

## CHAPTER ONE

# Returning Incarcerated Fathers to the Family

### JOEY'S STORY

Under the harsh glare of fluorescent lights, during an interview in prison less than a week before his scheduled release, Joey, a father of four, recalled the precious early days of his youngest child's life. Already "on the run" [his words] at that time for multiple crimes but not yet apprehended, Joey described himself as yearning to bond with his infant daughter. She was not with her mother, whose pregnancy had included a struggle with addiction, but with her maternal grandparents, who had taken her into their home on the outskirts of the city. The grandmother had encouraged Joey's visits, he said, even though they both knew the risks of allowing someone onto the property who had outstanding warrants for his arrest. He described the grandmother's generosity:

She wasn't supposed to ... but she let me out there. She let me feed and bathe my daughter. And fall asleep with her in my arms and just—she let me be a dad. But there was rules: no guns, no drugs in the house. Which I automatically knew. I'd leave [the guns and drugs] in the city and drive out to the country. Turn off my phone. Throw it in the glove box. Go in the house, and just forget I was who I was.

But Joey had been caught and sentenced to prison. The baby's grandparents cut off all contact with him. He also lost touch with his oldest child. At the time of his interview for our study, with his release date less than a week away, he was intently focused on reconnecting with his other two children, twin daughters who had been three years old when he was incarcerated and had been living with their maternal grandparents in the five years since. When he walked out of the prison gates, Joey would join their household—and see his family in person for the first time in almost exactly sixty months.

Since Joey didn't want his daughters to know he was in prison, they had never visited him in person. Weekly phone calls had been his only mode of communication with the twins since his arrest. But Joey described an ongoing close relationship with the two girls, full of inside jokes and good-natured teasing. Pushing his sleeves up to display muscular arms covered in black-inked tattoos he received while in prison, Joey recounted a recent phone conversation, saying that five years ago, before he went to prison,

I used to break out the Crayola markers, and I used to let them color in the tattoos and stuff. And [now] they're like, "Daddy?"

"What?"

"When you get home, do we get to color in your tattoos?"

I'm like, "Yeah. Daddy's got a lot more tattoos."

"Well, we've got a lot more markers."

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In the United States today, Joey's story is not uncommon. Over half the 2.2 million people in jails and prisons are parents, 2.7 million children have a parent behind bars, and one in every four women has a family member in prison (Lee et al. 2015; Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). Yet these point-in-time estimates drastically understate the reach of the incarceration system, as people cycle in and out of penal institutions. In 2015, for example, over 4.6 million people were supervised under community corrections, often after having been incarcerated (Kaeble and

Glaze 2016). And there is no reliable count of the potentially millions more who, though not currently incarcerated or under community supervision, spend time in a correctional facility during a given year.

These huge numbers have not been matched with commensurate efforts to measure and understand the intricacies of family life during incarceration and reentry. Correctional surveys pose few questions about kinship networks and close relationships. General surveys on family well-being fail to fill the information gap. As leading scholars in the field have noted, “very few of the data sources used to examine the well-being of families include information on incarceration, and those that do are extraordinarily limited in scope” (Wakefield, Lee, and Wildeman 2016). Although important gains in knowledge about the effects of incarceration have been extracted from existing data sources—most notably the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing data and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health—these studies were not designed to understand incarceration as an evolving process that encompasses time before, during, and after imprisonment, nor as involving people who are both prisoners and family members. The result is a fragmented, piecemeal approach to gaining knowledge about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people’s embeddedness in family life and the “repercussive effects” of the criminal justice system on families (Comfort 2007). Calls have been made for more holistic research to capture the complexity and fluidity of family life as it intersects with incarceration and reentry, but these calls have often gone unheeded in quantitative research.

