

# ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION  
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

## THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

### Marriage and Relationship Skills Education as a Way to Prepare Prisoners for Reintegration

*The number of people incarcerated in this country is in the millions, and most will eventually be released to the community. Policy interest in preparing prisoners for reentry has grown significantly in recent years. This interest is fueled in part by research showing that marital and parent-child relationships are at high risk of disruption during incarceration and reentry, and by research suggesting that healthy marriage is associated with a reduced likelihood of recidivism. Oklahoma is the first state whose correctional system offers standardized programming in marriage and relationship skills. In partnership with the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections offers this program in prisons throughout the state, to male and female prisoners, married and unmarried. This brief describes what led to the implementation of this program, how it was implemented, how participants have responded, and the potential implications for replication.*

Incarcerated men and women face substantial challenges to maintaining their marriages, relationships with their children, and other intimate relationships while incarcerated and when they reenter society. The marriage of an incarcerated man is about three times more likely to fail than that of one who is not incarcerated, and the likelihood of divorce increases with time served.<sup>1</sup> Absence and low levels of contact, among other factors, strain prisoners' relationships with their children. Incarceration also reduces the probability of subsequent marriage, especially among African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

### ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This ASPE Research Brief describes lessons learned during the establishment of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, drawing on findings from an in-depth process evaluation being conducted by researchers at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. under contract to ASPE. This brief was prepared by M. Robin Dion, Timothy Silman, Debra A. Strong, and Betsy Santos.

The full report of the process evaluation, and additional briefs focusing on specific aspects of the OMI's implementation, are available at ASPE's web site: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/OMI>

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<sup>1</sup> Lopoo, L.M. & Western, B. (2005). Incarceration and the formation and stability of marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 67(3), 721-734. Lynch, J.P. & Sabol, W.J. (2001). Prisoner reentry in perspective. *Crime Policy Reports*, vol. 3. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Western, B. (2004). Incarceration, marriage, and family life. Working paper 15-19-FF. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.

Research suggests that marriage is associated with lower rates of recidivism. Married men, compared to unmarried men, experience more successful transitions out of prison and are less likely to commit further crimes.<sup>3</sup> Recidivism is undoubtedly related to factors besides marital status; however, marriage appears to be at least a key contributor, even in the more rigorous analyses that control for these other factors.<sup>4</sup> Some studies suggest paths through which marriage might reduce recidivism: either directly by restraining men from translating criminal propensities into action,<sup>5</sup> or more indirectly, by changing their everyday routines and patterns of association with deviant peer groups.<sup>6</sup> A study of prisoners' reentry found that men with closer family relationships, stronger family support, and fewer negative dynamics in their relationships with intimate partners were more likely to have worked after release, and less likely to have used drugs.<sup>7</sup>

Although 90 percent of the incarcerated population is male, rates of female incarceration are rapidly rising. Less research has been conducted into the predictors and consequences of female incarceration, but existing data generally show that family process variables are the strongest predictors of successful reentry.<sup>8</sup>

High rates of incarceration have fueled interest in services to reduce recidivism. In 2001, Oklahoma's incarceration rate was the third highest in the nation. Concerned about both the social and fiscal costs associated with incarceration, Oklahoma's Department of Corrections (DOC) began to focus on reentry programs to better prepare inmates better for release and to reduce recidivism. To explore whether relationship and marriage education might improve inmates' ability to return to and maintain viable marriages upon release, the DOC approached the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) in the summer of 2002. With the OMI's assistance, DOC implemented a pilot which has since grown to be an official program available at all state prisons that have a full-time chaplain.

