



Fathers in Jail and their Minor Children: Paternal Characteristics and Associations with Father-Child Contact

Rebecca J. Shlafer¹ · Laurel Davis¹ · Lauren Hindt² · Lindsay Weymouth³ · Hilary Cuthrell³ · Cynthia Burnson³ · Julie Poehlmann-Tynan³

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020

Abstract

Objectives More than five million children have experienced a co-resident parent leaving to spend time behind bars. Most incarceration occurs in jails, yet little is known about contact between parents in jail and their minor children. Such information is essential to inform programming and policy to support families in the context of incarceration.

Methods In the present study, 315 fathers in jail with minor children (3–17 years old) were recruited from four jails in the Midwest region of the United States. Fathers in jail reported their demographic information, incarceration-related characteristics (e.g., number of prior arrests), children's exposure to incarceration-related events, and frequency of contact with their children.

Results Four main findings emerged: (1) telephone contact was the most common modality for engaging with children during a paternal jail stay, with 22% of fathers reporting daily phone contact with children, (2) types of contact were correlated, so that more phone contact and letter writing were associated with more frequent visits, (3) White, non-Hispanic fathers and those who did not plan to live with their children upon release were less likely to report telephone contact with their children, and (4) children who witnessed their fathers' arrest were less likely to write and children who witnessed their fathers' criminal activity were less likely to visit.

Conclusions Contact between fathers in jail and children has implications for the parent-child relationship. Future research should explore quality of and barriers to contact, including incarceration-related events.

Keywords Child · Contact · Visit · Incarceration · Jail · Fathers

The United States (U.S.) has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Walmsley 2016), and most incarceration occurs at the jail level (Wagner and Rabuy 2016). Unlike prisons, which are operated by state and federal governments and incarcerate people for felony-level offenses, jails are locally-operated correctional facilities that house individuals pre- and post-adjudication. Each year, there are nearly 11 million admissions to jails across the U.S. (Wagner and Rabuy 2016), and on any given day, ~646,000 people—85% of whom are men—are confined in local jails (Minton and Zeng 2016). Adults from racial and ethnic

minority groups are disproportionately incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons (Sakala 2014; Bronson and Carson 2019). For example, African American adults made up 13% of the general population, but 40% of the incarcerated population (Sakala 2014).

As the number of people incarcerated in the U.S. has increased, so too has interest in the collateral consequences of mass incarceration for children and families. Recent findings from the National Study of Children's Health (NSCH) indicate that more than five million children have experienced a co-resident parent's incarceration (Murphey and Cooper 2015). Qualitative and quantitative research suggests that paternal incarceration is associated with child behavior problems, substance use, cognitive delays, poor physical health, and school difficulties (e.g., poor grades, school failure; Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan 2019; Murray et al. 2012). However, the impact of a father's jail incarceration, compared to prison incarceration, has rarely been examined (Turney and Conner 2019). For example, the

✉ Rebecca J. Shlafer
shlaf002@umn.edu

¹ University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

² Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

³ University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

NSCH study—like most other large quantitative data sets that include information on parental incarceration—neither distinguishes between jail and prison nor includes information about parent-child contact during incarceration. We argue that jail incarceration may be especially consequential for children's well-being for several reasons.

First, jail sentences, compared to prison sentences, are relatively short, occur more frequently, and can be filled with uncertainty due to pending court cases. Such instability and unpredictability are associated with deleterious outcomes for children (e.g., Fomby and Cherlin 2007). Second, the visiting context in jails may be particularly challenging for families. Although visiting is more accessible and less expensive because local jails are often located closer to fathers' families, jails usually have less transparent visiting guidelines, offer fewer visit times for shorter periods, and generally do not allow contact visits (Shlafer et al. 2015). Non-contact visits, including barrier visits (such as Plexiglas) and video visits, are particularly common in jails, and several studies have found that young children have a more difficult time handling Plexiglas visits with incarcerated fathers compared to video or contact visits (Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2017; Poehlmann-Tynan and Pritzl 2019). Third, relative to prisons, jails tend to offer fewer services and programs (e.g., vocational programs, parenting education), as the relatively brief nature of the confinement may discourage investment of resources in educational and treatment programs that require longer-term engagement (Solomon et al. 2008).

In addition, there is less preparation for reentry in jails compared to prisons. In their review, Eddy and Burraston (2018) note several key topics related to child and family well-being that are commonly addressed in re-entry programs for imprisoned fathers, including knowledge of child development, co-parenting issues, and parenting from prison (e.g., through letters and calls). When such programs are available, they may foster incarcerated parents' skills and increase the contact that they have with their children. Indeed, participation in a parent management training program for parents in prison was related to parents' perceptions of whether parent-child contact was positive for the child and had a positive impact on the child's behavior (Eddy et al. 2013). Despite such positive findings, the availability of such programs in jails remains limited.

A small but growing body of research has considered the benefits for children who maintain positive contact with an incarcerated parent (Maldonado 2006). Contact may offer opportunities for children to clarify negative feelings associated with ambiguous loss (Arditti 2016). Although research on visits has revealed mixed findings regarding the impact on child adjustment (Sarkadi et al. 2008; Dallaire et al. 2015), with youth expressing positive feelings (Boswell 2002) and caregivers expressing negative feelings

(e.g., Tasca 2016), positive contact with incarcerated fathers can lead to more father-child involvement post-release (La Vigne et al. 2005; Poehlmann et al. 2010). Visits also offer children the opportunity to see that their father is safe and evaluate the environment in which he resides (Maldonado 2006). This may be particularly important when a child's last contact with a father involved seeing him arrested. Family visits have also been linked to reduced recidivism (De Claire and Dixon 2017; McClure et al. 2015).

