madison Division of Extension's Literacy Link program which aims to promote literacy skills and foster healthy parent-child interactions among justice-involved families. This innovative community-engaged research study was made possible by several partners including three Sheriff's Offices in Wisconsin, as well as UW-Madison's Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work, School of Human Ecology, and Division of Extension (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**

*Study partners including Wisconsin Sheriff's Offices, UW-Madison units, and study funders.*

With the aim of improving knowledge about participants' experiences in MRM and documenting change in outcomes, the study's purpose was to expand the delivery of MRM into several new counties and evaluate the program. As seen in Figure 2, MRM was introduced and evaluated in three Wisconsin county jails located in Brown County, Dane County, and Polk County.

This brief summarizes selected findings from the evaluation drawing on data collected before and after MRM from incarcerated parents and caregivers at home.



**Figure 2**

*Wisconsin counties where MRM was implemented and evaluated.*

For more information about the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board which focuses on family strengthening, building protective factors, and partnering with parents in Wisconsin, visit the agency's web page at: <https://preventionboard.wi.gov/Pages/Homepage.aspx>.

To learn about other family-focused research studies and programs for parents and children affected by the criminal legal system, please visit Dr. Charles' webpage <https://familywellbeingandjustice.com/>, Dr. Poehlmann's blog <https://kidswithincarceratedparents.com/>, and UW-Madison Division of Extension's Literacy Link program <https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu>.

## Overview of Program

The Making Reading Memories program promotes reading and relationship-building opportunities between incarcerated parents and their children. With attention to local Wisconsin county jails, MRM fosters active engagement between parents and their children, and learning and practicing skills which promote literacy, dialogic reading, and emotional bonding. MRM has two primary components – a workshop and video recordings – and is generally geared toward children who are age 10 and under.

To help parents feel more confident and at ease reading to their child while in jail, they first attend a one-hour workshop called Read and Connect, which highlights the significance of reading aloud for healthy child development and strengthening parent-child bonds. It also teaches parents how to read in an engaging and conversational manner (i.e., dialogic reading), creating an enjoyable and enriching learning experience for both them and their children.

Following the workshop, parents are invited to be video recorded reading one or more books to their children. The recordings and books are sent to caregivers at home who, in turn, support their children in viewing the videos and reading along with them. The goal is to increase literacy opportunities for children and strengthen parent-child relationships during the incarceration. MRM can be implemented in person, remotely, or using a hybrid approach, and for the purpose of our study, MRM was implemented remotely in Brown and Polk Counties and in person in Dane County.

## Approach and Participants Served

The UW-Madison research team led implementation and evaluation activities between July 2022 and August 2024. This included delivering MRM, collecting surveys, and conducting interviews with incarcerated parents and caregivers at home. Beginning in July 2022, while preparing to launch the research study, the team implemented MRM in a “program-only” capacity ahead of evaluation activities which began in June 2023. All parents participated in the MRM program, regardless of whether they were in the program-only phase or the research phase. As seen in Table 1, across the program-only and research study periods, 548 individual family members were served, including 136 incarcerated parents, 166 caregivers, and 246 children. Incarcerated parents participated in the MRM workshop and completed video recordings, while caregivers and children at home received books and video recordings.

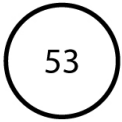
Table 1

Participants Served During the 2022-2024 Program and Study Phases

PROJECT PHASE	INCARCERATED PARENTS	CAREGIVERS	CHILDREN	TOTAL
Program-Only	59	115	192	366
Research Study	77	51	54	182
Total Served	136	166	246	548

## Who Participated in the MRM Evaluation Study?

### Incarcerated Parents



Incarcerated parents in the MRM evaluation completed program plus baseline and follow-up surveys and interviews



34 years old  
on average; range 21 – 56



64% people of color



62% fathers



Incarcerated 11 times  
on average; range 1 – 32



89% have a HS diploma, GED/HSED, or higher



64% told by professional that they have a mental or emotional condition  
e.g., major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia

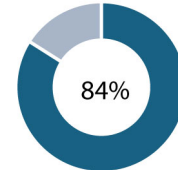
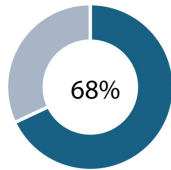


## Living Arrangements between Incarcerated Parents and their Children

Over two-thirds of the 53 parents who completed pre-tests before MRM (68%) reported living with their child full- or part-time before they were incarcerated.



Of the 50 parents who completed post-tests after MRM, 84% said they planned on living with their child after release.



