

## ***Imprisoned Fathers: the impact on families in a cross-national comparison***

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### **Background**

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 particular, little is known about the effects of men's re-entry into family life and how that re-entry affects the lives and general well-being of children and other family members (Brooks-Gordon, 2003; Peterselia, 2003).

Each year a significant proportion of the prison population are released and many 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.

### **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 pilot 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 will also assess 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***

#### ***Time One:***

From the volunteers only those who meet the following criteria were selected into the study sample:

- a) They intend on returning to their families. By return, we mean that they report an intention to contact and have some responsibility for a dependent child (under 18 years) on a regular basis, even if a divorce or separation has occurred.
- b) They agree to allow us to contact them following release and provide the necessary information to complete follow up interviews. Partners will be contacted separately to request consent to participate.
- c) They are within 6-8 weeks of prison release at first contact.
- d) They are assessed by relevant prison staff as emotionally suitable to complete individual and couple instruments.

For this study, there are 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 will involve:

- Individual face-to-face interview with father using pre-coded questionnaire including: a family geneogram 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.

- Individual face-to-face 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 contact each individual in the couple to arrange a follow-up interview around 6-8 weeks following release. Two short telephone questionnaire based interviews cover:

- Individual telephone interviews with father using pre-coded questionnaire
- Individual telephone interview with partner/ carer of target child using pre-coded questionnaire
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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 will be coded and analysed using statistical models within SPSS. Cross-sectional and follow-up patterns of association between the quality of father involvement and couple relationships against resettlement success and reported child outcomes will be carried out. Comparisons will be made between UK and US prison and resettlement experiences and outcomes.

### **Results**

In this paper results from Time 1 will be presented on the structure of prisoner father's families and their relationship with the target child in both the UK and USA studies as well as the partner's reports of the impact of imprisonment on the family's life.

A second theme will be research methodology issues. Important methodological considerations and findings concerning the study of such marginal or vulnerable populations will be elucidated.