National estimates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) provide key information about the frequency of children's contact with their imprisoned parents; however, comparable national estimates for children with parents in jail do not exist. Among fathers in state prisons, more than one-third (38%) report having some type of contact (either by telephone, letter, or in-person visits) with their minor children at least once a week (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Nearly 70% report ever exchanging letters with their children and more than half report talking on the phone with their children; in-person visits are the least common, with only 41% of fathers reporting ever receiving an in-person visit from their children (Glaze and Maruschak 2008).

The type and frequency of contact incarcerated parents have with their children varies with a number of factors including: the facility's security/custody level, policies regarding who can visit and under what circumstances, the distance between the visitor's home and the correctional facility, and policies regarding when phone calls can be made, including the cost of placing calls (Arditti et al. 2003; Hairston 1998). Phone calls can be expensive for families (Wagner and Jones 2019), making this method of communication especially difficult for families with limited financial resources (Christian et al. 2015; Hairston 1998). Additionally, jail policies vary in terms of the number and timing of phone calls, as well as rules regarding letter writing (Hairston 1998; Shlafer et al. 2015). Many facilities affix a stamp indicating letters were sent from corrections, which may increase caregivers' apprehension about giving the letters to children. Email may be cheaper, but not all facilities have the capability (Shlafer et al. 2015).

Visits can be particularly difficult to coordinate, given children's caregivers must be willing and able to bring the children to the correctional facility. Further, jail policies can create barriers by limiting the frequency, duration, and times for visits, along with who is allowed to bring children and what identification is required (e.g., proof of guardianship, birth certificate; Hairston 1998; Shlafer et al. 2015). This can make visiting difficult when children are cared for by non-parental kin, which is common in African American communities (Hairston 1998).

In addition to these facility-level factors that impact the frequency and type of contact parents in jail may have with their children, there may also be individual-level factors that

are associated with parent-child contact. Recently, Galardi et al. (2017) used BJS data to examine how the characteristics of fathers in prison predicted the frequency and type of contact they had with their minor children. They found that fathers' age, education, number of children, and marital status were significantly associated with father-child contact. Fathers' education and the number of children were both positively associated with phone calls and letter writing, but not visits. In addition, fathers who were never married or no longer married were significantly less likely to report any type of contact with their minor children than married fathers, highlighting the gatekeeping role that mothers often play when fathers are incarcerated (Roy and Dyson 2005). Other than the study by Galardi et al. (2017), little is known about the frequency and type of contact that incarcerated fathers have with their children or predictors of such contact, and there are no similar studies focusing on fathers in jail. The current study seeks to fill this gap by describing the frequency and type of contact fathers in jail have with their minor children and identifying key factors related to contact; such information is essential to provide a foundation for future research examining the well-being of families in the context of incarceration and to inform targeted service planning while parents are in and outside of jail.

Two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant when examining the characteristics of fathers in jail and contact with their minor children. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems perspective considers the importance of multiple contexts in which child development occurs. Poehlmann et al. (Poehlmann et al. 2010; Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan 2019) applied this perspective to parent-child contact experiences when a parent is incarcerated. In their model, they described the many factors that exist across multiple systems that influence the frequency and quality of parent-child contact. For example, Poehlmann et al. (2010) considered factors like parent-child relationship quality and children's experiences with visitation in the child's microsystem (i.e., contexts closest to the child in which they have direct contact). Within the mesosystem (i.e., connections between children's microsystems), parent-caregiver relationship quality is one important factor. Within the exosystem (i.e., factors that influence the child in indirect ways), the parent characteristics and the corrections environment have important implications for child development. In the current study, we build on this model and examine how factors in a child's micro-, meso-, and exo-systems relate to the frequency and type of parent-child contact. As Poehlmann et al. (2010) posit, children's experiences within their microsystems, including whether or not they witnessed their parent's criminal behavior and/or arrest, likely influence the frequency and type of contact that they have with the parent during the parent's

incarceration. For example, a child who has been exposed to these traumas may be more apprehensive to visit or have a caregiver who wishes to minimize the child's contact with their parent given the exposure to dangerous or antisocial behavior. In addition, exosystem factors, including the father's education, employment, and pre-incarceration income along with the jail environment contribute to the social context in which the child is situated and may lead to complex dynamics affecting parent-child contact during parental incarceration. Indeed, a recent analysis of nationally representative data from parents incarcerated in prison found that parents with lower income were less likely to be visited by their children (Rubenstein et al. 2019), highlighting links between different systems.

Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and family stress theories, Arditti (2016) describes a Family Stress-Proximal Process (FSPP) model for understanding the effects of parental incarceration on children and families. In this model, parental incarceration is considered within a broader context of social inequality, recognizing that many of the factors that increase a father's risk of incarceration (e.g., substance use and addiction, unemployment), are also factors that can compromise child well-being and family functioning. The FSPP model describes parental incarceration as an ongoing stressor that contributes to psychological distress, which is particularly salient when parents are in and out of jail. This distress subsequently influences proximal relational family processes, including the role of non-incarcerated caregivers and children's contact with their incarcerated parents.

