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RESEARCH BRIEF
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MULTI-SITE FAMILY STUDY ON INCARCERATION, PARENTING AND PARTNERING

EARNINGS AND CHILD SUPPORT PARTICIPATION AMONG REENTERING FATHERS

SUMMARY

A father's incarceration can represent a serious threat to economic stability for his children and family, yet little is known about earnings and child support payments among justice-involved men over the course of incarceration and release. This analysis uses state administrative and survey data from participants in five states to examine this gap.

- *Child support is a salient issue for incarcerated men and their partners.* Most men and their partners were involved with the child support system. Among the 1,548 incarcerated and reentering men in the analytic sample, the majority (85%) had at least one child support case for one or more of their children.
- *Pre- and post-incarceration earnings were not sufficient to avoid poverty.* Median earnings for those who were involved in the child support system and also engaged in the formal economy were below the federal poverty level before and after incarceration. Men's median annual earnings from formal employment in the five states ranged from \$2,311 to \$4,658 in the year before incarceration, and from \$1,179 to \$9,082 in the year after release.
- *Child support arrears increased during incarceration.* Among men with any child support arrears, the median owed for all children after release from prison was \$6,070 in Indiana and \$11,758 in Ohio. Arrears often increased substantially during men's incarceration.

About This Research Brief

This brief presents findings on pre- and post-incarceration wages and child support participation in the five impact sites of the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP). Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the study includes implementation and impact evaluations and qualitative and quantitative analyses of participants in programs providing services to incarcerated fathers and their families.

This brief was prepared by Linda Mellgren and by Tasseli McKay, Justin Landwehr, Anupa Bir, Amy Helburn, Christine Lindquist, and Kate Krieger of RTI International, under contract to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Erica Meade was the federal project officer. The findings and conclusions of this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of ASPE or HHS.

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BACKGROUND

The majority of incarcerated persons are parents, and they leave an average of two minor children behind in the community (Glaze and Maruschak, 2010). This disruption of employment and earnings can undercut the financial stability of an incarcerated person's family (Comfort et al., 2016; Comfort, 2008). Most often, it occurs in families and communities that are already economically vulnerable (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011).

Many justice-involved fathers provide material support for nonresidential children before their incarceration (McKay et al., 2014; Roman & Link, 2015). About one-third of fathers in the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP) reported that they were required to pay child support during the six months before their incarceration, typically for two children. Of the men with orders, one-third made all required payments during that time, and almost all (89%) owed past-due child support (Lindquist et al., 2015). Informal material support of nonresidential children was more widespread than formal child support. Among men with nonresidential children, 91 percent reported that they provided informal material support for at least one child prior to their incarceration—but 31 percent had at least one child who received no informal support from them during that time (McKay et al., 2014).

In the general population, over one-third of noncustodial parents who do not pay their ordered child support are living in poverty, with widespread employment-related challenges (Sorenson & Zibman, 2001). Employment issues are of particular concern among reentering men, who often experience tremendous difficulty finding employment in the formal economy and who are frequently unemployed prior to incarceration (Holzer et al., 2005; Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Pager, 2007; Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008; Visher & Kachnowski, 2007). Reentering men with child support orders may be somewhat more likely than other reentering persons to receive assistance in seeking employment, but such assistance is still relatively rare (Roman & Link, 2015) and its influence on employment and earnings is not yet established. Results from the [National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration \(CSPED\)](#)¹, expected within the next few years, may shed light on this link. However, research into employment experiences in the context of other forms of legal debt (Harris, Evans, & Beckett, 2010; McLean & Thompson 2007) suggests that insurmountable child support debt could make reentering fathers even less likely to secure formal employment.

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS

The MFS-IP study documents the implementation and effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming for incarcerated and reentering men and their committed romantic or coparenting partners, during incarceration and after release.² It was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). Although the results presented here are not findings about the impact of this programming, data collected from treatment and comparison participants for the impact study also provide a wealth of new information on the experiences of these families before, during, and after the male partner's incarceration.

