

MULTI-SITE FAMILY STUDY ON INCARCERATION, PARENTING AND PARTNERING



The Experiences of Families during a Father's Incarceration: Summary of Baseline Descriptive Findings

The United States has the highest incarceration rate and the largest total number of incarcerated people in the world (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2012). Over half of the 2.3 million individuals in U.S. jails and prisons are parents, and in 2006 an estimated 7,476,500 children had a parent who was incarcerated or under correctional supervision (Glaze, 2010; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Many fathers in prison are in committed intimate or coparenting relationships, and their incarceration can affect their families both during and after the sentence is served.

This summary describes the experiences of 1,482 incarcerated fathers and their intimate or coparenting partners. (For additional details, see full report available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners>.) It is based on survey data collected for the impact evaluation of the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP), which includes in-depth, longitudinal interviews in five states (Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New York). Although this report uses data collected for the MFS-IP evaluation, the results presented here are not findings about the impact of MFS-IP programming. Rather, the data are used to generate descriptive information into salient characteristics for a large sample of couples separated by incarceration. The study sample, although not nationally representative nor representative of the general prison populations in the five selected states, nevertheless provides the most detailed, descriptive portrait to date of incarcerated men who are in intimate or coparenting relationships

About This Report Summary

This summary document highlights findings from the baseline survey from the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP). The study includes implementation and impact evaluations and qualitative and quantitative analyses of participants in programs funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to provide services to incarcerated fathers and their families.

This summary was prepared by Anupa Bir, Tasseli McKay, Christine Lindquist, and Danielle Steffey of RTI International, under contract to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Linda Mellgren and Erica Meade are the federal project officers.

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during their incarceration, and their partners.

The study sample of incarcerated men and their female partners was asked about their work and family lives prior to incarceration; their health and well-being during the fathers' incarcerations; and their expectations for reentry, including reunification with each other and their child or children. Survey questions addressed relationship quality, parenting and coparenting, family contact, and the well-being of children and mothers during the fathers' incarcerations. Detailed information about a single "focal child" for each father was obtained. One key contribution of this report is that responses reflect the dual perspectives of both men and their partners during incarceration.¹ Findings from subsequent interview waves at 9, 18, and (for a subset of sites) 34 months after this baseline interview will provide information on later experiences, including reentry, family reunification, and factors associated with desistance (reports forthcoming).

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY COUPLES

On average across sites, the 1,482 study couples were in their early 30s at the time of the baseline interview. Twenty-five percent of sample members were married, and over 60 percent were in intimate relationships. The remaining men and women were in coparenting relationships. Over 80 percent of sample members had children under the age of 18. The study sample was racially and ethnically diverse; just over half of men and just under half of women were Black, about one-third were White, and slightly less than 10 percent were Hispanic. The average couple had been together for seven years and coparented two minor children together.

One-third of men and one-quarter of women reported not having a GED or high school diploma. The men had extensive criminal histories—more than half reported being incarcerated as juveniles, and they averaged 12 previous arrests and six adult incarcerations each. Although the women had far less criminal involvement than the men, nearly half reported having ever been arrested, with an average of 1.4 arrests.

SIX MONTHS BEFORE INCARCERATION

During the six months prior to incarceration, couples were generally in longstanding relationships, living together, and parenting together, although both men and women had children with other partners as well. Despite positive reports of family life, physical and emotional abuse by both partners was reported by just under half the sample. Reports of substance use and past criminal involvement were common for the men and their social networks. Specifically:

- **Couples reported being in serious, long-term relationships.** Over half of the couples lived together before the incarceration, and the same proportion shared an income. The majority of couples reported that they often enjoyed being together as a family before the incarceration, and about half said they often did family-oriented activities together.

¹ Although men, women, and couples are generally referred to as plural subjects throughout this report, the study was designed to capture the family dynamics within each study family, which included a man, his intimate or coparenting partner, and a "focal" child (with some information captured about all of the couple's children). When emphasis is on the family dynamic within individual study couples, the male partner, female partner, and focal child are referred to collectively in the singular. Also, this report typically refers to "the incarceration" in the singular, to emphasize that the study focused on a particular incarceration experienced by the study men.

