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Fatherhood and Incarceration

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Social science has long suggested that strong ties to social institutions such as work, school, and marriage can help deter deviant behavior. Criminal involvement, for example, increases when men are unemployed. Young men also tend to turn from crime when they marry and maintain a stable marriage over time. It follows that a prison sentence might disrupt family and work bonds, and therefore inadvertently increase crime. On the other hand, prison might be a turning point for fathers whose criminal lifestyle had driven a wedge between them and their families, causing them to reconsider their life options and reconnect with family. Finally, the birth of a child might make crime seem suddenly too risky for fathers.

Drawing upon data from the What About Fathers study, a qualitative in-depth interview study with 510 low-income noncustodial fathers in three U.S. cities, Kathryn Edin, Timothy Nelson, and Rechelle Paranal, in their Institute for Policy Research working paper, **Fatherhood and Incarceration as Potential Turning Points in the Criminal Careers of Unskilled Men**, examine the effect of incarceration on men's involvement with their children, as well as the effect of fatherhood on their criminal careers.

Interviews with Fathers

Edin and colleagues interviewed 90 unskilled and semi-skilled, low-income, noncustodial fathers in Philadelphia, and Charleston, South Carolina, between September 1995 and May 2001. Half of the men had been imprisoned at some point, and half had histories of criminal involvement but no incarceration.

Depending on family histories, men's incarceration had different effects on their family bonds. For men whose criminal careers were combined with episodic employment, who reported no heavy use of drugs or alcohol, and who had established bonds with their children, incarceration often served to sever their ties to their children.

All the fathers in this group reported that the mother had ended their relationship when he went to prison. Because mothers generally offer the only connection between unmarried fathers and their children, ending the relationship often meant ending or limiting communication with

the child. Fathers also claimed that mothers often turned children against them during their incarceration, using their criminal behavior as a rationale for excluding the father from his child's life. In some cases, fathers were released only to find that the mothers had taken the children and moved away, sometimes leaving no forwarding address.

"When I did have my first child, it changed me. It stopped me from doing all this stuff I was doing.... I was on the weed, drinking."

Former offender

Even if the relationships were preserved, fathers missed milestones in their children's lives. Children, especially older children, often became disillusioned with their fathers, who were in and out of jail and seldom able to keep promises of involvement or support. As one father said, he and his daughter were once close "all the way up until the age of eight or nine But after me keep getting myself in trouble [going back and forth to prison] I guess she kind of gave up on me. I was never around and I guess it hurt her." Another father said, "I am not there all the time where as though I want to be, and it hurts me and it upsets meI know that it upsets the mother.... I missed all that time with [my son] when he was an infant."

A second group consists of fathers whose drug use and serious crimes had already driven a wedge between them and their children. For these fathers, prison sometimes represented a turning point in their lives and criminal careers. Fathers in this group often believe they have nowhere to go but up in terms of their familial relationships and hope to repair severed bonds with their families. Older fathers, in particular, hope to rebuild their lives. For these men, the lure of fast money, and often an accompanying drug addiction, is, over time, replaced with the philosophy that "fast money don't get you nowhere, but slow money is sure money." Through steady but menial jobs, these men hope to forge a reconnection with their children.

For this second group, the time spent in jail or prison often serves as a necessary “time out” from their lifestyles and offers an opportunity to reorient their lives. One participant called prison a “blessing in disguise.” Another said of jail, “[It] was the best thing that happened to me.”

Wilbert, a 38-year-old father, tells of staying out all night for weeks at a time, “changing clothes right in the middle of the street. The water plugs would be on and I would wash up in the water plug, get a bar of soap and change my clothes in the middle of the street because I was out there on drugs, selling drugs... going in and out of jail.” Wilbert claims jail turned him around. “I went to prison a couple of times, but this last time really did something to me — it made me find myself.”

Not all fathers in this group turned their lives around. Some continued to sell drugs, and some lost all contact with their children. For the men who did turn their lives around, however, it was their children who provided the necessary focus and motivation. Many of the men spoke of fatherhood in almost religious tones. Their “before” and “after” accounts typically began with a life of selling or using drugs and “messing around” with several women. The birth of their child, however, changed everything, often “saving” them from the streets.

As one father said, “When I did have my first child, it changed me. It stopped me from doing all this stuff I was doing...you know, I was on the weed, drinking. If I didn’t have [my children], I’d still be doing that. Because [of them] I stopped hanging with different people, I stopped going certain places....And I got an outlook on life that was different.”

Policy Implications

The men who had existing ties to their families prior to incarceration often found those ties severed when they served time. Other research suggests that this disrupted bond might well have a negative impact on the prospects for their rehabilitation and may reinforce a criminal lifestyle.

On the other hand, for fathers who had already damaged their bonds to family, prison provided an opportunity to turn their lives around and reconnect with their children, as much as that was possible. For these men, the potential of reconnecting with their children may offer a powerful motivation to end (or at least slow) a life of crime. Fatherhood can also offer a strong disincentive to crime because many fathers perceive the risk of separation from their children as greater than the potential returns to ongoing criminal activity.

Fatherhood, therefore, can be a powerful motivator for men. Research has shown that noncustodial fathers often want to stay involved in their children’s lives regardless of whether they marry the mother. That more than 8 in 10 fathers attend the birth of their child or visit the child and mother in the hospital attests to the importance these men place on their bonds with children (McLanahan et al., forthcoming). For low-income, non-custodial men, who seldom marry or find stable employment until they are well into their 30s, if at all, paternity is sometimes the only avenue for creating a strong social attachment.

Data

The qualitative data were drawn from the larger What About Fathers study, consisting of in-depth interviews with 510 unskilled and semi-skilled noncustodial, low-income fathers. Respondents reported incomes, on average, of \$16,000 per year, and none had a college degree. All had at least one child, and most were not married at the time of the interview. Nearly two-thirds of those interviewed were African American or Latino, and roughly half report using drugs or consuming alcohol at excessive levels. The majority lived in poor, urban neighborhoods.

Reference

McLanahan, S., I. Garfinkel, N. Reichman, and J. Teitler. “Unwed Parents or Fragile Families.” Forthcoming in L. Wu and B. Wolfe (eds.) *Out of Wedlock: Trends, Causes and Consequences of Nonmarital Fertility*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

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