## Caregivers

51

Caregivers in the MRM evaluation received book and recording and completed baseline and follow-up surveys and interviews



40 years old  
on average; range 20 – 68



49% people of color



39% mothers



94% have a HS diploma, GED/HSED, or higher

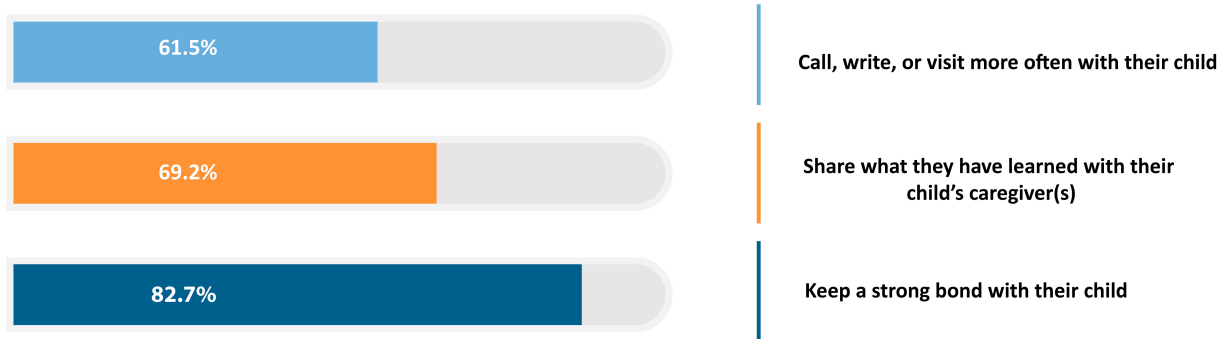


66% employed full- or part-time

A more complete description of incarcerated parent and caregiver characteristics can be found in Appendix A. Participant Characteristics.

## Program Findings

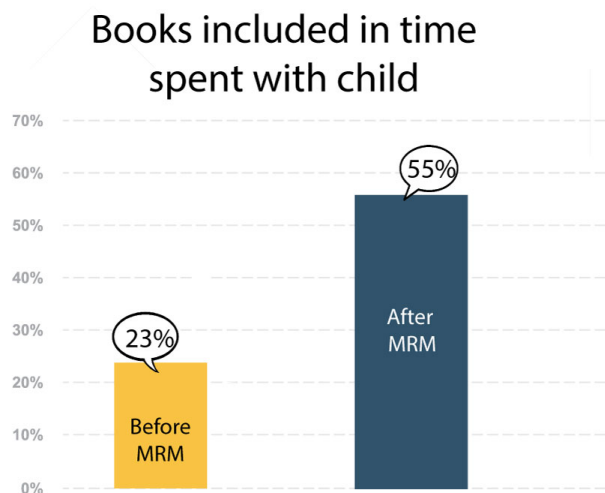
After the program, incarcerated parents responded “yes” to several questions about **how MRM would influence them** ranging from 62% - 83% (N=52):



The percentage of incarcerated parents who said that **reading out loud with their child was important** increased from 49% (before MRM) to 64% (after MRM) (N=53).



The proportion of incarcerated parents who said **that books were included** in the time they spent with their child in person, over video, or on the phone more than doubled after completing the MRM program.





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## Participant Feedback about the Program

As seen in Table 2. Participant Reports of Program Satisfaction, participants had overwhelmingly positive comments about MRM.

- » 92% and 85% of incarcerated parents and caregivers, respectively, said that MRM was “quite” or “very” helpful.
- » Incarcerated parents and caregivers thought that MRM had a “positive” or “very positive” effect on their child (96% and 90%, respectively).
- » 94% of incarcerated parents enjoyed making the video for their child “a lot,” while 85% of caregivers enjoyed sharing the video with the child “a lot.”

Overall, incarcerated parents reported more favorable views on how MRM influenced their ability to change their children’s reading habits compared to caregivers. For example:

- » 89% of incarcerated parents said the program had changed their ability to encourage their child to read or look at books “a lot” or “very much” compared to 50% of caregivers.

Both groups, however, shared similar perspectives on the program’s ability to help the child cope with being separated from their parent, with 50% of incarcerated parents and 50% of caregivers agreeing that this was true “a lot” or “very much.”

Finally, incarcerated parents were overwhelmingly “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the MRM workshop (96%) and with recording the video and having the book sent home (98%). Caregivers shared similar views about the video, printed materials, and book(s) that were sent home with 96% “satisfied” or “very satisfied.”



