

LIFE ON THE OUTSIDE: A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF INCARCERATION AND  
FAMILY LIFE

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After nearly four decades of unabated expansion, mass incarceration in the United States has become the new normal. Contact with the criminal justice system can fundamentally reshape family relationships and resources, and policymakers and families alike are grappling with how best to manage these negative repercussions. Using mixed methods, this dissertation investigates how families' responses to the challenges of incarceration shape experiences and the wellbeing of different family members over three papers. Each paper further considers how policies can support strategies to mitigate hardship. The first chapter identifies disruptions to father engagement and family resources act as key mechanisms explaining nearly half of the increase in acting-out behavior in children with incarcerated fathers. The second chapter identifies the tradeoffs faced by women after the incarceration of their child's father, linking variation in maternal wellbeing to whether the parent's relationship continues, ends, or the mother introduces a new social father to her household. Finally, the third chapter draws from qualitative interviews to categorize three sets of strategies families use to navigate incarceration in a rural county jail. This dissertation concludes family responses to incarceration are consequential for mitigating the negative repercussions faced by different family members. Existing policies, however, may not adequately reflect the complex decisions families face as they attempt to manage the challenges inherent to the incarceration process.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Allison Dwyer Emory completed her Ph.D. in the departments of Sociology and Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University, with concentrations in social stratification and inequality, family, and incarceration. She received her B.A. in Political Science from Wellesley College, where she focused on political theory and the American political system. Before attending graduate school, she worked at the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, gaining direct experience jail reentry and justice reinvestment issues. Her research focuses broadly on identifying how families interact with the legal system, including both family and criminal courts, and experience policy interventions. Her work has touched on the fields of family demography, criminology, social stratification, and urban sociology using a wide variety of research methods.

Dedicated to my husband and family, whose endless support and interest in my research provided the motivation to pursue important questions with curiosity and compassion. I would also like to thank the families, inmates, and community of Lake County, whose tireless efforts to navigate incarceration and improve their system make apparent the need for research in addressing social problems within the family and criminal justice system.

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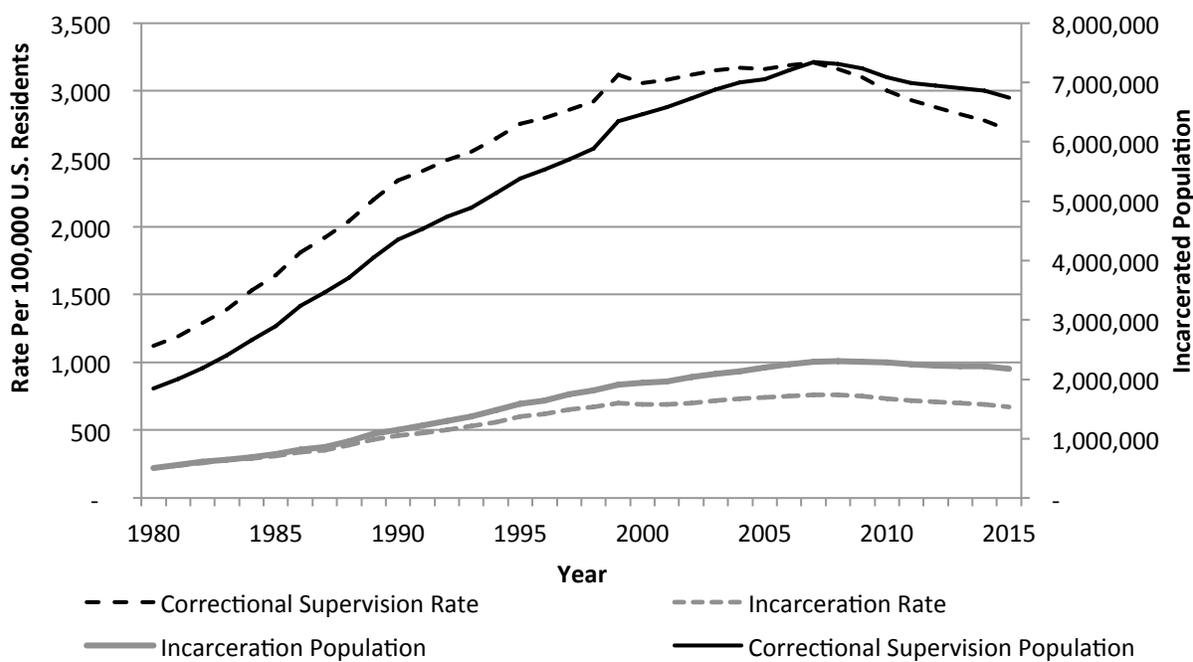
## **Introduction**