Joey’s poignant telling of his story echoes the compartmentalization of family relationships as separate from incarceration in two important ways. First, his desire to leave guns, drugs, and his cell phone behind—and enter a space where he could “just forget who I was” by sinking into the comforting, encompassing role of fatherhood—underscores his own sense of disjuncture between the demands of his criminalized livelihood and the joys and heartbreaks of parenting. Second, his decision not to tell his children he was incarcerated, even at the cost of not

being with them in person for five years, further underscores his commitment to keeping separate his identities of father and of prisoner. Perhaps it should not be surprising, therefore, that this compartmentalization carries over into the distinct silos within which society collects the data needed to fully understand Joey's situation: correctional data on Joey in his prisoner status on the one hand, and child welfare systems data on his daughters and the two separate sets of custodial grandparents on the other.

THE MULTI-SITE FAMILY STUDY ON  
INCARCERATION, PARENTING, AND  
PARTNERING

Joey does exist as both a father and a prisoner, and his children's lives have been profoundly affected by the criminal justice system, however aware they may be of that fact. In this book, we pull these two sets of experiences together—performing the social science equivalent of Joey's daughters applying their Crayola markers to their father's black-inked prison tattoos to add the color and multidimensionality of family life.

To accomplish this task, our book presents the findings from the largest and most comprehensive study to date of the interplay between imprisonment and family relationships: the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting, and Partnering. This was a groundbreaking study designed specifically to understand families' experiences of incarceration and reentry over time. Funded to document the implementation and impact of a set of federal demonstration programs serving justice-involved fathers with minor children and their female partners, the Multi-site Family Study aimed from the outset to investigate questions about almost two thousand families' experiences of the incarceration of their fathers. Its findings offer an unparalleled opportunity to use a unifying analytic lens to delve deeply into the experiences of

incarcerated and reentering fathers, their partners, and their minor children.

The little existing research that considers the family life of prisoners focuses more heavily on incarcerated women as mothers than on incarcerated men as fathers (Rebecca Project for Human Rights 2010; Women's Prison Association 2009; Haney 2010). The Multi-site Family Study's concentration on prisoners' experiences of fatherhood is distinctive. We propose that the separation of research on prisoners and on family well-being has obscured the centrality of men's roles as fathers and partners—and that this separation has helped justify a system that, by removing men from their families, hides the substantial human and other costs to parents, partners, and children. Indeed, the Multi-site Family Study data reveal many justice-involved men to be deeply invested in their roles as fathers, hesitant to subject their partners and children to the financial and emotional burdens of interacting with correctional systems and stymied by the conflicting needs of their families and the requirements of reentry “success.” At the same time, mothers with an incarcerated or reentering coparent struggle with their children's desire to see their father and the tolls exacted by prison visiting, the unending and unrecognized costs of maintaining relationships with justice-involved people, and the tremendous work required to keep families stable in the face of sustained hardship.

Our book's in-depth exploration of the issues raised by the massive increase in incarceration in the United States over the last four and a half decades—which has affected millions of families living in socioeconomically marginalized communities across the nation—challenges these false boundaries. The Multi-site Family Study brings valuable new perspectives to issues of widespread importance as the United States moves toward understanding the full harms the country's social experiment with mass incarceration has inflicted and the policy reforms necessary to reduce those harms moving forward.

TWO OVERLAPPING BUT UNCOORDINATED  
SYSTEMS

The critique of separating people's identities as parents and as prisoners concerns more than data collection. The systems organized around these two identities—the health and human services systems set up to support low-income families and the criminal justice system set up to adjudicate and punish “offenders”—have remarkably few points of interaction. Yet a sizable proportion of families involved with one of the two systems is also involved to some degree with the other. For example, households in which a father has been or is currently incarcerated are more likely to use Medicaid, food stamps, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families than otherwise similar households who have not experienced a father's incarceration (Sugie 2012; Pruitt Walker 2011). The overlap is to be expected: the same factors that put people at risk of criminal justice involvement (such as living in poverty or having little formal education) also heighten the likelihood of a family's need for government entitlements like food stamps or housing support (Western 2006). Furthermore, involvement with the two systems is synergistic. Incarceration deepens poverty and potentially results in the loss of parental guardianship of children; placement in the foster care system predicts future involvement in the criminal justice system (Western and Pettit 2010; Courtney et al. 2009; Roberts 2002).

