



“Always having hope”: Father–child relationships after reentry from prison

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ABSTRACT

Despite a substantial base of literature on father–child relationships, little is known about how incarceration affects these relationships, or how fathers connect with and support their children during the reentry period. In the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP) sample, deterioration from preincarceration to reentry was evident in various aspects of father–child relationships, including reduced coresidence, financial support, and frequency of father–child activities. Multivariate modeling and qualitative analysis identified factors that shaped these aspects of father–child relationships at reentry, including father–child contact during incarceration, child age, and fathers’ relationships with their partners or coparents.

KEYWORDS

Family; incarcerated parent; incarceration; parenting; reentry

Background

The effects of incarceration extend beyond the incarcerated individual, and also beyond the time of confinement. Following their release from prison, justice-involved persons must navigate significant reentry challenges, including obtaining housing, securing employment, and fulfilling parole requirements. Among those with children, the reentry process often presents additional challenges related to parenting. Paternal incarceration has known, lasting effects on children, including increased risk of infant mortality (Wildeman, 2012), increased behavioral issues and mental health problems (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011), and cumulative disadvantage as a result of loss of a father’s income (Davis, 1992; Grinstead, Faigles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001; Wildeman, 2009). Less is known about the long-term effects of incarceration on parenting and father–child relationships, and how these relationships may evolve as fathers and children reunite during the reentry period.

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Reentering fathers can face a number of unique parenting issues, including resuming contact with children, providing them with financial support, and rebuilding closeness following incarceration. Resuming contact is a necessary, although not fully sufficient, condition for maintaining or rebuilding a strong father–child relationship (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999), and coresidence greatly facilitates daily interaction. Reentering men who do not reside with their children after release may face the additional barriers to father–child contact experienced by nonresidential fathers in the general population, such as geographic distance and transportation (Leite & McKenry, 2006; Miller, 2006). Nonresidential fatherhood prior to incarceration is common: an estimated 44–64% of incarcerated fathers report having any nonresidential children prior to their incarceration (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Mumola, 2006). Multiple factors influence whether or not a father will reside with his children upon release, including the relationship he has with his coparent and any new intimate relationships that he or the coparent has formed (Roy & Dyson, 2005). As mothers are often the “gatekeepers” between incarcerated fathers and their children during an incarceration, strained relationships might prevent fathers from resuming contact with their children during reentry as well (Nurse, 2004; Smith, 2014).

Financially supporting children after release can be a major challenge for formerly incarcerated fathers. Evidence from general-population parenting studies indicates that fathers often see their role as a “breadwinner,” or main source of financial support, as integral to their relationships with their children; consequently, father–child relationships can deteriorate when fathers feel that they are not fulfilling their financial role in the family (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985; McLoyd, 1989). Financial support, via formal child support as well as other means, is also strongly related to positive father–child relationships among nonresidential fathers (King, 1994; Seltzer, 1991). These findings suggest potential challenges for reentering fathers, as men often experience great difficulty securing sufficient employment following incarceration (Visser, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011; Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001). Further, the financial effects of incarceration last beyond the immediate reentry period; in the year after a father’s release from prison, family income is on average 15% lower than the year before incarceration (Johnson, 2009), and families of fathers with an incarceration history are more likely to experience material hardship, after controlling for demographic and behavioral factors (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011). These financial challenges can place additional strain on family relationships, including father–child and intimate partner or coparenting relationships (Conger & Elder, 1994; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002).

While establishing contact with children and providing financial support are key tasks awaiting reentering fathers upon release, a longer-term

consideration in the father–child relationship is the establishment of emotional closeness and high-quality interactions. Frequency of contact has been found to have a limited effect on reported father–child closeness, while high quality of contact (including “authoritative parenting” that encompasses paternal emotional support, warmth, and limit setting) appears more important to the father–child bond (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). General population research has shown that high-quality father–child relationships (defined in one study by high positive affect, high task orientation, and low intrusiveness) can develop (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007) even when the amount of time that fathers and children spend together is low. The importance of quality of contact between fathers and children is further supported by a study of nonresidential fathers which found that when nonresidential fathers had frequent contact with a focal child, but were psychologically distant, children were more likely to exhibit behavior problems (Taanila et al., 2002). Closeness between fathers and their children may be increasingly difficult to maintain as children transition into adolescence, a period of declining father–child interaction and increased conflict (Larson et al. 1996; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001).

Despite a substantial base of literature on father–child relationships, our understanding of parenting after incarceration remains limited. Little is known about how relationships between fathers and their children change as a result of incarceration, or how fathers connect with, support, and relate to their children once they return to the community. This article compares several major dimensions of father–child relationships before and after an incarceration, identifies factors that influence these key aspects of father–child relationships during the reentry period, and offers a qualitative perspective on how and why fathers and their families mobilize scarce resources to meet the challenges associated with rebuilding father–child relationships.

Foundational research on fatherhood and child well-being has identified father–child warmth (Brown et al., 2007; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008), coresidence (Tach, Edin, Harvey, & Bryan, 2014), financial support (via formal child support as well as other means; King, 1994; Seltzer, 1991), frequency of activities or contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999), and parenting relationship quality (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Brown et al., 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001) as major dimensions of father–child relationships. Prior literature suggests a number of factors that could influence these dimensions of father–child relationships, including child age (Amato, 1989; Bailey, 1994; Larson et al., 1996; Shearer, Crouter, & McHale, 2005; Yeung et al., 2001), the status and quality of fathers’ relationships with their coparents (Nurse, 2004; Smith, 2014), family contact during incarceration (Bales & Mears, 2008; Berg & Huebner, 2010; Hairston, 1991; Mills & Codd, 2008; Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010), and fathers’ participation in parenting or fatherhood

programming during incarceration (Robbers, 2005; Skarupski et al., 2003). In addition to these factors suggested by prior works, our analysis also examines the role of fathers' incarceration histories. Repeated periods of incarceration may weaken family relationships and decrease mothers' willingness to facilitate contact between fathers and their children during incarceration, after release, or both. Further, qualitative work on parent-child relationships at reentry finds widespread discrepancies between children's hopes and their expectations for their postrelease relationships with a reentering parent (Johnson & Easterling, 2015), suggesting that prior histories of reentry-related disappointment and loss could be shaping their experiences.

