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MULTI-SITE FAMILY STUDY ON INCARCERATION, PARENTING AND PARTNERING

Change in Couple Relationships Before, During, and After Incarceration

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The MFS-IP study offers a unique opportunity to examine change in couple relationships over time among a sub-sample of 641 heterosexual couples who were in an intimate relationship at the time the study started. All of the male partners in this analysis were incarcerated in state prison when the study started and released before the study ended.

- After the male partner's release from prison, fewer couples defined their relationships as intimate, lived together, or were exclusive with one another than during the period of incarceration.
- Two common factors shaped whether participants defined their relationships as intimate, lived together, or were exclusive with one another after release: stronger fidelity attitudes and behaviors, and greater relationship happiness during incarceration.
- Other factors that were associated with one or more of these three relationship outcomes after release included: longer relationship duration, being married, having children together, more contact during incarceration, and satisfaction with help received to maintain contact during incarceration.
- Length of the male partner's incarceration, participation in relationship education, and baseline communication skills did not appear to affect whether participants defined their relationships as intimate, lived together, or were exclusive with one another after release.

About This Research Brief

This brief presents data on couple 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

Men who are in prison in the United States often navigate relationships with intimate partners before, during, and after their incarceration. Although rates of legal marriage are relatively low among incarcerated persons, studies consistently find that the majority of male prisoners consider themselves to be in an intimate relationship (Khan, Behrend, Adimora, Weir, Tisdale, et al., 2011; Lattimore & Visher, 2009; Lindquist, McKay, Bir, & Steffey, 2015; Mumola, 2000; Visher & Courtney, 2007). Low marriage rates obscure the reality that many justice-involved men engage in long-term intimate relationships that may involve cohabitation when they are not incarcerated. Indeed, one study of incarcerated persons from Ohio found that 46 percent lived with a spouse or intimate partner prior to incarceration (Visher & Courtney, 2007), and nationally representative data for men incarcerated in state prisons show that 44 percent were either married or lived with a partner at the time of their arrest (Lindquist et al., 2015; Mumola, 2000; Visher & Courtney, 2007).

Strong family relationships can be sources of much-needed emotional, financial, and practical support for men during their incarceration (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2007; Herman-Stahl, Kan, & McKay, 2008). However, incarceration presents specific challenges that may complicate the maintenance of strong and healthy relationships. Marital and partner bonds can be weakened by changes in roles associated with the male partner's absence, psychological changes, and economic strain (Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Western & McLanahan, 2000). As incarcerated men adjust to the stress, rigid routines, and deprivation of freedom in the prison environment, they may adopt coping mechanisms that impede relationships with intimate partners and family members (Haney, 2001; Nurse, 2002, 2004). Furthermore, incarceration itself may aggravate existing relationship struggles or generate new difficulties, such as issues of lost income, a sense of abandonment, or frustration with prison visiting regulations (Christian, 2005; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Hairston, 2003). Having a loved one go to prison can cause depression, anxiety, or other forms of psychological distress, which in turn may affect interpersonal relationships (Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012).

Given the known challenges and stressors associated with maintaining a relationship when one partner is incarcerated, it follows that many intimate partner relationships change and deteriorate over time. Although research on rates of relationship dissolution associated with a single, discrete incarceration term is limited, rates of divorce and relationship dissolution are substantially higher among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons than among the general population (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Lynch & Sabol, 2004). The one published study that has examined relationship dissolution during a single incarceration, which focused on a single-state sample of HIV-positive incarcerated men, found that half (52%) of the men were in primary relationships at the beginning of the focal incarceration, and 55 percent of these relationships had ended by the time of the in-prison follow-up survey (Khan, Behrend, Adimora, Weir, Tisdale, et al., 2011). The men cited their current incarceration, financial concerns, substance use by either partner, and non-monogamy by either partner as the main reasons that their intimate relationships ended.

For relationships that survive the incarceration period, reentry can bring a new set of stressors. Family members have been described as the "front line" of reentry, and individuals returning from prison are highly dependent on them for material, economic, and emotional support (Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004). This can place a heavy burden on partners who want to welcome a loved one home but feel ill-equipped to meet the reentering person's needs (Comfort, 2007; Cooke, 2005). When relationship difficulties that arose during incarceration are unresolved, partnership dynamics can be sources of tension, hindering post-release efforts to desist from criminal activity and avoid reincarceration (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Harker Armstrong, 2010; Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2008; Herrera, Wiersma, & Cleveland, 2010; Nurse, 2004).

