

Imprisoned Fathers and their Families: Marginal Populations in a Cross-national Comparison.

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Background

There are two significant features that draw researchers to this important topic. First, there has been a rapid and significant increase in the number of children raised in homes with an absent and incarcerated father: an estimated 1.5 million children in the USA have at least one parent in prison. In ninety-four percent of these cases the incarcerated parent is a father. Researchers know very little about the effects of men's re-entry into family life and how that re-entry effects the lives and general well-being of children and other family members (Brooks-Gordon, 2003; Peterselia, 2003).

In the UK too, as the male prison population reaches its highest level ever in the UK (Home Office, 2004), concerns about the impact of paternal imprisonment on child and family welfare are gathering momentum (Action for Prisoner Families, 2003). Recent estimates suggest that over 150,000 children are raised in homes with an imprisoned father, although information on prisoner parental status is not routinely collected for men (Every Child Matters, 2003; Shaw, 1992). Prevalence studies of female prisoners show that 61 per cent are mothers (Caddle and Crisp, 1997) and historically most policy initiatives for imprisoned parents have focused on supporting mothers (e.g. Prison Reform Trust, 2004). Research evidence on the extent of men's family relationships whilst in prison is still rather underdeveloped. In the UK, however, the prison system is less restrictive and there are more programmes for re-entry into civilian life than in the USA. The gradual 'down-grading' of the security risk of prisoners towards release with consequent privileges in terms of family contact, including moving to 'open' prisons where they go out to work in the community and are allowed weekend visits to their homes is a novel concept to USA prison regimes.

This relates to the second reason why the study of fathers in prison is of import. The research, political, policy making, and intervention communities care about this topic because of the sheer numbers of men who re-enter community life and are then rearrested. Successful connection to family life factors into re-arrest and re-incarceration. Each year about 600,000 are released from prison (approximately 12,000 per week); many of those men will reconnect (or attempt to reconnect) with spouses, former spouses, and children. As the volume of prisoners increase the sheer numbers of men who re-enter community life and are then rearrested will also rise. Recent American research is suggesting that early successful connection to family relationships post-release can be a significant factor in protecting against re-arrest and re-incarceration (Hariston, 2002).

It may well be that if successful reconnection to family life can be better facilitated this support could contribute to lowering recidivism rates, so reducing the burden of state welfare programmes and the numbers of children who grow up in reoccurring cycles of poverty. Also, this targeted preventative approach could contribute to decreasing the growing costs to public expenditure of maintaining prisoners in prison establishments.

Also, the extreme costs of maintaining a prisoner (about \$30,000 per year in Utah) is seriously impacting state and federal budgetary expenditures. Therefore, the overall purpose of this project is to try and isolate factors that contribute to successful re-entry into family life following incarceration and thus lowered recidivism rates.

Conceptual and Methodological Approach

Most research on the development and maintenance of anti-social and criminal behaviour stresses the interaction of individual, family and social factors over the life course (e.g. Farrington and Coid, 2003). Whilst the over-representation of males in anti-social behaviour and criminality categories has been well described, the specific antecedents, experiences and consequences of *paternal criminality* have been less well documented, however there is now a growing number of studies of prisoner fathers (e.g. Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Hairston *et al* 1998; Richards *et al* 1994; Shaw, 1987, 1992). Findings from these studies and from other developmental research show the limitations of an overly maternal focus in family research. Both fathers and mothers, whether co-residential or not, have been shown to influence children's well-being, summarized as the 'double dose' (Dunn *et al*, 2000) or 'double whammy' (Jaffee *et al*, 2003).

The orientation of this study is to closely explore the imprisoned father's family system, in particular, the extent of his parenting capacity and the quality of his relationship with the children's mother. The imprisoned father's role is conceptualized as being highly fluid and shaped through interaction and negotiation with mothers, children, and other individuals in his wider kin and social group. Most research on fathering capacity has built on the classic tripartite typology of father involvement developed in the 1980s: 'engagement' (care-taking, shared activities, direct contact); 'accessibility' (presence and availability); and 'responsibility' (ensuring care-taking and resource availability) (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). This construct has many limitations for understanding fathers' parenting in a prison context. We will seek to document the content and boundaries of father involvement among prisoner fathers, exploring for instance such elements as planning and decision-making, the maintenance of provision of social position, as well as the more conventional domain of direct caring and contact activities.

Similarly the couple relationship is conceptualized as being a negotiated between the pair, a separate but important mediating influence on child well-being. Our methodological tools draw on family research showing a clear connection between couple relationship quality (e.g. degree of conflict, emotional support and care) and a wide range of child-wellbeing outcomes (Gottman and Notarius, 2000). Most couple interaction research has been conducted in normative or clinical environments. Little is known about the role couple relationships play during imprisoned father's preparation for discharge. Assessing the quality of imprisoned fathers' parenting and couple relationships in the transition from prison to home is the focus of this study.