Most relevant to the current study are the proximal processes associated with children's contact with their incarcerated parents. Poehlmann-Tynan and Arditti (2018) illustrate application of the FSPP model to parent-child contact during parental incarceration, acknowledging that considerable variation exists. Much of this variation—particularly in terms of children's visit experiences—depends on the type of facility in which a parent is incarcerated. Notably, most jails have “no contact” visit policies, meaning that in-person visits are either conducted through Plexiglas or via video (Shlafer et al. 2015; Cramer et al. 2017). Such non-contact visits—during which children and parents cannot hug or hold hands—may be less conducive to supporting the parent-child relationship. Much of the current application of the FSPP model to parent-child contact is focused on visits. However, many incarcerated parents maintain their relationships with their minor children through other forms of contact, including letter writing and telephone calls. In the current paper, we draw on Arditti's (2016) FSPP model and examine two key elements, namely, characteristics of fathers in jail (contextual factors in the FSPP model) and the frequency and type of children's contact with their fathers.

In the current study, we build on Poehlmann et al.'s (2010) and Arditti's (2016) models to examine characteristics of fathers in jail and assess how these characteristics influence the frequency and type of father-child contact. Although others have recently focused on characteristics of fathers in prison and contact with their minor children (Galardi et al. 2017), our focus on fathers in jail fills an important gap in the current literature, provides a foundation for future research in this area, and offers valuable information to inform practice and policy that supports families. This study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How often and in what ways are fathers in jail in contact with their children? (2) How do fathers' demographic and family characteristics, including children's witnessing of paternal crime and arrest, relate to the frequency and type of contact that they have with their children?

Method

Participants

The sample included 315 fathers recruited from four jails in the Midwest region of the United States as part of a larger study examining children's experiences visiting their parents. All four jail systems were run by county sheriff's departments who were in charge of both law enforcement and jails in their counties. The first jail is located in a large urban community (823-bed capacity, 8000 annual admissions, 788 daily population, 79% men). The second jail is located in an urban community and holds a mix of individuals from urban and rural locations (876-bed capacity, 12,000 annual admissions, 800 daily population, 84% men). The third and fourth jails are located in suburban regions of a major metropolitan area. The third site is a 200-bed facility for adult men and women that holds pre-trial, convicted, and sentenced individuals for up to 365 days or less (202 daily population, 75% men). The fourth site is a 263-bed facility that only detains men; incarcerated women are transferred to another local county.

Additional data were collected from a subset of children and their caregivers who visited fathers in jail and participated in a randomized control trial testing the efficacy of educational materials designed for children with incarcerated parents (Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2020) [author citation removed, under review]. A father was eligible for participation if he met the following inclusion criteria: (1) was at least 18 years old, (2) had a child 3–17 years of age who, at the time of data collection, lived with kin within or near one of the four the study sites, (3) had retained legal rights to the child, (4) had not committed a crime against the child, (5) cared for the child at least part of the time prior to incarceration, (6) did not anticipate being released into the

Table 1 Participant characteristics

	N	%/Mean (SD; Range)
Incarcerated parent characteristics		
Age (in years)	309	32.3 (7.9; 18–53)
Race and ethnicity	307	
White, non-Hispanic		46.3
Black/African American		25.4
Asian		0.7
Native American		5.2
Hispanic		11.1
Multiple races/ethnicities		11.4
Education	309	
Partial high school or less		17.1
High school graduate or equivalency		48.2
Partial college or specialized training		29.1
College graduate		5.5
Employed in the month before arrest ^a	312	47.4
Father's monthly income	298	\$876.6 (\$1373.4; 0–\$8,000)
Drug or alcohol treatment ^a	302	74.8
Mental health treatment ^a	312	29.2
Total number of arrests	211	13.6 (16.6; 0–143)
Sentence served (in days)	282	116.2 (251.3; 1–1860)
Family characteristics		
Married or partnered ^a	310	45.8
Number of minor children	305	2.5 (1.6; 1–11)
Average age of all minor children	305	7.0 (3.6; 1–17)
Plan to live with child upon release ^a	307	80.8
Incarcerated family member ^a	308	66.6
Children's exposure to incarceration-related events		
Child witnessed criminal activity ^a	312	16.7
Child witnessed arrest ^a	311	24.8

^aIndicates the variable was coded as 1 = yes

community for at least one week, (7) anticipated receiving a visit from the child, and (8) could understand and read English. We did not exclude individuals with a history of mental health treatment, as studies have found that mental health concerns are common among adults in jail and may have important implications for parent-child contact (Yi et al. 2017). Characteristics of fathers are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

Trained researchers with experience working with children and families affected by incarceration were responsible for recruitment and enrollment of fathers in jail. To accommodate jail operations and policies, there were minor differences in the recruitment and enrollment procedures across facilities, including small group and individual informational meetings with incarcerated fathers or initial contact with caregivers. At all facilities, however, information about the study was shared with incarcerated adults through flyers and/or program announcements. In order to protect individuals' autonomy and reduce the potential for

coercion, corrections staff did not assist with recruitment. Incarcerated fathers who were interested then provided written informed consent for their participation. Fathers completed a Parent Questionnaire and reviewed a 1-page Parent Guide developed by Sesame Workshop (Sesame Street Workshop 2013). Because of jail regulations, we are unable to compensate parents in jail for their participation in the study.¹