- **The majority of men were employed prior to incarceration.** Over half of the men (61%) were employed, earning an average of \$1,907 per month and typically working in positions that did not provide paid leave or health insurance coverage.
- **Family structures were complicated, and most men had children in multiple households.** The typical man had fathered children with three different women, and women typically coparented with two different men. About two-thirds of fathers (68%) had lived with at least one of their children before the incarceration, and almost as many (62%) also had at least one child who did not live with them.
- **Most fathers did make meaningful parenting contributions before the incarceration.** Almost all (91%) reported that they provided some form of material support for at least one child prior to their incarceration. The typical father provided some financial support for two children; however, one-third had at least one child they did not financially support. Among fathers with at least one nonresidential child, 63 percent were in daily or weekly contact with at least one of those children.
- **Reports of physical and emotional abuse within the relationships were very common.** Forty percent of women and 45 percent of men who were in relationships with their study partners prior to incarceration experienced physical abuse from their partners. A smaller number experienced frequent physical abuse (13 percent of women and 14 percent of men) or frequent emotional abuse (17 percent of women and 13 percent of men). Seventeen percent of women and 10 percent of men reported severe physical or sexual abuse by their partners. In couples in which both partners experienced physical abuse, women reported feeling significantly less safe than men.
- **Education levels were low, particularly for men, and many sample members reported learning difficulties.** About one-third of the men and one-quarter of the women did not have a GED or high school degree. For 36 percent of men and 28 percent of women, a GED or high school diploma was the highest level of education attained (with a GED more common for men and a high school diploma more common for women). Only 30 percent of the men and 47 percent of the women reported any education beyond high school. Men's self-reported difficulties with reading, writing, and math were more substantial than those of their partners. Men were also less likely than their partners to rate themselves as good students during their childhoods and more likely to report having repeated a grade in school.
- **Pre-incarceration substance use was fairly high.** Almost three-quarters (71%) of men and one-quarter (26%) of women reported using at least one illicit drug (including marijuana) in the six months prior to incarceration.
- **Substance abuse and criminal justice involvement were prevalent in social networks.** Both men and women had extended family members with a history of arrest and problems with alcohol and other drugs. About one out of three men (36%) reported that all or most of their friends used illegal drugs, and 19 percent reported that all or most of their friends had been incarcerated. Two-thirds of women reported that the men's friends sometimes or often convinced them to do things they knew they should not be doing.

EXPERIENCES DURING INCARCERATION

By the time of the baseline interviews, the men had already been incarcerated for several years and still had significant time remaining, but nearly all expected to be released. Over half of the women were working full time, supporting a household and at least one minor child, and experiencing generally good physical and emotional health. Social networks, including extended family and friends, were perceived as supportive and loving, even though a third of men reported receiving no visits from extended family members during their incarcerations. Specifically:

- **Men had served an average of 3.4 years of a 6.5-year sentence**, although large site differences were evident in the durations of incarceration. Nearly all of the men (99%) expected to be released. The most common offenses for which the men were incarcerated were person offenses (e.g., robbery, assault) and drug offenses.
- **Over half of the women were working full time, living in their own dwellings, and parenting.** Fifty-seven percent of women were working at the time of their baseline interview; most of these women were working full time and earning an average of \$1,618 per month. Over half of working women reported that their jobs provided health insurance coverage (59%) and fully paid leave (59%). Two-thirds of women (67%) reported that they lived in their own homes or apartments, and the majority (91%) were living with at least one of their own children.
- **Women's reports of physical and emotional health indicated generally good health, but almost one in four experienced health-related limitations.** Most women rated both their overall health and their current emotional health as good, very good, or excellent. However, women's reports were significantly worse than those of their partners, and almost one in four women (23%) reported a serious health problem that limited the amount or kind of work she could do.
- **Almost all focal children were living with their mothers** during the fathers' incarcerations, with many living in households with other family members. Nearly all school-age children (99%) were attending school, and as with other national samples, few parents indicated that the children displayed extremely poor social skills or internalizing disorders.
- **Women reported receiving support from their social networks** during the men's incarcerations. Women generally felt close to their families during their partners' incarcerations and perceived them as being loving and supportive.
- **Men also reported receiving support from their social networks**, although nearly one-third had not received any personal visits during the incarceration from extended family members other than their partners and children. However, men generally felt close to their families and perceived them as being loving and supportive.