Despite this well-documented interconnectedness, people caught up in the criminal justice system are seldom asked about their intimate relationships or parenting status, even when this knowledge could be used to inform decisions to support family ties or leverage family strengths. Likewise, family welfare system records may simply document incarcerated parents as not being present in the household; the scope of case workers' interactions with families seldom includes contact with loved ones who are in jail or prison. Not only do these systems fail to offer integrated support, but they often work against each other. For example, continued accrual of unpaid child support payments

while fathers are incarcerated often results in massive arrears that decimate recently released men's earnings, foment acrimony between parents, and cause fathers to avoid seeing their children out of shame or feared confrontation with the children's mother (Pearson 2004; Rodriguez 2016). Likewise, visitation policies and regulations at correctional facilities are often out of sync financially and logistically with the reality of families' lives, which can decrease contact between loved ones, lead to deteriorating relationships, and increase recidivism risk (Bales and Mears 2008; Beckmeyer and Arditti 2014; Christian 2005).

The systems' lack of reference to each other and the consequent absence of shared data replicate the separation between the real-world operations of criminal justice and family in much of the academic and gray literature on these issues—scholars of one area are not expected or even encouraged to think about the other. Researchers who do try to bridge the divide are often stymied by data limitations—with marital status or number of minor children frequently being the sole indicator of family life in correctional data, and yes/no measures of parental incarceration commonly being the sole indicator of criminal justice involvement in family well-being data (Wakefield, Lee, and Wildeman 2016). Ethnographers frequently speak to people's involvement in both the criminal justice and family welfare systems, since their qualitative methodology concentrates on the lived experiences at the crux of the entanglement of the family and the justice system (Sered and Norton-Hawk 2014; Haney 2010; LeBlanc 2003). But quantitative research that combines these two lenses is sorely needed as well, to enable generalization to larger populations of interest, detect causal effects, and provide a foundation for evidence-based policy recommendations.

#### WHAT EXISTING DATA TELL US ABOUT JUSTICE-INVOLVED FAMILIES

Existing data do provide a foundation of knowledge on the numbers of prisoners with families, despite the data limitations. The Bureau of

Justice Statistics has estimated, through surveys of people in jails and prisons, that over half of incarcerated people are parents of minor children and that the number of incarcerated parents increased 79 percent between 1991 and midyear 2007 (Glaze and Murraschak 2010). In addition to having ties to children, many incarcerated and reentering fathers are in committed intimate relationships, often involving marriage or cohabitation prior to incarceration (Lattimore, Visher, and Steffey 2008). Analyses of a national sample of state prisoners indicated, for example, that 44 percent of men were married or living with an intimate partner at the time of their arrest.<sup>1</sup> A defining feature of mass incarceration is its disproportionate impact on communities of color (Tonry 2011). Recent research estimated that 44 percent of African American women, compared to 12 percent of White women, have a family member currently in prison (Lee et al. 2015). And African American children born in 1990 were estimated to have a 25.1 percent risk of having their fathers imprisoned by the time the children reached age 14, compared with a 3.6 percent risk for White children born the same year (Wildeman 2009).

