Chapter 5
Paternal Incarceration: Resilience in Father-Child Relationships

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Incarceration rates in the United States, though recently stabilized, increased rapidly over the past half century. Today, more than two million individuals are incarcerated in state and federal prisons across the United States (Carson, 2020). This number excludes the more than 12 million individuals incarcerated in local jails annually (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). It also excludes individuals recently released back to their families and communities, many of whom remain on supervision via probation or parole (Kaeble, 2018). Incarceration is a life-course experience concentrated among the most vulnerable, including people of color, those living in poverty, and those residing in economically distressed neighborhoods (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

The rapid increase in incarceration in the United States means that an increasing number of children experience parental incarceration, particularly paternal incarceration, given the concentration of incarceration among men. Recent data, based on a nationally representative sample of US adults, show that about one-sixth (16%) of individuals experience paternal incarceration (Enns et al., 2019). The prevalence of paternal incarceration is even higher among vulnerable groups. For example, among children born in urban areas to mostly unmarried parents around the turn of the twenty-first century, more than one-third (35%) experience paternal incarceration by age 15 (Turney & Haskins, 2019). Furthermore, even among this relatively vulnerable population, paternal incarceration is unequally distributed, being more common among Black urban children than among White urban children (Turney & Haskins, 2019).

The sizable number of children with fathers confined in jail or prison, in conjunction with the concentration of this experience among already vulnerable children, has generated research on the intergenerational consequences of paternal

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incarceration. Family systems theory, which highlights the interdependency of family members, suggests that paternal incarceration may disrupt the roles and functions of the entire family unit, thereby impairing the well-being of children (Minuchin, 1974). Such disruptions may occur directly, via the father's removal from the household, or indirectly via a number of pathways (e.g., changes to the parental relationship stemming from incarceration). Indeed, research documents mostly deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration for children's behavioral, educational, and health outcomes (for reviews, see Eddy, & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020; Turney & Goodsell, 2018; Turney & Haskins, 2019; Wildeman et al., 2018).

Despite this growing consensus that paternal incarceration is a family stressor with deleterious intergenerational consequences, little is known about how paternal incarceration systematically affects relationship quality between fathers and their children. Conceptually, the link between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships could take several forms. Paternal incarceration may weaken relationships between fathers and children, as the nature of confinement makes maintaining relationships difficult and creates new challenges to navigate. Alternatively, given that incarcerated fathers may be relatively disconnected from children prior to their incarceration (compared to fathers who do not experience incarceration), paternal incarceration may be relatively inconsequential for father-child relationships. Yet another possibility is that the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships is heterogeneous, with paternal incarceration weakening some relationships, strengthening other relationships, and being inconsequential for other relationships.

In this chapter, we examine the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships, as well as variation in this association, with a mixed-methods approach. First, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of children born in urban areas to mostly unmarried parents, to examine differences in father-child relationships between children who do and do not experience paternal incarceration. We focus on three aspects of father-child relationships, all ascertained by children at age 15: communication with father, time spent with father, and engagement with father. We also examine variation in the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships (by gender, race/ethnicity, father's residential status, and father's prior incarceration). Second, to better understand the processes linking paternal incarceration to father-child relationships, and to elucidate resilience patterns, we analyze in-depth interview data from children aged 8–17 years. These data come from the Jail & Family Life Study, a longitudinal qualitative examination of incarcerated fathers and their family members (Turney, 2020). This mixed-methods approach documents the complicated ways that paternal incarceration structures father-child relationships.

Background

Importance of Father-Child Relationships

Father-child relationship quality is consequential for children's well-being. Children reporting high-quality relationships with their fathers, compared to their counterparts, fare better along a number of behavioral, educational, and health outcomes (Hawkins et al., 2007; King, 1994). Relatedly, high-quality father-child relationships may buffer the deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration; that is, children who maintain positive relationships with their fathers during and after his incarceration may experience resiliency to challenges stemming from incarceration. Positive relationships can provide support and security that protect children from the trauma, stigma, and strain associated with this form of father absence (Foster & Hagan, 2015).

Additionally, father-child relationships are important for parental well-being. They have positive consequences for fathers themselves. For example, father engagement is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, more socializing, and more community involvement (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Knoester et al., 2007). Among currently and formerly incarcerated fathers, positive father-child relationships can protect against recidivism, as family relationships are critical for desistance from criminal activity (Sampson & Laub, 1995). Relationships with children can give fathers motivation to leave behind criminal activity (Forrest, 2014). Furthermore, high-quality father-child relationships may have spillover consequences for the well-being of children's mothers, as mothers often report wanting connection between children and their fathers and this connection may ease coparenting tensions (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Waller, 2012).

A Family Systems Perspective on Paternal Incarceration

Family systems theory suggests that paternal incarceration may be associated with distinctive patterns of father-child relationships (Minuchin, 1974). Paternal incarceration creates disruptions to the roles and functions in the family system, which can affect the father-child relationship. Though little research has examined father-child relationships stemming from paternal incarceration, there is ample evidence that paternal incarceration is a broader family stressor (Arditti, 2018; Turney, 2014a). The well-being of those incarcerated, their current and former romantic partners, and their children is impaired. Children who experience paternal incarceration, compared to those who do not, have more behavioral problems, including internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and delinquency (Geller et al., 2012; Turney, 2017); more challenges to their educational achievement and

attainment (Foster & Hagan, 2007; Haskins, 2014); and more physical health impairments such as asthma and migraines (Lee et al., 2013; Turney, 2014b).