Measures

Incarcerated parent characteristics

Fathers in jail completed a Parent Questionnaire, asking about their demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, education, pre-incarceration employment and income), and criminal justice and treatment histories. Due to the small size in several of the subgroups (e.g., Native American, Asian) we dichotomized race/ethnicity (White, non-Hispanic = 0; all other race/ethnic categories = 1) in the multivariate models. We also dichotomized education (GED/high school diploma or higher = 1) and pre-incarceration employment (employed = 1). Fathers who were employed in the month prior to arrest reported their approximate monthly income as a continuous measure representing dollars per month. Participants were asked about their history of participation in an alcohol or substance abuse treatment program (yes = 1) and whether or not they had ever received treatment for mental health concerns (yes = 1). Participants were also asked to report information about their criminal justice history, including number of times arrested as an adult and time served in the current incarceration (in days).

Family characteristics

Fathers reported about their family, including current marital status (married or partnered = 1), number and ages of their children, whether or not they planned to live with their children post-release (yes = 1), and family history of incarceration (yes = 1).

Children's exposure to incarceration-related events

Participants were also asked about their children's exposure to incarceration-related events (Dallaire and Wilson 2010). Participants were asked whether or not the child witnessed the parent's criminal activity (yes = 1) and whether or not the child witnessed the parent's arrest (yes = 1).

¹ Jailed fathers were not compensated; however, caregivers who participated in other parts of the larger study were compensated and some fathers may have been motivated to participate for this reason.

Frequency and type of contact

On the Parent Questionnaire, fathers also reported the frequency and type of contact they had with their minor children. Fathers with multiple children were asked to select one minor child and report the frequency and type of contact they had with that child. We asked fathers open-ended questions about each type of contact (i.e., letters, phone calls, and visits) to provide them with an opportunity to share as much detail as they wished to provide. For example, fathers were asked, "How often do you write to your child (e.g., send letters or cards)?" Their open-ended responses were then reviewed and re-coded into an ordinal scale with four values: 1 = never or have not yet (e.g., "never"), 2 = rarely or occasionally (e.g., "a couple times a year", "every once in a while"), 3 = monthly (e.g., "every other week"), and 4 = weekly or more frequently than weekly (e.g., "every Wednesday"). Similarly, fathers were asked, "How often does your child write to you or send you something?" Open-ended responses were re-coded into an ordinal scale with four values: 1 = never or have not yet, 2 = rarely or occasionally, 3 = monthly, and 4 = weekly or more frequently than weekly. Fathers were asked, "How often do you talk on the phone with your child?" Open-ended responses were re-coded into an ordinal scale with five values: 1 = never or have not yet, 2 = rarely, occasionally, or monthly, 3 = one or two times per week, 4 = three times per week or more, and 5 = daily or more than one time per day. Finally, fathers were asked, "Does the child visit you in jail?" Fathers who answered "yes" were also asked how often the child visits. Open-ended responses for frequency of visits were re-coded into an ordinal scale with five values: 1 = never or have not yet, 2 = rarely or occasionally, 3 = monthly, 4 = two to three times per month, and 5 = weekly or more than one time per week.

Protection of human subjects

Fathers in jail provided written informed consent for their participation. Because incarcerated people are a protected population in human subjects' research, additional precautions were put in place to protect their participation. Research protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Data Analyses

Central tendency statistics were used to describe the characteristics of fathers in jail and their contact with children. Linear regression analyses were used to identify associations with father-child contact. To examine associations with contact, we tested four multivariate linear regression

models, one for each type of contact (father write, child write, phone calls, visits). In each of the models, we controlled for demographic and family characteristics, incarceration-related characteristics, children's exposure to incarceration-related events, and the other forms of contact (i.e., in the model predicting frequency of letters, we controlled for the frequency of telephone calls and visits). All data were analyzed with SPSS v. 24.

Missing data

Missing data were low (<10%) for most study variables with the exception of number of total arrests (33%), length of sentence already served (10.5%), telephone contact with the child (16.2%) and writing to the child (12.1%). The most common reason for missing data was that the father was unable to provide the information. For example, some fathers responded to the question about how many times they had been arrested with phrases such as "too many to count" or "a lot". These values were coded as missing. To create a stable analytic sample and capitalize on the available data, we used multiple imputation to address missing data. Multiple imputation is considered a robust technique for dealing with missing data (Schafer and Graham 2002;

Enders 2010) and consists of three phases: (1) multiple copies of the complete dataset are created, (2) analysis proceeds as usual, and then (3) estimates are pooled. We used imputation to create 20 complete datasets, which were shown to adequately converge based on trace plots and potential scale reduction (Enders 2010). Descriptive statistics are based on non-imputed data; regression analyses used imputed data.