In addition to providing a sense of the overall numbers of people affected, a burgeoning literature published over the last two decades provides insight into the material costs to families of incarceration. The costs of visitation, phone calls, legal fees, and support of an incarcerated person, for example, impose a serious resource burden on partners and other family members—generating further financial hardship for those whose lives are likely already economically precarious (Arditti 2003; Christian, Mellow, and Thomas 2006; deVuono-Powell et al. 2015; Grinstead et al. 2001; Harris 2016). The loss of direct income from an incarcerated partner or father, as well as the loss of child support payments from a noncustodial father, also reduce a family's economic resources (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011). Restrictions on access to public housing support and other government entitlements

1. Unpublished analyses based on the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities.

can further decrease a family's resources if the formerly incarcerated person returns to the household (Mele and Miller 2005). The same restrictions can also prevent released prisoners from living with their partners and children, which in turn is associated with diminished formal and informal child support (Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011). The financial contributions that individuals with conviction histories make to their family members can be similarly limited, due to decreased job prospects (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2004; Pager 2007; Stoll and Bushway 2008), diminished earnings potential (Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001; Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2006; Wildeman and Western 2010), and the depreciation during incarceration of skills, information, and work networks (Smith 2007; Rose and Clear 2003).

Existing research also provides some information on the deterioration or dissolution of relationships due to incarceration. Removal of a parent or partner from the household, along with the significant barriers to communication during incarceration, can strain relationships or even lead to sustained or permanent loss of contact (Arditti 2012; Khan et al. 2011). The distance of correctional facilities from residential areas is a primary obstacle to in-person family contact, making incarcerated people housed far from home less likely to receive visitors than those placed closer to their family's residence (Shollenberger 2009; Christian 2005; Hairston, Rollin, and Jo 2004). Family members must also contend with limited visiting hours, lack of visiting-room privacy, and restrictions on movement and physical contact—all of which make the prison atmosphere generally inhospitable (Fishman 1990; Girshick 1996; Comfort et al. 2005; Comfort 2003; Hutton 2016). Indeed, the procedures and protocols for in-prison visiting prioritize security concerns, which are not designed to be “family friendly”; for example, facility policies may permit strip searches of outsiders or keep visitors and prisoners separated by Plexiglas barriers (Aiello and McCorkel 2017; Moran 2013). These conditions can decrease visitation quality, make emotional connection with incarcerated individuals more difficult, and cause family members distress. Finally, families who attempt to maintain contact

by phone are likely to confront high costs of receiving collect phone calls from their loved ones. Although the Federal Communications Commission set rate caps for calls originating from jails and prisons, telecommunication companies and some state governments filed a lawsuit against those rules, and correctional calling rates are still considerably more expensive than rates for regular calls (Federal Communications Commission 2017; Kang 2017). These challenges and barriers often result in decreased family contact during incarceration, which may be particularly problematic for the children of incarcerated parents (Poehlmann et al. 2010).

Although some studies demonstrate that in-prison contact can have a negative effect on a relationship that was already troubled before incarceration (La Vigne et al. 2005), maintaining strong family ties during incarceration clearly increases reentering men's chances of securing postrelease employment and decreases the likelihood of recidivism (Berg and Huebner 2011; Duwe and Clark 2013; Bales and Mears 2008; Barrick, Lattimore, and Visser 2014). However, many of the material and interpersonal challenges that make it difficult for men to maintain these ties during incarceration persist after reentry, and reentry often brings new challenges—even in families that did maintain close ties during incarceration (Turney 2015). The strain and disconnection many couples experience when one partner is incarcerated can contribute to distrust and the erosion of partnership bonds, making it difficult for couples to reunite (Herman-Stahl, Kan, and McKay 2008; Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011). Challenges related to residual mental health issues from the trauma of imprisonment may also arise after release (Haney 2003), as well as difficulties relating to the severity of the crime, which may have affected other family members directly or indirectly (Condry 2007); these can all interfere with the functioning of a couple's relationship. Couples may also struggle to establish mutually satisfying coparenting strategies in the wake of one parent's extended absence and the formerly incarcerated partner's daily exposure to a brutally authoritative environment (Nurse 2004; Bartlett and Eriksson 2018;

Fowler et al. 2017). In addition, substance use by one or both partners can loom large, especially if one of the partners used the incarceration period to engage with a treatment program (Cooper et al. 2014). Causal factors that protect against postrelease couple-relationship problems have not yet been identified, but some research suggests that postrelease parenting challenges might be mitigated by high-quality and frequent parent-child contact during incarceration. Such contact has been shown to lower parenting stress, strengthen attachment, and improve child involvement and compliance with child support among noncustodial parents after release (Arditti 2005; Beckmeyer and Arditti 2014; Landreth and Lobaugh 1998; La Vigne et al. 2005; Poehlmann 2005; Song et al. 2018).