Although many other experiences of reentering fathers and their children are yet to be understood, the findings presented here offer an important foundation for supporting their well-being, and strengthening families and communities during the reentry period and beyond.

Methods

Data collection approach

This article examines father-child relationship quality before and after incarceration using quantitative and qualitative data from the Multi-Site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting, and Partnering, or MFS-IP (described in "The Multi-Site Family Study: Design and Sample" in this issue). It focuses on a subsample of 772 male MFS-IP survey respondents who had children and who completed a study follow-up interview after their release from prison,¹ as well as a sample of 62 study fathers and mothers who completed MFS-IP qualitative interviews shortly before and/or after the father's incarceration. Qualitative interviews and baseline and postrelease surveys elicited detailed information on a wide range of topics related to the family lives of incarcerated fathers in committed intimate or coparenting relationships. The baseline interview was conducted an average of just over two years into the fathers' incarcerations and elicited their reports of preincarceration experiences as well as reports of family life during the incarceration. The first postrelease interview captured experiences since the father's release from incarceration, and was conducted an average of 6 months after release. All interviews captured detailed information about a "focal child," who was selected at the father's baseline interview. (Selection of a focal child prioritized children who were closest to age 8 and were coparented by both the father and the committed intimate or coparenting partner whom he identified at baseline.) Survey reports of father-child relationship quality focused on the father's relationship with this focal child.

Analytic approach

Our mixed-methods approach used MFS-IP survey data to identify how father–child relationships changed quantitatively from preincarceration to postrelease, and to identify the quantitative factors that influenced key dimensions of those relationships after reentry from prison. We then carried out a qualitative analysis to enrich our understanding and interpretation of the quantitative findings.

The quantitative analysis used data from the fathers' MFS-IP baseline surveys and first postrelease interviews to compare three key dimensions of father–child relationships before and after incarceration: coresidence, financial support, and frequency of father–child activities. First, we examined the fathers' coresidence with and financial support for their focal children, comparing postrelease experiences with those reported at baseline for the preincarceration time period using matched pairs *t*-tests. Next, predictors of father–child coresidence and fathers' financial support for their children after release were identified using multivariate logistic regression models. Based on prior research and guided by the results of a series of bivariate logistic regressions, we tested for the potential statistical significance of the following independent variables in influencing father–child coresidence and financial support after the father's release from prison:

- Age of focal child
- Whether the father was married to his survey partner at baseline
- Father's report of relationship happiness with the survey partner at baseline (rating from 1–10 with higher numbers indicating greater happiness)
- Father's report of the couple's conflict resolution skills at baseline (scale from 0–12 with higher values indicating better conflict resolution skills)
- Father's contact with focal child during his incarceration (a 4-point scale reflecting the types of contact the father reported having with the focal child during his incarceration: in-person visits, telephone calls, father sending mail, and father receiving mail)
- Whether the father participated in parenting classes during the baseline incarceration
- Father's incarceration history (number of adult incarcerations)

In addition, the models controlled for program site and the baseline measure of the outcome.²

Next, using the same set of independent variables as for the coresidence and financial support models, we ran additional multivariate models to identify predictors of parental warmth, self-reported relationship quality, and activity frequency. These models were run separately for residential and nonresidential fathers, because of the possibility that the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables (which primarily used frequency-based measures such as, "How often did you")

might differ according to a father's residential status (Hofferth et al., 2007). Parental warmth was operationalized using a 12-point scale dichotomized at 0–9 versus 10–12, reflecting how often the father reported engaging in the following activities with the focal child since his from incarceration: praising the child, hugging or showing physical affection with the child, communicating with the child about his/her interests, and telling the child that he loves him/her. The father's self-reported relationship quality with the focal child was based on a single item asking fathers to rate their current relationship with their focal children, dichotomized as “poor or fair” and “good or excellent.” Frequency of activities was operationalized as how many days per week fathers reported doing an activity with their focal children, such as eating meals, going shopping, helping with homework, or doing something fun with the child. Residential fathers who engaged in an activity 6–7 days per week were compared with those who engaged in an activity 0–5 days per week. Nonresidential fathers who engaged in an activity 1–7 days per week were compared with those who engaged in an activity 0 days per week.

Results from multivariate modeling were used to guide analysis of qualitative data from detailed, individual, open-ended interviews with a subset of formerly incarcerated fathers and their partners recruited from within the quantitative study sample. Qualitative interview data were transcribed and loaded into ATLAS.ti for coding. A codebook was developed jointly by the analysis team, incorporating deductive codes based on the study research questions (see “The Multi-Site Family Study: Design and Sample” in this issue), as well as inductive codes to capture themes that emerged during the coding and data review process. Queries of coded data were run in ATLAS.ti to capture segments of text that focused on parenting and reentry and in which interviewees identified what had positively or negatively shaped their parenting experiences. Analysts read the code reports for these queries, identified salient themes, and met to discuss how these themes informed each of the quantitative findings. Analytic memos were used to develop and expand themes, and key themes and the exemplary quotations associated with them were tracked in an Excel spreadsheet.

Sample characteristics

The quantitative analysis focused on 772 men (out of a total of 1,991 male MFS-IP study participants) who had children and who were released from prison prior to one of the study follow-up interviews. Demographic and family characteristics of those fathers at baseline are shown in [Table 1](#). Most of the fathers in the quantitative analysis sample reported being in nonmarried intimate relationships that were exclusive and long term. On average, fathers had three children. The majority of fathers coparented at least one

Table 1. Sample characteristics at baseline.