Paternal Incarceration and Bonds Between Fathers and Children

Family systems theory, in conjunction with research documenting mostly deleterious intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration, suggests that paternal incarceration weakens bonds between fathers and their children. Research on other forms of family instability—such as divorce, which also involves the removal of a father from the home—provides some guidance about how paternal incarceration could weaken father-child bonds (Amato et al., 2016; King et al., 2015; King et al., 2018).

There may be a direct relationship between paternal incarceration and weakened father-child relationships. Incarceration necessarily involves the removal of fathers, many of whom were living with their children prior to incarceration, from households. Jail or prison confinement means that fathers have less opportunity for interactions with their children, potentially reducing the quality of the relationship. Jail or prison confinement also makes interactions—via phone calls, visits, and other forms of communication such as letter writing—more challenging. Phone calls in prison are expensive. Visits, especially when fathers are confined in jail facilities, are short in duration and often do not involve physical contact (Turney & Conner, 2019). Taken together, there are a number of constraints that families face in maintaining relationships when one member is incarcerated.

Additionally, the relationship between paternal incarceration and weakened father-child relationships may stem from a number of indirect pathways including strained parental relationships (Comfort, 2008; Turney, 2015a, 2015b; Western, 2006; Widdowson et al., 2020), economic difficulties (Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Pager, 2003; Western, 2018), and mental health problems stemming from incarceration (Schnittker et al., 2012; Turney et al., 2012; Wildeman et al., 2012).

Alternative Possibilities

Though there are good reasons to expect that paternal incarceration impairs father-child relationships, at least two alternatives exist. The first is that there is no association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships after accounting for factors associated with paternal incarceration. Incarceration is not a random event; instead, vulnerable individuals including people of color and the poor are most commonly affected. Incarceration is also concentrated among those who use substances, engage in criminal activity, and have a history of incarceration (Johnson

& Easterling, 2012; Kirk & Wakefield, 2018). Therefore, children experiencing paternal incarceration often suffer challenges in relationships with their fathers regardless of his confinement.

A second alterative is that responses to paternal incarceration, with respect to father-child relationships, are heterogeneous, with some experiencing impairments in their relationships and others experiencing null or positive changes. Children may experience resilience in the face of paternal incarceration. For one, children enduring multiple bouts of paternal incarceration may become accustomed to the absence and the corresponding challenges, and therefore may not experience strained relationships. Another possibility is that fathers and children have contact during the incarceration stint (via visits, phone calls, or other opportunities such as letter writing), which allows bonds between children and fathers to flourish. Paternal incarceration may strengthen connections between children and other family members (such as caregivers and siblings) and, given the interdependency of familial relationships, these strengthened relationships may improve the father-child bond.

Methods

Our mixed-methods approach to understanding the repercussions of paternal incarceration for father-child relationship quality relies on two data sources. Survey data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was used to document differences in father-child relationships between children who do and do not experience paternal incarceration. After documenting these broad patterns, data from the Jail & Family Life Study, which includes in-depth interviews with children of incarcerated fathers, was used to understand the processes linking paternal incarceration and father-child relationships, focusing on resilience processes.

Quantitative Analyses

Data: The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a longitudinal survey of children born to mostly unmarried parents in urban areas around the turn of the twenty-first century (Reichman et al., 2001). Parents were interviewed shortly after their child was born and then an additional five times over a 15-year period (when the children were about 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years old). Children were also interviewed at ages 9 and 15. The data provide a unique opportunity to understand the intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration (e.g., Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2014, 2015, 2016; Turney, 2015c, 2017; Turney & Goldberg, 2019; Wildeman, 2010). Data were collected during the peak of the prison boom and include information about paternal incarceration at each wave. Given that the sample includes mostly unmarried parents in urban areas, a relatively large number of children

experienced paternal incarceration, making it possible to compare children who do and do not experience this stressor.

Key Variables: We measured father-child relationships with three variables, all ascertained at the 15-year survey. First, communication with father was measured by the child's response to the question: "How well do you and your dad share ideas or talk about things that really matter?" (1 = *not very well*, 2 = *fairly well*, 3 = *quite well*, 4 = *extremely well*). Second, time with father was measured by the child's response to the question: "In the past month, how often has your dad spent one or more hours a day with you?" (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *a few times this past month*, 4 = *a few times a week*, 5 = *every day or nearly every day*). Third, engagement with father was measured by averaging the child's responses to the frequency of the following activities with the father in the past month: (a) talk with you about current events, like things going on in the news; (b) talk with you about your day; (c) help you with homework or school assignments; and (d) do activities with you such as play sports or video games, or household chores such as doing dishes or preparing food (1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*; $\alpha = 0.95$). The relationship questions were not asked of children who had not seen or communicated with their fathers and, accordingly, we coded these observations as 1 (and conducted supplemental analyses that instead removed them from the analytic sample).