**Table 2**  
**Participant Reports of Program Satisfaction**

INCARCERATED PARENTS (N=47-53)			CAREGIVERS (N=50-53)	
	% Agreement	Respondents	% Agreement	Respondents
<b>Overall experience</b>				
How helpful was MRM to you? (quite or very)	92%	49	85%	45
Recommend MRM to other families? (strongly recommend)	91%	48	85%	45
MRM had an effect on the child? (positive or very positive)	96%	45	90%	47
MRM had an effect on you and other adult? (positive or very positive)	94%	47	77%	41
Enjoyed creating the video for the child? (a lot)	94%	50		
Enjoyed sharing the video with the child? (a lot)			85%	45
<b>How much has the program changed...(a lot or very much)</b>				
Your ability to increase your child’s interest in reading?	70%	36	56%	28
Your ability to encourage your child to read or look at books?	89%	46	50%	26
Your child’s ability to cope with being separated from their parent?	50%	25	50%	25
How happy and satisfied you are with being a parent/caregiver to the child?	89%	47	79%	42
Your belief that books can be a way to stay connected during incarceration?	83%	44	89%	47
<b>Overall satisfaction...(satisfied or very satisfied)</b>				
With the MRM workshop?	96%	51		
With recording the video and having the book sent home?	98%	52		
With the video, printed materials, and book that were sent home?			96%	51



## Incarcerated Parent Interviews: Workshop and Video Recording Feedback<sup>1</sup>

When incarcerated parents were asked open-ended questions about **what was useful from the workshop experience and whether anything stood out to them**, they responded with comments such as...

“This whole workshop has been a huge reminder, **that my kids need me**. And that reading was a big part of it like with my son – that’s how we got his speech therapy back on track.”

Father reading to one-month-old son



“It was very meaningful that the program gives you an opportunity to connect with your child especially for somebody that is like me and has never even met my child. So that gives my child an opportunity to get to know me and (I) get to read a book.”

Father reading to five-month-old daughter



“It made me feel awesome and brave! I guess, it made me a little emotional, because he’s so young. But it did make me feel just a lot – it uplifted me.”

Mother reading to three-month-old son



<sup>1</sup>Consent obtained from participants to use their photographs and quotes when sharing study findings.

## Caregiver Interviews: Child-Focused Feedback<sup>1</sup>

When caregivers were asked questions about how the child reacted to the video recording, they responded with comments such as....

***Grandmother explains reaction of 8-year-old granddaughter whose incarcerated father participated in MRM:***



"She was going along with it, so, when he kind of teared up she was like 'it wasn't even a sad book' [gasp] **'It's because he misses me!'**."

***Grandfather talking about his 2-year-old grandson's reaction whose incarcerated father participated in MRM:***



"...a third of the way or so through that first viewing he recognized that it was in fact his dad, and then he watched it at least six or seven more times right after that."

<sup>1</sup> Consent obtained from participants to use their photographs and quotes when sharing study findings.

## Brown County Jail: Experience with the Program

When asked, “**What have been some of the highlights from the program?**”, Heidi Michel, Captain, shared this story:

“**He had never met his child.** He did the recording, and the mom played that video for his child every single night. So, he really already had that relationship with his child, even though he never physically got to hold him, or be present...when I try to recruit other parents to come in and participate, I share his story because I think it’s very touching. I sometimes get a little emotional when I talk about this because I feel like it’s a **great story and it’s why we need this program.**”

## Polk County Jail: On the Partnership

When asked, “**Why did you choose to partner with the UW-Madison research team and Division of Extension to implement and evaluate MRM?**”, Lorraine Beyl, Jail Programs Coordinator and Correctional Officer, said:

“I thought the idea of keeping children connected with their parents was very important...there’s a lot of anxiety that goes on inside the jail and if the parent can have contact or feel they still are making a connection with their children, I think that helps them adapt inside of these walls and **makes them feel connected with society and their family.**”

## Summary

- \* Implementation of Making Reading Memories in Wisconsin jails located in Brown County, Dane County, and Polk County was largely successful with **over 500 individuals served** including incarcerated parents, caregivers, and children.
  - \* MRM appears to have positively impacted incarcerated parents’ belief that they would be better able to **keep a strong bond** with their children and **communicate more frequently** with them than before.
  - \* The study also showed an increase in incarcerated parents’ recognition of the **value of reading to children**, and importantly an increase in the actual **use of books** during time spent with children when on the phone, over video, and during visits.
  - \* Participants expressed largely positive viewpoints about the program with incarcerated parents sharing more favorable views than caregivers at home.
  - \* Finally, strong partnerships with the county jails supported not only successful study implementation activities but overall, an **increased likelihood of long-term sustained programming.**
-

## Limitations and Future Work

While the findings from the evaluation of Making Reading Memories were largely positive, there are several limitations worth noting.