Variable	Fathers in quantitative sample ^a	Fathers in qualitative sample ^b	Mothers in qualitative sample ^c
Age			
Age at study enrollment (<i>M</i>)	32.5 years	33.7 years	33.9 years
Relationship with survey partner			
Relationship status			
Married	22%	21%	25%
In an intimate relationship	72%	76%	64%
In a coparenting relationship only	6%	3%	11%
In an exclusive relationship	85%	91%	89%
Duration of relationship, if married/intimate (<i>M</i>)	7.1 years	10.1 years	10.0 years
Parenting/coparenting characteristics			
Number of children (<i>M</i>)	3.1	2.8	2.5
Number of coparents (<i>M</i>)	2.8	3.1	2.0
Age of focal child (<i>M</i>)	7.0 years	6.1 years	7.2 years
Coparent any children with study partner	87%	82%	76%
Incarceration history			
Age at first arrest (<i>M</i>)	16.3 years	17.4 years	(not asked)
Number of previous adult incarcerations (<i>M</i>)	6.5	7.0	1.8
Duration of current incarceration (<i>M</i>)	2.3 years	2.5 years	(n/a)

^a*n* = 772. ^b*n* = 33. ^c*n* = 29.

child with their study partners and reported an average of three coparents with whom they raised children. Focal children, on whom many parenting-related questions focused, were an average of 7 years old at baseline. Fathers had fairly extensive criminal justice histories beginning around age 16.

Qualitative analyses incorporated data from the first 68 MFS-IP study qualitative interviews, which were completed with 62 reentering fathers and their partners (see Table 1)³. As shown in Table 1, the 33 fathers and 29 mothers in the qualitative subsample generally resembled the larger quantitative sample in terms of demographic, family, and incarceration-related characteristics. Fathers in the qualitative subsample, however, had been in relationship with their survey partners for an average of 10 years at baseline (compared to an average of seven years among fathers in the quantitative subsample) and their focal children were an average of six years old at baseline (compared to an average age of seven years old among focal children of quantitative subsample fathers).

Results from quantitative analysis

Change in father-child relationships from preincarceration to reentry

A pattern of deterioration from preincarceration to reentry was evident in quantitative comparisons of father-child relationships reported during fathers' baseline and first postrelease interviews. As shown in Figure 1,

significantly fewer fathers lived with their focal children after release from prison (50%) compared to during the 6 months before the incarceration (70%, $p < .001$). The proportion of fathers who provided financial support for their focal children was also significantly lower at the first postrelease follow-up interview (75%) than before the incarceration (87%, $p < .001$).

Frequency of father–child activities also tended to decline from preincarceration to postrelease ($p < .001$). As shown in Figure 2, however, several distinct patterns were evident within this overall picture of decline: While 39% of fathers saw their children less frequently after release than they had during the 6 months prior to incarceration, 17% saw their children more frequently after release. For another 43%, frequency of father–child activities was stable across the two time periods.

Predictors of father–child coresidence and financial support

Multivariate logistic regression results showed that fathers were more likely to live with their focal children after release if the focal child was younger ($p < .05$), there was more frequent father–child contact during the incarceration ($p < .001$), the father was married to his survey partner at baseline ($p < .01$), and the father was happier in his relationship with his survey partner at baseline ($p < .001$) (Table 2).

As shown in Table 3, fathers were more likely to financially support their focal children after release in cases where the focal child was younger ($p < .001$), there was more frequent father–child contact during the incarceration ($p < .001$), and the father reported stronger conflict resolution skills in relationship with his survey partner ($p < .05$).⁴

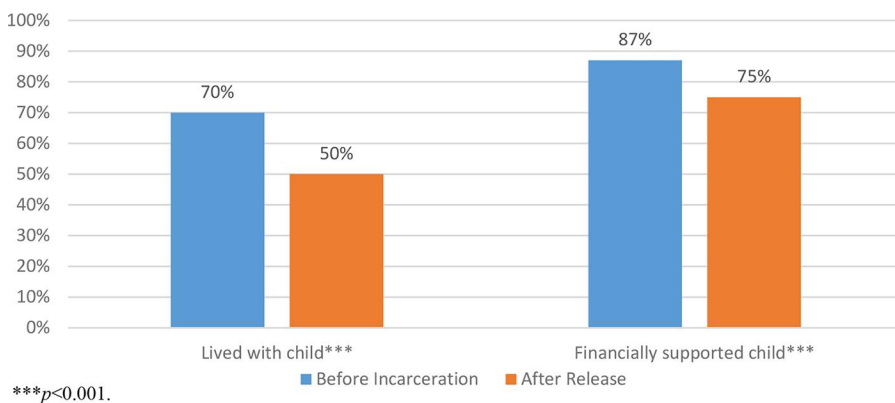


Figure 1. Proportion of fathers who lived with and provided financial support for focal children before incarceration and after release.

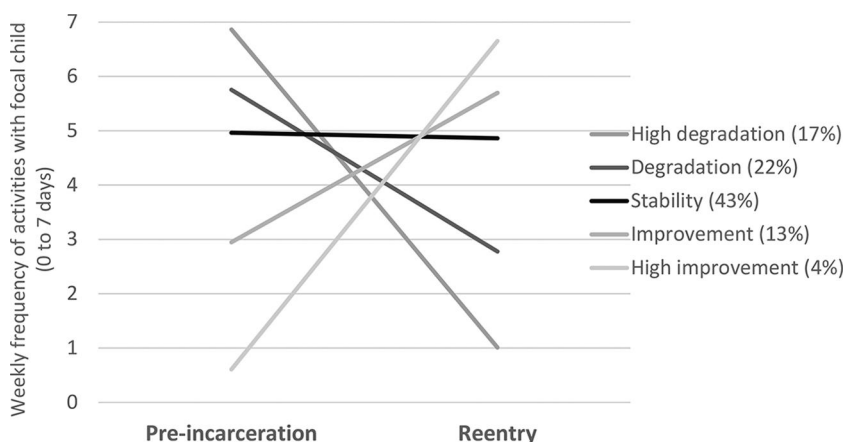


Figure 2. Change in frequency of father-child activities from before incarceration to after release.