FAMILY CONTACT DURING INCARCERATION

The vast majority of men and women believed in the importance of staying in contact during the incarceration, though within couples, men felt more strongly about this. There was a larger gap

between men and their partners regarding the importance of father-child contact; more men strongly agreed that father-child contact during incarceration was important. Seventy percent of fathers reported having a personal visit from at least one of their children at least monthly, and over half spoke on the telephone with at least one of their children weekly. Contact between partners varied greatly during the incarceration, and men and women reported institutional barriers to contact including the cost of phone calls and visits. Specifically:

- **Most couples believed strongly in the importance of contact with each other.** However within couples, men felt more strongly than their partners: 84 percent of men and 75 percent of women strongly agreed that staying in touch with one another during the incarceration was very important. This difference was stronger for father-child contact, where 91 percent of men and 67 percent of women strongly agreed that father-child contact during the incarceration was very important.
- **Couples' contact during the incarceration varied widely.** More than half of men spoke to their partners at least once a week, but 16 percent never spoke to their partners. Slightly more than half of men received visits from their partners at least twice a month, whereas 21 percent never received visits from their partners. Letter writing was the most common form of contact, with 68 percent of men reporting that they wrote their partners every week and 55 percent reporting that they received mail from their partners every week.
- **Fathers' contact with their children during the incarceration varied widely.** Seventy percent of fathers saw one or more of their children in person at least once a month, and 55 percent spoke on the telephone with one or more of their children every week. But a sizable minority (39%) had never had in-person contact with the focal child during the current incarceration, and one-quarter had never spoken with the child on the phone.
- **Many institutional barriers affected efforts to maintain contact with the family.** Common barriers included the cost of telephone calls and visits, the distance from the prison to the family's home, and the prison not being a pleasant place to visit.

RELATIONSHIP CONCERNS DURING INCARCERATION

Despite having different concerns about the impact of incarceration on their relationships, more than half of men and women reported that the incarceration brought them closer together. Men and women shared similar concerns about the impact of the incarceration on their child or children, and most reported that the incarceration had a neutral or negative effect on the father-child relationship. Men perceived themselves as being more involved in parenting decisions relative to their partners' perceptions, both before and during incarceration. Specifically:

- **Men and women had many and different concerns about their romantic relationships during the incarceration.** Men's concerns included uncertainty about the male partner's place in the family during the incarceration and fears that the partners would drift apart or become involved with other people. Women were concerned about the male partner's lifestyle while in prison, challenges with forgiveness, and financial or

schedule issues that prevented the female partner from accepting the male partner's collect calls.

- **Over half of the men and women reported that the incarceration had brought them closer together.** However, women were less likely to report increased closeness as compared with men.
- **Parents shared many fears and concerns about their children.** Men and women were both concerned about their children's well-being during the incarceration—specifically, the child's happiness, the lack of a male role model, the lack of money to support the child, and the possibility that father and child would not be as close as they were before the incarceration.
- **Men and women reported that the incarceration had a negative or neutral effect on father-child relationships.** Women were significantly less likely than their male partners to report increased closeness in the father-child relationship as a result of the incarceration.
- **Perspectives on parenting decision making differed.** Men and women both reported that men played less of a role in parenting decisions during the incarceration than they had before. Within couples, men perceived their own role in parenting decisions as being more significant than their partners did, both before and during the incarceration. Men also believed more strongly than their female partners did in the idea that incarcerated fathers could still be involved in parenting decisions.