### *The Pilot and the Transition to Larger-Scale Implementation*

Small scale implementation of marriage education in Oklahoma's prison system began in 2002. As a first step, one prison chaplain was trained in PREP, the OMI's marriage and relationship skills curriculum.<sup>9</sup> That chaplain's favorable reaction led to the training of two more chaplains and the implementation of a pilot program in one men's and two women's facilities in early 2003. Chaplains were a natural choice for leading the PREP workshops because they frequently provide or oversee other rehabilitative programming. By design, each pilot site set its own eligibility criteria for inmate participants, such as marital status, length of incarceration, and release date. The pilot sites also varied in how they defined the details of the program: whether it was voluntary or mandatory; the size of the workshops; and whether spouses participated. The pilot was implemented in facilities of different security levels: one minimum and one medium security facility, and one with wards at each security level. All of these variations provided a broad basis that DOC could draw on for insights into alternative approaches.

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<sup>3</sup> Hairston, C.F. (1988). Family ties during imprisonment: Do they influence future criminal activity? *Federal Probation*, LII(1).  
Hairston, C.F. & Lockette, P.W. (1987). Parents in prison: New directions for social sciences. *Social Work*, 32(2).  
Fishman, L.T. (1986). Prisoners' wives' interpretations of male criminality and subsequent arrest. *Deviant Behavior*, 7(2).

<sup>4</sup> Sampson, R.J. Laub, J.H., and Wimer, C. (2006). Does marriage reduce crime? A counterfactual approach to within-individual causal effects. *Criminology*, vol. 44(3).

<sup>5</sup> Sampson, R.J. & Laub, J.H.(1993). *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Warr, M. (1998). Life-course transitions and desistance from crime. *Criminology*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Visher, C., Lavigne, N.G., & Travis, J. (2003). Understanding the challenges of prisoner reentry, Maryland Pilot Study: Findings from Baltimore. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

<sup>8</sup> Dowden, C. & Andrews, D.A. (1999). What works for female offenders: A meta-analytic review. *Crime and Delinquency*, 45(4).

<sup>9</sup> PREP is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, a 12-hour curriculum for strengthening relationships, developed by Howard Markman and Scott Stanley. It focuses on communication skills, problem solving, conflict management, and friendship.

Positive feedback from this pilot led to expansion. The chaplains participating in the pilot reported positive reactions from both male and female inmates, so the agency decided to adopt PREP as an official DOC program, meaning that state-wide implementation would be supported from the top down. Since pilot participants were positive about their experience regardless of marital status, release date, or mandatory/volunteer status, the DOC ruled that all inmates would be eligible, with the exception of sex offenders, those with no possibility of parole, and inmates in mental units.

In expanding Prison PREP, as it came to be known, the DOC had to give careful consideration to the circumstances of its inmate population. People entering prison, like others, face a wide range of circumstances in their relationships and marriage, and these may have implications for service priorities. Some are married and hope to maintain their marriage while serving their sentences. Others may be in an intimate but unmarried relationship, and also hope to continue it or even marry while they are incarcerated. Some inmates even “meet” partners for the first time while in prison. Finally, many inmates are not in any kind of intimate relationship. Regardless of their relationship or marital status, prisoners often have children.

In the face of the diverse situations faced by inmates, the DOC focused primarily on married inmates for the PREP program. The main reason for this focus is that married inmates experience a very high rate of divorce during incarceration. It is DOC policy not to encourage single inmates to marry during their incarceration (because such marriages fail at a high rate), but chaplains are permitted, twice each year, to perform marriages at their discretion. For these marriages, the DOC established a policy that requires inmates and their partners to undergo premarital counseling, a requirement that can be met by taking the PREP program. For all other inmates, participating in PREP workshops is entirely voluntary.<sup>10</sup>

Expansion proceeded quickly. By the end of 2007, all DOC chaplains had been trained, and more than 2000 inmates had participated in the program. In addition, in order to meet the demand for services, three inmates were identified at two facilities to become trained and work closely with chaplains to teach classes. Currently the chaplain led workshops are provided at a handful of Oklahoma’s 17 state prisons. While all prisons with a full-time chaplain (usually the larger prisons) are expected to offer the workshop, some facilities lack a full-time chaplain. When inmates want to marry but resources aren’t in place to offer the class, the OMI provides a workshop leader from the outside to teach the workshop twice each year. This brief focuses on implementation at two men’s and one women’s facility where services have been offered at regular intervals:

- ***Joseph Harp Correctional Center*** in Lexington, Oklahoma, is an all-male medium security prison about an hour’s drive from Oklahoma City. With more than 1,400 inmates, this prison has been offering Prison PREP since 2003 and currently operates two programs three times per year: one for inmates who participate together with their visiting partners, and one for inmates who participate without a partner. The latter workshop is intended for both single men who are not in a relationship and men who are in a relationship but whose partner is unable to attend classes at the prison. Workshops are provided by the chaplain and a trained inmate.
- ***Jess Dunn Correctional Facility*** is an all-male high-minimum security prison with 982 inmates located in Taft, Oklahoma. It has offered Prison PREP since 2005 and operates a year-round inmate-only workshop for men who are not in relationships or whose partner/spouse is unable to attend classes at the prison. This facility is currently working towards implementing a couple’s workshop. Classes are led by the chaplain and two trained inmates.

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<sup>10</sup> An exception to this policy is found at Eddie Warrior Correctional facility where curriculum content is included as a part of the services provided to Residential Substance Treatment Program (RSAT) participants.

- ***Eddie Warrior Correctional Facility*** is a minimum security facility for women in Taft, Oklahoma, with 718 inmates. OMI workshops began in 2003. No couples' workshops are provided, but in addition to the standard PREP curriculum, inmates receive an adapted version of PREP for single women, known as Within My Reach, focused on how to choose better partners in future relationships. All workshops are led by the chaplain.

### ***Implementing OMI Services in Male Correctional Facilities***

The Prison PREP experience has yielded important lessons about four aspects of conducting marriage and relationship skills education in prison systems. DOC and OMI staff have learned what strategies are effective in motivating inmates to participate. The experience has underscored the complex relationship dynamics that a program like Prison PREP has to address, and cast some light on the kinds of program leaders who can be most “authentic” in addressing them. It has highlighted the practical factors that must be addressed to implement workshops that include partners from the outside. Finally, it has shown what participants see as the most important rewards and benefits of the program and has also identified limits on the perceived relevance for inmates not currently in a “couple” relationship.

***The desire to improve relationships, and an interest in improving chances for parole, create strong dual motivations to participate in Prison PREP.*** Most male inmates enroll because they want to improve their current relationships, learn better communication skills, or plan to marry. These were cited as the main reasons inmates chose to enroll in the program. Many inmates, however, also cited the potential benefit of a certificate demonstrating their interest in self-improvement. A certificate of completion is placed in the files of those who complete the program, which some hope will play a positive role in their parole hearings.

Given these dual motivations, recruitment is generally not difficult at large facilities, and often there are waiting lists. Most participants learn of the program through word of mouth, especially from the inmates who have been trained as workshop leaders. Positive peer pressure within the prison setting exists and has led to increased enrollment in classes. It is more difficult to recruit for couples' groups, however, because of logistical barriers to attendance by spouses/partners at the prison. To address that issue, one prison is experimenting with presenting information about the couples' program during orientation for new arrivals, in church sermons, and via flyers posted around the grounds and visiting area. Other facilities offer the program as a “bonus” to regular visitation, creating an incentive to participate and earn more time together in the process.

***A program like Prison PREP must inevitably address the unusual relationship dynamics experienced by male inmates.*** Interviews with prison workshop leaders and participants suggested the unusual power dynamics in relationships between incarcerated men and women “on the outside.” All too often, long-term inmates are “deserted” by family members, so even if inmates talk by telephone daily or several times a week (as most do) with their partners, their greatest fear is abandonment. As one workshop leader put it, “There is no inmate that doesn't think his partner will eventually leave the relationship.” Inmates often react to this fear in negative ways that can sabotage their relationships. For example, they may respond with anger and hostility if their partner misses a visit or phone call, which may only serve to push the partner further away. These fears and their effects have implications for what inmates need from the Prison PREP workshop. Workshop leaders felt that it was important to focus on those aspects of the curriculum that help inmates understand how to appreciate and respect the sacrifices that their partner is making to maintain the relationship while he is still incarcerated.