¹<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/grants/grant-updates-results/csped>

² The MFS-IP study recruited men who self-identified as being in a committed romantic or coparenting relationship and were willing to provide contact information for their female partners. These couples were followed over time as one another's "study partners." As shown in Table 1, study partners often had children with one another as well as children with other non-study coparents

To better understand pre- and post-incarceration earnings and child support participation among reentering fathers in committed partnerships, the current analysis matches MFS-IP survey data with administrative data on wages and child support participation from state child support agencies in the five MFS-IP sites: Indiana, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota. Additional administrative data on child support payments and arrears were obtained from the two largest study sites, Indiana and Ohio. For more on the MFS-IP study design, instrumentation, and data collection, as well as the programs the study was funded to evaluate (see <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/mfs-ip/>).

Sample Characteristics

For this analysis, the 1,830 men and 1,402 women enrolled in the MFS-IP study were matched with administrative data available from state child support agencies.³ This match resulted in an analytic sample of 1,548 men and 1,231 women. Like respondents in the full MFS-IP study sample, this subset of men and women were typically in long-term, non-marital, intimate relationships with their survey partners. Most had two or three children, and most couples co-parented at least one child together. Men’s histories of criminal justice system involvement were generally extensive, with a lifetime average of six incarcerations (see Table 1 for more on the sample).

Analytic Approach

To better understand respondents’ experiences with formal wages and child support, we used study identifiers to link the administrative data to MFS-IP survey data on each respondent that was matched. All analyses were conducted separately for each state for which the administrative data were available. Using these matched data we created three incarceration status indicators—“before incarceration,” “during incarceration,” “after incarceration”.⁴ All wages, child support payments, and arrears are reported in 2016 dollars, adjusted for inflation. Wages and child support payments are annual amounts. Finally, for sample members in Indiana and Ohio, who have more detailed child support data, we created variables that combined the case-level data that states provided on child support payments and arrears by summing each across all of a participant’s children or cases for a given year.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	Men (N=1,548)	Women (N=1,231)
Relationship with Survey Partner		
Relationship Status		
Married	25%	23%
In an intimate relationship	68%	60%
In a coparenting relationship only	7%	17%
Study couple in an exclusive relationship	86%	81%
If married/intimate, length of relationship	7.7 years	6.9 years
Parenting/Coparenting Characteristics		
Study partners coparent any children together	79%	73%
Average # of coparents (including residential and nonresidential)	2.8	1.9
Average # of children	2.8	2.5
Any residential children ²	69%	91%
Average # of residential children	1.5	1.9
Average age of focal child (years)	7.1	6.9
Age		
Man’s age at study enrollment (mean)	33.5	31.5
Incarceration History		
Man’s age at first arrest (mean)	16.6	(not asked)
Number of previous adult incarcerations (mean)	5.9	1.4
Length of current incarceration (mean)	3.4 years	(not asked)

³ Matching data were available for members of the MFS-IP study sample who had ever been involved with the child support system, whether as a custodial or non-custodial parent, whether the non-custodial parent had ever been ordered to pay child support, and whether the non-custodial parent was currently subject to child support orders.

⁴ Values for “before incarceration” are based on data from the last full calendar year before the male respondent’s incarceration. Values for “after incarceration” are based on data from the first full calendar year after his release from incarceration.

The descriptive statistics on wages, child support orders, child support payments, and arrears use the full analytic sample and each available time point. We also used paired t-tests to explore differences among smaller samples of participants for whom data were complete enough to allow these comparisons. We compared men’s and women’s wages within couples, and we also compared how wages, child support payments, and arrears changed from pre-incarceration to post-release.

Limitations of the Data

State child support agencies retrieved administrative data (including data on child support participation and formal earnings) for those MFS-IP sample members for whom a match was available in their state child support data systems, whether as a custodial or noncustodial parent and whether or not an order had been established. Among the analytic sample (those respondents for whom a match was obtained), earnings data were sometimes missing or unavailable for quarters prior to an established child support order. In addition, sample sizes used in generating earnings estimates for men’s pre-incarceration years were often limited by wage data dating only to 2007, as many men in the sample had been incarcerated during or prior to that year. Some earnings estimates (particularly in Minnesota, New Jersey, and New York) were therefore based on very small samples, as noted in the exhibits and text (see Table 2 for more details).