Specific factors found to contribute to low marriage rates and relationship dissolution among formerly incarcerated men include barriers to becoming economic providers due to lack of employment opportunities, the fact that men who spend portions of their lives behind bars have less time in the community to develop relationships with potential partners, and the effects of sustained separation from existing partners (Edin, 2000; Lane et al., 2004; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011; Pager, 2007; Wilson, 1996). The role of contact through letters, phone calls, and visits has been repeatedly identified as pivotal in maintaining family ties during (and possibly after) an incarceration (Braman & Wood, 2003; Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2002; Hairston, 1991). Such ties have consistently been found to play an important role in lower recidivism, decreased substance use, and other positive outcomes when men return home from prison, pointing to the importance of providing services and programs that can help support them (Bales & Mears, 2008; Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004; Hagan & Coleman, 2001; Hairston, 1988; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001).

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS

Understanding what supports strong relationship quality among formerly incarcerated men and their partners could therefore have an impact on individual, interpersonal, and community safety and wellbeing. The findings presented here, drawn from a couples-based longitudinal study of families affected by incarceration, give insight into issues facing couples before, during, and after incarceration and identify key factors that predict stronger couple relationships after release.

To identify whether couple relationships changed during incarceration and reentry, and what factors influenced those changes, we focused on three dimensions of relationship status from the general population literature. First, we assessed rates and predictors of **self-defined relationship status**, a widely used construct in relationship research. Self-defined relationship status is particularly important for this study given prior evidence from justice-involved samples that the majority of men are unmarried but consider themselves to be in an intimate relationship (Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005; Khan, Behrend, Adimora, Weir, White, et al., 2011). This construct was operationalized in our analysis as whether the male and female partners both endorsed that they were “romantically involved” with one another at a given survey wave. Second, we examined rates and predictors of **couple coresidence** after release. This construct was chosen based on prior research indicating that the physical separation of the incarcerated partner from the household is a highly salient aspect of the incarceration experience for many couples (Massoglia et al., 2011). Whether incarceration has a transitory (e.g., during the time of imprisonment only) or permanent (lasting beyond the incarceration itself) influence on couple coresidence is not yet understood. Third, we assessed rates and predictors of **relationship exclusivity** (i.e., monogamy) after release, based on evidence for the central role of exclusivity in prior research on relationship status and dissolution among justice-involved couples (Khan, Behrend, Adimora, Weir, Tisdale, et al., 2011).

The independent variables explored as predictors of post-release couple relationship status in this brief were chosen based on literature identifying these factors as being likely to influence intimate relationship stability or dissolution in either the general population or among couples affected by incarceration. Baseline **marital status**, **communication skills**, and **relationship happiness** were all examined on the basis of general population research that links each of these four constructs to relationship stability over time (Bumpass & Sweet, 1995; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Rosenfeld, 2014). **Receipt of relationship education**, which has been associated with increased communication skills and relationship happiness in some impact studies (Lundquist, Hsueh, Lowenstein, Faucetta, Gubits, Michalopoulos, & Knox, 2014; Wood, Moore, Clarkwest, Killewald, & Monahan, 2012), was also examined. **Duration of the male partner’s incarceration** was included in the models based on literature suggesting that prolonged separation from a partner increases likelihood of relationship dissolution (Massoglia

et al., 2011). **Fidelity** was included based on prior research indicating that non-monogamy is an important cause of relationship dissolution among couples in which one partner is incarcerated (Khan, Behrend, Adimora, Weir, Tisdale, et al., 2011). Finally, previous research has identified increased **family contact during incarceration** in the form of visits, letters, and phone calls as contributing to decreased recidivism upon release (Bales & Mears, 2008; Berg & Huebner, 2010; Hairston, 1991; Mills & Codd, 2008). While its impact on post-release partner relationship outcomes was not examined in these studies, the observed influence of family contact on other post-release outcomes suggests that such a link is worth investigating.

Data Collection Approach

Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and the Office of Family Assistance, 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. Data collected 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 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 couples before, during, and after incarceration and identify key factors that predict stronger family relationships post-release.