Relationship dynamics can also have implications for what happens to relationships after prisoners are released, and how Prison PREP might help couples manage their relationship's transition. An inmate

who married during his long prison term and is approaching release described a conversation he had with his wife recently, in which she expressed concern about whether he will be able to maintain his positive behavior on the outside when the structure and rules governing behavior in prison are absent. Because of skills he learned in the workshop, he was able to acknowledge this risk and discuss with his wife the ways in which they could address this upon his release.

The circumstances of incarceration can also affect the reasons women enter or sustain relationships with inmates, and Prison PREP may help couples recognize the significance of those reasons for the relationship. Workshop leaders noted that some women who have been abused in the past may look for relationships with inmates because it is a way for them to feel safe: the woman doesn't have to worry that he will abuse or cheat on her as long as he is incarcerated. This leader challenges inmates in such relationships to explore the reasons that their partners remain involved with them, so that they are not surprised upon release.

Inmates, familiar as they are with these complex relationship dynamics, can be powerful workshop leaders. At both prisons, the chaplains who lead workshops are highly respected. They have built strong rapport with inmates through their humor and firm but compassionate approach, establishing a trusting environment in which inmates feel comfortable and safe. Inmates have also been trained as workshop leaders, and their experience gives them extraordinary credibility. In one case, the inmate/workshop leader was completing his 21st year in prison for murder, but had apparently made dramatic changes in his life and was a role model for other inmates. He had married a woman on the outside four years ago, which allowed him to draw on his own experiences in the workshops. He could directly relate to the frustrations and challenges inmates face in trying to maintain a marriage or relationship during incarceration. For example, he was acutely aware of the sacrifices that spouses on the outside make to maintain their marriage, and he encouraged inmates to validate their spouses and show appreciation for them. In teaching the "XYZ technique" (when you do X in situation Y, I feel Z), he encouraged them to say things like "when you visit me on Sundays, it makes me feel like I haven't been forgotten."

***Couples' workshops present special practical challenges.*** Arrangements for couples' workshops must address barriers related to the distances spouses or partners must travel to attend, child care, and security issues. If facilities are in rural areas or far from population centers where inmates originate, it can be difficult for their partners to attend, because of travel time and transportation problems. If they work, it is often difficult or impossible to be available for an evening session at a prison far from home. The cost of transportation and child care can present problems. Another "cost" for spouse/partners is the inconvenience and sometimes humiliation of cooperating with security requirements and dealing with the general environment of a men's prison. Prison visitors are often subjected to strip searches, encounter drug-detection dogs and irritable guards, and endure hot and crowded visiting rooms and hassling by other inmates. These factors combine to make the recruiting, scheduling, and conducting workshops for couples particularly challenging.

One prison has addressed both security and availability issues by holding couples workshops on Sundays when the majority of women are more likely able to travel to the prison. Sunday is also visitation day at this facility, and many women may already be planning to visit at that time. In addition, holding workshops directly following visitation avoids the need for an additional round of security clearance. However, this solution requires that the chaplain sacrifice time with his or her own family.

A less desirable, but practical approach to overcoming distance barriers is for the couple to go through the class separately. When a couple simply cannot participate together on-site, the OMI has assisted the outside partner in finding a local PREP workshop. Even though they don't learn the skills together, the opportunity to experience the class concurrently can be helpful in establishing better communication



when the couple does see each other. This has been particularly helpful in situations where distance is an extreme barrier and when a couple is planning to marry while one of the partners is incarcerated.