The primary explanatory variable, paternal incarceration, is a binary measure indicating that the child's primary caregiver reported that the father was incarcerated in jail or prison between the 9- and 15-year surveys.

The multivariate analyses included characteristics of mothers, fathers, and children that are associated with both paternal incarceration and father-child relationships. The demographic variables, such as race/ethnicity and immigrant status, were measured at baseline. Other variables that change over time, such as parents' relationship status or material hardship, were measured at the 9-year survey (and therefore prior to paternal incarceration). See Table 5.1 for descriptive statistics of all variables included in the analyses.

Analytic Plan: The analytic plan proceeded in three stages. First, we compared means of the three indicators of father-child relationships between children who did and did not experience paternal incarceration, testing for statistically significant differences across groups. Second, we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to estimate the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships. Supplemental analyses used ordered logistic regression, given that the dependent variables are count variables, but we used OLS regression for ease of interpretation (as the findings are consistent across both strategies). We present three models: one without control variables, one with control variables (all measured prior to paternal incarceration), and one with control variables that is restricted to children who saw their father in the past year. Note that this final model is not necessarily the most rigorous model, as contact with fathers at the 15-year survey may be endogenous to incarceration. Third, we estimated the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships for four sets of subgroups: gender, race/ethnicity, father's residential status (measured at the 9-year survey), and father's prior incarceration (measured at the 9-year survey). We compare differences across groups (Paternoster et al., 1998).

Table 5.1 Descriptive statistics: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

	% or mean	(S.D.)
Key variables		
Communication with father (y15)	2.248	(1.198)
Time with father (y15)	2.700	(1.702)
Engagement with father (y15)	1.408	(1.080)
Father incarcerated (y15)	16.4%	
Control variables		
Mother race/ethnicity (b)		
WhiteWhites (non-Hispanic)	21.8%	
Black (non-Hispanic)	50.1%	
Hispanic	24.7%	
Other race (non-Hispanic)	3.5%	
Mother foreign-born (b)	13.3%	
Father foreign-born (b)	14.5%	
Mother age (y1)	26.371	(6.001)
Father age (y1)	28.922	(7.224)
Mother lived with both parents at age 15 (b)	41.9%	
Father lived with both parents at age 15 (b)	44.0%	
Mother and father relationship status (y9)		
Married	29.6%	
Cohabiting	9.0%	
Nonresidential romantic	2.1%	
Separated	59.3%	
Mother repartnered (y9)	34.4%	
Father repartnered (y9)	5.6%	
Mother relationship quality (y9)	2.767	(1.472)
Father relationship quality (y9)	3.087	(1.426)
Mother number of children (y9)	2.646	(1.329)
Father number of children (y9)	1.058	(0.990)
Mother lives with her mother (y9)	10.1%	
Father lives with his mother (y9)	10.4%	
Mother parenting stress (y9)	2.033	(0.681)
Father parenting stress (y9)	1.917	(0.688)
Mother engagement (y9)	2.716	(0.595)
Father engagement (y9)	1.511	(1.180)
Mother shared responsibility in parenting (y9)	2.253	(1.195)
Mother cooperation in parenting (y9)	2.848	(1.190)
Father cooperation in parenting (y9)	3.268	(0.890)
Mother education (y9)		
Less than high school	22.0%	
High school diploma or GED	18.9%	
More than high school	59.1%	

(continued)

Table 5.1 (continued)

	% or mean	(S.D.)
Father education (y9)		
Less than high school	25.3%	
High school diploma or GED	30.0%	
More than high school	44.8%	
Mother employed (y9)	61.8%	
Father employed (y9)	70.0%	
Mother income-to-poverty ratio (y9)	2.025	(2.323)
Father income-to-poverty ratio (y9)	2.556	(2.844)
Mother material hardship (y9)	1.529	(1.870)
Father material hardship (y9)	1.461	(1.964)
Mother neighborhood disadvantage (y9)	0.025	(3.102)
Father neighborhood disadvantage (y9)	0.290	(3.096)
Mother depression (y9)	17.8%	
Father depression (y9)	16.1%	
Mother overall health (y9)	3.545	(1.043)
Father overall health (y9)	3.690	(1.030)
Mother perceived support (y9)	4.102	(1.783)
Father perceived support (y9)	4.202	(1.817)
Mother drug use (y9)	6.6%	
Father drug use (y9)	13.3%	
Mother heavy drinking (y9)	8.8%	
Father heavy drinking (y9)	26.8%	
Mother domestic violence (y1, y3, y5, y9)	15.3%	
Father domestic violence (y1, y3, y5, y9)	20.7%	
Mother cognitive skills (y3)	6.795	(2.658)
Father cognitive skills (y3)	6.503	(2.720)
Mother impulsivity (y5)	1.525	(0.481)
Father impulsivity (y1)	2.016	(0.668)
Mother previously incarcerated (y1, y3, y5, y9)	9.4%	
Father previously incarcerated (y1, y3, y5, y9)	49.8%	
Child is boy	51.6%	
Child low birth weight	9.1%	
Child temperament	3.406	0.768
N	3431	

