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MULTI-SITE FAMILY STUDY ON INCARCERATION, PARENTING AND PARTNERING

CHANGE IN FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER INCARCERATION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- In this sample of 772 reentering fathers in committed intimate or coparenting relationships, fewer fathers lived with and financially supported their children after release than did before incarceration.
- Men's relationships with their children's mothers were critically important to their post-release relationships with their children. Fathers who had happier relationships with their children's mothers were more likely to live with their children. They also have better self-reported relationships with their children. Strong conflict resolution skills between the parents were associated with the father's financial support for the children and self-reported relationship quality.
- Children's age was a significant predictor of post-release father-child relationship quality. Fathers of younger children reported higher parental warmth and better relationship quality with their children than fathers of older children. They also engaged in more activities with their children.
- Fathers who had more contact with their children during incarceration were more likely to live with them after release and, for nonresidential fathers, engage in activities with the child.
- The length of the fathers' incarcerations and their participation in parenting programming during incarceration did not appear to affect post-release father-child relationship quality.

About This Research Brief

This brief presents data on parent-child relationships before, during, and after incarceration 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.

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BACKGROUND

Most men in prison face the challenge of navigating parenting relationships during and after incarceration. Glaze and Maruschak (2010) found that more than half of individuals in state and federal prison have children under age 18 (with an average of two children), and 71 percent of married men in prisons have minor children. Among fathers in state prison, 47 percent reported living with at least one of their children during the month before arrest or just before incarceration. Most fathers (88%) incarcerated in state prison reported that at least one of their children was in the care of the child's mother, highlighting the importance of the coparenting relationship for children with justice-involved fathers.

Incarcerated persons face many barriers to communication and connection with their children. Prisons are often far from major residential areas, making visitation difficult and costly (Herman-Stahl, Kan, & McKay, 2008). More than 60 percent of state and 80 percent of individuals in federal prisons are housed in facilities more than 100 miles from where they last lived, and lack of money for gas or public transportation can keep families from being able to visit (Mumola, 2000). Limited visiting days and hours also pose obstacles for coparents/caregivers as they have difficulty coordinating visits with children's school and their own work schedules. Once at the prison, fathers and children must interact in an environment designed specifically to manage potential security risks rather than to foster family connectedness. Lack of privacy and restricted movement and physical contact during visits often hamper ease of conversation, feelings of closeness, and fathers' ability to play with their children in prison visiting rooms (Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996; Hairston, 1996; Comfort, 2008). Furthermore, as fathers adjust to life in a stressful and highly routinized environment, they may adopt coping mechanisms (such as emotional withdrawal and hypermasculinity) that impede intimate relationships with children (Nurse, 2002, 2004). Some coparents/caregivers and incarcerated fathers may be unwilling to have children visit in a prison for fear the visit would be emotionally traumatizing and obstructive of meaningful connection (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010).

The literature clearly indicates that paternal incarceration takes a toll on children (Arditti, 2012; Bernstein, 2007; Comfort, Nurse, McKay, & Kramer, 2011; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Hairston, 1998; Mazza, 2002; Travis & Waul, 2003). Having a father in prison has been associated with increased risk of behavioral problems (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011) and mental health issues (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012) among children, as well as with such family factors as loss of income and intensified disadvantage (Davis, 1992; Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001; Wildeman, 2009, Wildeman & Muller, 2012). Separation can affect the incarcerated parent as well, although most previous studies have focused on the effects of parent-child separation during incarceration on mothers (Poehlmann, 2005; Tuerk & Loper, 2006).

Little is known about the impact of incarceration on fathers, including how paternal incarceration may influence father-child relationships, or about factors that promote stronger father-child relationships after a father's release from incarceration. The limited previous research on the experiences of incarcerated fathers has focused on the role of father-child relationship quality on men's desistance from future criminal activity. For men with histories of incarceration, becoming a father has been found to provide motivation to refrain from criminal activity and to seek legal employment (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004). Fathers with a history of incarceration who report strong relationships with their children have been shown to fare better on employment and abstinence from substance use and crime (Maley 2014; Petersilia, 2003; Visher, Yahner, & La Vigne, 2010).

To date, building an understanding of changes in father-child relationships among families affected by incarceration has been limited by lack of available large-scale data focused

specifically on this phenomenon. The body of knowledge developed thus far has drawn from qualitative studies, which provide rich context and insight but involve small sample sizes, and from quantitative analyses of national datasets that were not designed to gather information specifically about incarceration, such as the Fragile Families and Child Well-being study.¹ The findings presented here are drawn from a couples-based longitudinal study of families affected by incarceration and thus shed new light on salient issues in father-child relationships before and after incarceration and on key factors that predict stronger father-child relationships after release.

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS

Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP) documents the implementation and effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming for justice-involved couples during incarceration and after release.² Data collected from couples for the impact study also provide a wealth of new information on the experiences of families before, during, and after incarceration. Although this brief uses data collected for the MFS-IP impact evaluation, the results presented here are not findings about the impact of MFS-IP programming. Rather, the data are used to generate insight into salient issues for a large sample of fathers and identify key factors that predict stronger family relationships post-release.