Predictors of paternal warmth, self-reported relationship quality, and activity frequency

Multivariate models were constructed to explore three additional dimensions of father-child relationship quality at reentry: paternal warmth, the father's rating of father-child relationship quality, and the frequency of father-child activities. These models were run separately for residential and nonresidential fathers. Paternal warmth at reentry increased with younger child age for both residential and nonresidential fathers.⁵ For both residential and nonresidential fathers, self-reported quality of the father-child relationship increased with younger child age and the father's relationship happiness with his survey

Table 2. Predictors of father-child coresidence after release ($N = 629$).

Predictor	Coefficient	SE	95% confidence interval	
			Lower	Upper
Age of focal child	-0.0450*	0.0214	-0.0869	-0.0031
Father-child contact during his incarceration	0.4104***	0.0758	0.2620	0.5589
Whether the father was married to his survey partner	0.5918**	0.2238	0.1532	1.0303
Father's report of relationship happiness with the survey partner	0.1550***	0.0331	0.0902	0.2198
Father's report of couple's conflict resolution skills	-0.0010	0.0375	-0.0745	0.0724
Father's incarceration history	0.0215	0.0125	-0.0030	0.0459
Whether the father participated in parenting classes during baseline incarceration	-0.1564	0.1904	-0.5296	0.2167
Site				
OH	0.4297*	0.2137	0.0109	0.8484
NY	0.5416	0.5360	-0.5089	1.5921
NJ	0.3793	0.2650	-0.1401	0.8987
MN	-0.3574	0.4915	-1.3207	0.6059
Baseline measure of outcome (dichotomous)	1.1365***	0.2092	0.7266	1.5465
Constant	-2.8560***	0.4489	-3.7358	-1.9761

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Predictors of father's financial support for focal child after release ($N = 628$).

Predictor	Coefficient	SE	95% confidence interval	
			Lower	Upper
Age of focal child	−0.0943***	0.0231	−0.1395	−0.0491
Father–child contact during his incarceration	0.3024***	0.0781	0.1494	0.4555
Whether the father was married to his survey partner	0.0886	0.2482	−0.3979	0.5751
Father's report of relationship happiness with the survey partner	0.0474	0.0358	−0.0229	0.1176
Father's report of couple's conflict resolution skills	0.1027*	0.0408	0.0227	0.1827
Father's incarceration history	0.0036	0.0134	−0.0226	0.0298
Whether the father participated in parenting classes during baseline incarceration	0.0168	0.2144	−0.4035	0.4371
Site				
OH	−0.1364	0.2444	−0.6154	0.3426
NY	−0.5167	0.5876	−1.6685	0.6350
NJ	−0.7653**	0.2839	−1.3217	−0.2088
MN	−0.7025	0.4826	−1.6483	0.2434
Baseline measure of outcome (dichotomous)	1.2352***	0.2588	0.7279	1.7425
Constant	−0.7953	0.4711	−1.7186	0.1280

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

partner. For nonresidential fathers, the father's conflict resolution skills with his survey partner were also associated with father–child relationship quality.⁶ For nonresidential fathers, frequency of father–child activities after release was significantly associated with younger child age, greater father–child contact during incarceration, and higher relationship happiness with his survey partner. For residential fathers, frequency of father–child activities after release was significantly associated with just one independent variable, younger child age.⁷

When these three models were run without controlling for the father's relationship with his partner/coparent (e.g., when marital status, relationship happiness, and conflict resolution skills were removed from the models), father–child contact during the incarceration became a statistically significant predictor of frequency of activities with the child for residential fathers ($p < .05$ for both residential and nonresidential fathers when partner/coparent relationship factors were excluded) and of self-reported father–child relationship quality after release ($p < .05$ for nonresidential fathers only).

Results from qualitative analysis

Data from open-ended interviews with MFS-IP parents shed light on the observed empirical significance of partner/coparent relationships, father–child contact during incarceration, and child age in shaping fathers' relationships with their children after release from prison. They also help to contextualize the deterioration from preincarceration to reentry that was observed across several dimensions of father–child relationships, including coresidence, financial support, and frequency of father–child activities.

Although the qualitative themes that emerged cannot represent the experiences of all reentering fathers (or even all fathers in our sample), they greatly enrich the understanding generated from quantitative modeling.

Role of the partner/coparent relationship in postrelease parenting outcomes

In quantitative modeling, three aspects of the partner/coparent relationship—marital status with the survey partner, relationship happiness, and conflict resolution skills in the relationship—influenced father–child relationships at reentry. Qualitative data suggest that men’s partners/coparents played both supporting and constraining roles in fathers’ efforts to re-establish a parenting role during the reentry period. Most mothers in the qualitative study sample poured great time and energy into supporting father–child relationships at reentry. Among resident fathers, mothers typically provided housing for fathers and their children, maintained financial responsibility for children (and often fathers) while fathers looked for work, helped to create specific opportunities for father involvement and father–child activities, helped fathers to catch up on their children’s development and daily routines, and provided them with coaching and encouragement on their interactions with their children. For nonresident fathers, mothers helped to create specific opportunities for father–child activities, and sometimes offered transportation or other resources to support these activities. Regardless of fathers’ residential status, mothers provided guidance and encouragement for fathers’ efforts to reconnect with their children.

However, mothers sometimes prevented fathers from interacting with their children because they did not trust that fathers would parent appropriately. Mothers tended to constrain interactions on a temporary basis and in an effort to protect their children. Both mothers and fathers described how fathers had to win mothers’ confidence in their parenting abilities during reentry:

It is like she always tells me she doesn’t trust me with my kid but like I have never, ever given her a reason not to trust me with her kid. But like I said, we are working on that. We are starting to—we have got a good line of communication going now. She is starting to let [son] come over here and stay on the weekends and stuff.

