

Incarceration, and Variation in Parenting Behaviors among Fathers in Fragile Families

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Introduction

Over the twentieth century, incarceration has dramatically increased in the United States. In 2009, over 7.3 million men and women were under some form of correctional supervision (Glaze, 2010). Approximately 12 million adults have served time in prison, representing 5.4% of adults and 9.2% of adult males (Uggen, Manza, and Thompson, 2006). Even further, incarceration is concentrated among the less-educated and minority men (Western and Petit, 2010). In response to the growing risk of imprisonment, a burgeoning academic literature has examined the patterns and implications of men's incarceration. Incarceration has a variety of unintended consequences for individuals and families and—given its associations with low socioeconomic status—may exacerbate cumulative disadvantages for particular groups. For example, incarceration is associated with a reduction in employment opportunities and wages for ex-offenders (Pager, 2003; Western, 2006), decreased marital stability (Lopoo and Western, 2005; Massoglia, Remster, and King, 2011), and increased physical health problems (Curtis, 2011; Massoglia, 2011).

Despite the prevalence of incarceration, there is a lack of empirical research examining whether there is variation in the parenting behaviors of fathers who have ever been incarcerated. Individuals with an incarceration history are an important group to examine differences in parenting behaviors because of the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Above and beyond the experience of imprisonment, these fathers face difficulties in the labor market and other social institutions. Deciphering whether there is variation in parenting behaviors among this highly stigmatized group, will shed light on a group of fathers who are generally portrayed as engaging in anti-social behaviors. Previous research has generally portrayed incarceration as a psychologically and emotionally damaging experience for men and their families. But, there has not been any quantitative research that looks at whether there are different types of parenting behaviors among men who have ever been incarcerated.

Moreover, research suggests that the effects of imprisonment on the family will depend on the type of father a man was before incarcerated (Hagan and Dinovitzer). For example, a father has the potential to be emotionally abusive and financially supportive. Or, the father could be emotionally supportive but financially absent. Describing possible variation among incarcerated men is important to paint a portrait of the variation in parenting behaviors. This research is particularly important especially because forthcoming research demonstrates that incarceration has the ability to effect the father's parenting behaviors (Wildeman et al forthcoming). Additionally, being incarcerated may also exacerbate cumulative disadvantages among a low socioeconomic group.

This paper seeks to provide a descriptive analysis of the differences in parenting behaviors by fathers. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey of parents in urban areas, to examine whether there are differences across ever incarcerated fathers on a variety of measures including: relationship quality, shared trust with the mother, shared responsibility and cooperation in parenting, paternal involvement, and mothers' financial support from the father support. These measures attempt to assess both a variety of parenting interactions with father and child and to examine the type of relationship the

father may have with the mother. Further, after performing a latent class analysis based on these observed variables, I describe whether the severity of the crime committed is associated with class membership. Based on class membership, I then predict aspects of child wellbeing.

Data and Methods

The data for this study are from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal survey intended to provide information about unmarried and married parents and their children. The study surveys 4,897 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 metropolitan areas with populations over 200,000 (for a complete description of the sample and design, see Reichman et al. 2001). The survey contains an oversample of nonmarital births and a comparison group of married parents. When weighted, the data are representative of all births in large U.S. cities in the late 1990s. As a result, both parents and children differ in this sample from those in a nationally--representative sample of all births. Mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours after giving birth. The father was interviewed in the hospital or as soon after the birth as possible. Both the mothers and the fathers were interviewed at the baseline, and the child's first, third and fifth birthdays (and nine-year data have just recently become available).

Methods

I use latent class analysis to determine variation in parenting behaviors among fathers. I used six variables: relationship quality, shared trust with the mother, shared responsibility and cooperation in parenting, paternal involvement, and child support receipt as indicators of a latent variable. The underlying premise of latent class analysis is that the responses to a set of observed variables are indicative of an underlying latent variable with a finite number of mutually exclusive classes or subtypes (Collins and Lanza 2011). Thus, in this study, latent class analysis was utilized in order to create a more global measurement of the father parenting quality representing weight-related parenting practices by combining individual parenting practice variables into three mutually exclusive latent classes. The classes were created based on parameter estimates representing probabilities of responding in the affirmative to particular questionnaire items. Items with estimated conditional probabilities of an affirmative response greater than the marginal probability were taken to be indicative of the particular class. Individuals were assigned to one of the latent classes based on their highest posterior probability of class membership derived from their response to the items (Collins and Lanza 2011). After the latent class groups are generated, I separate among fathers based on incarcerated status to determine whether there are different patterns of parenting behaviors between these two groups.

I assessed the number of latent classes and model fit by using the Bayesian information criterion (BIC). A lower BIC model indicates a better fitting model once the latent classes were determined, I used multinomial regression techniques and the severity of the crime committed to predict latent class membership. Finally, I predict child well-being among children in the Fragile Families dataset to see if there are different effects based on the group the father is assigned.

Measures

Measures

Relationship Quality. Overall relationship quality is measured with a single item based on the father reports and varies from 1-“excellent” to 5-“poor”. The question asks “In general, how would you rate your relationship with the mother?”

Shared Responsibility. Shared responsibility is assessed by the mean score of 2 items which asks the mother to indicate the frequency with which the biological father, “takes child places he or she needs to go, such as daycare or doctor?” and “look after child when you need to do things?” Each item was measured on a 4 point scale from 1-“often” to 4-“never.”

Cooperation in Parenting. Cooperation in parenting is comprised of the mean score on 6 items assessing mother reports of the extent to which the biological father “acts like the kind of parent she would want for her child”, “can be trusted to take good care of the child”, “respects her schedules and rules for the child”, “supports her in the way she wants to raise the child, talks with her about problems related to raising the child”, and “can be counted on to look after the child for a few hours” (each measured on a 4-point scale, from *always true* to *never*).

Shared Trust. Shared trust is assessed with a single item based on the mother’s reports. The question asks, “If you had to go away for one week, and you could not take your child, how much would you trust the father with the child?” This measure is based on a 3 point scale from 1 “very much” to 3-“not at all.”

Father Involvement. In order to assess the variety of ways that fathers engaged with their child I created a measure of father involvement based on 4 items. The questions asks the mothers, how many days a week the father “sings to the child,” “read to the child,” “tells stories to the child,” “plays inside with the child.” The items are measured from 0 day a week to 7 days a week. I reserved coded and created a category for high, medium, low paternal involvement and no contact with the child.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results suggests that there are three groups of fathers among ever incarcerated men. The first group of fathers are highly engaged on the various dimensions of parenting behaviors, the second group is comprised of men who receive average scores in terms of engagement and social support, and the third groups are men are not engaged with the children. This suggests that incarcerated fathers are a diverse group with different experiences that may affect that children. Further, the next steps are to distinguish this patterning of parenting from the never incarcerated fathers. Additionally, to decipher whether there are varying effects of paternal incarceration based on the class membership.

Conclusions

Prior research has indicated that paternal incarceration has negative consequences on the well-being of loved ones attached to incarcerated men. This study extends this research by examining how parenting behaviors differ among ever incarcerated men. The goal was to show that there is heterogeneity in parenting strategies even among a select group of men. Research often portrays these fathers as contributing negatively to their family. However, my results suggest that there is variation in the parenting behaviors among ever incarcerated fathers. This research has important policy implications because many highly engaged fathers may be incarcerated, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

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