The analyses presented here take advantage of this unique dataset by focusing on dependent variables that correspond to indicators of strong father-child relationships as identified in the existing literature. Although these relationships have been understudied in the context of incarceration, the literature on nonresidential fathers and fatherhood more generally indicates that **paternal nurturance** and **involvement in children's lives** are dimensions of strong father-child relationships (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). **Father-child contact** alone is a necessary, although not fully sufficient, condition for maintaining a strong relationship (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Higher frequency of contact between nonresident fathers and their children has been found to have very modest effects on father-child closeness (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Perhaps more important than the frequency of contact is quality of contact, particularly paternal emotional support, warmth, and limit setting (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Indeed, strong father-child relationships can form even when the father is not highly involved with the child but parenting quality—including positive affect—is high (Brown, Shin, & Bost, 2007).

Financial support from nonresidential fathers, via child support and other means, is also strongly related to positive father-child relationships (King, 1994; Seltzer, 1991).

The independent variables explored as correlates of post-release father-child relationship quality in this report were drawn from factors identified in the literature as being likely to influence family relationships after incarceration. Previous research has identified **family contact during incarceration** as a key factor in reentry success, although studies have primarily focused on desistance from criminal activity (Bales & Mears, 2008; Berg & Huebner, 2010; Hairston, 1991; Mills & Codd, 2008) rather than on family relationship quality. This work has generally demonstrated that maintaining family ties through visitation, letters, and telephone calls during incarceration is associated with lower recidivism, yet the effects on post-release father-child relationship quality are unknown. One consistent finding from previous research on maintaining family contact during incarceration is that mothers and other caretakers are often “gatekeepers” between imprisoned fathers and their children (Nurse, 2004; Smith, 2014). This suggests that

¹ <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/about.asp>

² Reports from the MFS-IP implementation and impact evaluations can be found at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-search/MFS-IP>.

the **status (e.g., married, nonmarried intimate, coparenting only) and quality of the relationship between coparents (e.g., happiness, conflict resolution skills)** are critically important to consider when exploring father-child relationships. Not only can strained relationships with children's mothers affect father-child relationships during incarceration, but they may also keep recently released fathers from having regular (or any) contact with their children, particularly when women have formed new partnerships during the incarceration (Nurse, 2004).

Although previous studies have not directly examined the influence of **men's incarceration histories** on father-child relationship quality, this is an important factor to consider because 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. The **child's age** may also influence the quality of the relationships maintained among incarcerated and reentering fathers and their children, as the general parenting literature consistently finds lower levels of father-child interaction as children age into adolescence and beyond (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). There is some evidence that fathers are also less involved with very young children (i.e., babies and infants) than with school aged children, suggesting that fathers are most involved with their children during the pre-school and younger school-aged years, before adolescence (Amato, 1989; Bailey, 1994). Fathers self-report less frequent communication, less time spent together, and more conflict with older versus younger children, although these have not been found to consistently translate into overall lack of closeness with older children (Shearer et al., 2005). Finally, **participation in parenting or fatherhood programming during incarceration** is an important factor to explore as a predictor of father-child relationship quality. Such programs have been associated with increases in fatherhood knowledge and child contact during incarceration (Robbers, 2005, Skarupski et al., 2003), but little is known about the impact of such programming on post-release father-child relationships.

Data Collection Approach

Beginning in December 2008, couples in five program sites (Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New York) were enrolled in the MFS-IP impact study. Interviews were conducted at baseline with 1,991 men and 1,482 partners in the five sites. Couples were interviewed again at nine- and 18-month follow-up. An additional 34-month follow-up interview was conducted with more than 1,000 of the couples in two sites. During the baseline interview, at which point all the men were incarcerated in a state prison, men identified their primary intimate or coparenting partners (referred to as "survey partners" throughout this report), who were then recruited for baseline interviews. 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 coparented by both members of the study couple.

This brief examines father-child relationship quality before, during, and after incarceration using baseline interview data and data from the fathers' first post-release interview. The baseline interview took place, on average, just over two years after the fathers were incarcerated. Of the 1,991 men enrolled in the study, 772 fathers were released from prison before any of the follow-up interviews. Of these men, 50 percent were released before their nine-month interview, 29 percent were released between their nine- and 18-month interviews, and 22 percent were

released between their 18- and 34-month interviews.³ On average, the first post-release interview took place about six months after the father’s release.

For the results presented in this brief, data are combined across sites and for treatment and comparison groups—meaning that some fathers received MFS-IP healthy relationship programming and others received “treatment as usual.” Parenting programming was not received by all fathers in the treatment group and many treatment and comparison group fathers received parenting programming through sources other than the MFS-IP program. Therefore, this analysis does not provide insight into whether parenting-related components of MFS-IP programs or any other specific parenting programs could affect father-child outcomes.⁴ Both treatment and comparison fathers included in this analysis were subject to the selection criteria for the impact evaluation (Lindquist, McKay, Bir, & Steffey, 2015).