Results

Father-Child Contact

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between contact variables are presented in Table 2. In bivariate analyses, each type of contact was significantly and positively associated with the other types of contact. Specifically, fathers' reports of their frequency of writing letters to their children was significantly and positively correlated with their reports of how often their children write to them ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$), frequency of phone calls ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), and visits ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Fathers' reports of how often their children write was significantly and

Table 2 Types of father-child contact—percent and intercorrelations

	N	% ^a	Father write	Child write	Phone calls	Visits
Father Write	277		–	0.574***	0.263***	0.488***
Never or haven't yet		35.0				
Rarely, occasionally		16.2				
Monthly or more frequently		13.7				
Weekly or more frequently		35.0				
Child Write	273			–	0.186**	0.277***
Never or haven't yet		53.5				
Rarely, occasionally		20.1				
Monthly or more frequently		10.6				
Weekly or more frequently		15.8				
Phone calls	264				–	0.326***
Never or haven't yet		17.4				
Rarely, occasionally, or monthly		20.8				
One or two times per week		23.9				
Three or more times per week		15.5				
Daily or more frequently		22.3				
Visits	289					–
Never or haven't yet		45.7				
Rarely, occasionally		12.1				
Monthly		6.2				
Two to three times per month		11.4				
Weekly or more frequently		24.6				

^aMay not sum to 100% due to rounding

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 Results from multiple regression analyses

Variable	Model 1a: father write		Model 1b: child write		Model 2: phone calls		Model 3: visits	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Demographic and family characteristics								
Age (in years)	-0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	-0.001	0.02
Race/Ethnicity (1 = not White, non-Hispanic)	-0.11	0.17	0.08	0.14	0.68***	0.19	0.18	0.23
Education (1 = high school or equivalent)	-0.01	0.11	0.04	0.08	-0.12	0.12	-0.06	0.14
Employed (1 = yes)	-0.22	0.22	0.20	0.17	-0.18	0.24	0.33	0.29
Monthly income (in dollars)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Married or partnered (1 = yes)	-0.02	0.17	0.17	0.13	0.25	0.19	-0.18	0.22
Number of minor children	0.06	0.05	-0.05	0.04	-0.02	0.06	0.10	0.07
Avg. age of minor children	-0.01	0.03	-0.001	0.02	-0.01	0.03	-0.03	0.04
Plans to live with child upon release (1 = yes)	0.12	0.22	0.25	0.18	1.01***	0.24	0.21	0.29
Incarceration-related characteristics								
Prior arrests	0.001	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Sentence served (in days)	0.001	0.00	-0.001	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.001	0.001
Incarcerated family member (1 = yes)	-0.17	0.17	0.06	0.14	0.12	0.19	-0.06	0.23
Drug or alcohol treatment (1 = yes)	0.14	0.20	-0.08	0.16	-0.06	0.22	-0.05	0.27
Mental health treatment (1 = yes)	0.08	0.19	-0.06	0.15	-0.31	-0.21	0.41	0.25
Children's exposure to incarceration-related events								
Child witness criminal activity (1 = yes)	0.10	0.23	0.09	0.18	0.29	0.25	-0.61*	0.30
Child witness arrest (1 = yes)	-0.09	0.19	-0.40**	0.15	0.09	0.22	0.42	0.26
Frequency of contact								
Frequency of father write	-	-	0.40***	0.05	0.07	0.08	0.01	0.10
Frequency of child write	0.63***	0.08	-	-	0.03	0.10	0.60***	0.11
Frequency of phone calls	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.05	-	-	0.20*	0.09
Frequency of visits	0.003	0.06	0.21***	0.04	0.14*	0.06	-	-
Model Summary Statistics ^a								
	$R^2 = 0.37$ $F(19,114) = 2.89$, $p < 0.001$		$R^2 = 0.41$ $F(19,114) = 3.49$, $p < 0.001$		$R^2 = 0.29$ $F(19,114) = 2.04$, $p < 0.013$		$R^2 = 0.36$ $F(19,114) = 2.77$ $p = 0.001$	

^aModel summary statistics are reported for non-imputed data

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

positively correlated with phone calls ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$) and visits ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). Phone calls and visits were also significantly and positively correlated ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.011$).

Letter Writing

We examined fathers' reports of how often they write to their children (Table 3, Model 1a) and how often their children write to them (Table 3, Model 1b). In multivariate analysis, how often children write to their fathers was significantly associated with fathers' reports of writing letters to their children ($B = 0.63$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). None of the demographic characteristics (i.e., age, race, education, employment, income), family characteristics (i.e., marital status, number of children, average age of minor children, post-release plans to live with the child) or incarceration-related characteristics (i.e., sentence served, prior arrests, family history of incarceration, history of substance abuse or mental health treatment) were significantly associated

with fathers' reports of writing letters to their children. Children's exposure to incarceration-related events (i.e., witnessing the father's criminal activity or arrest) was also not correlated with fathers' reports of writing to their child.

In the next model, fathers who reported that their children witnessed their arrest indicated that the child was less likely to write the father ($B = -0.40$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, children's letter writing was significantly and positively associated with the frequency of fathers' letter writing ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) and visit frequency ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). Demographic and family characteristics, incarceration-related characteristics, and children's exposure to incarceration-related events were not correlated with writing to the child.

Telephone Contact

In the multivariate model predicting frequency of telephone contact, fathers' race/ethnicity ($B = 0.68$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$), whether fathers planned to live with children upon

being released from jail ($B = 1.01$, $SE = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$), and the frequency of visits ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.02$) were significantly associated with fathers' reports of telephone contact. White, non-Hispanic fathers were less likely to report telephone contact with their children. Fathers who planned to live with children after release were more likely to report telephone contact, and more visits were associated with more telephone contact. Other demographic characteristics, family characteristics, incarceration-related characteristics, and children's exposure to incarceration-related events were not significantly related to telephone contact. Frequency of letter writing was not significantly associated with frequency of phone calls.