Note: b = measured at baseline survey; y1 = measured at 1-year survey; y3 = measured at 3-year survey; y5 = measured at 5-year survey; y9 = measured at 9-year survey; y15 = measured at 15-year survey. *Source*: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Qualitative Analyses

Data: The interview data come from the Jail & Family Life Study, a longitudinal qualitative examination of 123 incarcerated fathers and their family members. Fathers were recruited for study participation across three Southern California jails between 2015 and 2016 (see Turney, 2020, for more information about the study design). Fathers were eligible to participate if they were at least 18 years old and had at least one child. During the fathers' interviews, we asked them to provide contact information for their children's caregivers and their own mothers. With permission from children and their caregivers, we interviewed children who were aged 8–17 (Turney et al., 2017).

We conducted 38 baseline interviews with children (most of these conducted while fathers were in jail) and 30 follow-up interviews with children (most of these conducted when fathers had been released from jail or, less commonly, sentenced to prison). Baseline interviews occurred between August 2015 and October 2017, and follow-up interviews occurred between January 2016 and August 2017. Given the developmental heterogeneity among children, we had different interview protocols for children aged 8–12 years and children aged 13–17 years. Interviews with younger children, those aged 8–12, were designed to last between 20 and 30 min. Interviews with older children, those aged 13–17, were designed to last between 30 and 60 min. The interview guide comprised the following five modules: (1) warm-up, (2) family life, (3) peers, (4) school, and (5) future. For example, in the "family life" module, we asked the following question: "Sometimes when dads go to jail, there are big changes for the rest of the family. Sometimes there aren't too many changes at all. What about for you?" We also asked questions about their feelings related to the incarceration and about contact with their father during incarceration and after release. We asked similar developmentally appropriate questions to all children, though we varied the question wording and timing to make the interview flow like a conversation. The average baseline interview lasted 48 min, and the average follow-up interview lasted 49 min. Children were paid $10 for each interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analyses: The coding occurred in three stages. First, a research team of trained graduate students conducted deductive coding of the interviews. These initial codes were primarily derived from topics covered in the interview guide. For example, we coded for broad themes such as "effects on child," "effects on focal father," and "effects on mother." Second, the research team conducted inductive coding within some of the larger deductive codes. These codes, instead of being derived from the interview guide, were generated inductively as the research team read through the transcripts in an iterative fashion. For example, we read through "effects on child" and developed codes for emergent themes including "relationship with child" and "child stigma." The research team worked together to ensure reliability during these first two stages of coding. Third, we further analyzed emergent patterns from the inductively generated themes, again working together to ensure reliability.

Table 5.2 Descriptive statistics, Jail & Family Life Study

Variable	Mean or %
Child gender	
Girls	66%
Boys	34%
Age	12
Child race/ethnicity	
Latino/a	68%
White	13%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8%
Multiracial	11%
Child primary caregiver	
Mother	71%
Grandparent	18%
Father	8%
Other	3%
Residential status with father before incarceration	
Residential	8%
Nonresidential	92%
N	38

Sample Description: Table 5.2 presents descriptive information for the qualitative sample of children. Girls comprise about two-thirds (66%) of the sample. More than three-fourths (78%) of the children identified as Latino/a. Nearly all (92%) children were living apart from their father before his incarceration and, at the time of the interview, about two-thirds (71%) of children's primary caregivers were their mothers.

Results: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Father-Child Relationships by Paternal Incarceration

Table 5.3 presents means of the three indicators of father-child relationships—communication with father, time with father, and engagement with father—for two groups of children: those who endured paternal incarceration between the 9- and 15-year surveys and those who did not endure paternal incarceration between the 9- and 15-year surveys. There are striking differences in father-child relationships by paternal incarceration. Children who experienced paternal incarceration, compared to those who did not, reported less communication with fathers (1.995 compared to 2.298, $p < 0.001$), less time with fathers (1.993 compared to 2.893, $p < 0.001$), and less engagement with fathers (1.093 compared to 1.470, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5.3 Means of father-child relationship by paternal incarceration

	Father recently incarcerated		Father not recently incarcerated		
Outcome variable	Mean	(S.D.)	Mean	(S.D.)	
Communication with father	1.995	(1.146)	2.298	(1.201)	***
Time with father	1.993	(1.452)	2.839	(1.714)	***
Engagement with father	1.093	(0.975)	1.470	(1.089)	***
N	562		2869		

Note: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between groups. ***$p < 0.001$. *Source*: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Given the vast differences between families who do and do not experience paternal incarceration, it is important to consider whether these differences render the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships spurious. We examine this in Table 5.4. Model 1 presents the unadjusted association, which documents results consistent with the differences in means presented in Table 5.3. Paternal incarceration is associated with less communication ($b = -0.302$, $p < 0.001$), less time ($b = -0.846$, $p < 0.001$), and less engagement ($b = -0.377$, $p < 0.001$) with fathers. In Model 2, which adjusts for all control variables, the magnitude of the associations decrease (by 88% for communication, 73% for time, and 95% for engagement). This model shows that paternal incarceration is negatively associated with time ($b = -0.227$, $p < 0.01$) but is not associated with communication ($b = 0.035$, *n.s.*) or engagement ($b = -0.018$, *n.s.*) with fathers. In Model 3, which adjusts for all control variables and restricts the sample to children who have seen their father in the past year, paternal incarceration is associated with less communication ($b = -0.147$, $p < 0.05$), less time ($b = -0.501$, $p < 0.001$), and less engagement ($b = -0.245$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, conditional on children having some contact with their fathers, incarceration weakens the father-child relationship.