Exhibit 1. Baseline Characteristics of Sample Members		Fathers (n=772)
Relationship with Survey Partner		
Relationship Status		
Married		22%
In an intimate relationship		72%
In a coparenting relationship only		6%
Study couple in an exclusive relationship		85%
(If married/intimate) Length of relationship		7.1 years
Parenting/Coparenting Characteristics		
Study partners coparent any children together		87%
Average # of children		3.1
Average # of coparents		2.8
Average age of focal child		7.0 years
Age		
Age at study enrollment (mean)		32.5 years
Incarceration History		
Age at first arrest (mean)		16.3 years
Number of previous adult incarcerations (mean)		6.5
Length of current incarceration (mean)		2.3 years

Sample Characteristics

Most of the fathers in the study sample reported being in nonmarried intimate relationships with their survey partners that were exclusive and long-term. On average, fathers had three children. Most fathers coparented at least one child with their survey partner and reported an average of three coparents. Finally, fathers had fairly extensive criminal justice histories beginning around age 16. See **Exhibit 1** for details.

Comparison with National Data

The study sample (**Exhibit 1**) includes more men in committed relationships, who have experienced longer incarcerations and have more serious criminal histories (more lifetime arrests and incarcerations) than nationally representative samples of male prisoners.^a

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), at year end 2013, more than half of individuals in state prisons had been convicted of violent crimes. The median time served by men in prison convicted of violent offenses was 29 months, by those convicted of property crimes, 12 months; and by those convicted of drug offenses, 14 months (Carson, 2014).

^aDue to measurement differences, many of the estimates shown in Exhibit 1 cannot be directly compared with BJS data.

³ 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.

⁴ Almost half of the fathers in the study sample (49.2%) reported in their baseline interviews that they had participated in parenting classes at some point since being incarcerated.

Analytic Approach

This brief examines several aspects of the fathers' relationships with their children after their release from incarceration. First, we examine the **fathers' residential arrangements and financial support for their focal children**, comparing post-release experiences with those before incarceration using matched pairs t-tests. Predictors of father-child coresidence and fathers' financial support for their children after release are identified using multivariate logistic regression models. Next, several dimensions of the quality of the relationships the fathers reported having with the focal children after their release are explored, including **parental warmth, self-reported relationship quality, and frequency of activities with the child**.

Since parent-child dynamics in the general population are known to differ depending on whether fathers and children live together or not, multivariate models examine predictors of parental warmth, self-rated father-child relationship quality, and frequency of father-child activities separately for residential and nonresidential fathers.

Notes on Analytic Approach to Multivariate Models

The following independent variables were included in each logistic regression model:

- Age of focal child (measured in years, which was a continuous variable ranging from 0-17)
- Father's criminal history (number of adult incarcerations, which was a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 40)
- Father's contact with focal child during his incarceration (a four-point categorical variable reflecting the types of contact the father reported having with the focal child during his incarceration, with one point given for each of the following four forms of contact: in-person visits, telephone calls, father sending mail, and father receiving mail)
- Whether the father participated in parenting classes during incarceration (a dichotomous variable)
- Whether the father was married to his survey partner at baseline (a dichotomous variable)
- Father's reports of the couple's conflict resolution skills post-release (a score ranging from 0-12 based on 4 scale items assessing respondent's reports of the frequency with which the couple manages potentially harmful issues or arguments)
- Father's reports of relationship happiness with his survey partner post-release (respondent's rating of how happy he is with his relationship with study partner on a scale from 1-10)

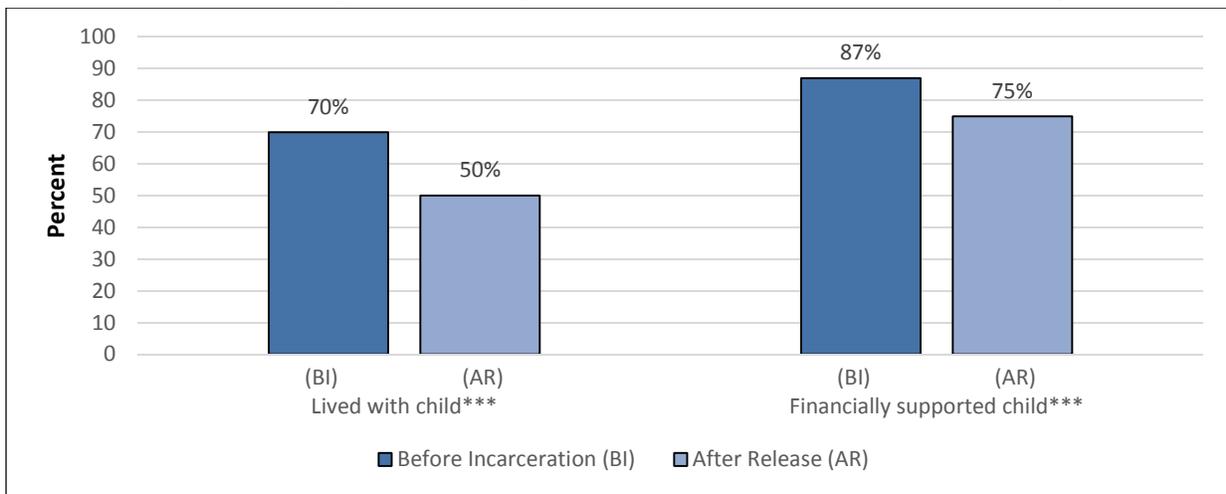
In addition, the models controlled for program site and the baseline measure of the outcome. Several other variables explored as potential independent variables were not significantly correlated with father-child relationship quality—including whether the father was enrolled in MFS-IP healthy relationship programming (vs. receiving treatment as usual), the father's satisfaction with the assistance he 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.