Child support data were also challenging to interpret. State-specific differences in the definitions of case and order were exacerbated by incomplete information on whether cases, orders, and payments were current or historical. It was also not possible to develop an analytic file that allowed aggregation beyond the person level; that is, to look at all cases that a custodial and non-custodial parent may share or consolidate all cases that may pertain to a particular child or sibling group. The analyses reported here summed case data to permit analyses at the individual parent level, but it was not possible to link data from two cases for a single child, or cases associated with different children or adults in the same couple or family, in order to conduct child- or family-level analyses.

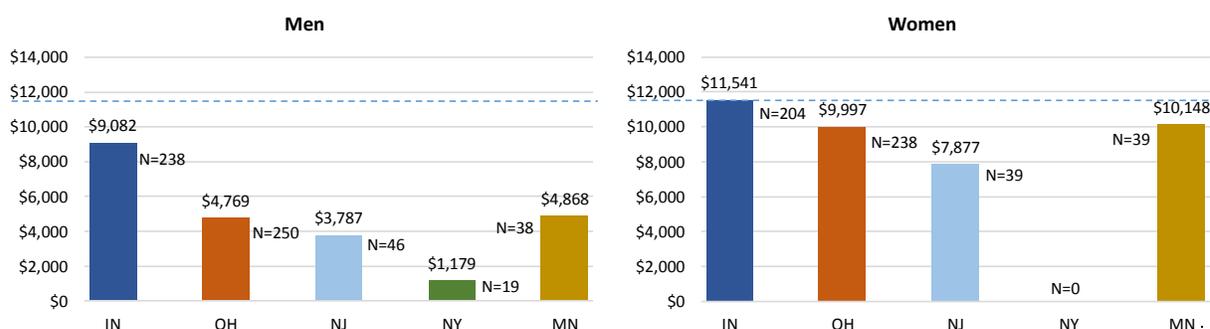
Table 2. Missing or Zero Reported Earnings (in 2016 Dollars)

State	No. of Persons	Percentage with Missing or \$0 Earnings		
		Across All Years	In the Last Full Year before Incarceration	In the First Full Year after Release
All States	2,779	45.6	90.9	74.5
Ohio	1,028	34.6	90.0	74.0
Indiana	865	31.6	91.8	59.9
New Jersey	460	76.3	98.3	90.9
New York	297	86.9	93.9	96.3
Minnesota	129	23.3	58.9	60.5

EARNINGS FROM FORMAL EMPLOYMENT

Earnings for men and women for the first full year following the male partner’s release from prison are shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. Men’s and Women’s Median Annual Wages by State (Post-Release Year, in 2016 Dollars)



The dotted blue line shows the federal poverty level (FPL) for a single individual for calendar year 2016. The FPL for a three-person household, which is the average family size for custodial mothers in this study, was \$20,160. (See <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>)

Men’s median annual wages ranged from \$2,311 in New York to \$4,658 in New Jersey in the year before their incarceration (data not shown), and from \$1,179 in New York to \$9,082 in Indiana for the year after their incarceration. As shown in Exhibit 1, the size of the sample was limited in New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota for the post-incarceration year. However, these data suggest that median yearly earnings for both male and female participants were at or below the federal poverty level (\$11,880 for a single person in 2016) in all five states, both before and after the male partner’s incarceration.

Men’s and women’s median inflation-adjusted earnings were generally higher after the male partner’s release than before his incarceration.⁵ The largest increases were in Indiana and Ohio (data not shown).

Within couples⁶, women’s earnings tended to be higher than those of their male partners. Indiana women’s earnings were slightly higher than men’s at both time points. Among Minnesota and Ohio couples, women earned considerably more than men at both time points.

CHILD SUPPORT

Table 3 shows the proportion of respondents with custodial and noncustodial child support cases for this analysis.

Table 3. Prevalence of Child Support Cases and Orders (Administrative Data)

	Total	IN	OH	NY	NJ	MN
Percent of MFS-IP study men who had a child support case	84.6	73.9	84.1	100	100	84.8
Percent of MFS-IP study women who had a child support case	87.8	77.8	90.4	100	100	88.6
Percent of men in the matched analytic sample with orders ⁷	60.1	79.3	44.9	30.4	69.0	92.5

⁵ To understand how earnings changed over the course of the incarceration and release, we used data from the three states with large enough samples to permit that comparison (Indiana, Ohio, and Minnesota). The sample for this analysis included 28 men and 23 women in Indiana, 5 men and 10 women in Ohio, and 23 men and 23 women in Minnesota. Sample sizes for New York and New Jersey were too small for inclusion in the analysis.