Table 5.5 examines heterogeneity in the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships. Four key findings emerge. First, the magnitude of the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships (including communication, time, and engagement) is similar for boys and girls. Second, the magnitude of the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships is larger for Whites than for Blacks or Hispanics, but these differences are not statistically significant. Third, the deleterious repercussions of paternal incarceration for father-child relationships are concentrated among children living with their fathers prior to his incarceration (with the groups being significantly different for estimates of time). Fourth, the deleterious repercussions of paternal incarceration for father-child relationships are concentrated among children of fathers not previously incarcerated (with the groups again being significantly different for estimates of time).

Table 5.4 Regression models estimating father-child relationships as a function of paternal incarceration

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Unadjusted			Adjusted			Restricted to those with contact in past year		
Outcome variable	*b*	(S.E.)		*b*	(S.E.)		*b*	(S.E.)	
Communication with father	−0.302	(0.055)	***	0.035	(0.055)		−0.147	(0.067)	*
Time with father	−0.846	(0.077)	***	−0.227	(0.072)	**	−0.501	(0.086)	***
Engagement with father	−0.377	(0.049)	***	−0.018	(0.047)		−0.245	(0.045)	***
N	3431			3431			2364		

Note: Each row represents a different dependent variable. Model 1 presents the unadjusted association. Model 2 adjusts for all control variables in Table 5.1. Model 3 adjusts for all control variables in Table 5.1 and restricts the sample to children who had any contact with their father in the past year. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 001$. *Source*: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Table 5.5 Regression models estimating father-child relationships as a function of paternal incarceration, considering heterogeneity

	Communication		Time			Engagement		
	b	(S.E.)	*b*	(S.E.)		*b*	(S.E.)	
Boys (*n* = 1771)	0.076	(0.079)	−0.215	(0.102)	*	−0.026	(0.067)	
Girls (*n* = 1660)	−0.003	(0.079)	−0.201	(0.104)	^	0.004	(0.067)	
Whites (*n* = 745)	−0.156	(0.140)	−0.452	(0.186)	*	−0.070	(0.116)	
Blacks (*n* = 1714)	0.107	(0.077)	−0.123	(0.098)		0.024	(0.066)	
Hispanics (*n* = 844)	0.026	(0.121)	−0.268	(0.160)	^	−0.048	(0.104)	
Residential (*n* = 1204)	−0.149	(0.122)	−0.610	(0.165)	***	−0.032	(0.093)	**
Nonresidential (*n* = 1858)	0.059	(0.064)	−0.176	(0.080)	*	0.003	(0.056)	
Prior incarceration (*n* = 1707)	0.053	(0.062)	−0.191	(0.081)		0.002	(0.054)	
No prior incarceration (*n* = 1724)	−0.063	(0.150)	−0.558	(0.195)	**	−0.140	(0.123)	

Note: All models adjust for all control variables in Table 5.1. ^ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. *Source*: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Results: Jail & Family Life Study

Children interviewed in the Jail & Family Life Study commonly described their father's incarceration as a turning point in their lives that created instability. Children overwhelmingly reported being concerned about the well-being of their incarcerated fathers. They also overwhelmingly reported contending with the consequences of their father's absence. With respect to relationship quality, we find that children fall into one of the three following groups: fractured relationships (comprising 45% of the sample), those relationships that were weakened by paternal incarceration and remained that way; unchanged relationships (16%), those relationships that were impervious to paternal incarceration, often because they were distant before incarceration; and reestablished relationships (39%), those relationships that were

fractured by paternal incarceration but were actively being rebuilt. We describe characteristics of these three groups.

Fractured Relationships: "Missing a Part of Us"

Nearly half (45%) of the children reported that the disruption stemming from paternal incarceration generated fractured relationships with their fathers. These children identified two primary ways that father-child relationships became fractured. First, children reported challenges to contact with their father, with some challenges stemming from the nature of confinement and other challenges exacerbated by the fathers themselves or by other family members in gatekeeping roles. Second, children reported distress in their inability to initiate contact with their fathers, which created a power imbalance that made fostering and maintaining relationships difficult.

Constraints of Contact with Incarcerated Fathers: First, children described how the nature of incarceration creates a challenging context for maintaining relationships. Children reported having contact with their incarcerated fathers in three primary ways: by visiting their fathers in jail; by talking with their fathers on the telephone; and by sending and receiving letters, drawings, and other artwork via the mail. All three types of contact were characterized by challenges.