***Inmates attending couples' workshops see immediate benefits.*** Men who participated in couples' workshops perceived tangible benefits to their intimate relationships and beyond, and were enthusiastic about what they had learned. One participant said that the most helpful part of the curriculum was learning how to stop and think before reacting. Instead of blowing up and saying things like "hey, you don't talk to me like that!" he now "lets her talk her side, then I talk my side." Others agreed that the class helped them avoid letting arguments escalate by learning how to take timeouts. Another said that his typical reaction to conflict was to shut down, and that the class taught him how to open up and express himself better. According to participants, the benefits of the workshop went beyond their intimate relationships, to help them deal with the stresses of prison life, including relationships with other inmates and guards. In crowded facilities where two prisoners often occupy a cell designed for one, cellmate relationships can be tense and dangerous if not managed well. Learning to communicate with cellmates and guards and avoid escalation of tensions was seen as a valuable survival skill.

***Program utility is less obvious to men participating alone.*** Workshops for inmates attending without spouses or partners were also well received, but some such participants expressed concern about their immediate utility. As in the couples' workshops, participants in the singles' group identified skills they had learned and found useful, including listening and speaking effectively and taking timeouts from interaction when needed. However, the curriculum is designed for use with couples, and some felt that the concepts were confusing since they were not currently in relationships, and may never have been married. Not having a partner with whom to practice the skills made the workshops seem more abstract, and as the chaplain said, it probably would not be effective to "pair off male inmates and ask one of them to pretend to be the female partner." The single men thus felt that adapting the curriculum to make it more relevant to other types of relationships would be useful. Some suggested that domestic violence should be covered in greater depth, including how to avoid it and what to do when it happens. They also suggested that using terms like "communication skills" may be a better way to advertise the class rather than "marriage skills." One inmate suggested that the curriculum workbook be expanded to contain more of the core information so that when he returns home and finds a partner, they could share it. These concerns have lead OMI to explore options with the PREP developers for tailoring the curriculum to have more applicability within the prison setting.

### ***Implementing OMI Services in Female Correctional Facilities***

Working with female prisoners has posed different challenges for the OMI. Although women comprise only about 10 percent of the Oklahoma prison population, serving them is also a high priority, with the state's female incarceration rate ranking, in 2004, the highest in the nation at 129 per 100,000 female residents.<sup>11</sup> One-quarter of female inmates were married, and 81 percent had children, so relationships are key to what happens in their lives. The vast majority of them reported that they had been in abusive relationships. The experience of working with female prisoners in the OMI has underscored the importance of their past relationship patterns to defining services, the diverse values that draw participants to the program, and ways to tailor OMI services to women in their circumstances.

***Female inmates' histories of abusive relationships have led the OMI to focus on helping them prepare for future relationships even more than helping them nurture current relationships.*** In a survey conducted by the DOC, nearly three quarters of Oklahoma's female inmates reported having been in an abusive couple relationship; as children, 35 percent had been sexually abused and 29 percent physically

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Bureau of Justice, data compiled by Women's Prison Association, available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/csfcf00.pdf>. Also see Special Task Force for Women Incarcerated in Oklahoma (2004). See <http://www.ocjrc.net/pubFiles/OtherPub/R-S/stffwiiio.pdf>

abused.<sup>12</sup> According to the prison's chaplain, some of the women engaged in crime at the behest or under the influence of their male partners. In response to these patterns, the chaplain offered a domestic abuse recovery curriculum for inmates even before PREP was introduced at the prison.

Experience led the DOC to focus on the needs of women who were mostly single and had histories of abuse. When approached to pilot test the PREP curriculum, the chaplain at the Eddie Warrior facility was interested in its potential for helping female inmates identify and avoid or end violent and destructive relationships, for their own benefit and that of their children, who are also at risk of abuse from their mothers' intimate partners. Eventually, they found its focus on sustaining marriage off-target for their inmates, who needed instead to address unhealthy or abusive relationships. Leaders of the OMI received the same message from local welfare offices that began offering PREP to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients, the vast majority of whom were single.