Mass incarceration has fundamentally reshaped the context of family life for millions of United States residents, especially among those with low socioeconomic status or from disadvantaged communities (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Waquant, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009). In 2015, there were approximately 1.6 million prisoners and 780,000 jail inmates, over 7 million individuals under supervision, and many million more cycling through the system annually (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). The present level of incarceration reflects over three decades of nearly unabated growth, a trend depicted in Figure 1 (Bureau of Justice Statistics). In the last decade, expansion of the incarcerated and supervised populations has plateaued at a level nearly double that observed in 1980 (Bureau of Justice Statistics). Each spell of incarceration also brings inmate's family members into contact with the criminal justice system, affecting the lives of millions of women, children, parents, siblings, and other kin (Wildeman, 2009; Lee et al., 2015). For these families, incarceration has lasting implications for relationships, resources, and wellbeing (Braman, 2004; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Turney, 2015a; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Short of a wholesale reversal of federal and state criminal justice policies, it is likely that the level of exposure to incarceration will remain high. Mass incarceration has become a new normal, and inmates, families, and policymakers must grapple with how best to manage the ensuing challenges.

Incarceration can reflect, create, and perpetuate social inequality both through the life course and across generations (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). Contact with the criminal justice system is most common among those with other socioeconomic disadvantages like low educational attainment, poverty, or racial minority status (Pettit and

Western 2004; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Waquant, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009). System involvement can also perpetuate and create inequality, however, by operating as a people processing institution that confers and enforces negative social status on processed individuals rather than primarily focusing on rehabilitation (Comfort 2008; Hasenfeld 1972; Waquant, 2010). The ramifications of this contact, however, can also reverberate through family systems. Incarceration is associated with a host of serious emotional, social, and financial collateral consequences for inmate’s families (Arditti et al. 2003; Braman, 2004; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Incarceration can also reshape family processes, affecting everything from family relationships and stability (Apel et al., 2016; Nurse, 2002; Turney, 2015a), parenting practices (Turney, 2014; Turney & Wildeman, 2013), and access support through family or community ties (Braman, 2004; Turney et al., 2012).

FIGURE 1: INCARCERATED AND SUPERVISED POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Key Statistics. “Estimated number of inmates held in local jails or under the jurisdiction of state or federal prisons and incarceration rate, 1980-2015.”

Families are typically tasked with managing criminal justice system involvement, and can play an important role in steering the process as well as mitigating negative outcomes. Within the criminology research, families have a recognized role as part of the inmate's context, potential sources of resources and support, and protective factors against recidivism (Clemmer, 1958; Naser & La Vigne, 2005; Uggen et al., 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003). Other literatures, however, capture a more diverse array of family interactions with the criminal justice system. Parents and partners may strategically use the law enforcement to manage difficult behavior or individuals (Bell, 2016; Goffman, 2014, ch. 4), and the stability of incarceration can at least temporarily support damaged relationships (Comfort, 2008; Turney, 2015b). Within the legal process, family members can interact with the criminal justice system by attending court dates (Feeley, 1992, p.164; Goffman, 2014), influencing pretrial or legal processing decisions (Blumberg 1967; Feeley, 1992; Sandefur, 2007), or providing resources like bail or housing to enable release (Braman, 2004, p. 54; Clark, 2014; Goffman, 2014, p. 95).