Survey data collection with incarcerated men and their partners was conducted in five impact sites (Indiana, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota) selected from among the 12 MFS-IP grantees. Beginning in December 2008, couples participating in MFS-IP programming¹ and a set of similar couples not participating in that programming were enrolled in the national impact study. Interviews were conducted at baseline and at nine- and 18-month follow-up with 1,991 men and 1,482 partners in the five sites, and 34-month follow-up interviews were conducted with over 1,000 couples in two sites. During the baseline interview, at which point all the men were incarcerated, men identified their primary intimate or coparenting partners, who were then recruited for baseline interviews. The longitudinal surveys collected information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry. In-depth qualitative interviews are also being conducted among a subsample of couples to better understand the context of family relationships during incarceration and reentry.

Sample Characteristics

This paper examines intimate relationship quality over time among couples in which the male partner was released from prison prior to the 9-, 18-, or 34-month interview and in which both partners completed the first post-release interview (n=641 couples). Baseline interview data and data from the couples' first post-release interview are used, with data combined across sites and for treatment and comparison groups—meaning that some study participants received MFS-IP programming and others received “treatment as usual.” Relationship education programming was not received by all men in the treatment group and many treatment and comparison group men received relationship education programming through programs other than MFS-IP.² (Individual reports of relationship education receipt are distinct from receipt of the MFS-IP intervention, which was a multi-component, couples-based family

¹ Relationship strengthening programming provided through this initiative is described in “Strategies for Building Healthy Relationship Skills Among Couples Affected by Incarceration”: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/mfs-ip/RelationshipSkills/rb.shtml> (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2012)

² Forty percent of men in the study sample reported in their baseline interviews that they had participated in relationship education classes at some point since being incarcerated.

strengthening intervention.) All study respondents were subject to the selection criteria for the evaluation (Lindquist et al., 2015).

Exhibit 1 summarizes the characteristics of the study couples at the baseline interview, which took place on average about two and a half years after the male partner’s admission to prison. Most of the couples in the study sample reported being in non-married intimate relationships that were exclusive and long-term. The vast majority of men and women had minor children and coparented at least one child together (with men reporting coparenting with three partners and women reporting coparenting with two partners, on average). Finally, fathers had fairly extensive criminal justice histories beginning around age 17. When considered in the context the average duration of couples’ relationships, it is evident that many couples likely experienced previous cycles of incarceration and reentry.

Comparison with National Data	Exhibit 1. Baseline Characteristics of Study Couples		n=641	
			Men	Women
<p>The study sample includes a large number of men in committed relationships and men who have experienced longer incarcerations and have more serious criminal histories (more lifetime arrests and incarcerations) than nationally representative samples of male prisoners.</p> <p>According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at year end 2013, more than half of state prisoners had been convicted of violent crimes. The median time served by male prisoners 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).</p>	Relationship With Survey Partner			
	Relationship status			
	Married		27%	26%
	In an intimate relationship		73%	64%
	In a coparenting relationship only ³		1%	10%
	Study couple in an exclusive relationship		87%	86%
	Average duration of relationship (if married/intimate)		7.9 years	7.2 years
	Parenting/Coparenting Characteristics			
	Has children under 18		86%	82%
	Study partners coparent any children together		76%	74%
	Average # of children (among parents)		2.7	2.4
	Average # of coparents (among parents)		2.9	1.9
	Average age of focal child		7.0 years	7.1 years
	Age			
	Average age at study enrollment		34.0 years	32.7 years
	Incarceration History			
	Average age at first arrest		16.8 years	(not asked)
	Average # of previous adult incarcerations		6.5	1.2
Average duration of current incarceration		2.5 years	(n/a)	

Analytic Approach

Using baseline interview data and data from these couples’ first post-release interviews, this brief compares **self-defined relationship status, coresidence, and exclusivity:**

- Across the different time periods for which data on each relationship measure was available (i.e., before, during, and after incarceration) using two-sample t-tests, and
- Between male and female partners within each study couple using paired t-tests.

³ The sample for this analysis consists of couples in which at least one partner indicated that they were romantically involved at baseline. In some of these couples, the other partner characterized the relationship as coparenting only.

Predictors of self-defined relationship status, coresidence, and exclusivity after release were then identified using multivariate logistic regression models. (These analyses cannot establish a causal role for the factors examined; rather, they identify statistically significant relationships between those factors and couples' relationship outcomes after the male partner's release.) The models used data from each sample member's baseline interview and the first interview following the male partner's release—which took place on average six months post-release.