CORESIDENCE AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT BEFORE AND AFTER INCARCERATION

Comparing the proportion of fathers who lived with and provided financial support for the focal child at each of the two time periods (before incarceration and after release),⁵ we found that fathers were significantly less likely to report living with the focal child after release from prison (50%) than before incarceration (70%, $p < 0.001$) (**Exhibit 2**). Similarly, 87 percent of fathers said they contributed financial support for the focal child before their incarceration, whereas 75 percent reported doing so after release ($p < 0.001$).

⁵ The comparisons were made using matched pair t-tests, which test whether, on average, a father's report of the outcome at the post-release interview was significantly different from his experiences before incarceration (as reported during his baseline interview).

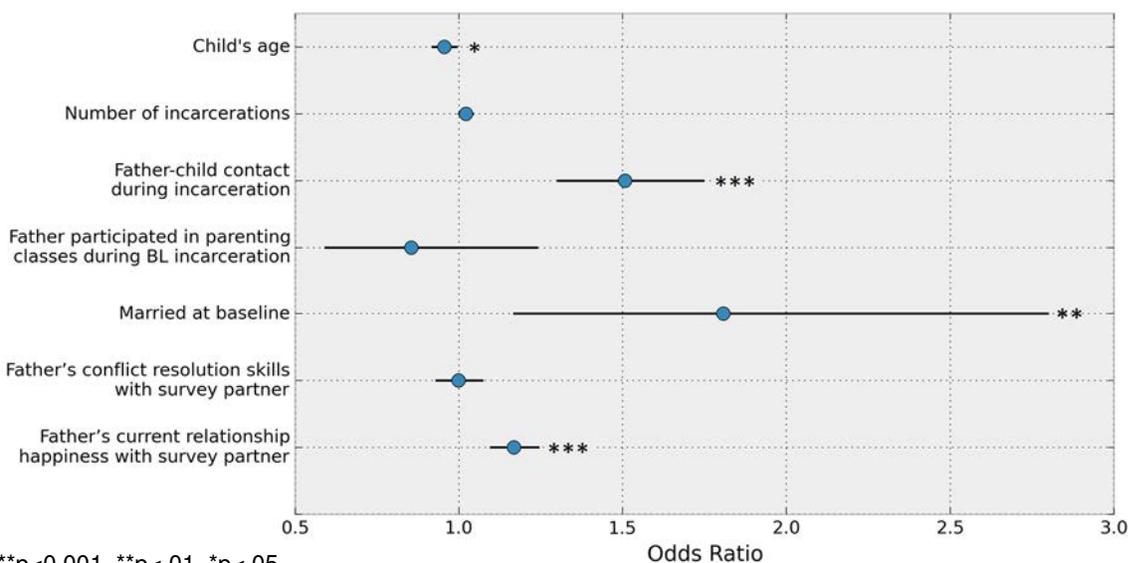
Exhibit 2. Proportion of Fathers Who Lived with and Provided Financial Support for Focal Child, by Time Point (before Incarceration and after Release)



***p<0.001.

Multivariate models showed that, after we controlled for whether or not fathers were living with the focal child before their incarceration, those who stayed in contact with the child during the incarceration, were married to their survey partners after release, and reported higher levels of happiness in their relationships with their survey partners after release were more likely to live with the focal child after release (see **Exhibit 3**⁶). The focal child's age was inversely associated with the likelihood of father-child coresidence (as the age of the child increased, the likelihood of coresidence decreased). The father's participation in parenting classes during his incarceration was not significantly associated with his likelihood of living with the child after release, nor were his incarceration history or conflict resolution skills with his survey partner after release.