With some notable exceptions, research on how families manage the incarceration stage of criminal justice involvement has largely focused on the impact of incarceration rather than family responses. These exceptions, however, lay important groundwork for understanding how families can manage incarceration experiences. In her research on prisoner's partners, Megan Comfort describes how incarceration can be a "social agency of first resort" (2008, p. 168), allowing family members to access resources and stabilize inmate behavior albeit at great cost to inmates and their partners alike. Interactions with correctional facilities can shape family processes, as prison rules regulate everything from allowable behavior within the facility to the frequency and conditions of contact (Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002). Arditti and colleagues (2003) identify another way in which families manage the implications of incarceration, finding that

mothers decreased employment or left paid work during spells when their child's father was in jail, and in doing so potentially traded financial wellbeing to better manage children's needs. These studies suggest that families are responsive to incarceration, though more work is needed to understand the implications of different responses for family wellbeing.

As criminal justice system involvement continue to affect millions of U.S. families, it is increasingly important to understand how families manage the process and repercussions of incarceration. Moving incarceration research and policy in this direction requires documenting both how families respond to criminal justice system involvement and the implications of different family-level responses for family members wellbeing. This dissertation contributes to developing this body of research over three chapters, each addressing a different aspect of how families manage incarceration and its implications. Each chapter also considers how policy could help families develop responses to mitigate the repercussions of incarceration for family wellbeing and intergenerational inequality. In the first chapter, I identify changes in family relationships and resources as mechanisms underpinning observed behavioral changes in children with incarcerated fathers, affirming that family-level changes are consequential aspects of children's behavioral response to incarceration. In the second chapter, I link variation in wellbeing among mothers who experienced the incarceration of their child's father to relationship trajectories. This chapter identifies some of the tradeoffs women face when managing the implications of incarceration for both relationship instability and maternal resources. Finally, the third chapter identifies three sets of strategies families use to navigate one particular incarceration context, in this case a rural county jail.

I take a mixed methods approach, though each chapter utilizes a discrete methodology. The first two chapters use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Reichman

et al., 2001), a longitudinal birth-cohort study including both married and unmarried parents who had children in 20 large U.S. cities. This data is particularly well suited for studying the intersection of incarceration and family processes, as many study participants experience incarceration and the study contains longitudinal measures of both incarceration and a wide range of family processes and outcomes. The third chapter uses data from 41 qualitative interviews I conducted with the family members of inmates in a rural county jail over a six-month period spanning 2015 and 2016.

The first chapter uses structural equation modeling to show that the collateral consequences of incarceration families experience can mediate changes in externalizing behavior observed in school-aged children with incarcerated fathers. Having a father spend time in jail or prison is associated with increased aggressive or acting-out behavior (Haskins, 2015; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Roettger & Swisher, 2011; Wildeman, 2010), potentially placing inmate's children at greater risk for experiencing disadvantage or later criminal justice involvement (Geller et al., 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Roettger & Swisher, 2011). Identifying how a father's incarceration translates into child behavior is crucial for disrupting this cycle, yet incarceration has largely remained a "black box" with few studies providing insight into underlying mechanisms. Drawing from research on both incarceration and child behavior, three latent measures of family processes and resources are tested as mechanisms in this paper: father family engagement, material hardship, and maternal stress. This chapter contributes to unpacking the experience of incarceration by testing co-occurring changes in these family-level measures using a modeling strategy designed to test mechanisms.