Notes on Analytic Approach to Multivariate Models

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

- Male partner's receipt of relationship education classes during baseline incarceration
- Whether the couple was married at baseline
- Duration of the relationship
- Duration of the male partner's incarceration
- Whether the couple coparented at least one child together at baseline
- Contact between study partners during the incarceration (a four-point scale reflecting the types of contact the couple reported having with one another during the male partner's incarceration: in-person visits, telephone calls, sending mail, and receiving mail)
- Couple's satisfaction with assistance received for staying in touch with one another during the incarceration
- Couple's communication skills
- Couple's reports of relationship happiness with one another
- Fidelity attitudes and behaviors at baseline (an 18-point scale in which a higher score indicates higher levels of fidelity behavior and attitudes about the importance of fidelity)

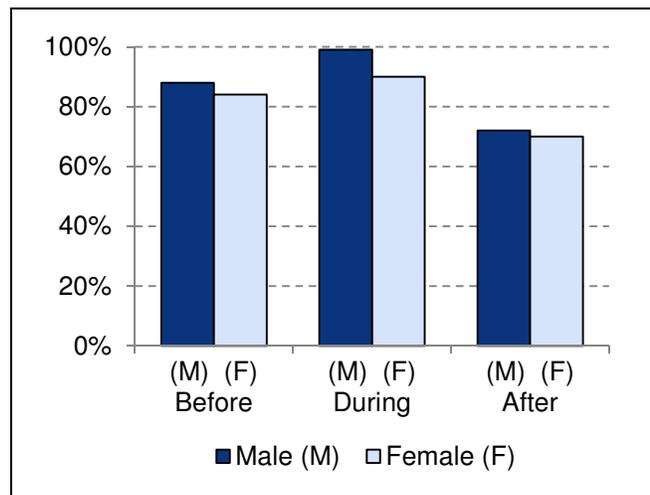
In addition, the models controlled for the baseline measure of the outcome. Several other variables explored as potential independent variables were not significantly correlated with post-release intimate relationship status—including whether the participants were enrolled in healthy relationship programming (vs. receiving treatment as usual), whether they received relationship counseling, whether they reported physical violence before incarceration, the support they received from extended family or friends, substance use, and the male partner's peer influences.

COUPLE RELATIONSHIP STATUS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER INCARCERATION

This section summarizes couple relationship status before, during, and after incarceration. These findings compare couple members' reports of the definition of their relationship, whether or not they were living together, and the exclusivity of the relationship.

As discussed above, marriage and other intimate partner relationships are fragile, and studies indicate that break-up during incarceration and after release is common but not inevitable. **Exhibit 2** shows the percentage of couples who were in intimate (as opposed to coparenting only) relationships prior to incarceration, during incarceration, and after release. ("Intimate relationship" means that the relationship was considered romantic, whether respondents were married or not.)

Exhibit 2. Percentage of Men and Women Who Reported that the Couple Was in an Intimate Relationship Before, During, and After Incarceration



Both men and women were less likely to report that the couple was in an intimate relationship after release than during incarceration (p for both differences <0.001). In addition, within-

couple comparisons indicate that the male partner was more likely than the female partner to consider the couple's relationship to be married or intimate both prior to incarceration ($p < 0.05$) and during incarceration ($p < 0.001$). After release, however, men's and women's characterizations of their relationship status did not differ within couples.

In this sample of both married and unmarried respondents, men were less likely to report living with their study partners after their release than prior to incarceration ($p < 0.001$) as shown in **Exhibit 3**. Differences in women's reports across the time periods were not statistically significant. Within couples, the male partner was more likely to report living together prior to incarceration ($p < 0.001$); after release, couples' reports did not differ from one another.

Exclusivity is another dimension of couple relationship status. **Exhibit 4** shows the percentage of couples who reported that their relationship with one another was exclusive (i.e., they were not romantically involved with anyone else). Men were less likely to report that their relationship with their study partner was exclusive after their release than they were during incarceration ($p < 0.05$). Differences in women's reports across the time periods were not statistically significant. Within study couples, reports of relationship exclusivity were similar between the male and female partners.

In addition to the observed changes in couple relationship status from pre- to post-release, there was also an overall decline in relationship happiness between the two time periods. Also, within-couple differences in men's and women's relationship happiness (with men tending to report greater happiness than their female partners, $p < 0.001$) disappeared after release (not shown).