In response, the OMI worked closely with the authors of PREP to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of these and similar groups. The result was "Within My Reach" (WMR). While traditional PREP assumes that couples are in viable relationships, WMR aims to teach individuals how to identify, stabilize, and sustain good relationships; identify and safely exit from dangerous relationships; and make good relationship choices in the future. WMR began to be used at Eddie Warrior when it became available in 2005. Each workshop now begins with WMR, and then covers the standard PREP material as well, so participants can also learn skills to maintain healthy relationships. In all, 12 weekly sessions are held.

***Women's reasons for participating are even more varied than men's.*** The workshop is highly popular with female inmates, so recruitment is not a problem. Inmates at Eddie Warrior learn about the workshop mostly from flyers posted at the educational center and by word of mouth. The program is well-attended, with 3 or 4 classes of 40-70 participants conducted each year. Interviews revealed that trust and rapport with the chaplain was an important reason for female inmates' enthusiasm for the program; they saw her as experienced in the ups and downs of life and relationships, capable of understanding their situations, and able to share her experiences and life lessons with them. They referred to her as "blunt and honest"—someone who would "tell it like it is," but not judge them.

In addition to their interest in the quality of their intimate relationships, inmates have several compelling reasons for participating. As at the male prisons, the women receive completion certificates which are placed in their files, and which may reflect favorably on them during parole hearings. The women, however, have two additional reasons for participation: first, activity in any of the prison's educational programs helps inmates earn privileges on the compound, and second, staff members and inmates believe that completing the class could strengthen a woman's position should she be involved in future child custody proceedings.

***Both chaplain and inmates saw ways to make these highly appreciated workshops still better.*** The inmates felt that WMR helped them set rules or boundaries—such as prohibiting a boyfriend from being alone with her children to reduce the risk of possible child abuse. Some inmates said that before WMR, they did not know how to say "no" to their partners or spouses, or even that they had a right to do so. They felt they had learned about the ingredients of good and bad relationships, and how to balance the fact that no one is perfect with the importance of having a partner who respects you and treats you well. They felt that, after the class, they would have a better chance of deciding what a good relationship is, rather than slipping into a bad one. Many had begun applying some of the skills and concepts they learned in the class to their relationships.

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<sup>12</sup> Special Task Force for Women (see note 11).

Inmates also offered suggestions for strengthening the class. Many had children by multiple partners, and wished that the curriculum included information on how to deal with the issues and challenges these situations create. Many said they would like to have the option of inviting their current partners to attend some of the later PREP sessions, though they recognized the logistical difficulties, such as the remote location of the compound where they were incarcerated.

### ***Implications for Implementing Marriage Education in Prison Settings***

Oklahoma's experience in providing marriage and relationship skills programs in correctional institutions has several potential implications for replication of such services in other jurisdictions.

***Incarceration appears associated with specific couple dynamics that may merit special attention.*** These relationship dynamics may partly explain why inmates' relationships are difficult to maintain, suggest why relationship skills programs are popular with prisoners, and point to issues that should be emphasized. The imbalance of power created by incarceration, the abusive nature of some relationships, and the greater likelihood that male partners will not "wait" for female inmates to complete their sentences imply that curriculum providers should give special attention to particular topics.

While the female partners of male inmates are more likely to remain involved with prisoners during their incarceration, the greatest fear of male inmates is that their partners will leave them. Unfortunately, male inmates often lack the skills for expressing this constructively. Instead they are prone to behaving in ways that are not productive and that contribute to dysfunctional relationships. This confirms that a strong focus on managing conflict is essential, but also that interventions should focus on showing respect, appreciation, and expressing one's feelings. These are the curriculum topics that men in the couples' groups resonated to the most.

Conversely, the male partners of female inmates appear more likely to leave the relationship during incarceration than are female partners to leave male inmates. This suggests that female inmates are more likely to be single than male inmates. Along with the frequency of female prisoners' histories of abuse, this suggests that interventions should focus on ways they can "choose better." This emphasis was well received by the chaplain and female inmates. Nevertheless, some female inmates may be in relationships or marriages that are at least as healthy as those of male inmates, and many of the female inmates interviewed suggested that they would welcome the opportunity to participate in the workshops together with their partners/spouses.