Exhibit 3. Predictors of Father-Child Coresidence after Release

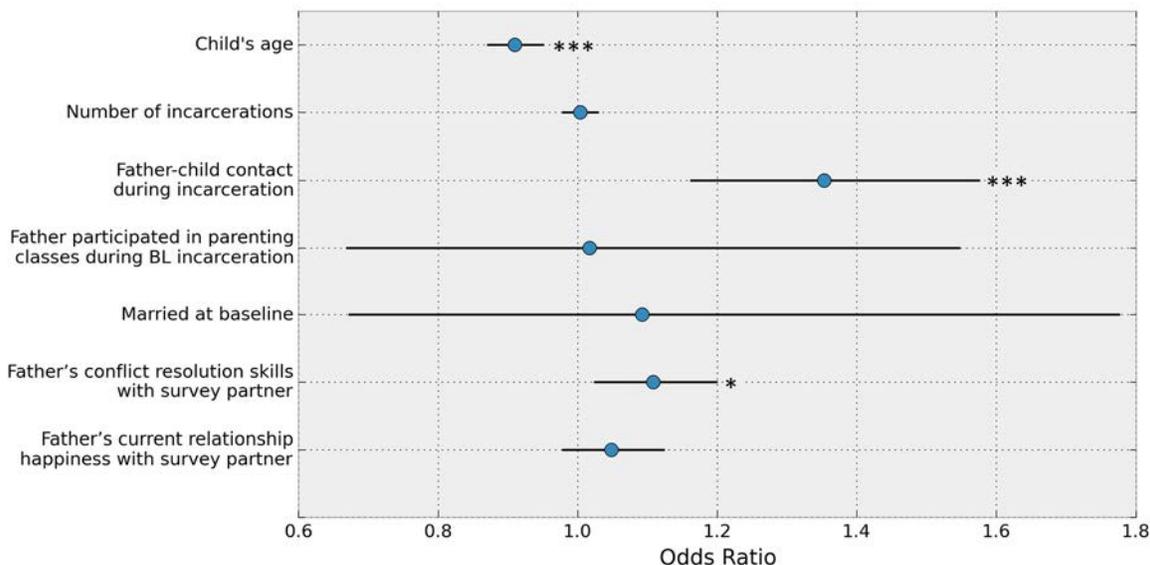


***p<0.001, **p<.01, *p<.05.

⁶ The odds ratios depicted in Exhibits 3-7 show how strongly each factor influenced the study outcomes, if at all. The farther an odds ratio (blue dot) is from zero, the stronger the observed positive or negative influence. The smaller the confidence interval for that odds ratio (length of black line), the more confidently we can pinpoint it. If a factor is statistically significant (asterisks), the observed influence is unlikely to be due to chance alone at the likelihood indicated by the number of asterisks (5 in 100, 1 in 100, or 1 in 1,000, respectively).

Factors significantly related whether the father provided any financial support for the child after release (controlling for preincarceration financial support) were having engaged in more types of contact with the child during incarceration and having better conflict resolution skills in the relationship with the survey partner after release (see **Exhibit 4**). As with coresidence, the focal child's age was inversely associated with the likelihood of financial support for the child (as the child's age increased, the likelihood of providing financial support decreased). Neither the father's participation in parenting classes during his incarceration nor the other factors explored as independent variables were significantly associated with his likelihood of providing financial support. (See box on p. 6 for a discussion of how the independent variables were measured.)

Exhibit 4. Predictors of Father's Financial Support for Focal Child after Release



***p<0.001, **p<.01, *p<.05.

Fathers' Perceptions of Their Post-Release Relationships with Children

In their first post-release interview, fathers were asked how easy or hard it had been to have a good relationship with the focal child since their release from incarceration. Most fathers reported that it had been "very easy" (39%) or "pretty easy" (30%), with only 31% feeling that it had been "pretty hard" or "very hard." In addition, most fathers (60%) felt that their release made them closer to their children. When asked about specific challenges to their relationship with their children after release, the most commonly reported challenge was fathers having missed out on so much that happened with their children during the incarceration (reported by two-thirds of fathers). Other frequently reported challenges by fathers included rebuilding their children's trust after the time apart (39%), having money to financially support the children (44%), dealing with people who didn't want him to see his children (26%), not being in a stable enough financial and housing situation to spend time with the children (24%), and finding transportation for visits or activities (21%).

PREDICTORS OF FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AFTER RELEASE

Next, we explored three dimensions of father-child relationship quality, running separate models for fathers who lived with their focal children ("residential fathers") and those who did not ("non-residential fathers"). We examined predictors of father-child relationship quality separately for residential and nonresidential fathers because fathers' relationships with their children are likely affected by the degree of access they have to those children. The outcomes used in these models were parental warmth, father's self-reported quality of his relationship with the focal child, and frequency of activities. (See box on p. 9 for a discussion of how the dependent variables were measured.)

Parental Warmth

Only one factor—the age of the child—was shown to be a statistically significant predictor of fathers’ parental warmth at the post-release interview (controlling for baseline levels of parental warmth). For both residential and nonresidential fathers, as the child’s age increased, parental warmth decreased.

Neither the extent of contact between the father and child during the father’s incarceration or participation in parenting classes, nor the other factors explored as independent variables, were significantly associated with parental warmth after release. The results for parental warmth are shown in **Exhibit 5**.⁷