Many children in this group (and in the reestablished relationships group) reported visiting their fathers in jail. In two of the three facilities where we recruited fathers, this visitation occurred through a plexiglass barrier (with the father on one side of the plexiglass and his family on the other side, taking turns communicating with the father via one telephone). In the third facility, visits occurred at a cafeteria-style table, without plexiglass and without a telephone, but strict visitation rules ensured that fathers and family members could not initiate physical contact. Visits across all three facilities lasted a maximum of 30 min. The constraints of incarceration contact—including the travel time associated with getting to the jail, the impersonal nature of the visitation space, and the inability for physical contact—hindered the development of positive father-child relationships, fracturing father-child relationships over time.

Children in this group also commonly spoke about challenges associated with visiting their fathers in jail. Philip, a 9-year-old Latino, described visiting his father as "kinda fun, because I didn't see him in a long time." Philip also said, though, "… but it was, like, kinda far drive. And then, there was sometimes always traffic so, I didn't really like going there all the time, but sometimes I would go." Philip expressed happiness in seeing his father, after a long period without contact, but also noted sadness stemming from his father's incarceration. These mixed emotions were common among children in this group. Many children reported feeling sad from being unable to touch or hug fathers during visitation. For example, Bella, a White 17-year-old, observed that visitations took a toll on her entire family, including herself and her father, and attributed much of this toll to the plexiglass

separating them during visits. Similarly, Eduardo, a 16-year-old Latino, described his younger brother as feeling sad when he visited his father due to the lack of physical contact. Eduardo said, "He knows where he is but not being able to hug him and tell like oh, I love you dad or something like that …."

Children reported challenges associated with maintaining other forms of contact, including letters and telephone calls. Some father-child dyads maintained contact only through letter writing. The absence of connection through talking and listening profoundly shaped the nature of their relationships. Children described the distant nature of this form of communication. Melinda, a 16-year-old Latina who kept in contact with her jailed father via letters only, described how limiting this was. She said, "… last time he was in jail he gave us a card like telling us forgive me. Telling us forgive me and hope you come and visit me and we read it and he's like… Yeah and I think I accidently threw the card away." She continued, after the interviewer asked her how receiving the letter made her feel: "Sad and a little weird. Cuz it's like a stranger giving me cards you know like cuz I don't really know him." This remark illustrates the impersonal nature of letter writing and underscores the importance of talking and listening in fostering strong father-child relationships.

Power Imbalance Associated with Contact: The fractured relationships between children and fathers were also characterized by a lack of accessibility, as incarcerated fathers were not readily available for contact. Children could not call fathers when they had a problem or needed advice; instead, they had to wait for fathers to initiate a phone call from jail. Children could not visit their fathers without a parent or guardian. And though children could contact fathers via letter writing, this form of communication was delayed. Taken together, the lack of accessibility shows the little agency children had in maintaining contact with their incarcerated fathers. Fathers were responsible for initiating phone calls with their children, and other parents or guardians were responsible for initiating visitation. Bella reflected on the challenges associated with maintaining contact with her father: "I feel like it was harder when he would call because I couldn't see him. It was just over the phone. And I couldn't call him when I needed something. It was just when he could call … It sucked because he couldn't be there for me like everything that I was going through." This inability of children to initiate contact with fathers further fractured father-child relationships.

This power imbalance, particularly how fathers dictated the timing and frequency of phone communication with their children, means that fathers wield substantial power in determining the strength of father-child relationships. Children who did not have frequent phone contact with their fathers talked about how this limited their relationships. Nicole, a White 16-year-old, said: "[He] never calls me. He sometimes calls my grandma's house. Just asks for money to put on his books you know. But that's it, he doesn't call." Nicole had contact with her father via jail visitation, but also expressed challenges with this form of communication. She described a recent visit with her father as being maddening, as her father spent most of the visit talking to her aunt and ignoring her. Consequently, Nicole hesitated to initiate contact with her father via letter writing when he asked. In this case, the lack of effort from Nicole's father, combined with her inability to initiate contact, resulted in a fractured relationship.

Unchanged Relationships: "It Didn't Have an Effect on Me"

A relatively small percentage (16%) of children in the sample reported that relationships with their fathers were impervious to paternal incarceration. Those with unchanged relationships generally pointed to two reasons. First, these children commonly reported that their father was physically or emotionally absent prior to his incarceration. These dyads had weak or nonexistent relationships and, accordingly, the father-child relationship did not suffer from incarceration. Second, and relatedly, these children commonly reported that they had grown accustomed to their father being incarcerated.

Father's Absence Prior to Incarceration: Many children with unchanged relationships said that this stemmed from a weak or nonexistent relationship with their father prior to his incarceration. The absence of their father was normalized, and they were able to weather a bout of incarceration without much difficulty. A preexisting weak relationship was the case for Mimi, a 13-year-old Latina, who said the following when asked about her father's incarceration: "I don't really think about it because he's never really been there." Similarly, Junior, a 15-year-old who identified as Black and Latino, reported that his father's incarceration was inconsequential. "I don't really like pay much attention to him. It doesn't bother me," he said. Junior also said that he rarely thought about his father, stating that the incarceration did not represent a real or noticeable absence for him. The limited bond between Junior and his father prior to incarceration resulted in minimal changes to their relationship. For children like Mimi and Junior, paternal incarceration was a continued pattern of father-absence to which they had grown accustomed.