Two key findings emerge from this study that demonstrate the salience of changes occurring within the family for the behavior of inmate's children. First, changes occurring within

families account for nearly half of the change in child behavior, a latent measure incorporating both mother- and child self-reports of externalizing. While the remaining half of the association was non-significant, other aspects of incarceration like stigma, interactions with criminal justice or other institutions, or ambiguous loss may further mediate the association. Second, both father disengagement from the family and increased material hardship consistently mediated the association between paternal incarceration and child behavior across model specifications. These findings suggest that targeting the financial implications of paternal incarceration and helping families navigate changing relationships may be fruitful ways to manage the negative implications of the incarceration experience for children.

The second chapter examines whether mothers' wellbeing after the incarceration of their child's father varies by whether the parents remain together, separate, or the mother separates and introduces a new social father to her household. This chapter identifies how mothers' relationship decisions, or incarceration related relationship instability beyond her control, can shape the implications of incarceration for maternal wellbeing distinct from child or paternal interests. Incarceration can strengthen, destabilize, or strain romantic relationships to the breaking point (Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Massoglia et al., 2011; Turney, 2015a). This incarceration-related family instability is typically described negatively, an interpretation rooted in criminology literature concerned with recidivism (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson et al., 2006; Visher & Travis, 2003) as well as the family instability literature (Cooper et al., 2009; Cooper et al. 2011). For incarcerated and recently released fathers, maintaining connections with family on the outside has distinct advantages for access to support, resources, and relationships with children (Braman, 2004, p. 54; Comfort, 2016; Naser & La Vigne, 2005; Nurse, 2002; Visher & Travis, 2003). Reflecting this perception, social pressure and policies often emphasize

the importance of keeping couples together except in cases of violence or abuse (Goffman, 2014, p. 74-89; Visher & Travis, 2003; Sampson et al., 2006; Uggen et al., 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). It is unclear, however, that remaining in relationships with incarcerated men is in the best interest of their partners, especially for mothers facing the collateral consequences of incarceration, damaged relationships, or the forgoing the possibility of repartnering with a higher quality social father (Braman 2004; Bzostek et al., 2012; Carlson & Berger, 2013; Turney, 2015b).

The analyses in this chapter focus on a sample of mothers who were all in relationships with their child's father and experienced their partner's incarceration, but took different relationship trajectories. This sample focuses attention on how families respond to incarceration and tradeoffs in wellbeing associated with varying responses. Comparisons are made both after the incarceration, identifying variation in how women fare after their partner's incarceration, and longitudinally to determine how wellbeing changed over the incarceration window for women whose relationships took different trajectories. Maternal wellbeing is considered over three constructs identified in both the family instability and incarceration literatures: resources, relationship quality, and parenting support.

Three key findings emerge, demonstrating that the tradeoffs faced by mothers after the incarceration of their child's father are more complicated than reflected by current policies emphasizing reunification. First, most relationships end (67%), and mothers typically become single mothers (48%) rather than repartnering quickly (19%). Second, with important nuances, women whose relationships continued fared better after the incarceration than those whose relationships ended. These advantages, however, largely reflect pre-incarceration stability and relatively little change, some negative, occurring over the incarceration window. Third, ending a

relationship was associated with more change over the incarceration window, especially for women who repartnered. In some measures, especially relationship supportiveness and parent engagement, these changes were for the better; yet, these families also reported the highest prevalence of domestic violence and the lowest level of cooperation with the recently incarcerated father. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the interests of family members may not always align after incarceration, and that families face important tradeoffs in managing the implications of incarceration. Importantly, policies aimed at keeping families together may fail to support the majority of families who separate or oversimplify a complex landscape of decisions.