Constraints placed by mothers on fathers’ interactions with their children were also sometimes related to new romantic relationships with other men. Mothers’ new partners had often assumed caregiving responsibilities while fathers were incarcerated, and did not always facilitate fathers rejoining their children’s lives. Fathers expressed frustration with this barrier, mingled sometimes with appreciation for the care other men had shown

their children. As one put it, “I am not even mad at him. My initial approach will be to thank that man first and foremost for what he did for my son.”

Even mothers who were critical of or resistant to fathers’ parenting after their release from prison often expressed hope that fathers would someday play a positive role in their children’s lives. When the partner/coparent relationships were strained but both parents wished for children to have contact with their fathers, many respondents reported that extended family members played a key role in facilitating this contact. They noted that such support had often begun with family members facilitating father–child contact during the father’s incarceration. After the father’s release, parents reported how grandparents and other extended family members facilitated contact by supervising, hosting, and/or providing transportation for father–child visits; assisting with child care; and contributing to children’s financial support as fathers worked to find stable housing and employment and repair their parenting and coparenting relationships:

I can’t give the credit to myself, it’s all to my family, my sister and my mother ... It’s the family. You’ve got to have family. If you ain’t got no family, you know, you wouldn’t, I wouldn’t see the kids at all.

Role of contact during incarceration in postrelease parenting outcomes

In multivariate modeling, father–child contact during incarceration predicted coresidence and financial support after release, and—when the partner/coparent relationship was not controlled for—also predicted frequency of father child-activities (for both residential and nonresidential fathers) and father–child relationship quality (for nonresidential fathers only). Qualitative findings suggest that contact during incarceration affected father–child relationships after release in different ways. Fathers expressed that being a parent meant “being there” for their children, and no amount of telephone calls, letters, or in-person visitation during their incarceration mitigated the feeling that they weren’t “there” for their children while imprisoned. When one father was asked to identify the hardest thing about parenting during a father’s incarceration, he replied: “Not being there, not being there. That is the hardest thing, not being there. What can you do? What can you really say? You can’t even get your point across. That is the hardest thing.”

Fathers often described their interactions with children during incarceration as short, shallow, or otherwise restricted. Fathers felt unable to communicate in ways that would allow them to parent effectively. As one father described it, “I didn’t know how to be a dad over the phone.”

Despite the limitations associated with contact during incarceration, fathers clearly valued opportunities to interact with their children, and some did describe how keeping in touch with their children during the incarceration facilitated a better postrelease relationship:

So they started knowing me more through my letters: “Hey, how you doing? How’s school? How’s basketball?” ... So I was, like, writing letters, they write me back. You know, I’d send them birthday cards and everything. So I built a relationship between us. So, they start knowing me and they start liking me. And when I came home we just clicked right off the gate.

Both fathers and mothers also explicitly critiqued prisons as erecting barriers to father–child contact. They explained that visitor searches were invasive and potentially traumatic for children, and described how limited visitation time and space compounded schedule and transportation issues, keeping fathers and their children apart:

This visiting room is so small that—this month I [only] got one visit [with my children] because it has been so packed. ... You have to schedule—you have to call and schedule it. ... And it has got to work on the right day, the day [mom] doesn’t have to work or the days the kids aren’t at school.

Although participation in parenting programs during incarceration was nonsignificant in logistic regression models, such programs were often cited by parents in the qualitative sample as providing important opportunities for more frequent, lengthy, and intimate family interaction than was otherwise possible during the incarceration. One father compared: “Regular visits, you’re just there talking. But, like, during programs you guys interact, hug and touch your family and sit next to them how you want to, versus having to sit like you’re watching the opera or something.”

Role of child age in postrelease parenting outcomes

Multivariate models indicated that fathers of younger focal children demonstrated more warmth, engaged in more frequent activities, and experienced higher-quality relationships after release compared to fathers of older children. Qualitative data suggest that fathers working to reunite with older children encountered several distinct challenges. First, many had been incarcerated through major developmental phases in their children’s lives, and returned home to find older children utterly changed. Two different mothers recounted this problem poignantly:

He is like, “I came home, she got breasts, butt, she got a period. When I left, she was just a little baby in pampers.”

It is kind of like being in a—a dark space. ... You know, like being in a coma and waking up and [his son] is 15. And I think that puts a lot of stress between the two of them.

Interviewees commonly described how fathers of older children struggled to adjust their parenting approach to catch up to their children's current developmental stages. Female partners often bemoaned what they saw as fathers reasserting themselves in their older children's lives without sufficiently understanding how the children or their activities had changed.

Respondents also noted that, compared to younger children, older children seemed more likely to harbor hard feelings about their fathers' time away: "So I know I just can't jump back in where I was, I have to pick it up slow and work on our relationships. More so with the oldest. He is the one with the most resentment."

Similarly, parents reported that older children were reluctant to accept the authority of fathers who had long been absent from the household and were still unfamiliar with its routines:

I haven't been there. I can't just tell him to go to sleep. ... He is going to look at me like, "You just came in my life. How are you going to tell me to go to sleep? I don't go to sleep at this time. I go to sleep when I feel like it," or "I go to sleep at this time."

Finally, some older children seemed to doubt that their fathers were home for good:

Oh, you've got to earn their trust again. That was the hardest part right there, earning her trust. Earning my oldest daughter's trust, anyway. My other two, they flock to me because they—you know, they're still little. But my oldest, she think I was going to be back out here on that law ride again. But now she's coming around.

Fathers of older children coped with these three challenges in a variety of ways. For some, a sense of having lost their chances with older children led them to refocus fathering efforts on younger ones. As one father explained after listing his goals for his relationships with his younger children, "I feel that it is too late for the older ones, who don't even know who I am or anything. I am ... [first name], you know, not Dad." Many others, however, described a slow and patient process of getting to know their older children again, of "eas[ing] my way into it," while coping with their own impatience and longing for more connection to their children:

I am wanting to catch up, and I am trying to—you know, I am a go getter: "What you been doing? How you been doing? Who are your friends? Bring your friends over. Let me get to know them." "Dad, come on, man!" ... They are different people, so you have to get to know them again. Start all over. I got to get to know them first.