Growing Accustomed to Father's Incarceration: Relatedly, many children with unchanged relationships with their fathers reported that this stemmed from growing accustomed to their father spending time in jail or prison. Samantha, a 13-year-old Latina, offered insight by describing the reconnection with her father after his release: "It didn't have an effect on me since I knew how it feels." Samantha referenced her father's habitual incarceration as a reason for this unchanged relationship. Sean, a 16-year-old Latino, is another example of a child with an unchanged relationship with his father due to his churning in and out of jail. When the interviewer asked Sean's feelings about the most recent incarceration, he reported: "I mean, it's still the same story. I never needed him then and I don't need him now." These children described how they grew familiar with and unbothered by the repercussions of having an incarcerated father.

Reestablishing Relationships: "We're All Happy Now"

Finally, about two-fifths (39%) of children in the sample reported reestablished relationships, relationships that were initially characterized by fractures but were being rebuilt. First, these children commonly said that father-child relationships were

splintered, similar to children in the fractured relationships group, reporting that their father's incarceration caused him to miss important events in their lives. Second, these children highlighted how frequent contact with their incarcerated fathers ameliorated the deleterious consequences and fostered the reestablishing of relationships. Third, and relatedly, frequent contact after release promoted the reestablishing of relationships.

Missing Milestones: Similar to children in the fractured relationships group, those in the reestablished relationships group spoke about fractured relationships between themselves and their fathers. Their father's incarceration reduced the quantity and quality of their contact. Incarcerated fathers could no longer be present in their everyday activities. Children felt sad that they could no longer spend quality time with fathers while he was incarcerated, and this sadness became more prominent during life events such as birthdays, graduations, and holidays. Given that the ability to create memories is a powerful tool for forging relationships, the absence of fathers during these events impaired the development of strong father-child relationships.

Several children provided exemplars of how missed milestones weakened relationships with their fathers. Cupcake, an 8-year-old Latina, reported feeling sad when her incarcerated father missed her last birthday. She described wishing how her father were present on this day that was spent celebrating with family. Alexis, a 16-year-old who identified as Latina and White, reported that the absence of her father during incarceration produced an ache in her life:

> It was a big impact because we're not used to my dad being in jail. And, now that we're older I think that it sucks even more because, like, our eighth grade graduation, our promotion. Just, like, school field trips, we're so used to, like, my dad or mom going. You know. And our mom went still, but it's just we would ask our dad too. So, we felt bad because we're kind of leaving him out. So, that's just how it had to go, you know. But, I mean, it had an impact. But I wasn't depressed, or, like, eating food. Just, missing a part of us. We got to talk to him whenever we wanted. We got to see him whenever we wanted. We didn't have to wait until the weekend, or wait 'til, like, he got the phone privilege to call us. You know, we weren't used to all of that until now.

The carceral state produced circumstances where father's participation in life events was not a possibility. Hence, simple contact such as phone calls became a privilege for children such as Alexis.

Reestablishing Relationships Through Contact: Children in the reestablished relationships group, similar to children in the fractured relationships group, experienced challenges in maintaining contact with their incarcerated fathers. Children in the reestablished relationships group were different from these other children because they described how father-child contact facilitated the reestablishment of their relationships with their fathers. Children reported positive feelings when visiting their father, when receiving phone calls from him, or when writing or receiving letters. These children often expressed relief that they were able to maintain at least some contact with their father during incarceration.

Father-child contact during incarceration buffered some of the negative consequences for the father-child relationship. Maintaining contact with incarcerated

fathers was a source of resilience for children in this group, giving them strength to weather this difficult event. Nicole, a White 13-year-old, offered insight into this resiliency. When asked how she felt when her father contacted her, she said, "It made it easier. His life, it wasn't the same seeing him. And- but to hear that he wasn't getting into trouble and he was trying to get better, and go to all these meetings to help him cuz he's here."

Alexis reported that contact with her father during his incarceration helped mitigate the negative emotions she experienced resulting from his incarceration, which in turn strengthened their relationship. When asked about her feelings stemming from her father's incarceration, she said, "I wouldn't say disappointed, but I was just, like, angry, confused, mad, sad. I think it was just, like, all the above. But, once I seen him or if I got his letter, if I talked to him, then I was happy again." Similarly, Catalina, a 14-year-old Latina, expressed that receiving letters from her father made her happy: "I did cry at first because I kind of missed him. I was really happy he sent like … for … when he was in jail they gave him Christmas or like Valentines. But he would send us letters, cards and he would say that hopefully we get back together. But I don't know. I was really happy that he at least sent us these cards." Though Catalina reported missing her father, her reflections underscore the importance of father-child contact in reestablishing relationships. Catalina's happiness when receiving letters from her father suggests that contact can strengthen father-child relationships.