Research on incarceration and families is most advanced with regard to the experiences of children of incarcerated parents, with several recent volumes focusing specifically on children (Gordon 2018; Wildeman, Haskins, and Poehlmann-Tynan 2017; Eddy and Poehlmann 2010). Since the U.S. prison population is 93 percent male, children with an incarcerated parent are far more likely to have an incarcerated father than an incarcerated mother. Prior research indicated that children of incarcerated mothers have a high risk of entering the foster care system (Swann and Sylvester 2006; Norman 1995), whereas children with justice-involved fathers typically remain in the care of their mother or a grandparent caregiver (Glaze and Maruschak 2010). Even so, the home environment of children with an incarcerated father can be substantially disrupted; in addition to being less likely to live with both parents, these children move more frequently than their counterparts unaffected by incarceration, and they may be more likely to experience family homelessness (Wildeman 2014; Geller et al. 2009; Johnson and Waldfogel 2004). Although early work suggested that children with an incarcerated mother suffer particularly poor outcomes (Dallaire 2007), paternal incarceration has been associated with maternal neglect and psychological and physical aggression (Turney 2014), which may be related to separately observed associations between paternal incarceration and depression for both fathers and

mothers (Turney, Wildeman, and Schnittker 2012; Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012).

A father's incarceration can also interfere with children's psychosocial development. Children of an incarcerated father may suffer from internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and depression; externalizing disorders, such as aggression and behavioral problems; and other health issues, such as developmental delays and speech difficulties (Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Aaron and Dallaire 2010; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Turney 2014). All these effects are stronger than those associated with other forms of father absenteeism, and they may vary by the gender and age of the child (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003; Geller et al. 2012).

Of the unanswered questions about the experiences and trajectories of justice-involved families, many relate to how father-child and couple relationships change over the course of incarceration and reentry and what predicts how reentering men reconnect (or don't) with their partners and children after their release. Whether the documented effects of paternal incarceration on child well-being differ by the father's incarceration or release status and what factors might moderate the effects of paternal incarceration or release on child well-being are also questions that still need to be answered. In addition, the field has not yet developed a strong sense of whether family members' perspectives on incarceration and family life converge or diverge, since studies typically focus on either the incarcerated family member or those on the outside, not the two together.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE MULTI-SITE FAMILY  
STUDY ON INCARCERATION, PARENTING, AND  
PARTNERING

Data from the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting, and Partnering provide an unprecedented opportunity to delve into these heretofore unanswered questions. The first study of its kind, it

followed 1,482 different-sex couples for about eighteen months to three years, beginning during the male partner's incarceration and typically continuing through his reentry into the community. Unique in its couples-based, mixed-methods design, its large scale, and its extended follow-up period, the Multi-site Family Study focuses directly on the nexus of incarceration and family life. Longitudinal interviews with Multi-site Family Study participants collected quantitative information about parenting, child well-being, couple relationship experiences, family stability, and reentry into the community. Quantitative data collection took place from December 2008 through April 2014. These data are now publicly available in the interest of welcoming other scholars to draw upon this unique source for teaching and further analysis.

In addition to the longitudinal surveys, a qualitative substudy was conducted from 2014 through 2015 to better understand family relationships during incarceration and reentry. In-depth interviews were conducted with the subsample of the Multi-site Family Study couples in which the male participant either was nearing release from prison (interviewed twice: both before and after release) or had been released within roughly the prior year (interviewed once: after release). Both members of the study couple were invited to participate in the quantitative and qualitative interviews, but they were interviewed separately.