The third chapter further unpacks the experience of incarceration by focusing on pretrial and short spells of jail incarceration, shedding light on how families manage the earliest phase of the incarceration process and its implications for both inmates and their families. Within jails, families may interact with the inmate, service providers, the correctional facility itself, and lawyers or court actors. Family involvement is well documented throughout the legal system, from arrest and pretrial processing (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992; Goffman 2014) through spells of incarceration in state or federal prisons (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002). This involvement can be focused on strategically using the legal system to manage behavior (Bell, 2016; Goffman 2014), managing the process in the legal phase of criminal justice system involvement (Blumberg, 1967; Felstiner et al., 1980; Feeley, 1992), or managing the collateral consequences during in prison incarceration (Arditti et al., 2003; Comfort, 2008). How families navigate the complexities of incarceration in county jails remains unclear, particularly in the growing proportion of small or rural jails (Minton & Zeng, 2016; Weisheit et al., 2005). Through 41 interviews, stratified by the pretrial status of the inmate, this project examines how families

interact with the jail, and how the jail shapes daily life for a broad group of parents, partners, and siblings.

The strategies families use to navigate incarceration in this context underscore both the importance of family involvement in jails as well as the liminal place of jails between incarceration, legal processing, and the precipitating family context. Families developed three approaches to respond to perceived family needs and opportunities within the legal system. The *correctional constraint* approach centered on strategies developed to manage the collateral consequences of the incarceration and care for the inmate within the constraints of jail regulations. The *legal processing* approach focused on navigating interactions with lawyers and courts on the inmate's behalf, and families compensate for the inmates' confinement by acting as primary negotiators or legal strategists. Finally, the *jail engagement* approach incorporated the jail into the family member's strategy to address inmate needs, actively communicating and negotiating with jail staff to coordinate appropriate treatment or services. These different strategies to address inmates' legal, personal, and incarceration related needs demonstrate that family members can see jails as both an important resource as well as a source of constraint and hardship. Furthermore, the variation in these approaches affirms that families take different approaches toward managing the process of incarceration in response to family needs. Families managing incarceration may need different types of support to do so successfully, and may not necessarily prioritize a swift release over other goals like access to rehabilitation or preferable legal resolutions. Inmate's family members can also be an important resource for both inmates and the criminal justice system, acting as key organizers and service coordinators to manage needs in regions where necessary services are scarce or inaccessible.

My dissertation makes two contributions to developing research on how families manage

incarceration and its implications. First, each chapter examines a different aspect of how family responses or family-level disruptions associated with incarceration contribute to the wellbeing of different family members. Findings presented in each chapter underscore that responses take a wide range of forms, including mitigating the collateral consequences of incarceration for families, making strategic relationship decisions, or incorporating incarceration as a strategy to manage family processes or address member needs. Second, I identify how policy approaches or strategies may help families best manage the incarceration process to mitigate both collateral consequences and implications for social inequality. Policies aimed at supporting families must recognize the complexity of the incarceration experience, diversity in both the form of incarceration and the implications for families, and the tradeoffs families face when an incarceration occurs. Future research should focus on developing the body of research documenting how families can best navigate the period of intense uncertainty and resource change associated with incarceration.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Explaining the Consequences of Paternal Incarceration for Children's Behavioral Problems**

Paternal incarceration has consistently been linked with aggression and acting-out in children, yet mechanisms underlying these behavioral problems remain unclear. Identifying these paths is essential for understanding how incarceration contributes to intergenerational disadvantage and determining how best to mitigate these collateral consequences for children. This article tests the extent to which changes incarceration imposes on children's families after incarceration fill this important gap. Two key findings emerge from structural equation models using the longitudinal Fragile Families study. First, changes occurring within the child's family account for nearly half of the total association between recent paternal incarceration and aggressive or externalizing behavior. Second, the father's disengagement from the family and increased material hardship are the strongest and most consistent mechanisms. These findings suggest that targeting these two co-occurring hardships that families face when an incarceration occurs may be valuable for addressing child behavior.

## **Introduction**

A large proportion of U.S. children experience their father's incarceration with profound implications for their future. An estimated 1.5 million children had a father in prison in 2007 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), though the cumulative risk of experiencing paternal incarceration is as high as one in four for black children (Wildeman, 2009). For children across a range of ages, having a father spend time in jail or prison is associated with more aggressive or acting-out behavior (Haskins, 2015; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Roettger & Swisher, 2011; Wildeman, 2010). Due in part to these repercussions, incarceration has emerged as an important contributor to the transmission of disadvantage across generations (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011). Identifying how a father's incarceration translates into child behavior is crucial for disrupting this cycle, yet relatively little is known about the underlying mechanisms.