Differences in father-child coresidence at reentry

In the quantitative sample, fewer fathers lived with their focal children after release than before incarceration, and the factors that influenced postrelease

parenting often differed depending on residential versus nonresidential parenting status. Our qualitative data do not specifically address how these factors might have operated differently for residential versus nonresidential fathers. They do indicate, however, that nonresidential fathers faced two serious (and related) challenges not faced by residential fathers: distance and transportation. Fathers who lacked a residence to return to at the time of release were commonly sent to temporary housing, which could be far from family: “Unless you are providing your own spot to go, then they just put you wherever within the district.” Other fathers were paroled to communities from which their coparents and children had moved. Fathers rarely had easy access to cars or other forms of transportation, and cited distance as a major barrier in their efforts to see their children:

They was coming over on the weekend. See, now it’s kind of hard because I ain’t driving no more. So I can’t go get them ... I was going to pick them up from school every day. They was with me every day then. Yeah, because I had transportation. I could get to them. See, now I can’t really get to them like I want to.

For some fathers, formal restrictions on movement (such as home confinement or legal constraints on travel) further exacerbated the physical distances that separated them from their children.

Differences in father–child financial support at reentry

Fathers in the quantitative study sample were less likely to provide financial support for their children after their release than before incarceration, and the struggle to provide financially for children was highly salient in qualitative interviews. Reentering fathers saw employment as crucial to meeting their parenting responsibilities, but many encountered criminal record-related hiring biases that limited their employment options and thus their ability to provide:

I knew it was going to be hard, because it is like, when you apply for jobs and they ask if you have been convicted of a felony within the last 7 or 8 years, and by me getting out recently, it is like, “Well, I have been convicted in the last 5 years.” I know I am not going to get a job. What am I going to do to provide for my children? And they are getting older, they need more and they need bigger than what I can do.

Some fathers also felt that the desperation of their search for employment in the context of children’s pressing material needs went unrecognized by the criminal justice system:

I had two different parole officers and it seemed like they were both continually trying to find ways to lock me up. ... No one has ever helped me find a job ... and like I said, I have my son, and he is in my custody now. He is not even enrolled in school. So I am bugging [parole officer], “Hey, I have responsibilities!”

In the context of ongoing employment struggles, partners/coparents and other family members often worked hard to make up for fathers' lack of financial resources and ensure that children were provided for. Still, fathers expressed that limited access to money directly affected their efforts to be a positive presence in their children's lives—both because they so often had to turn down their children's material requests, and because they lacked the funds for father–child activities that they had previously enjoyed.

Differences in frequency of father–child activities at reentry

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses document an array of challenges that likely contributed to the observed decline in average frequency of father–child engagement from preincarceration to reentry ($p < .001$). Yet survey data also indicate that many reentering fathers successfully maintained (43%) or even increased (17%) the frequency of their activities with their children compared to preincarceration levels. For some families, the father's improved engagement with his children after release occurred relative to very disengaged preincarceration parenting:

Before he got released, I just expected he was going to be the same now that he was before he got locked up, running the streets, partying, not caring about responsibilities. That's what I was expecting ... [but] he got him a little apartment, he got a job, he don't be out here on these streets, he don't drink, and he's a full-time father.

Some fathers in the qualitative sample described how the experience of incarceration brought maturity and a new level of insight to their actions and relationships, which fundamentally changed how they approached parenthood:

Before I went to jail, I was young. And, like, I didn't care about anything. I didn't have a care in the world. Although I did have a daughter, I still felt like I was young and I wanted to do whatever I wanted. And there was no like—there was no limit to anything I could do. And I was just, like, I would always think irrationally, and the outcome was never positive. So, now that I have had all of this time to sit and think about my thoughts and actions, I probably think a lot better than I did when I was 22. Because I actually had the time to sit on and realize “What do I got? What do I got to lose?” ... and I don't think irrationally no more. I always think about my family first. And the decisions that I do make always involve them.

These fathers had often formed a firm conviction during their prison terms that fatherhood would be a primary focus in their postrelease lives. For many, the new (or renewed) focus on fatherhood translated into strongly prioritizing “being there” for their children in a way they could not during incarceration:

It is wonderful ... but we still got a long ways to go. She didn't have to listen to me for all of those years, because I wasn't there. And it is just—it is a hurdle I have to overcome. So, it's going to take working with her for the rest of our lives, I guess, to

overcome that obstacle ... [but] she is starting to listen, and she is starting to realize that I am going to be here, and I am not going nowhere.

Reentering fathers took conspicuous pride in describing at length the various mundane and special activities they did with their children after release. They expressed great hope that the presence of a caring and involved father, which many had lacked themselves, might lift their children up and protect them from justice system involvement and other harms. As one father stated simply, "I am trying to be a good dad and be there. I didn't have my dad there my whole life, but I want that for my daughter. So, she is my main priority." One father captured the sentiments of many others in explaining what he regarded as the best thing about being a parent:

Always having hope. ... You look forward to, like, doing the right thing. You look forward to giving that child good, sound advice which is going to help them succeed in the future. Those are the things that really kept me going, you know.

Discussion

Previous work suggests that the effects of imprisonment on family relationships can outlast the incarceration itself (Khan et al. 2011; Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004; Western and McLanahan, 2000). Understanding how parent-child relationships suffer or recover in the wake of a father's incarceration is important to efforts to stem the downstream effects of parental incarceration on child well-being (e.g., Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013). The analyses reported here integrated survey data from a large sample of incarcerated fathers (who were asked about their family lives before and during an incarceration and again after release), as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with a subset of these fathers and their partners/coparents. Our analyses quantified changes in father-child coresidence, financial support, and frequency of father-child activities from preincarceration to postrelease, and identified factors that influenced various dimensions of father-child relationships at reentry. Qualitative findings help to explain and support these quantitative results, while also exposing the subjectively painful and challenging work of rebuilding father-child relationships at reentry, and the immense effort and determination that fathers, mothers, and other family members brought to it.