Exhibit 3. Study Couples Living Together Before and After Incarceration

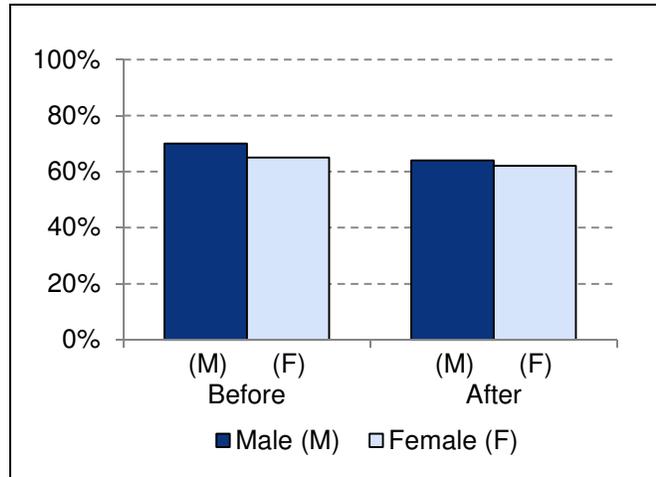
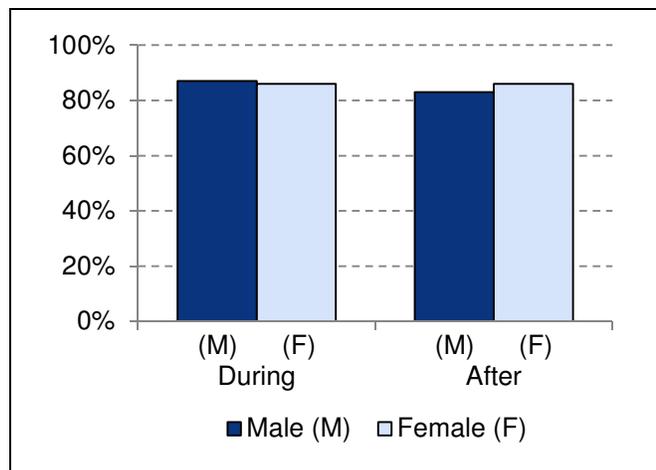


Exhibit 4. Relationship Exclusivity (No Other Partners) During and After Incarceration



What Predicts Couples Staying Together After Release?

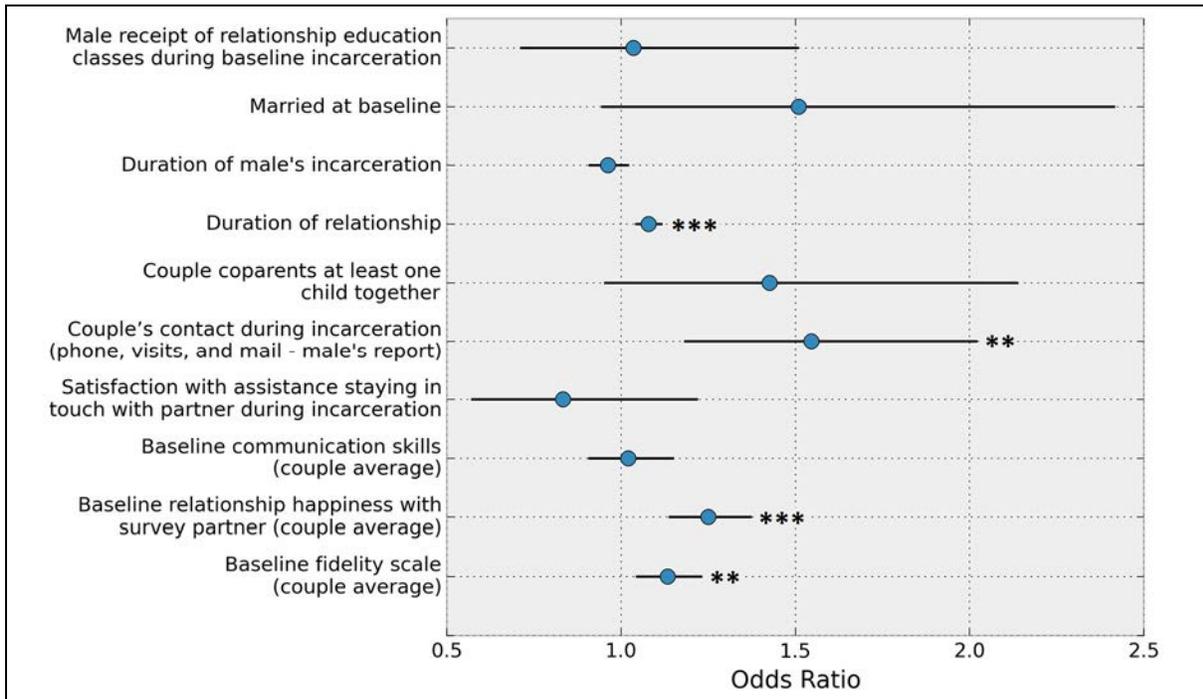
To investigate factors that predict whether the couple remained in an intimate relationship at post-release follow-up, multivariate logistic regression models were run for all study couples who were in an intimate relationship at baseline.⁴ The analyses controlled for MFS-IP program site and did not differentiate between treatment and control group.