⁶ To explore wage-earning among couples, we used data from the three states with large enough samples to support a within-couple comparison (Indiana, Ohio, and Minnesota). The sample for this analysis included 10 Indiana couples pre-incarceration and 115 post-release; 8 Ohio couples pre-incarceration and 108 post-release; and 19 Minnesota couples pre-incarceration and 21 post-release. Sample sizes for New York and New Jersey were too small to include.

As shown, the proportion of men in the MFS-IP study who had a child support case was about 85 percent overall and ranged from 74 percent in Indiana to 100 percent in New York and New Jersey. The high level of child support involvement is not surprising. The match did not target the focal child but included any match for any child, including those who may have reached the age of majority but for whom the case had not been closed (for example, a case may remain open because past due child support may still be owed). Additionally, unique characteristics of the study samples in New York and New Jersey may have contributed to the potential for having a case. New York served men with longer sentences and New Jersey served individuals who “maxed out”, that is, stayed in prison longer to avoid being on supervision when they returned to the community. Both circumstances might have contributed to the likelihood of custodial parent involvement with state social services, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child welfare, or Medicaid, which could result in a case being opened.

Based on the administrative data, 60 percent of men appeared to have child support orders, with the proportion ranging from one quarter in New York to three-quarters in Minnesota. As part of MFS-IP baseline surveys completed by members of this analytic sample, fathers were asked to self-report if they were required to pay child support for any of their children during the six months prior to their incarceration. Substantially fewer fathers reported having any child support orders. Across states, 33 percent of fathers reported having any child support orders (39% of men in Indiana, 36% in Ohio, 16% in New York, 26% in New Jersey, and 41% in Minnesota). This variance may be because the reporting periods were different, with fathers self-reporting on their pre-incarceration experience and the administrative data including the post-release time period as well as pre-incarceration and during incarceration. However, it is also possible that some men were not aware of child support judgments against them. (Many child support agencies do not require that parents be notified in person of required court appearances and child support orders can be set even if the parent being required to pay is not present in the courtroom or administrative hearing.)

Among couples living together before the male partner’s incarceration or at their last study interview, there was a sizable minority (about one-third) in which both partners had child support cases in their state’s system. This raises the possibility that some fathers may have been subject to support orders for children with whom they had been living prior to incarceration or after release.⁸

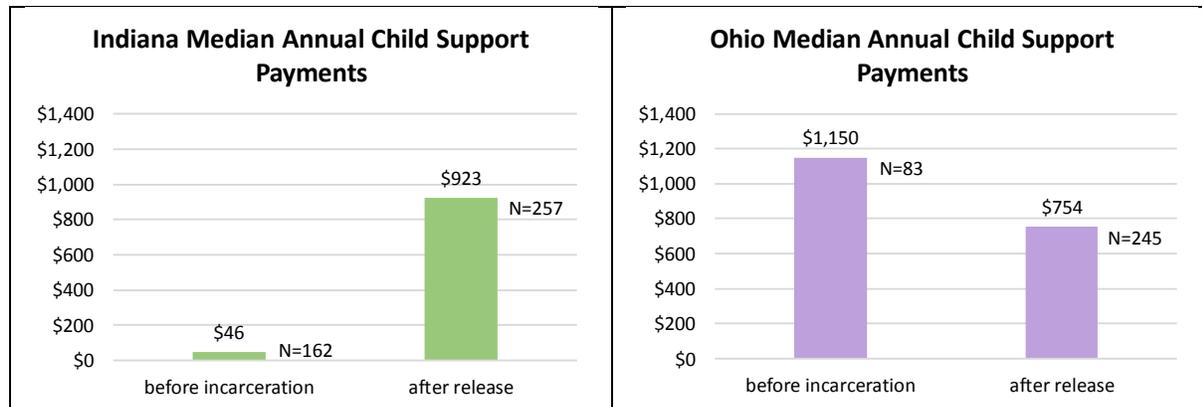
CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS AND ARREARS

Data on child support payments and arrears were provided by Indiana and Ohio, the two states that contributed the largest proportion of the MFS-IP study sample. Exhibits 2 and 3 show median yearly child support payments before and after incarceration for each state.