Deterioration in father-child relationships

These findings identify statistically significant deterioration from preincarceration to postrelease in three aspects of father-child relationships: coresidence ($p < .001$), financial support ($p < .001$), and frequency of father-child activities ($p < .001$). Although many nonresidential fathers do sustain healthy

relationships with their children (Aquilino, 2006), father–child coresidence facilitates daily communication, caretaking, and support, and creates informal opportunities for joint play, help with homework or other tasks, and sharing in household chores (Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda, 2012). The observed decline in rates of coresidence, from 70% preincarceration to 50% after release, suggests that a father’s incarceration results in enduring disruption in many households. Along with qualitative interview findings, it suggests that many reentering fathers find themselves newly navigating the challenges of nonresidential fatherhood (negotiating with children’s mothers or other caretakers, formally scheduling visitation time, and finding transportation and space for father–child activities) alongside the acute housing- and employment-related challenges faced by reentering persons generally. Qualitative findings suggest that transportation, in particular, presented a formidable obstacle for fathers who did not live with their children after release. The combination of decreased rates of residential parenting and particular barriers to contact faced by nonresidential fathers (such as transportation to reach their children) may help to explain the lower frequency with which fathers in this sample engaged in activities with their focal children after release.

The reality of prolonged household disruption for children of reentering men was further evident in the reduced proportion of fathers who provided any financial support to their focal children after release. Whereas 87% had provided some financial support before their incarceration, just 75% were doing so at the time of their postrelease interview, when fathers had been back in the community for an average of 6 months. General population research suggests that providing financial support for children can be a proxy for fathers’ feelings of responsibility for, and investment in, their long-term relationships with their children (Magnuson & Gibson-Davis, 2007). Previous studies have found that some fathers do indeed feel less connected to their children after an incarceration (Hairston, 2003; Western and McLanahan, 2000; Western and Wildeman, 2009)—and therefore perhaps less motivated to provide for them financially. In our qualitative analyses, however, questions of providing financial support for children were embedded more in stories of prolonged postrelease employment struggles (e.g., Pager, 2007) than in a subjective distancing from parenting responsibility after release.

Key influences on postrelease fathering

Quantitative and qualitative accounts converged on the role of three factors in shaping father–child relationships after release: child age, the partner/coparent relationship, and contact during the incarceration (although the latter was only significant when not controlling for the partner/coparent relationship).

Logistic regression results indicated that younger child age predicted higher paternal warmth, higher self-rated quality of the father–child relationship, and (for residential fathers) more frequent father–child activities. Prior research in the general population documents a natural individuation and distancing process in parent–child relationships as children enter adolescence, producing changes in parent–child communication, conflict, activities, and parental self-perception with older children (Larson et al. 1996; Laursen and Collins, 2004; Shearer et al., 2005; Steinberg, 2001; Yeung et al. 2001). Research with low-income and justice-involved fathers also suggests that men who have previously struggled with meeting parenting responsibilities see the process of making up for prior parenting shortcomings with their older children as too daunting, whereas younger children offer a “fresh start” (Patillo et al., 2004; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Our qualitative findings indicate that reentering fathers did face particular resentment, resistance, and developmental challenges in reuniting with their older children. Some fathers concluded that it was indeed “too late with the older ones,” while others resolved to “pick it up slow and work on our relationships.” Parents’ insistence that rebuilding relationships with older children required much time and patience raises the possibility that poor father–child relationship outcomes might eventually improve after fathers had been back in the community (and in their older children’s lives) for a longer period.

Partners and coparents also played a pivotal role in shaping father–child relationships at reentry. Results of logistic regression indicated that fathers’ relationships with their partners/coparents (including their baseline marital status, relationship happiness, and conflict resolution skills) influenced various aspects of their relationships with their children, such as coresidence, paternal warmth, financial support, and father–child relationship quality. The influence of partners and coparents was also strongly apparent in our qualitative interviews, which showed that mothers’ efforts at supporting or constraining father–child relationships continue well after fathers are released. This expands on earlier work on the “gatekeeping” role of mothers in relationships between imprisoned fathers and their children (Nurse, 2004; Smith, 2014) which primarily characterized gatekeeping as restraining father–child relationships. Importantly, although partners/coparents curtailed contact when they perceived fathers as ill-prepared to care for children, they also invested substantial interpersonal, financial, and logistical resources to facilitate that contact when they perceived it as helpful.

Additionally, father–child contact during the incarceration exerted a statistically significant influence on multiple father–child relationship outcomes after release, although effects on self-reported relationship quality for nonresidential fathers and on activity frequency for residential fathers disappeared when controlling for the father’s relationship with his partner/coparent. Although family contact during incarceration is known to influence

reentry experiences, previous studies have focused on its role in desistance from criminal activity (Bales & Mears, 2008, Mills & Codd, 2008; Berg & Huebner, 2010; Hairston, 1991) or in affecting child well-being during parental incarceration (Arditti & Savla, 2015) rather than its influence on postrelease parenting relationships. According to our qualitative data, parents saw father–child contact during incarceration as important, but also perceived such contact as being of low quality, painfully distinct from “being there” for one’s children. While fathers’ contact with their children during incarceration does indeed seem to shape their postrelease parenting, our quantitative analysis confirms that it is difficult to distinguish its influence on postrelease fatherhood outcomes from the influence of the partner/coparent relationship, which has previously been found to separately shape father–child contact during incarceration (Nurse, 2004; Smith, 2014).

Families’ continued commitment to father–child engagement

These results clearly depict the experiences of loss and challenge that surround fathers’ parenting efforts after release from prison. Yet they also indicate that the number of a father’s prior incarcerations did not affect post-release parenting, and that many fathers managed to see their children as much (43%) or even more often (17%) than they had before they were incarcerated—with those in the qualitative sample recounting the time they’d spent with their children since release in enthusiastic and extensive detail. Frequent postrelease activities were predicted in regression models by younger child age and more frequent contact during the incarceration.⁸ Qualitative data suggest a key role for family member support: fathers and mothers alike described the tremendous investments of time, money, and emotional resources that partners/coparents, grandparents, and other family members made to support positive contact between reentering fathers and their children. These extensive efforts of family members may even help to protect father–child relationships from the cumulative effect of repeated cycles of incarceration and release.