⁴ Both members of the couple had to report that the couple was married or romantically involved at their first post-release interview for the couple to be classified as in an intimate relationship.

The findings indicate that couples who remained in intimate relationships after the male partner's release from incarceration had been together longer, engaged in more contact during the male partner's incarceration, had stronger attitudinal and behavioral support for fidelity at baseline, and reported greater relationship happiness at baseline. The strength of those predictors is shown in **Exhibit 5**.

Most men (64%) and women (54%) felt that it had been "pretty easy" or "very easy" to have a good relationship with one another since the male partner's release. The most commonly reported challenges to having a good relationship after release were being able to feel close to one another after the time apart (reported by 39% of women and 34% of men) and being able to trust one another (reported by 34% of women and 29% of men).

Exhibit 5.⁵ Predictors of Couple Remaining in an Intimate Relationship After Release



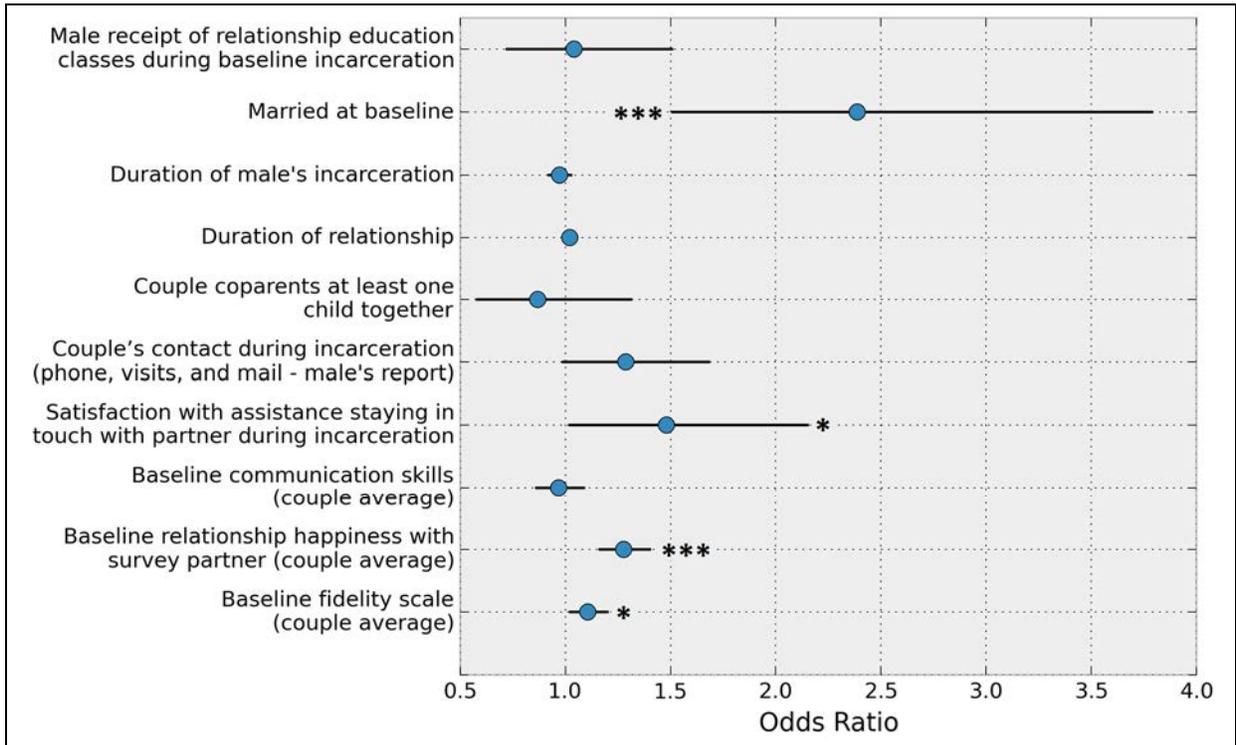
***p<0.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

No influence on post-release relationship status was detected for baseline communication skills, male partner's receipt of relationship education classes during his incarceration, baseline marital or coparenting status, the duration of the male partner's incarceration, or satisfaction with assistance the male partner received for staying in touch with the female partner during his incarceration.