EXPECTATIONS FOR REENTRY

The vast majority of men and women were optimistic about remaining in committed relationships after release and felt that it would be easy to have good relationships. They did recognize incarceration-related relationship concerns, like the male partner missing what had happened in the female partner's life and living up to her expectations for not using drugs, getting a job, and helping financially. Men also believed that it would be easy to resume the relationship with the focal child but had concerns about having missed much of the child's life. Overall, men thought it would be easy to reconnect with their families, find employment, and stay away from drugs. Although women were slightly less optimistic, they generally felt the same. Specifically:

- **The vast majority of men and women expected to live together post-release.** Among couples who considered their relationship to be an intimate one (as opposed to coparenting only), the vast majority of men (91%) and women (86%) intended to remain in a committed relationship after the man's release. Overall, 83 percent of men and 75 percent of women expected that the couple would live together after release.
- **Overall, both men and women thought it would be easy to continue the couple's relationship post-release.** Nearly half of men reported that it would be very easy for the couple to have a good relationship after his release. These reports were significantly more positive than those of their partners, but 34 percent of women also reported that it would be very easy. Among both men and women, the top concern about the couple's

relationship was his having missed out on so much that happened in her life during the incarceration, followed by his trying to meet her expectations for him finding a job, staying away from drugs, and helping her financially.

- **Men were also optimistic about how easy it would be for them to have good relationships with their children after release.** Most men (78%) and women (68%) expected that the father would live with the focal child after release, and 92 percent of men and 62 percent of women expected that he would financially support the child after release. The most commonly anticipated challenge from the men's perspective was having missed out on so much that happened in the child's life during his incarceration.
- **Men and women had different expectations for parental decision making.** Although both partners most often reported expecting to make decisions jointly, men were significantly more likely than their female partners to anticipate that the couple would make decisions together.
- **Men and women were optimistic about receiving tangible support from family and friends during reentry, and men were optimistic about their reemployment prospects.** Within couples, the female partner was significantly less optimistic than the male partner about the ease of his finding a decent job, the likelihood that he would use illegal drugs, and the likelihood of his being reincarcerated after his release.

SUMMARY OF BASELINE DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

Descriptive data from these baseline interviews with men in prison and their female partners reveal some of the complexities associated with maintaining positive family relationships during incarceration.

On the one hand, among the 1,482 men whose partners responded to the baseline interview, the average couple had been together for over seven years and had parented two children together, despite being separated by the incarceration for over three years. More than half of the couples had lived together and shared an income prior to incarceration, and thought the incarceration brought them closer together; similarly, more than half of the men were in contact with their partners and focal children at least weekly during the incarceration. Almost all fathers reported having provided at least some financial support to at least one child prior to incarceration. More than half of the women reported working full time at positions that offered health benefits and paid leave during the men's incarcerations.

On the other hand, life appeared bleak for many respondents on several indicators of life before and during the men's incarcerations. More than a third of the men were unemployed and/or had at least one child they did not support prior to incarceration. Close to one half of men and women reported experiencing physical abuse from their partners, and 10 percent of men and 17 percent of women reported severe physical or sexual abuse prior to incarceration. Additionally, close to three out of four men reported using illicit substances prior to incarceration, and over one-third reported that all or most of their friends used illegal drugs. During the incarceration, more than a third of men reported little contact with their partners and/or children. More than a third of the women were unemployed, and almost a quarter reported having a serious health problem that prevented them from working during the men's incarcerations.

CONTEXT FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

These initial descriptive findings suggest many challenges for policy makers to consider when developing policies to address the needs of this diverse group of incarcerated fathers and their families. Findings among the study sample that may be useful in guiding decisions on how to structure supports for families include