Visits

Finally, witnessing fathers' criminal activity ($B = -0.61$, $SE = 0.30$, $p = 0.04$) was associated with less frequent visits. In addition, frequency of children's letter writing ($B = 0.60$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$) and frequency of telephone contact ($B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.02$) were significantly and positively associated with fathers' reports of the frequency of visits. More frequent letters from children and more telephone contact were associated with more frequent visits. None of the demographic or family characteristics, or incarceration-related characteristics were related to visits. Children's exposure to their fathers' arrest was not related to visits.

Discussion

It is particularly important to examine parental jail incarceration in relation to the family, as jail stays are the most common form of incarceration in the United States. Jail incarcerations are also characterized by heterogeneity in length and high rates of recidivism (e.g., Lamberti 2016; Spaulding et al. 2011), which can contribute to family disruption and ambiguous loss (Arditti 2016). The current study had four main findings: (1) telephone contact was the most common modality for engaging with children during a paternal jail stay, with 22% of fathers reporting daily phone contact with children, (2) types of contact were correlated, (3) fathers from racial and ethnic minority groups and those who planned to live with their children upon release reported talking on the phone with their children more frequently than White/non-Hispanic fathers and fathers who did not plan to live with their children, and (4) children witnessing their fathers' arrest or crime was associated with less parent-child contact. We consider these findings in the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework and Arditti's (2016) FSPP model.

Types and Frequency of Contact and Children's Exposure to Incarceration-related Events

Parent-child contact during parental incarceration is an important aspect of a child's microsystem. Similar to samples of parents in prison (Glaze and Maruschak 2008), telephone contact was the most common modality for engaging with children during the paternal jail stay. Indeed, 62% of fathers reported at least weekly phone calls with children. In contrast, 35% reported writing to their children weekly, 16% reported receiving letters from their children weekly, and 25% reported weekly visits. When fathers speak to their children every day during incarceration—which 22% of fathers in our sample reported doing—they may maintain some aspects of their parental role and stay engaged as a co-parent in the day-to-day activities of their children. Such contact may lessen the stress of a traumatic separation and decrease feelings of ambiguous loss, consistent with the FSPP model (Arditti 2016). However, frequent phone calls could place a financial burden on families because of the high cost of calls from some correctional facilities. Across the four jails included in the current study, costs for each 15-min phone call ranged from \$2.70 to \$6.55 (Wagner and Jones 2019). For the 22% of fathers who reported daily phone calls with their children, families could easily spend more than \$100 per month on the cost of calls. Although the cost of phone calls does not directly impact children's development, it indirectly affects their proximal experiences and thus, it is an important exosystem factor.

Fathers in jail may use phone contact and letter writing as ways to connect with children between visits. This is consistent with our finding that telephone contact and children's letter writing were associated with frequency of visits, even after controlling for incarcerated parent and family characteristics, and children's exposure to incarceration-related events. Different types of contact may have shared benefits, such as opportunities to communicate information about children's interests. These experiences have implications for the parent-child relationship (e.g., feelings of closeness) and for the father-caregiver relationship (e.g., co-parenting). Understanding the content and quality of contact—and how contact relates to family relationships—are important areas for future inquiry.

We also found that other aspects of children's microsystem, namely children's exposure to incarceration-related events, related to children's frequency of letter writing and visits, consistent with ecological models. Children who witnessed their father's arrest were less likely to write, and children who witnessed their father's criminal activity were less likely to visit. Children who have been exposed to these traumas may be more reluctant about contact or have caregivers who seek to minimize children's contact with a

parent who exposed the child to unsafe or antisocial behavior. Caregivers often function as gatekeepers of children's contact with parents who are incarcerated, often limiting contact because of strained caregiver-incarcerated parent relationships (Tasca 2016). This gatekeeping is an important way that the child's mesosystem (parent-caregiver interactions and relationship quality) influences the child's microsystem experiences (contact frequency). When a child has witnessed potentially traumatic events, such as the parent's arrest, caregivers may have more reason to limit a child's contact with the parent who is incarcerated.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, we relied on fathers' reports of their contact with their minor children and recruited fathers who anticipated a visit from their child. Future studies would benefit from including caregivers' reports of parent-child contact and administrative logs of all incarcerated fathers' contact, not just those who anticipated receiving a visit. Second, pre-incarceration factors are associated with parent-child relationships and children's outcomes when parents are incarcerated (Murray et al. 2012). In this study, we did not assess whether or not fathers lived with their children before this incarceration. Future studies should examine fathers' residency and contact pre-incarceration, children's proximity to jails, and the quality of fathers' relationships with their children and their children's caregivers. Third, when fathers had multiple children, we asked them to identify one child and report on contact with that target child. It is likely that contact varies depending on a number of factors, including children's ages and the children's caregivers. For fathers who have children by different biological mothers, there may be considerable variation in contact across children. Understanding complex family systems and how contact may vary across families is an important area for future inquiry. Fourth, although the multi-site nature of our study is a strength, jail policies dictated recruitment at each site, which inhibited our ability to track the number of people who were eligible for our study or calculate a participation rate. Whenever possible, future studies should standardize recruitment across sites to minimize bias. Finally, our study took place at jails in the Midwest U.S. and therefore may not be generalizable to other geographic regions and with varying jail environments and policies.