⁵ The odds ratios depicted in Exhibits 5-7 show how strongly each factor influenced the study outcomes, if at all. The farther an odds ratio (blue dot) is from one, 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 given our statistical power. If a factor is statistically significant (asterisks), the observed influence is unlikely to be due to chance alone. The specific p values indicate that the chance of obtaining the observed result if there in fact were no relationship between the independent and dependent variables is less than .05 (*), less than .01 (**), or less than .001 (***).

As shown in **Exhibit 6**, two of the same four factors that predicted remaining in a self-defined intimate relationship after release also predicted whether couple members lived together after the male partner's release: stronger attitudinal and behavioral support for fidelity at baseline ($p < .05$), and greater relationship happiness at baseline ($p < .001$).⁶ In addition, being married ($p < .001$) and being satisfied with assistance received for staying in touch during the incarceration ($p < .05$) also made coresidence after release more likely.

Exhibit 6. Predictors of Couple Living Together After Release



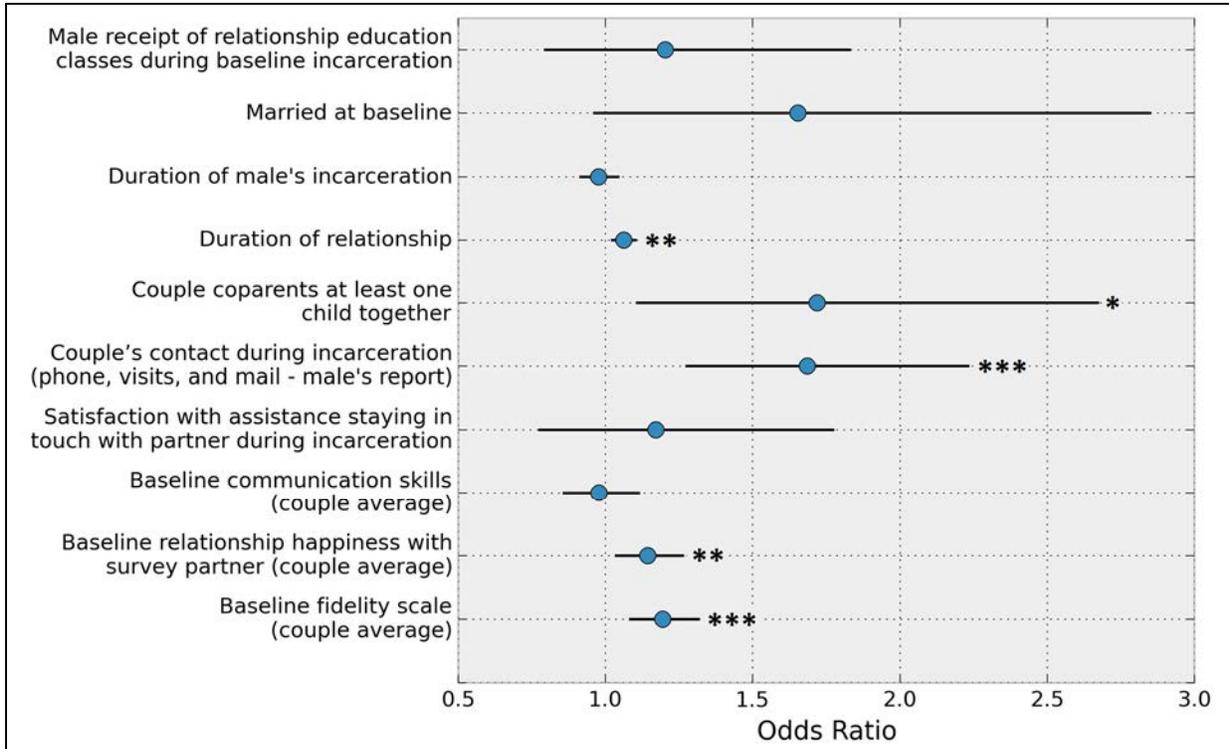
*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Note: When controlling for whether participants were enrolled in healthy relationship programming (vs. receiving "treatment as usual"), the influence of the couple's contact during incarceration became statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Exhibit 7 shows factors that predicted whether couple members were exclusive with one another after the male partner's release. All four factors that exerted a significant influence on relationship status also shaped relationship exclusivity after release: stronger attitudinal and behavioral support for fidelity at baseline ($p < .001$), baseline relationship happiness ($p < .01$), longer relationship history ($p < .01$), and more contact during the incarceration ($p < .001$). In addition, coparenting a child together ($p < .05$) also made couples more likely to be exclusive after release.