⁷ This reported proportion is a composite measure and includes positive values for any of the following variables: has a child support order, has a child support payment, or has child support arrears. In some cases, individuals were reported not to have an order, but had made child support payments or were identified as having arrears.

⁸ The administrative data sets furnished by the state child support agencies provide data on child support orders at the case level, not the person, couple, or family level. It is impossible to establish whether members of couples who both have a child support case in the data set actually have child support orders on a shared child (as opposed to each partner having a child support case with a coparent other than their MFS-IP study partner).

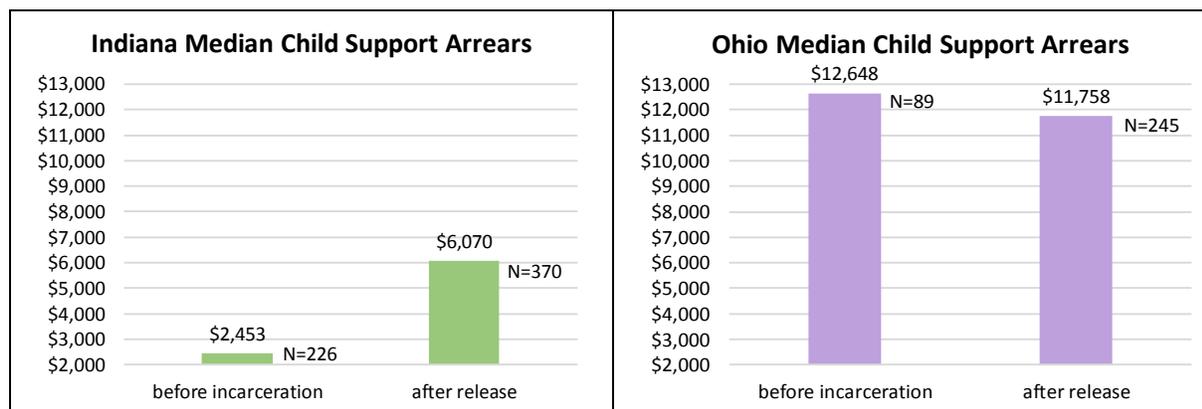
Exhibits 2 and 3. Men’s Median Annual Child Support Payments (in 2016 Dollars)



In Indiana, median annual payments were \$46 in the year before incarceration and \$923 in the year after release. In Ohio, median payments were \$1,150 before incarceration and \$754 after release.⁹ Among men in the two states for whom data were available both pre- and post-incarceration, child support payments tended to be higher in the year after release than in the year before incarceration (even after adjusting for inflation).¹⁰

Exhibits 4 and 5 show median yearly child support arrears before and after incarceration in Indiana and Ohio.

Exhibits 4 and 5. Men’s Median Child Support Arrears in Indiana and Ohio (in 2016 Dollars)



In Indiana, median child support arrears were \$2,453 in the year before incarceration and \$6,070 in the year after release. In Ohio, median arrears were \$12,648 before incarceration and \$11,758 after release.¹¹ Among men in both states for whom data were available both pre- and post-incarceration, arrears were generally higher after men’s release from prison than before their incarceration (even after adjusting for inflation).¹²

⁹ Median payments are shown here because the range of annual child support payments varied very widely--from \$0 prior to release to \$12,173 after release in Indiana and \$68,084 after release in Ohio. These medians may be lower than other published estimates that use mean values, which may be affected by very high outliers.

¹⁰ To compare child support payments over time, we used paired *t*-tests to test for differences among men for whom both pre- and post-incarceration payment data were available, which was a subsample of 147 Indiana men and 68 Ohio.

¹¹ Arrears amounts varied widely and often were substantial, with highs of \$229,368 in Indiana and \$174,859 in Ohio (data not shown). The medians shown may be lower than other published estimates that use mean values, which may be affected by very high outliers.