- \* There was no long-term follow-up of participants, use of administrative data, or strategy to determine if the positive findings were directly caused by the program or other factors. Future evaluations could incorporate these types of strategies to help assess the sustainability of outcomes and determine if the program has effects on observed behaviors instead of self-reported outcomes. An especially important contribution would be a study designed to examine causality.
- \* While incarcerated parents and caregivers were the focus of the study, children were absent from the evaluation. Their inclusion in future work could help ensure that the findings reflect their unique experiences and inform how MRM is shaped to directly address their needs and perspectives. We are in the process of coding the videos to determine the emotions and messages provided to children in the videos, which is the first step in understanding what children experience in programs such as this.
- \* While not the focus of the current evaluation, an implementation study (i.e., process evaluation) would be beneficial as part of future work to enhance adoption, replication, and sustainability of MRM in other Wisconsin counties and in other states interested in implementing the program.

## Acknowledgements

Support for this research was provided by the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board, the University of Wisconsin – Madison Division of Extension and Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Human Ecology. Special thanks to the entire team of Literacy Link educators and leaders who supported this effort including Mary Campbell Wood, Ronda Davis, Heidi Ungrodt, and Pam Wedig-Kirsch; our local jail partners Lorraine Beyl, Allison Hoekstra, and Heidi Michel; and all the UW-Madison students for their time and commitment to supporting justice-impacted families including Sarah Jensen, Ava Heyrman, Miranda Dorsey, and Nina Santiago. Importantly, we thank the participating parents and caregivers for their contributions and resolve to build reading opportunities and strong relationships with children.

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## Appendix A.

### Participant Characteristics

As seen in Appendix A. Table 1, almost three-quarters of the incarcerated parent participants were male (74%) and over one-quarter identified as female. Most of the parents were individuals of color (64%) and were on average 34 years old. Nearly three-quarters of the parents were single and almost half had a high school diploma or GED. While most parents (89%) reported being in good to excellent physical health, over one-fourth said they were in poor or fair mental or emotional health, and 64% reported having ever been diagnosed with a serious mental health condition (e.g., depression, schizophrenia). Parents reported they had been in jail or prison 11 times on average and had been incarcerated during the current stay for an average of four months.

**Appendix A. Table 1**  
**Incarcerated Parent and Child Characteristics (N = 53)**

INCARCERATED PARENT CHARACTERISTIC	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	AVERAGE (SD)
SEX			
Female	14	26%	
Male	39	74%	
RACE AND ETHNICITY			
Hispanic	11	21%	
Non-Hispanic Black	13	25%	
Non-Hispanic Other	10	19%	
Non-Hispanic White	19	36%	
AGE			34 years (8)
MARITAL STATUS			
Divorced or Legally Separated	7	13%	
Married	8	15%	
Single, Never Married	38	72%	
EDUCATION			
Less than High School	6	11%	
HS/GED/HSED	25	47%	
Technical School, Some College, or Associate's Degree	17	32%	
Bachelor's Degree	5	9%	
OVERALL PHYSICAL HEALTH			
Good/Very Good/Excellent	47	89%	
Poor/Fair	6	11%	
OVERALL MENTAL or EMOTIONAL HEALTH			
Good/Very Good/Excellent	39	74%	
Poor/Fair	14	27%	
EVER TOLD BY MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL THAT YOU HAD A MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL CONDITION (E.G., MAJOR DEPRESSION, SCHIZOPHRENIA)	34	64%	
NUMBER OF TIMES EVER INCARCERATED	44		11 times (9)
LENGTH OF TIME IN JAIL (AT TIME OF SURVEY)	53		4 months (5)
INCARCERATED PARENT REPORT ON CHILDREN			
RELATIONSHIP TO FOCAL CHILD			
Father	33	62%	
Mother	14	26%	
Stepparent	3	6%	
Relative (who played parenting role)	3	6%	
PARENT-CHILD CONTACT IN MONTH PRIOR TO PARENT'S INCARCERATION			
Lived With Child Full- or Part-time	36	68%	
Lived Apart from Child but Visited	14	26%	
Only Phone, Mail, or Video Chat Contact	2	4%	
Child Not Born Yet	1	2%	