⁶ These models controlled for baseline versions of the respective dependent variables (coresidence and relationship exclusivity).

Exhibit 7. Predictors of Couple Being Exclusive After Release



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

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

The analyses presented here illuminate the experiences of a sample of committed intimate partners who tended to be in long-term, mostly exclusive intimate relationships; were raising children together; and had likely been through prior cycles of the male partner's arrest, incarceration in jail or prison, and release. The predictors of couple relationship quality that emerged in these analyses cannot be considered to be causal factors; however, the associations that emerged around couples' experiences as they navigated an incarceration in state prison and the male partner's subsequent reentry into the community have implications for future research and policy.

Justice-involved couples need support to avoid widespread deterioration in their intimate relationships during incarceration and reentry. Overall, men and women in this study faced deterioration in their intimate relationships from the time of study enrollment (when all male partners were in state prison) to the first post-release interview. Relationship happiness generally declined, fewer participants reported being in intimate relationships with one another, and fewer lived together after release than before the incarceration. Development and testing of policy and program options to ameliorate these potential collateral consequences of incarceration for families should be considered.

Changes in couple relationship dynamics from incarceration to reentry may signal a need for couples' programming to be provided during incarceration and in the post-release period. Some of the differences in men's and women's relationship perceptions at baseline—including men reporting higher relationship happiness, being more likely to report being in an intimate relationship, and being more likely to report that the couple cohabited—disappeared once men reentered the community. In addition, analyses of the male sample indicated that men were less likely to consider the relationship exclusive after their release compared to during their incarceration. The fact that some relationship dynamics observed

during incarceration (such as men's tendency to focus exclusively on one partner, or their greater relationship optimism relative to their female partners) tended to alter upon reentry suggests that even relationship issues that are successfully identified and addressed during an incarceration may require revisiting when male partners are back in the community. Intervention strategies that follow couples through the reentry transition, or that specifically address issues and skills that are salient for the reentry period, could help to address this need.

The observed strengths of couples who maintained intimate relationships at reentry may be helpful for designing future interventions. Four common factors predicted relationship outcomes in two separate multivariate models focused on (1) whether couples remained in a self-defined intimate relationship, and (2) whether they were exclusive with one another after the male partner's release. These strengths were stronger fidelity attitudes and behaviors at baseline, greater relationship happiness at baseline, length of the relationship at baseline, and frequency of contact during the male partner's incarceration. Coparenting a child together at baseline also made it more likely that couples would be exclusive with one another after release. Whether couples lived together after release was similarly influenced by baseline relationship happiness and fidelity attitudes and behaviors, as well as by whether couples were married at baseline and how happy men were with the assistance they had received for staying in touch during the incarceration.

While two of these observed influences (length of a couple's relationship with one another and whether they coparented a child) are not amenable to intervention, each of the factors has implications for thoughtful intervention design. The importance of the length of the relationship, marital status, and whether couples coparented a child together suggests that human services programs designed for couples who are invested in remaining together should consider taking these factors into account. Justice policies and programs that address obstacles to contact between partners during an incarceration (such as free buses to bring family members of incarcerated persons to correctional facility visiting hours, or policy initiatives to reduce exorbitant telephone rates for calls from correctional institutions) could increase the likelihood that couples will maintain contact during an incarceration, and experience more stable relationships after release.

Coparenting seems to have a positive effect on couples' stability; future research should examine how stability in couple relationships affects the children of incarcerated and reentering parents. Findings that coparenting a child together at baseline was predictive of intimate relationship exclusivity after release suggest that the presence of children could have a stabilizing effect on parents' relationships with one another. While most research has tended to assume that children of incarcerated parents will likewise benefit from stable relationships between their parents, this has not been established empirically and could be expected to vary—particularly for families in which intimate partner violence, child abuse, or substance abuse are present.

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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/basic-report/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners>.

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