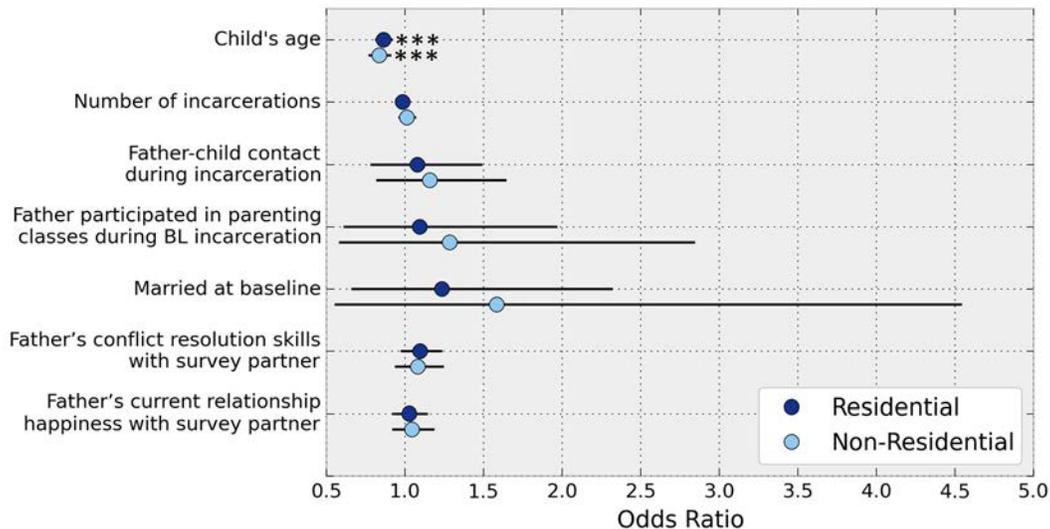
Measurement of Dependent Variables

Parental warmth reflects the frequency with which the father reported engaging in the following activities with the focal child during his interactions with him/her since the father’s release from incarceration: praising the child, hugging or showing physical affection with the child, communicating with him/her about his/her interests, and telling the child that he/she loves him/her. Scores ranging from zero to 12 were created based on the father’s responses (never, sometimes, usually, and always). Given the skewed distribution among the sample (toward high levels of warmth), fathers who scored 10 or higher were compared with those who scored nine or lower.

Father’s **self-reported quality of his relationship with the focal child** reflects the father’s rating of his current relationship with the focal child. Fathers who reported ratings of poor/fair were compared with those who reported ratings of good/excellent.

Frequency of activities with the focal child reflects how many days per week fathers reported doing an activity with the child such as eating meals, going shopping, helping with homework, or doing something fun with the child (never, only a couple of times, every couple of months, about once a month, a couple of times a month, one or more times a week). Residential fathers who engaged in an activity six to seven days per week were compared with those who engaged in an activity zero to five days per week. Nonresidential fathers who engaged in an activity one or more days a week were compared with those who did not engage in any activities per week. Because of skip patterns in the survey instrument, the models for nonresidential fathers were conducted only for those who reported seeing the child one or more times per week.

Exhibit 5. Predictors of Parental Warmth after Release



***p<0.001, **p<.01, *p<.05.

⁷ Models shown in Exhibits 5-7 were run separately for residential and nonresidential fathers. P-values therefore represent whether each independent variable was significantly associated with the outcome for residential and nonresidential fathers separately.

Father-Child Relationship Quality

The self-reported quality of the fathers' relationships with their focal children was significantly related to fathers' relationships with their survey partners and their children's age:

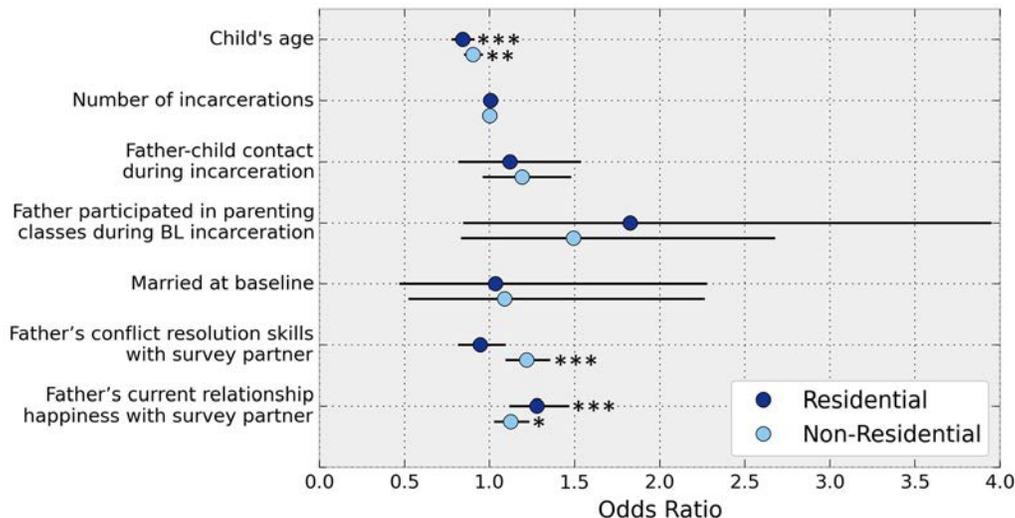
- (1) Nonresidential fathers who had stronger conflict resolution skills with their survey partners reported better relationships with their children than those with poorer conflict resolution skills.
- (2) Both residential and nonresidential fathers who were happier in their relationships with their survey partners reported better relationships with their children than fathers who were not happy in their relationships with their survey partners.
- (3) For both residential and nonresidential fathers, as the age of the child increased, the relationship quality decreased.

The Role of In-Prison Contact

The multivariate models showed that father-child contact was not significantly associated with any of the post-release relationship quality outcomes. However, these models control for the father's relationship with the child's mother. When these variables are removed from the models, the degree of contact between the father and child during the father's incarceration becomes significantly associated with father-child relationship quality for nonresidential fathers ($p=0.02$) and with frequency of activities with the child for both residential and nonresidential fathers ($p=0.04$ for both models). This pattern suggests that fathers' contact with their children during incarceration is important for post-release relationship quality, but the father's relationship with the child's mother is so critical to his relationship with his children that the independent effects of in-prison visits, telephone calls, and letters are difficult to detect.