- **Family structures are complex.** Supports for families affected by incarceration must take into account the complicated reality of pre-incarceration family life, rather than attempting simply to address the disruption prompted by incarceration.
- **Research and practice with this population may need to target families earlier in the incarceration term to engage both members of the couple.** The analysis of 509 men whose partners did not respond to the baseline interview—a likely indicator of tenuous relationships—highlights this finding. Men whose partners did not complete the interview had been incarcerated longer, reported more relationship strain, and reported much less in-person contact with partners and children. (Future multivariate analyses will confirm the apparent correlation between family relationship strains and the point in the incarceration term at which a father was interviewed.)
- **Maintenance of contact with family members during incarceration is not easy.** Both partners reported distance, costs, and the atmosphere of the prison environment as being barriers to contact. To facilitate contact, programs may have to address many institutional barriers, using strategies such as creating child-friendly visitation rooms within prisons, calling on utility companies to establish reasonable telephone rates for calls placed from prisons, and challenging correctional policies that place many residents hundreds of miles from their home communities. In addition, video visitation as a supplement to opportunities for in-person contact may help some families remain connected.
- **Efforts to support fathers and children in maintaining or improving their relationships (such as through supported visitation) may be helpful.** Although many couples seem to get closer during an incarceration, this is usually not the case for fathers and children. This suggests that interventions need to address the very different experiences among family members of the same incarcerated man.
- **Women affected by a partner’s incarceration might benefit from additional types of support.** Over three-quarters of the female sample (82%) reported at least one of the following conditions: likely clinical depression, physical limitations relating to work, lack of health insurance, or unemployment. This suggests that policies that take into account stressors for women affected by incarceration (e.g., strains associated with single parenting, behavioral or mental illness, financial problems) could be beneficial.
- **Negotiating reentry as a family requires realistic planning.** Men, but to a lesser degree their partners, reported very optimistic expectations about their reentry success. Previous research has shown that pre-release optimism is associated with post-release success for reentry samples (Burnett & Maruna, 2004), so being optimistic could be important for couples’ reentry success. However, it is possible that within couples, one-sided optimism could lead to post-release conflict, abrupt changes in housing plans, and

associated parole violation risks. Couples facing reentry need help to develop realistic and mutually agreed-upon plans for a healthy family life after release.

- **Substance abuse is a major issue for justice-involved men and their social networks.** Many of the men and some of the women were using illicit drugs prior to incarceration. Substance abuse is a significant predictor of recidivism among reentering persons (Hakansson & Berglund, 2012). Finding effective approaches to screening, assessing, and treating currently incarcerated and reentering persons with drug and alcohol problems—and their partners—could help mitigate family distress.
- **Intimate partner violence needs to be addressed.** The high proportion of couples reporting physical and emotional abuse within their relationships prior to incarceration, coupled with widespread intentions to continue the relationships after release, suggests the need for intervention with both members of the couple.
- **Some characteristics of the population point to the need for early intervention and prevention strategies.** Many of the men (53%) were involved with the juvenile justice system, often beginning in adolescence. Additionally, education deficits and learning problems were high, particularly for men. Given the strong correlation between school failure and juvenile justice involvement, prevention and early intervention approaches are needed.

These descriptive baseline findings on 1,482 intimate or coparenting couples in five states offer the beginning of a portrait that findings from subsequent waves of survey data will continue to augment. Understanding the characteristics, experiences, and aspirations of couples who have maintained their relationships through several years of incarceration will be crucial in developing programs and policies that meet the needs of similar families. The data and evaluation results will also shed light on the conceptual frameworks in the literature that link family support with desistance from crime. Although more data are needed to examine these desistance frameworks within the MFS-IP sample, the role of the family in desistance clearly merits investigation. Family contact and family support alone are likely to be less effective than family support in a policy environment that addresses other key challenges related to poverty and histories of criminal justice involvement.

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Multi-Site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering

Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the Multi-site Family Study of Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MSF-IP) is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

Implementation Study: Annual site visits entailing in-depth interviews and program observations were conducted with 12 grantee programs through fall 2010. The implementation evaluation comprehensively documented program context, program design, target population and participants served, key challenges and strategies, and program sustainability.

Impact Study: From December 2008 through August 2011, couples participating in MFS-IP programming and a set of similar couples not participating in programming were enrolled in the national impact study conducted in five of the grantee program sites. Study couples completed up to four longitudinal, in-person interviews that collected information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes.

Qualitative Study: A small qualitative study was added in 2014, in which in-depth interviews were conducted with about 60 impact study couples to capture detailed information about the families' experiences during the male partner's reentry.

Predictive Analytic Models: Using the impact study sample of more than 1,482 couples (from the 1,991 men who did baseline interviews), a series of analyses is being conducted to examine the trajectories of individual and family relationships and behaviors before, during, and after release from incarceration. A public use dataset will be released for further analysis at the completion of this project

This brief and other publications related to the MFS-IP evaluation are available from the HHS ASPE website: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners> .

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