Reestablishing Relationships upon Release: Finally, among this group of children, father-child relationships were further reestablished after release from jail. Without the confinements of incarceration, children in this group spent more time with their fathers. Children and fathers could now partake in activities that had not been allowed during incarceration. Children commonly expressed happiness about having their fathers physically back in their lives and excitement about seeing their fathers daily. Upon release, father-child relationships were further reestablished as contact increased in frequency. Reestablishing relationships via contact offered children the opportunity to find comfort in unstable situations.

Nelly, a 14-year-old Latina, provided an illustrative example of how father-child relationships were reestablished after release. When asked what it was like to see her father upon release, Nelly said the following: "When I seen him walk up, I was happy cuz I actually seen him. So it was a relief. We finally—next time we meet we could go have fun at the park or something like that. It's actually better." She goes on to say, "We're all happy now … Everybody's happy. There's no sadness." Nelly maintained some level of contact with her father during incarceration, underscoring the significance that incarceration contact has for the improvement of father-child relationships upon release. Nelly suggested that her relationship with her father had improved because now she could see her father and could enjoy leisure activities with him. Given the constraints of father-child contact during incarceration, release gives families an opportunity to bolster relationships that were previously challenged.

Discussion

High incarceration rates in the United States mean that a large number of children experience paternal incarceration (Enns et al., 2019; Turney & Haskins, 2019). Despite mounting evidence that paternal incarceration has deleterious consequences for children's well-being (for reviews, see Eddy, & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020; Turney & Goodsell, 2018; Turney & Haskins, 2019; Wildeman et al., 2018), as well as deleterious consequences for the quality of relationships that men have with other family members including romantic partners and parents (Turney, 2015a, 2015b; Western, 2018), little research systematically considers how paternal incarceration shapes the bonds between fathers and their children. In this chapter, we used a mixed-methods approach to understanding father-child relationships in the wake of paternal incarceration. Understanding father-child relationships is important, as high-quality relationships can improve child well-being and reduce recidivism among men (King, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1995).

Survey data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a population-based sample of children born to mostly unmarried parents, was used to document the association between paternal incarceration and father-child relationships (measured by communication, time, and engagement). Paternal incarceration, on average, has negative repercussions for the time that children spend with their fathers but the repercussions for communication and engagement stem from selection factors. Considering *average* associations masks considerable heterogeneity, as the consequences of paternal incarceration were concentrated among children living with their fathers prior to his incarceration and among children whose fathers were incarcerated for the first time.

In-depth interview data from the Jail & Family Life Study was used to document the processes through which paternal incarceration affects father-child relationships. These data also provided evidence of substantial heterogeneity in the consequences of paternal incarceration, with incarceration fracturing relationships between some fathers and children; incarceration neither strengthening nor weakening relationships between some dyads; and incarceration enabling a rebuilding of relationships between some dyads. Contact with fathers, particularly during incarceration, is a critical way to foster resilience between fathers and children. Children reporting frequent and affirmative contact with their fathers often describe a strengthening of relationships and, alternatively, children reporting challenges to contact often describe a weakening of relationships. Contact—via visitation, telephone calls, and letter writing—can facilitate connections between children and their fathers.

These findings, particularly those that show how children's contact with their fathers during incarceration can foster resilience in their relationships, have implications for policies and practices. First, reducing barriers to telephone contact is critical. Telephone contact can be made more accessible by reducing the economic costs of these calls, as children report awareness of this expense (and many families

cannot afford the calls, either at all or as frequently as they would like). Allowing children to initiate telephone calls can make contact more accessible. Children repeatedly described frustration and sadness in being unable to call their fathers when they wanted or needed such contact; enabling two-way communication could strengthen father-child relationships. Second, reducing barriers to visitation is critical. Barriers include logistical aspects such as long wait times and short visit times. Lack of physical contact permitted between the incarcerated and their family members is an additional barrier. Children repeatedly expressed wanting to touch, hug, and kiss their fathers; allowing for physical contact could bolster father-child relationships. Third, reducing barriers to written communication is critical. Many children report enjoying this form of communication, but the time between sending and receiving a letter is often lengthy, impeding the maintenance of relationships. Streamlining this process—so that fathers and their children can more quickly receive letters—could improve relationships. Relatedly, allowing for other types of contact—such as email, which can be instantly received—could also improve relationships.

These findings also have implications for future research on resilience among children of incarcerated fathers. First, future research should examine how paternal incarceration shapes children's relationships with other family members, including their mothers, social fathers, and siblings. A family systems perspective suggests that paternal incarceration has repercussions for the entire family unit and these relationships may foster resilience in a number of ways (Minuchin, 1974). Second, future research should consider the extent to which supportive father-child relationships can buffer the deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration for children's well-being. We found that contact with incarcerated fathers—via visitation, telephone calls, and letter writing—can foster resilience in the father-child relationship. But supportive and high-quality father-child relationships may also promote resiliency, and future research should consider this possibility. Third, future research should consider how the timing of paternal incarceration shapes father-child relationships over the life course. Paternal incarceration in early childhood may be most consequential to father-child relationships in adolescence, as early childhood experiences are critical and can set in motion a cascade of stressors. Alternatively, more proximal exposure to paternal incarceration, such as during adolescence, might be most consequential for father-child relationships. Adjudicating between these possibilities is another important direction for future research.

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