As with the findings for parental warmth, neither the father's incarceration history nor the extent of in-prison contact with the focal child during the father's baseline incarceration significantly predicted post-release relationship quality (see sidebar). The results for father-child relationship quality are shown in **Exhibit 6**.

Exhibit 6. Predictors of Self-Reported Father-Child Relationship Quality after Release



*** $p<0.001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$.

Frequency of Activities with Focal Child

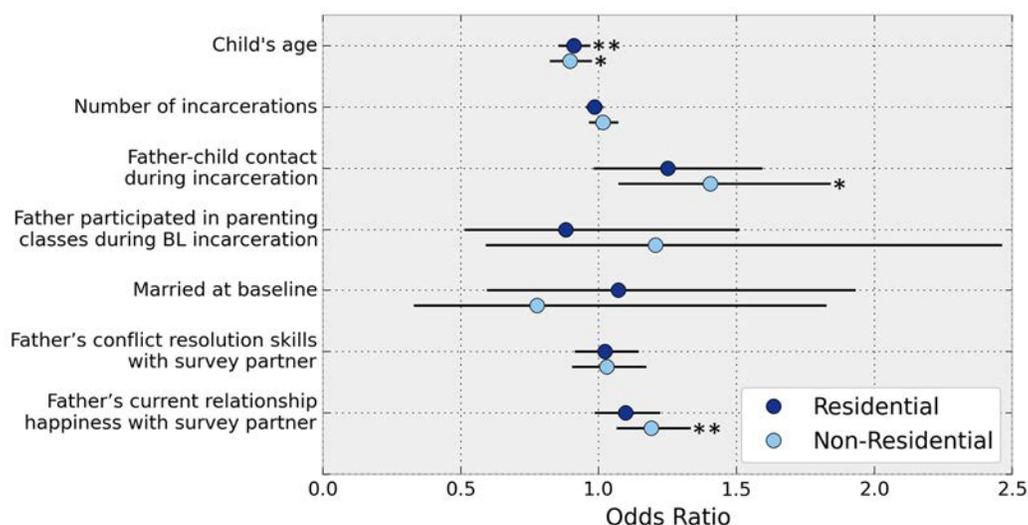
Fathers' frequency of activities with the focal children was significantly related to the child's age. As the child's age increased, the likelihood of fathers' engaging in frequent activities with their children decreased for both residential and nonresidential fathers (with a lower threshold used to define "frequent" for nonresidential fathers), controlling for preincarceration involvement.

Among nonresidential fathers only, two other factors had an influence on the likelihood of engaging in frequent activities:

- (1) Nonresidential fathers who had more contact with their focal children during incarceration were more likely to report engaging in at least one activity per week with those children after release than fathers who had less contact with their focal children during incarceration.
- (2) Nonresidential fathers who were happier in their relationships with their survey partners after release were more likely to report engaging in at least one activity per week with their focal children than fathers who were not happy in their relationships with their survey partners.

None of the other independent variables were associated with fathers' likelihood of engaging in frequent activities with focal children after release from incarceration for either residential or nonresidential fathers (see **Exhibit 7**).

Exhibit 7. Predictors of Frequent Activities with Focal Child after Release



**p<.01, *p<.05.

Note: When controlling for whether fathers were enrolled in MFS-IP programming (vs. receiving “treatment as usual”), father-child contact during incarceration and relationship happiness with survey partner were no longer significant for nonresidential fathers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The findings from this study help to broaden our understanding of father-child relationships in the wake of paternal incarceration.

Fewer fathers lived with their children after release than did before incarceration.

Coresidence can greatly facilitate father-child relationships by providing daily opportunities for communication, care-taking, and financial support, as well as by encouraging spontaneous moments of playing together or helping with homework or household tasks (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012). Our analyses showed that fewer fathers lived with their focal children after release than had lived with them before incarceration, which is not surprising given the evidence from previous studies that incarceration often weakens family ties and deteriorates relationships (Khan et al., 2011; Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004; Western & McLanahan, 2000).

However, fathers who maintained contact with their children during incarceration were more likely to live with them after release. In addition, nonresidential fathers who had higher

levels of contact with their children during incarceration were more likely to engage in activities with those children after release. These findings could indicate that encouraging and facilitating father-child contact throughout the incarceration period could contribute to higher levels of coresidence during the post-release period. Such efforts to facilitate father-child contact during incarceration could support high-quality father-child relationships even for fathers who do not live with their children after release.

Fewer fathers financially supported their children after release than did before incarceration. Financial support contributed by fathers for their children can serve as a proxy for a sense of responsibility for and investment in a long-term relationship with a child (Magnuson & Gibson-Davis, 2007). Our analyses showed that fewer fathers provided financial support to their focal children after release than before incarceration. Literature on the disintegration of family relationships that can be associated with incarceration (Hairston, 2003; Western & McLanahan, 2000; Western & Wildeman, 2009) suggests that some fathers may feel less connected to their children after release from prison and therefore less inclined to provide for them financially. However, given the many barriers to gainful employment faced by people with criminal records (Pager, 2007), these decreases could reflect men's lack of financial resources rather than a sign of disengagement from their children's lives. Dual strategies for family strengthening and creating employment opportunities may be needed to facilitate post-incarceration support.