Relative (e.g., aunt, uncle, sibling)	6	12%	
Other Parent Figure (e.g., foster parent, stepparent, pastor)	8	16%	
<b>CAREGIVER-CHILD CONTACT IN MONTH PRIOR TO PARENT'S INCARCERATION</b>			2 children (1)
Lived With Child Full- or Part-time	36	71%	
Lived Apart from Child but Visited	11	22%	
Only Phone, Mail, or Video Chat Contact	1	2%	
No Contact or Child Not Born Yet	3	6%	
<b>NUMBER OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18</b>			
<b>CAREGIVER PLANS TO LIVE WITH CHILD UPON PARENT'S RELEASE</b>			
Yes	43	93%	
No	3	7%	

*Note:* Results exclude participants with missing data. Items about the child refer to the child who participated in the MRM program (i.e., the focal child). Some percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

As seen in the second panel of Appendix A. Table 1, incarcerated parents were most frequently the focal child's father (62%) or mother (26%) and over two-thirds of parents reported living with their child in the month prior to the incarceration. Participating children were, on average, five years of age and most parents (84%) reported that they planned on living with their child once released.

Details about caregiver characteristics are included in Appendix A. Table 2. Unlike parents in jail who were predominantly male, most caregivers at home were female (84%). Over half were White (51%) and were on average 40 years of age. Compared to incarcerated parents, fewer caregivers were single (72% vs. 59%) and two-thirds reported working full- or part-time. One in five caregivers reported Child Protective Services involvement with the family. Additionally, 22% and 25% reported having poor or fair physical and mental health, respectively, and two-fifths reported having ever been told by a professional that they have a significant mental or emotional condition such as major depression or schizophrenia.

In the second panel of Appendix A. Table 2, we see that caregivers' relationship to the child varied considerably; most caregivers reported being the child's mother (39%), followed by grandparent (25%), other parent figure (e.g., foster parent, or stepparent) (16%), and other relative (12%). Only four of the 51 caregivers were the child's father. Most of the caregivers (71%) had lived with the child prior to the parent's incarceration and the vast majority (93%) planned on living with the child after the parent's release from jail.

## Appendix A. Table 2

### Caregiver Characteristics (N = 51)

CAREGIVER CHARACTERISTICS	N	PERCENTAGE	AVERAGE (SD)
SEX			
Female	43	84%	
Male	8	16%	
RACE AND ETHNICITY			
Hispanic	6	11%	
Non-Hispanic Black	9	17%	
Non-Hispanic Other	11	21%	
Non-Hispanic White	27	51%	
AGE			40 years (13)
MARITAL STATUS			
Divorced or Legally Separated	6	12%	
Married	11	22%	
Single, Never Married	30	59%	
Widowed	4	8%	
EDUCATION			
Less than High School	3	6%	
HS/GED/HSED	20	40%	
Technical School, Some College, or Associate's Degree	22	44%	
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	5	10%	
EMPLOYMENT			
Employed Full- or Part-time	33	66%	
Unemployed	17	34%	
CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES CURRENTLY INVOLVED WITH FAMILY			
Yes	10	20%	
No	40	80%	
OVERALL PHYSICAL HEALTH			
Good/Very Good/Excellent	40	78%	
Poor/Fair	11	22%	
OVERALL MENTAL or EMOTIONAL HEALTH			
Good/Very Good/Excellent	38	75%	
Poor/Fair	13	25%	
EVER TOLD BY MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL THAT YOU HAD A MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL CONDITION (E.G., MAJOR DEPRESSION, SCHIZOPHRENIA)	23	43%	
CAREGIVER REPORT ON CHILDREN			
RELATIONSHIP TO FOCAL CHILD			
Mother	20	39%	
Father	4	8%	
Grandparent	13	25%	



## Appendix A. Table 2

### Caregiver Characteristics (N = 51)

Relative (e.g., aunt, uncle, sibling)	6	12%	
Other Parent Figure (e.g., foster parent, stepparent, pastor)	8	16%	
<b>CAREGIVER-CHILD CONTACT IN MONTH PRIOR TO PARENT'S INCARCERATION</b>			
Lived With Child Full- or Part-time	36	71%	
Lived Apart from Child but Visited	11	22%	
Only Phone, Mail, or Video Chat Contact	1	2%	
No Contact or Child Not Born Yet	3	6%	
<b>NUMBER OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18</b>			2 children (2)
<b>CAREGIVER PLANS TO LIVE WITH CHILD UPON PARENT'S RELEASE</b>			
Yes	43	93%	
No	3	7%	

*Note:* Results exclude participants with missing data. Items about the child refer to the child who participated in the MRM program (i.e., the focal child). Some percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

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