

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background

By the middle of 2007 more than 1.7 million American children had a parent in prison, and millions more had a parent in jail, or who had been incarcerated in the past. It is well-known that incarcerated individuals face severe challenges both during and after their time in prison and jail, and a growing literature suggests that children's material resources are compromised when their fathers are incarcerated. Geller, Garfinkel, and Western (2011) show that incarceration reduces the amount of money that fathers contribute to their partners and children, compromising family economic stability. However, much less is known about incarceration's effects on other aspects of fathers' involvement with their children.

Incarceration has the potential to dramatically disrupt family life, and reduce the extent of fathers' contact with their children. Children's interactions with incarcerated fathers are limited in both quantity and quality; travel to prisons can be both logistically difficult and stressful, and mothers may shield their children from the experience (Arditti, Lambert-Shute and Joest 2003; Comfort 2008). Incarceration may also compromise parental relationships by undermining the father's role as a provider (Hairston 1998) or threatening the family reputation (Anderson 1999; Edin 2000) and mothers may limit contact between children and their incarcerated fathers (Arditti, Smock and Parkman 2005; Edin, Nelson and Paranal 2004; Roy and Dyson 2005).

One understudied dimension of paternal incarceration is the extent to which it compromises the time that fathers spend with their children. Hijawi et al. (2003) cite several mechanisms by which the frequency of father-child contact might improve child well-being. Involved fathers, resident and nonresident alike, are more likely to create secure attachments with their children. Father-child contact also has the potential to strengthen co-parenting relationships, which in turn, have the potential to improve mother-child attachment as well as attachment between the father and child. On the other hand, father involvement could have negative implications for child wellbeing, particularly if the father is violent or antisocial (Murray and Farrington 2010).

Current Analysis

In this paper we estimate the effects of incarceration on fathers' involvement with their children, using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a population-based longitudinal survey, which follows nearly 5,000 couples with children born between 1998 and 2000 in twenty large U.S. cities. Both mothers and fathers are surveyed at the time of their child's birth, and when the children are one, three, five, and nine years old. We focus on findings from the study's first five years.

Key Constructs

1. Father-Child Contact

Contact between fathers and their children is measured as the number of days, of the 30 leading up to each survey, that the father reports seeing the focal child. Sensitivity analyses will test the robustness of our findings to measurement choice.

2. Incarceration

Beginning at the first follow-up survey, both fathers and mothers are asked about the fathers' incarceration history, and also have the opportunity to note incarceration in several other questions. We identify parents as having been incarcerated if they, their partners, or the survey contractors, report incarceration, either directly or indirectly. By the fifth-year survey, nearly half of fathers had been incarcerated.

3. Potential confounders

While we hypothesize that incarceration is likely to reduce fathers' extent of contact with their children, fathers who have been incarcerated likely also face considerable socioeconomic disadvantage from other sources. We therefore consider incarceration effects in the context of family characteristics such as parents' race, age, and educational attainment, as well as impulsivity and cognitive ability. Where appropriate, we will also control for several factors reflecting fathers' labor market potential, health, and substance use patterns. Finally, we control for the parents' baseline relationship status and whether the father has children with multiple partners.

Analytical Approach

We begin our analysis by examining differences in relationship status and patterns of father-child visitation between fathers with and without histories of incarceration. We then estimate a series of multivariate regression models that predict the number of days

fathers spend with their children, focusing on fathers' more recent incarceration history: whether or not the father spent time in jail or prison between the first and fifth-year surveys. We control for pre-incarceration demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, so as to isolate the association between incarceration and father-child contact from other observable characteristics that might influence them both.

To further isolate the effects of incarceration from those of confounding factors, we will focus our attention on the nearly 2,000 fathers not incarcerated by their child's first birthday. In these families, year one characteristics are unaffected by incarceration, and changes driven by subsequent time in prison or jail are not confounded by prior experiences. We re-estimate our models for this subsample of fathers, as well as two additional longitudinal models: one that includes a lagged dependent variable, and one that controls for father fixed effects, isolating changes in visitation from unobserved, time-invariant, differences between respondents. By focusing exclusively on within-family changes, fixed effects models eliminate the majority of threats to causal inference.

We also propose to examine the extent to which changes in father-child contact are driven by fathers' incapacitation from parenting while in jail or prison, the extent to which changes are driven by the dissolution of parental relationships, and the extent to which changes are driven by a reduction in visitation among previously nonresident fathers. We will replicate the analysis described above for subsamples of the Fragile Families data: one replication will be limited to the fathers not incarcerated within 30 days of their survey. We will next replicate the analysis for subsamples of fathers who were living with the focal child at year one, and those fathers who were nonresident.

Anticipated Results

We anticipate that incarceration will significantly reduce the extent of contact that fathers have with their children, and that our estimates will be robust to the aforementioned tests for causal inference. Based on the Geller, Garfinkel, and Western (2011) finding that reductions in financial contributions were driven by an increased likelihood of separation among previously resident couples, we anticipate that our analysis of time contributions will yield similar results.

Sensitivity Analysis

To the extent that our results suggest a damaging effect of incarceration on father-child contact, we plan to test the robustness of our findings to a variety of modeling assumptions. We will first test the robustness of our findings to our choice of measure, by replicating the analysis to examine mothers' reports of father-child contact rather than fathers', and to vary the number of days that resident fathers are expected to see their children. We hypothesize that our substantive conclusions will not change by reporting source, but that incarceration's effects will weaken when the presumed contact of resident fathers is diminished.

In addition, we plan to conduct a falsification test in which we predict father-child contact at year one with paternal incarceration between years one and five. Because subsequent incarceration cannot, by definition, cause an earlier difference in contact patterns, a significant relationship would suggest that the association is driven by unobserved differences among formerly incarcerated fathers, and suggest that earlier associations might also be driven by this heterogeneity. On the other hand, a null relationship in the falsification test would strengthen our confidence that earlier estimates represent causal effects.