Whilst support for fathers in the community is not well established, a number of prison-based parenting education programmes are developing, particularly in young offender institutions, where it has been estimated that around 25 per cent of young men are fathers

or expectant fathers (Dennison, 2003). Dennison's programme evaluation on behalf of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence highlighted a gap in prison to home support for these young men. Partnerships between the range of voluntary and statutory organizations (e.g. the National Probation Service and Forensic Psychologists within HM Prison Service) involved in prison and resettlement family support provide another forum for father work (Towl, 2000).

Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to explore the mechanisms that promote and/or hinder the successful resettlement of fathers into the lives of their children and families following imprisonment. Specific objectives are:

- i) to assess the quality of prisoner fathers' parental and couple relationships prior to release;
- ii) to explore associations between the quality of prisoner fathers' family relationships and subsequent resettlement.

The investigation also assesses the usefulness of the proposed methodology (interviews with men and their partners prior to release from prison, a couple history joint interview and a follow-up interview after release. Findings and methodological insights from this intensive study will be used to develop the design for a larger scale investigation, including children as well as parents, and to inform professional practice in the voluntary and statutory sectors.

Methodology

Two USA and three UK prisons were the sampling frames for this study, selected to exemplify the range of security and policy regimes existing in the two countries.

Time One:

The prisoner fathers were sampled for recruitment into the study if they intended to have contact and some responsibility for a dependent child (under 18 years) on a regular basis, even if a divorce or separation has occurred. They were mostly within 6-8 weeks of prison release at first contact. For this study, there were two exclusions: prisoners who have ever have been convicted of a sex crime or other crime involving the physical or sexual exploitation of children; prisoners whose spouses/ partners have a legal injunction against continuing father contact with the child or any other family member.

The first interview stage involved:

- Individual face-to-face interview with father using pre-coded questionnaire including: a family genogram exploring the wider family and fictive kin network; an assessment of father involvement whilst in prison; involvement in prison support programmes; visiting experiences and other forms of contact with target child; views and plans for post-release family life, residence and employment; socio-demographic profile.
- Telephone interview with partner/ carer of target child using pre-coded questionnaire exploring maternal report of areas covered in father's interview.
- Some couple interviews using the *Oral Marital History Interactional Interview*. In preparation for this activity, interviewers are being trained in Gottman's *Oral Marital History Interactional Coding System*.

Time Two:

After release, the researchers contacted each individual in the couple to arrange a follow-up interview around 6-8 weeks following release. Two short telephone questionnaire based interviews were conducted separately with the father and partner/carer of the child. The following list of target constructs to be assessed in the final interview:

- Involvement and contact with the target child;
- relationship quality with the mother of the target children;
- assessment of changes in expectations about family life following prison release;
- assessment of resources to which they have access following release (jobs, finances, friends, and family support networks);
- assessment of 'successful' resettlement as measured by *Inventory of Successful Resettlement*. (This is an instrument previously tested in the U.S. This inventory seeks to discover if former prisoners reconnect successfully with spouses/partners, their children, work and job connections, legal recreational interests, and reconnection with extended and fictive kin.)

Data Analysis

Interview data was coded and analysed using statistical models. Cross-sectional and follow-up patterns of association between the quality of father involvement and couple relationships against resettlement success and reported child outcomes is being carried out and comparisons being made between UK and US prison and resettlement experiences and outcomes.

Results

The fieldwork for the USA element of this study has been completed and is almost completed for the UK contingent. Analyses of the data from this study are being conducted and for this paper results from Time 1 will be presented on the structure of prisoner father's families and their relationship with the target child while in prison in the differing policy and practice contexts existing in the UK and USA. Initial results exhibit complex family connections in both the UK and USA studies. The fathers' partners' reports of the impact of imprisonment on the target child's and the family's life are varied but also show similarities.

The policies and practical arrangements for visitation and contact with children and families vary in each location but show distinct differences between countries. In the UK the programmes for introducing men back into community life are much more progressive but do not extend into maintaining and developing ties with children and families, which is a departure from previous practice. Poignant stories from fathers of the hurdles faced when trying to keep in touch with children and families are balanced by tales of violence and extreme unhappiness from some partners and children.

Another theme we have discovered concerns research methodology issues. Important considerations and findings surrounding the location, contacting fathers and their families and obtaining information in a study of such marginal but 'high-risk' policy populations will be elucidated.