Qualitative findings also point to how reentering fathers, many of whom had experienced both a search for meaning during their incarceration and a painful deprivation of contact with their children, placed primary importance on spending time with those children after release. Fathers’ descriptions of postrelease parenting are rich with their own hopes for a new life after imprisonment, for the possibility of saving another from specific forms of suffering (incarceration, street life, a father’s absence) that they have vividly known. This focus on the redemptive possibility of parenting seems to power a particular steady determination—one capable, maybe, of meeting the immense challenges of fatherhood after imprisonment.

Summary and conclusions

Incorporating quantitative and qualitative data from the MFS-IP study, these analyses reveal deterioration in father–child relationships (including coresidence, financial support, and activity frequency) from pre- to postincarceration, but also a heightened commitment from many parents who do stay connected to their children. They highlight the way child age, fathers' relationships with their partners/coparents, and father–child contact during incarceration all shape parenting outcomes after release. They also suggest the strategies by which families confront daunting material and emotional circumstances—from fathers' lack of employment and transportation to older children's wariness to accept a long-absent father back into their lives—to manage some form of father–child reunification after an incarceration.

These findings must be interpreted in the context of measurement, analytic, and sampling limitations. The quantitative and qualitative findings reported in this article use self-report data, so ratings or descriptions of various aspects of father–child or coparent relationships are based entirely on the subjective perspectives of our study participants. Participants were first interviewed when the male partner was incarcerated and were asked to report retrospectively on preincarceration family experiences, which introduced a potential source of recall bias (as participants might have either systematically inflated or discounted their past experiences relative to their current ones). In addition, our analytic approach to assessing factors that shaped postrelease father–child relationship outcomes used separate models for residential and nonresidential fathers. We found that some independent variables (e.g., father–child contact during incarceration) were only significant for one of the two groups; however, the 95% confidence intervals for these effects overlapped, indicating that it is possible that effects did not differ between the two groups.

With regard to limitations of the study sample, the MFS-IP survey data included in this analysis were collected from justice-involved men in self-defined committed intimate or coparenting relationships who completed a postrelease interview. These men are not representative of the general population of reentering men, but rather of a specific population of interest: fathers who reported being in a committed intimate or coparenting partnership during incarceration. In addition, although qualitative study respondents were recruited from within the main MFS-IP study sample, they do not represent that sample. Due to the time elapsed between completion of the final MFS-IP survey and recruitment of respondents for qualitative interviews, the qualitative study would have oversampled more stable respondents whose circumstances made them more likely to be reachable via telephone numbers and addresses that were 6–18 months old. Thus, the differences in perspective afforded by the qualitative data cannot be

attributed solely to the method (open- versus closed-ended interview), but may also reflect a distinct sub-sample. Demographic characteristics point to that possibility, as the average relationship duration at baseline was ten years for qualitative sample members and seven years for quantitative sample members.

Although the findings presented here cannot represent the life experiences of all reentering fathers, they do highlight the pivotal importance of relationships between fathers, mothers, and other close family members (e.g., grandparents) in shaping justice-involved men's relationships with their children. Questions persist about the role of mothers and other family members in alternately supporting or constraining father-child relationships during and after incarceration: What shapes their decisions about whether and how to support fathers in connecting with their children? How do their personal interactions with the father affect their support for his parenting efforts? What supports do partners/coparents and other family members themselves need? These data also underscore the importance of understanding how low-income and justice-involved fathers perceive and enact their fatherhood roles at different ages and stages in their children's lives, particularly when they have been absent or disengaged for some portion of the child's development process. In addition, they raise questions about what shapes trajectories of stability or deterioration in parenting and other family relationships over the course of incarceration and release, an issue that is beginning to be examined in other work (e.g., Mowen & Visher, 2015).

Finally, the finding that parenting is what "kept me going" for many fathers facing the stark odds of reentry suggests that reentry programs and community supervision agencies would do well to recognize the central place of fatherhood in the self-concepts, goals, and day-to-day activities of the men they serve or monitor. Programs and policies that aim to support reentry success in the conventional sense (often focusing on employment, housing, and desistance from criminalized activity) might actively support fathers in succeeding at the parenting role which motivates their persistence in the face of discouraging material circumstances, and in which so many of their deepest hopes are vested.

Notes

1. Of these men, 50% were released before their nine-month interview, 29% were released between their nine- and 18-month interviews, and 22% were released between their 18- and 34-month interviews. Two-thirds of the sample were released from Ohio or Indiana, the two sites with the highest-enrolling programs and the only sites in which 34-month interviews were conducted.
2. Several other variables explored as potential independent variables were not significantly correlated with father-child relationship quality, including assistance received with staying in touch with children during incarceration, father's childhood parenting situation

(involvement of biological father, living in a two-parent home), and gender of the focal child.

3. At the time this article was prepared, survey data collection was complete and qualitative data collection was ongoing.
4. Number of past incarcerations, participation in parenting classes, baseline marital status with the survey partner, and relationship happiness with the survey partner did not affect whether fathers provided financial support to their focal children at reentry. (These analyses also controlled for relationship status with the survey partner).
5. Number of past incarcerations, father–child contact during incarceration, participation in parenting classes, baseline marital status with the survey partner, conflict resolution skills, and relationship happiness with the survey partner did not affect father–child relationship quality ratings at reentry.
6. Number of past incarcerations, father–child contact during incarceration, participation in parenting classes, and baseline marital status with the survey partner did not affect father–child relationship quality ratings at reentry.
7. Number of past incarcerations, participation in parenting classes, baseline marital status with the survey partner, and conflict resolution skills with the survey partner did not affect frequency of father–child activities at reentry for either group of fathers (residential or nonresidential).
8. Only in models that did not control for the partner/coparent relationship.

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