This book draws upon these rich quantitative and qualitative datasets to provide a multidimensional look at how incarceration affects families and how families grapple with incarceration. Our aim, in part, is to *return* incarcerated fathers to the family—not only in the sense of reentry from prison but also, with the use of empirical data, to understand men as both parents *and* prisoners, as both returning citizens *and* returning partners. A common thread across the chapters that follow is the perspective of incarcerated and returning fathers as full people embedded in family relationships. This approach renders visible what is too often erased by the “subtraction” of people living behind bars from general household surveys. As illustrated with Joey's story at the beginning of this chapter, the Multi-site Family Study data knit

together multifaceted identities that are too often divided into data silos, truncated by anonymizing systems, or just tossed in the glove compartment by people struggling to hold their lives together.

#### OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 2, “‘Always Having Hope’: What We (Didn’t) Know about Fatherhood and Incarceration,” focuses on justice-involved men’s relationships with their children. Drawing on the study’s quantitative data, we compare various dimensions of father-child relationships before and after an incarceration, identifying factors that shape positive father-child relationships when fathers return to the community. We then use qualitative data to help illuminate how father-child relationships may function in the bleak landscape of men’s reentry from prison.

Chapter 3, “‘I Do, but I Don’t, Know Where We Are’: Couple Relationships during Incarceration and Reentry,” applies qualitative and quantitative data to illustrate how imprisonment and the return from imprisonment affect intimate relationships. In this chapter, we first examine change in couple relationships from preincarceration to post-release. We then use qualitative data to explore how incarceration and release may destabilize relationships, and the ways a conviction history may follow a person from the prison gates into efforts to reconstruct family life.

Chapter 4, “‘None of the Above’: Partner Violence and the Limitations of Research,” turns our lens to intimate partner violence (IPV). Challenges in collecting sensitive data safely and confidentially have made couples-based studies of IPV relatively rare. The Multi-site Family Study design was different in that it enabled us not only to gather survey data from both partners about their experiences of relationship violence but also to interpret participants’ responses in light of insights from their qualitative interviews as well. This chapter investigates what we learned about IPV that would not be apparent within a single partner’s survey reports.

Chapter 5, “‘To Be in Jail for Ten Years, Change Ain’t Going to Happen Overnight’: Operationalizing Reentry Success,” expands the two-part definition of *success* typically used in prison reentry studies: that is, avoiding rearrest or a return to prison. We show that additional dimensions of reentry success (for example, family relationships) are relevant as outcomes in themselves and also as factors related to recidivism.

Chapter 6, “‘A Breakthrough Type of Thing’: Measuring the Impact of Family-Strengthening Programs during Incarceration and Reentry,” emphasizes the importance when evaluating relationship-strengthening programs of including the perspective of both members of the couple and of measuring change over an extended period. We discuss how the Multi-site Family Study’s impact evaluation used an innovative analytic approach and drew on quantitative and qualitative data to look at the impact of program participation on fathers, mothers, and couples. The study found limited treatment effects in most study sites, with the notable exception of Indiana—where a low-dosage, one-time relationship-skills retreat showed point-in-time treatment effects for individuals and sustained positive effects for couples. In concert with chapters 4 and 5—which discuss the interpretation problems of using data collected from only one partner’s perspective or focusing on narrowly defined outcomes—this chapter illuminates the complexities of measurement and evaluation in research. The Multi-site Family Study’s approach elicited a multidimensional sense of the experiences of participating families—finding, for example, that members of a couple might have quite different views of the same event or its impact on their family unit. Layering quantitative analytical techniques enabled us to understand the status of individual members of a couple at a given point in time, as well as couples’ joint average trajectories over time. Qualitative data provided a window into how it was possible that a short (three-day) intervention could have an impact on the lives of couples weathering years of incarceration.

Chapter 7, “On the Horizon: The Social Science of Incarceration and Family,” finishes the volume with a reflection on the unique