Paternal incarceration is simultaneously associated with a host of changes for children and their families, some of which may help to explain children's behavioral reactions. Most directly, incarceration separates fathers from their children. In contrast to other forms of father absence, paternal incarceration may be particularly ambiguous and stressful for children given the stigma surrounding incarceration (Geller et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2010). This separation can only partially explain aggressive, delinquent, or externalizing behavior (Geller et al. 2012; Murray & Farrington 2005), however. Incarceration is associated with a host of other changes in children's families including disrupted relationships, resources, and stress that can indirectly link incarceration to behavior (Turney et al., 2012; Turney, 2015; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011).

Qualitative research on families' experiences of incarceration has documented that the hardships of strained family relationships, reduced material resources, and personal stress are often co-occurring (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). With some exceptions, however, these

challenges families face have been modeled as isolated outcomes unrelated to one another or to child behavior in quantitative studies. The few studies that have engaged both family context and behavior found that family engagement, father involvement, or parent stress may individually mediate the relationship between paternal incarceration and at least some forms of adolescent delinquency (Murray et al., 2012; Porter & King, 2015). Even these studies, however, only consider a single mediating variable at a time. While much is known about the implications of paternal incarceration for families and child behavior, studying each hardship and behavioral outcome in isolation has left a gap in our understanding of how the co-occurring challenges families face after an incarceration matter collectively for child behavior.

This article addresses the lingering question of why a father's incarceration is associated with acting-out in children living with their biological mothers. Using structural equation modeling (SEM) and the longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this article makes two contributions toward identifying these mechanisms: testing proposed mechanisms of changes in family relationships, financial wellbeing, and maternal stress, and importantly testing them together to reflect the co-occurring nature of these changes. Two key findings emerge that clarify the mechanisms underlying the link between paternal incarceration and externalizing or delinquent behavior in nine-year-olds. First, changes in the fathers' engagement with the family, material hardship, and maternal parenting stress account for half the relationship between incarceration and behavioral problems. The remaining association is no longer statistically significant after accounting for these family level changes. Second, these family-level mechanisms are not equally consequential or robust when modeled together; decreased father family engagement and increased material hardship following the fathers' incarceration accounted for the largest share of children's behavioral problems and did so even after

controlling for both selection and other theoretically motivated mechanisms. These findings are an important step toward understanding and ultimately targeting the underlying components of the incarceration experience most harmful for children.

### **Background**

Paternal incarceration has been consistently associated with higher levels of aggressive, delinquent, or antisocial behavior across a range of rigorous studies. A father's recent incarceration is associated with higher levels of aggression in preschoolers (Geller et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2010) and externalizing and delinquent behavior in both school age children (Geller, 2010; Haskins, 2015) and young adults (Murray et al., 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Porter & King, 2015; Roettger & Swisher, 2011; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). This association is consistently stronger for sons, with daughters only showing smaller or statistically non-significant behavior changes (Geller et al. 2012; Haskins 2015; Wildeman, 2009, 2010). The theory of same-sex role models suggests sons may be more sensitive to the influence of their fathers and thereby more affected by paternal incarceration (Foster & Hagan, 2013), and that acting-out behavior among sons may be particularly consequential for intergenerational criminal justice involvement (Roettger & Swisher, 2011).