Practice and Policy Implications

Our findings have implications for practice and policy. Many fathers in jail have regular contact with their minor children during the incarceration period, most commonly via telephone. This is noteworthy because the cost of phone

calls from jail or prison can be high (Wagner and Jones 2019), and daily phone contact can become a significant expense and challenge for families, especially when there are few economic resources. Although there have been attempts to lower the cost of phone calls from corrections facilities, implementation has been slow and uneven (Poehlmann-Tynan 2015). In the absence of legislation to cap the cost of phone calls, correctional facilities could offer free or reduced-cost calls between parents and their children and provide the resources (e.g., free stamps, envelopes) to promote letter-writing (Peterson et al. 2019). We also recommend that correctional facilities reconsider policies that restrict parent-child contact for disciplinary reasons (Peterson et al. 2019), as this may punish children and families as well as the individual who is incarcerated. Finally, correctional facilities could collaborate with community-organizations to coordinate and facilitate coached parent-child calls and visits (Peterson et al. 2019). In the current study, we found that types of parent-child contact were positively correlated. Parents who had more phone calls were also more likely to write and visit with their children. As such, implementing policies and practices that increase parents' frequency of one form of contact, may also increase the frequency of other types of contact, and ultimately support parent-child relationships. Contact via letters or phone calls between visits is a common recommendation for making visits more child-friendly, as then parents and their children have more shared experiences and more to discuss during visits (Poehlmann-Tynan and Pritzl 2019).

Conclusions

One important contribution of the current study was our ability to analyze each type of contact (i.e., letter writing, telephone calls, and visits) separately. Doing so allowed us to explore different predictors of each form of contact. We found that telephone contact is the most common and that types of contact were correlated. We also found that contact between incarcerated fathers and their children was lower when children experienced incarceration-related events. Specifically, children who witnessed their fathers' arrest were less likely to write and children who witnessed their fathers' criminal activity were less likely to visit. Future research should explore quality of parent-child contact, especially factors that can support child and family well-being during parental and after incarceration.

References

- Arditti, J. A. (2016). A family stress-proximal process model for understanding the effects of parental incarceration on children