¹² We used paired *t*-tests to test for differences between pre-and post-incarceration child support arrears from a subsample of 207 Indiana men and 72 Ohio men who had data on child support arrearages both before incarceration and after release.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

This analysis offers insight on experiences with formal employment and child support participation among justice-involved men and their committed partners.

Absolute incomes were very low for men who were employed in the formal economy in the year after their release from prison. Poverty is an established barrier to paying child support in the general population and is a particular concern for reentering fathers, given the well-known and formidable employment obstacles they face. The data show that some reentering men succeed in obtaining employment after their release from prison, but their very low median earnings (below the poverty level of \$11,880 for a single person) raise questions about men's ability to successfully support themselves and their children through work in the formal economy.

Female partners of incarcerated men also had very low formal earnings before and after the incarceration. Most women's earnings were insufficient to raise their families out of poverty, either before the male partner's incarceration or after his reentry. With the poverty level for a family of three at \$20,160 and a family of four at \$24,300, most families remained poor even if both partners were working. One earner leaving the household because of incarceration introduced the potential for severe material hardship.

Some incarcerated and reentering fathers may be unaware of child support judgments against them. Across sites, one-third of men in the MFS-IP study reported that they had been required to pay child support for one or more of their children before they were incarcerated. However, administrative data from child support agencies show that 60 percent had orders for one or more of their children. Although these estimates are not directly comparable (as the survey item focused on whether fathers were required to pay child support during the pre-incarceration period, whereas administrative data would have also captured some men who were ordered to pay child support during incarceration or after release), they suggest that some reentering men may be unaware of child support judgments against them.

Reentering men faced increased child support debt after release from prison. Median debt owed after release from prison in Indiana was about \$2,300 and in Ohio about \$12,000. Prior analyses using the full MFS-IP sample found that 38 percent of men with child support orders reported that those orders had been modified during their incarceration (Lindquist et al., 2015). Still, arrears were high relative to men's earnings, and among fathers with arrears data from both time points, arrears rose from pre-incarceration to post-release.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Matching MFS-IP survey data with administrative data shared by state child support agencies made it possible to better understand fathers', and to a lesser extent couples', economic experiences before and after incarceration. To maximize the research utility and meaningfulness of these rich data sources for future work, several limitations may merit addressing.

To better understand individual and family experiences, child support systems need the capacity to aggregate case-level administrative data into additional units of analysis.

State child support agencies maintain their data at the case level for enforcement purposes. To generate policy-relevant insights, however, these data need to be summed and consolidated so that they represent an externally meaningful unit of analysis, such as a person, couple, or family. The analyses reported here summed case data to the person level, but linking data from two cases pertaining to a single child, or cases associated with different children or adults in the

same family, was not possible. Data structures that support such linking would enable a much more policy-relevant look at couples' and families' experiences.

State differences in child support policies and administrative processes present challenges to data pooling, interpretation, and comparison. The five states included in this analysis each had distinct policies, administrative procedures, and outreach or programmatic initiatives that shaped the child support participation experiences of reentering fathers and the ways administrative data were organized. These differences caused challenges in interpreting certain elements in the datasets and could not be adjusted for analytically. If data were standardized across states, it would be possible to (1) pool child support participation data across states to enable well-powered analyses of child support participation and other relevant constructs, and (2) conduct more rigorous cross-state comparisons that might help to assess the influence of state-level policies and procedures on fathers' and families' experiences.

Using nationally standardized wage data would improve our understanding of the intersection between child support and employment experiences among reentering men. As the research limitations of this brief demonstrate, differences across state data systems constrained the analysis and interpretation of wage data. First, states varied in their sources of wage data (for example, from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) or a state Department of Economic Security) and how they defined the population for purposes of retrieving wage data. Second, states sometimes assigned an individual with no reported earnings in a given year a zero dollar value for earnings, but sometimes treated this as missing data. Efforts were made to clarify or resolve these differences, but the ultimate lack of consistency across states made it challenging to interpret cross-state findings, both in terms of defining the study population and in understanding what the earnings estimates for a particular time point represented. Using data from a single source would eliminate some of the cross-state differences and help advance our understanding of reentering men's experiences at the intersection of formal employment and the child support system.

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About the MFS-IP Study

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 (MFS-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 all 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/hsp/08/mfs-ip/>.

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