Emerging evidence indicates that relationship education is not only valued by inmates and their partners but may also lead to changes in their understanding of what it takes to make relationships work better. In a recent article published in *Family Process*, Einhorn, et al, show that inmates in the Oklahoma prison PREP program actually reported gains in such relationship variables as satisfactions with relationship, communications skills, and friendship.<sup>13</sup> Although not based on a random assignment treatment protocol, the pre/post analysis showed potential for improved prison programming directed at strengthening family relationships. Findings held true regardless of gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

***Marriage education for prisoners who are not in a relationship or marriage may need to be enhanced.*** The OMI quickly recognized the need to adapt PREP to address the needs of women prisoners who were primarily not currently in a partnered relationship and worked with the curriculum developers to do so.

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<sup>13</sup> Einhorn, L.A., Williams, T., Stanley, S.M., Wunderlin, N.K., Markman, H.J. & Eason, J. (2008), PREP Inside and Out: Marriage Education for Inmates. *Family Process*, Vol 47, No 3.



More men than women in prison were in coupled relationships, but men who participated in the singles group were less enthusiastic than those who had participated in a couples group. They found it harder to apply the couples-based skill lessons, were concerned that they wouldn't remember enough to share the knowledge with a partner once they found one, and were interested to learn more about domestic violence. Agencies implementing relationship education within a prison context need to consider whether multiple kinds of relationship education might increase the value of this training in their facilities.

***Characteristics of the correctional setting may have implications for programs in other prison systems.*** Every state prison system is different. The nature of prison settings in Oklahoma and the relationship between the OMI and the DOC may help explain why relationship education has become an accepted part of prison programming, even if not regularly offered in every Oklahoma prison. Practitioners thinking of offering similar programs elsewhere need to address these issues as part of their planning process.

- *Richness of the service environment and focus on rehabilitation.* Oklahoma has a relatively rich service environment in its prisons, providing a variety of programs from educational and career development services to substance abuse treatment. Other states may not be as focused on providing reentry services and programming for prisoners.
- *Autonomy of individual prisons.* Although state systems usually govern individual prisons, some states give considerable autonomy and flexibility to local prisons. This autonomy can mean that even within the same state system, some wardens will be more open to new programs than others.
- *Supply of respected, experienced, and engaging personalities committed to the program.* At each of the prisons we visited, the chaplains (and trained inmates, at the men's facilities) were highly respected by participating inmates, and described as charismatic and caring. Participants remarked on how this drew them to the program and contributed to what they got out of it.
- *Instability in staffing chaplain positions.* Due to budget pressures, not all Oklahoma prisons have full-time chaplains. Some prisons experience considerable turnover, sometimes using volunteer chaplains from the surrounding community with limited time to spend with inmates. Stability of the program leadership is important for implementation success.
- *Security issues (for couples classes).* When spouses/partners are expected to participate with inmates, striking a balance between security and programming becomes important. The program provider must skillfully navigate this balance to meet the inmates' needs without compromising safety.

#### ***Evaluation Methodology for the OMI Process Study***

*Information reported in the OMI research brief series is based on an analysis of data gathered during a multi-year study of the initiative's design, development, and implementation. Study methodologies included semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups, direct observation of program operations, focus groups with staff and participants, and secondary analysis of data from existing reports and surveys. The research team met directly with more than 160 people involved with the OMI in various ways, focusing on implementation in the education, social services, health, military, and community volunteer sectors, and including a special emphasis on OMI services within the state's correctional system. A full report of the findings of this study was released in December 2008. Mathematica's research team was led by M. Robin Dion, and included Alan Hershey, Debra A. Strong, Heather Zaveri, Sarah Avellar, Tim Silman, Nikki Aikens, Betsy Santos, and Shawn Marsh.*

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