- and their families. *Couple and Family Psychology*, 5(2), 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000058>.
- Arditti, J. A., Lambert-Shute, J., & Joest, K. (2003). Saturday morning at the jail: Implications of incarceration for families and children. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 195–204.
- Boswell, G. (2002). Imprisoned fathers: the children's view. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 41(1), 14–26.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronson, J., & Carson, E. A. (2019). *Prisoners in 2017*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Christian, J., Martinez, D. J., & Martinez, D. (2015). Beyond the shadows of the prison: Agency and resilience among prisoners' family members. In *And justice for all*, (pp. 1–42). Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library.
- Cramer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., & Sandstrom, H. (2017). *Parent-child visiting practices prisons and jails: a synthesis of research and practice*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Dallaire, D. H., & Wilson, L. C. (2010). The relation of exposure to parental criminal activity, arrest, and sentencing to children's maladjustment. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 19(4), 404–418. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-009-9311-9>.
- Dallaire, D., Zeman, J. L., & Thrash, T. M. (2015). Differential effects of type of children's contact with their jailed mothers and children's behavior problems. In J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Ed.), *Children's contact with incarcerated parents: implications for policy and intervention* (pp. 23–38). New York, NY: Springer.
- De Claire, K., & Dixon, L. (2017). The effects of prison visits from family members on prisoners' well-being, prison rule breaking, and recidivism: a review of research since 1991. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 18(2), 185–199.
- Eddy, J. M., Martinez, Jr., C. R., & Burraston, B. (2013). VI. A randomized controlled trial of a parent management training program for incarcerated parents: proximal impacts. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 78(3), 75–93.
- Eddy, J. M., & Burraston, B. O. (2018). Programs promoting the successful reentry of fathers from jail or prison to home in their communities. In C. Wildeman, A. R. Haskins & J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Eds), *When parents are incarcerated: interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Eddy, J. M., & Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (2019). *Handbook on children with incarcerated parents*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Enders, C. K. (2010). *Applied missing data analysis*. 1st ed. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Fomby, P., & Cherlin, A. J. (2007). Family instability and child well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 72(2), 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200203>.
- Galardi, T. R., Settersten, Jr, R. A., Vuchinich, S., & Richards, L. (2017). Associations between incarcerated fathers' cumulative childhood risk and contact with their children. *Journal of Family Issues*, 38(5), 654–676.
- Glaze, L. E., & Maruschak, L. M. (2008). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Hairston, C. F. (1998). The forgotten parent: understanding the forces that influence incarcerated fathers' relationships with their children. *Child Welfare*, 77(5), 617–639.
- La Vigne, N. G., Naser, R. L., Brooks, L. E., & Castro, J. L. (2005). Examining the effect of incarceration and in-prison family contact on prisoners' family relationships. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21(4), 314–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986205281727>.
- Lamberti, J. S. (2016). Preventing criminal recidivism through mental health and criminal justice collaboration. *Psychiatric Services*, 67(11), 1206–1212.
- Maldonado, S. (2006). Recidivism and paternal engagement. *Family Law Quarterly*, 40, 191–211.
- McClure, H. H., Shortt, J. W., Eddy, J. M., Holmes, A., Van Uum, S., Russell, E., & Martinez, C. R. (2015). Associations among mother-child contact, parenting stress, hair cortisol, and mother and child adjustment related to incarceration. In J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Ed.), *Children's contact with incarcerated parents: implications for policy and intervention (advances in child and family policy and practice)*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Minton, T. D., & Zeng, Z. (2016). *Jail inmates in 2015*. Washington, D.C.: BJS.
- Murphey, D., & Cooper, P. M. (2015). *Parents behind bars: what happens to their children?* Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.
- Murray, J., Farrington, D. P., & Sekol, I. (2012). Children's antisocial behavior, mental health, drug use, and educational performance after parental incarceration: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(2), 175.
- Peterson, B., Fontaine, J., Cramer, L., Reisman, A., Cuthrell, H., Goff, M., McCoy, E., & Reginal, T. (2019). *Model practices for parents in prisons and jails*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (Ed.). (2015). *Children's contact with incarcerated parents: Implications for policy and intervention*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J., & Arditti, J. A. (2018). Developmental and family perspectives on parental incarceration. In: C Wildeman, A. R Haskins, J Poehlmann-Tynan, (Eds), *APA Bronfenbrenner series on the ecology of human development. When parents are incarcerated: interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children*. (pp. 53–81). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000062-004>.
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J., Burnson, C., Runion, H., & Weymouth, L. A. (2017). Attachment in young children with incarcerated fathers. *Development & Psychopathology*, 29, 389–404.
- Poehlmann, J., Dallaire, D., Loper, A., & Shear, L. (2010). Children's contact with their incarcerated parents: research findings and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 65(6), 575–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020279>.
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J., & Pritzl, K. In: In J. M. Eddy, J. Poehlmann-Tynan Eds 2019). Parent-child visits when parents are incarcerated in prison or jail. *Handbook on children with incarcerated parents*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Springer International Press.
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J., Runion, H., Burnson, C., Maleck, S., Weymouth, L., Pettit, K., & Huser, M. (2015). Young children's behavioral and emotional reactions to plexiglass and video visits with jailed parents. In J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Ed.), *Children's contact with incarcerated parents: implications for policy and intervention* (pp. 39–58). New York, NY: Springer.
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J., Cuthrell, H., Weymouth, L., Burnson, C., Frerks, L., Muentner, L., Holder, N., Milavetz, Z., Lauter, L., Hindt, L., Davis, L., Schubert, E., & Shlafer, R. (2020). Multisite randomized efficacy trial of educational intervention for young children with jailed fathers. In press, *Development and Psychopathology*.
- Roy, K. M., & Dyson, O. L. (2005). Gatekeeping in context: baby-mama drama and the involvement of incarcerated fathers. *Fathering*, 3(3), 289.
- Rubenstein, B. Y., Toman, E. L., & Cochran, J. C. (2019). Socioeconomic barriers to child contact with incarcerated parents. *Justice Quarterly*, 1–27. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07418825.2019.1606270?casa_token=TVD-0fETe0kAAAAA:AeOSU7qSPyNMFzAG9JieHshXKkk6o63yNfc50zDhvuPbOKgb_Tz9usIZ-uuJxlyJ6d6fKh1oj.
- Sakala, L. (2014). *Breaking down mass incarceration in the 2010 census: state-by-state incarceration rates by race/ethnicity*. Prison Policy Initiative.
- Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: a

- systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica*, 97 (2), 153–158.
- Schafer, J. L., & Graham, J. W. (2002). Missing data: our view of the state of the art. *Psychological Methods*, 7(2), 147–177.
- Sesame Street Workshop (2013). *Tips for incarcerated parents*. New York, NY: Sesame Street.
- Shlafer, R. J., Loper, A. B., & Schillmoeller, L. (2015). Introduction and literature review: is parent-child contact during parental incarceration beneficial? In J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Ed.), *Children's contact with incarcerated parents: implications for policy and intervention*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Spaulding, A. C., Perez, S. D., Seals, R. M., Hallman, M. A., Kavasery, R., & Weiss, P. S. (2011). Diversity of release patterns for jail detainees: implications for public health interventions. *American Journal of Public Health*, 101(S1), S347–S352.
- Solomon, A., Osborne, J. W. L., LoBuglio, S. F., Mellow, J., & Mukamal, D. A. (2008). *Life after lockup: improving reentry from jail to the community*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Tasca, M. (2016). The gatekeepers of contact: child-caregiver dyads and parental prison visitation. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 43 (6), 739–758.
- Turney, K., & Conner, E. (2019). Jail incarceration: a common and consequential form of criminal justice contact. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 2, 265–290.
- Wagner, P. & Jones, A. (2019). *State of phone justice: local jails, state prisons and private phone providers*. Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/state_of_phone_justice.html.
- Wagner, P., & Rabuy, B. (2016). *Mass incarceration: the whole pie 2017*. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2017/html>. Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative.
- Walmsley, R. (2016). *World prison population list*. London, UK: International Centre for Prison Studies. http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_11th_edition_0.pdf.
- Yi, Y., Turney, K., & Wildeman, C. (2017). Mental health among jail and prison inmates. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 11(4), 900–909.