Men's relationships with their children's mothers are critically important. Several dimensions of a father's relationship with his focal child were related to the quality of his relationship with the child's mother. After their release, fathers who had happier relationships with their survey partners were more likely to live with and have better relationships with their focal children. Nonresidential fathers who had happier relationships with their survey partners were also more likely to engage in at least one activity per week with their focal children. In addition, fathers who reported stronger conflict resolution skills with their survey partners were more likely to provide financial support for their children and (for nonresidential fathers only) to report better relationships with their children. Interestingly, although fathers who were married to their survey partners were more likely to live with their focal children after release from prison, being married was not significantly associated with other aspects of father-child relationships. This suggests that the quality of the coparenting relationship, rather than marital status, is what shapes father-child interactions. The key role of the coparenting relationship has strong implications for future programming for families affected by paternal incarceration—indicating that efforts to strengthen conflict resolution skills and relationship happiness (for both intimate and coparenting relationships) are likely to have a positive impact on father-child relationship quality. Providing support to maintain or improve relationship happiness among couples during incarceration could potentially result in more fathers living with their children once they return home and maintaining higher quality relationships.

The age of the child is a significant predictor of post-release father-child relationship quality. Fathers with younger children rated their parental warmth and their relationship quality with their children more highly than did fathers of older children, and they also engaged in more activities with their children. These findings can be interpreted in multiple ways. It may be that fathers are generally better able to relate to and interact with young children, whose needs can be met through specific, concrete actions (feeding, diaper changing), as opposed to understanding and responding to the more complex emotional needs of older children. Indeed, research on child development from an evolutionary perspective strongly supports a natural distancing in the parent-child relationship as the child enters adolescence and puberty and seeks to develop his or her independent, autonomous identity (Laursen & Collins, 2004).

Parent-child conflict that occurs during adolescence can also negatively affect parents' self-esteem, mental health, and reported perceptions of their relationships with their children. In contrast, children are more likely to view such conflict as natural and less meaningful (Steinberg, 2001).

Other factors specific to the experiences of families affected by incarceration may also contribute to the age-related patterns observed. Older children may also perceive time differently and have a stronger awareness of a father's incarceration history, and fathers may find it daunting to handle children's anger, sadness, or fear stemming from that experience (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008), leading fathers to be distant and avoidant. Although incarceration history did not emerge as a significant independent predictor of father-child relationship quality in our analyses, it may be that previous incarcerations have caused fathers to miss out on larger portions of older children's than younger children's lives, and "making up for lost time" with them may have felt insurmountable—whereas younger children may have made fathers feel that they had an opportunity for a "fresh start" to be an involved parent (Edin et al., 2004). This suggests that programs for families affected by incarceration might do well to focus on parenting challenges and strategies that are appropriate at different developmental stages for children, with a particular focus on how children's experiences of paternal incarceration may evolve as they get older.

Current analyses did not find that participation in parenting classes directly influenced post-release father-child relationship quality, although such programs have been shown to increase fatherhood knowledge and father-child contact during incarceration (Robbers, 2005; Skarupski et al., 2003). It is possible that an explicit focus on strategies for men's reintegration with children after release—particularly dealing with issues specific to reuniting with older children—would enhance prison-based parenting and fatherhood programming.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Although not nationally representative of all fathers and their families experiencing incarceration, the MFS-IP dataset is a large and diverse repository of information on the experiences of fathers, their partners, and their children before, during, and after incarceration. This research brief on father-child relationships begins to explore how families are affected by incarceration and identifies areas where additional research efforts may be needed.

First, it would be helpful to have a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the predictors of father-child relationship quality that emerged in this analysis. For example, learning how fathers approach parenting children of different ages during and after incarceration could inform efforts to increase their warmth toward and engagement in the lives of older children by illuminating areas of apprehension or misunderstanding. Qualitative research could be particularly well suited to developing this knowledge, as it permits study participants to raise new topics and explain emotional responses.

Second, more research attention should be paid to potential differences in how residential and nonresidential fathers and their children experience various aspects of their relationships. In particular, measures of parental warmth, self-rated relationship quality, and frequency of activities may have different meanings depending on whether a father lives with a particular child or not. Measures that attempt to capture the experiences of fathers who live with their children and those who do not need to be continually revised and tested.

Third, the central role of the father-mother relationship in shaping father-child relationships after reentry from prison in this study reinforces the need for continued research on coparenting and

couple relationships in this population. For example, examining predictors of father-mother relationship quality may provide additional insights into supporting the father-child relationship. Additionally, modeling approaches that examine the potential role of other factors that may influence family relationship quality, such as participation in couples-based relationship strengthening programming, extended family support, peer influence, and employment and financial stability, are worth exploring. Enriching our understanding of the complexity and diversity of family relationships in these ways should continue to yield insights that support more meaningful and effective services for families affected by incarceration.

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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 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 study are available from the HHS ASPE Web site: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners>.

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