Concerns over the appropriate comparison group and methodology to isolate the effects of incarceration from selection factors have prompted debate over the implications for child behavior (Johnson & Easterling, 2012, 2013; Wildeman et al., 2013). There is good reason for this focus, as the men who experience incarceration also experience other risk factors that may also account for behavior problems in children. Incarceration disproportionately affects young minority men from disadvantaged backgrounds (Pettit & Western 2004; Western & Wildeman 2009). Many of these men also have histories of anti-social or impulsive behavior or mental

health problems (Braman, 2004; Hagan & Dinovitzer 1999; Pettit & Western 2004) The association between incarceration and children's aggressive or externalizing behavior is robust to modeling strategies including regression adjustments, propensity score matching, fixed effects, and placebo models (see Wildeman et al. 2013 for a review of methodology). In studies varying the comparison group, children whose fathers are incarcerated exhibit more aggressive or delinquent behavior than those whose parents are convicted but not incarcerated (Murray et al. 2012), are incarcerated later (Porter & King 2015), or are absent for reasons like parent separation, hospitalization, or death (Geller et al., 2012; Murray & Farrington 2005). The robustness of the association regardless of the model specification implies that there are mechanisms beyond selection at play.

#### *Links Between Family and Behavior*

Identifying the relevant mechanisms linking incarceration and behavior is an important step for both focusing future research and developing policies to address the issue. Researchers have drawn on trauma theory, parental modeling, and family-level risk factors like instability to frame the question. Most theories proposed to link incarceration to behavior emphasize changes in the child's relationship with their parent, resources within the family, caregiver stress, parents' ability to monitor the child, or increased scrutiny from institutions external to the family (see Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray et al., 2012). Combining this theoretical foundation with the large body of research documenting the collateral consequences of incarceration for families suggests family-level changes to be a potentially fruitful place to search for mechanisms.

Children are embedded in families, and their families face co-occurring challenges when an incarceration transpires. Two complementary approaches have been taken to examine the

implications of incarceration for these families. First, qualitative researchers have provided detailed description documenting the multifaceted challenges faced by families when a father or partner is incarcerated (see Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). The nature of this research, however, limits the ability to draw population-level estimates of the hardships faced by families or measure their relevance for children. Second, quantitative researchers have used representative data to model the extent to which incarceration affects specific aspects of family life like father involvement or instrumental support. These studies have largely modeled outcomes in isolation from one another and focused more on isolating effects than mechanisms. Three consistent changes within the family have emerged from these complementary approaches: father disengagement from the family, material hardship, and caregiver stress. Furthermore, each of these three changes is also a stressor found to contribute to behavior problems in children in non-incarceration samples.

In one of the few studies that explicitly incorporated family process measures as mediators, Porter and King (2015) found that father attachment mediates the relationship between paternal incarceration and delinquent behavior in adolescents. Incarceration, however, is associated with a broader array of changes in father engagement with their families on the outside. Incarceration can impose direct strains on family relationships through physical separation, the cost of maintaining contact through calls or visits, and the stress faced by the family members on the outside (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). During incarceration, children may not have contact with their father based on their age, the location and regulations of their father's facility, the state of their parent's relationship, and family resources (Braman, 2004; Nurse, 2002). Even after release, fathers with incarceration histories have more limited, sporadic, and lower quality interactions with their children (Geller, 2013; Swisher & Waller, 2008), though

these changes may be particularly acute for coresident fathers (Geller, 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2013).

Father engagement is also tied to the quality and form of the father's relationship with his child's mother. Parents who sustain a romantic relationship through the period of incarceration report lower quality relationships (Turney, 2015), and declines in father involvement may be particularly acute for these couples (Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Romantic relationships with incarcerated men are particularly prone to dissolution (Edin, 2000; Western et al., 2004), in part due to the physical separation incarceration imposes on families (Massoglia et al., 2011). The disengagement of the father can be particularly acute if the mother has a new romantic partner (Nurse, 2002). Within the broader family literature, child behavior problems have been strongly linked to family experiences characteristic of paternal incarceration including father absence (McLanahan et al., 2013), high conflict relationships between parents (Goldberg & Carlson 2014), and instability (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Fomby & Osborne, 2010).

Second, exposure to material hardship is similarly associated with externalizing behavior in children (Zilanawala & Pilkauskas, 2012; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997), and incarceration imposes both direct and indirect financial costs on families. Families are typically responsible for absorbing the costs of court fees, telephone calls, visitation, and necessities for the incarcerated individual while also coping with a loss of the father's income or contributions to the support of the child (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Geller et al., 2011). Following release, men with a history of incarceration face long-term disadvantages in employment (Pager, 2003; Pettit & Western, 2004), and may be more of a drain than a boon to family resources (Edin et al., 2004). The financial strain of incarceration may make families less able to securely provide basic needs like food, comfortable housing, and utilities (Braman, 2004; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). One

manifestation of this hardship is increased housing insecurity, which can exacerbate the family's situation by making the employment of remaining adults precarious, disrupting existing support systems, and potentially exposing children to poor living conditions (Comfort 2008; Geller & Walker Franklin, 2014). Families may also have more limited ability to reach out to friends and family for help meeting basic needs, which may place these families in a particularly vulnerable position (Braman, 2004; Turney et al., 2012). Limited instrumental support from friends and family is directly linked to child behavior problems beyond families with incarcerated fathers (Ryan et al., 2009).

Finally, a father's incarceration can exacerbate caregiver stress, a change that Murray and colleagues (2012) found to be a potential mediator of delinquency in adolescents. Incarceration is associated with mental health problems like anxiety, stress, and depression for the non-incarcerated parent (Wildeman et al., 2012). This strain experienced may be detrimental to the caregiver's ability to parent effectively (Turney 2014) or manage resources effectively (Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). These reduced capacities may influence how well the child copes with the package of hardships associated with incarceration, and may mediate the relationship between incarceration and child behavior (Murray et al., 2012). Moreover, poor maternal mental health is a predictor of externalizing behavior in children who have not experienced incarceration (see Turney, 2012), strengthening the theoretical path through this mechanism.

The links between incarceration, family-level changes, and child behavior suggest that these paths may be relevant mechanisms. This theoretical pathway is supported by a small number of studies that have found some family-level variables to reduce the magnitude of the relationship between incarceration and behavior in adolescents (Porter & King, 2015; Murray et

al., 2012). These studies, however, do not reflect the co-occurring nature of these changes and cannot adjudicate between the relevance of different mechanisms linking family experiences of incarceration to child behavior. This article uses data from the longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study and structural equation models to test the extent to which the changes incarceration imposes on families mediate the relationship between paternal incarceration and behavior problems in children. This analysis accounts for the co-occurring nature of hardships faced by many families by modeling changes in father engagement, material hardship, and caregiver stress simultaneously.

### **Methods**

This article uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a birth cohort study of unmarried parents in large urban areas with a comparable sample of married parents. The majority of respondents are socioeconomic disadvantaged and from racial minorities (Reichman et al., 2001), the same population most likely to experience paternal incarceration (Wildeman, 2009). Core surveys were conducted with both parents at the birth of the focal child, and follow up interviews occurred when children were approximately 1, 3, and 9 years old. The response rate for the Year 9 survey was 70%, though this wave provides two key advantages over previous waves. First, at Year 9 children were also interviewed. The ability to use both mother- and child-reports reduces the risk of reporting bias resulting from the mothers' reaction to the father's incarceration. Second, behavior in nine-year-olds is potentially more consequential. School-aged children should have more personal control and are more likely to face repercussions for their behavior than toddlers.

The analytic sample includes children from the Year 9 survey for whom information on paternal incarceration and the key outcome variables are available, who primarily live with their

mothers, and whose mothers do not have a history of incarceration. Of the full sample, 163 were dropped due to having a non-maternal primary care giver. This population is necessarily excluded from the analysis since measures family wellbeing are drawn from both the primary care giver and mother surveys and only meaningful measures capture the child's family wellbeing if the mother is the primary caregiver. Maternal incarceration and the incarceration of both parents may expose children to a different set of risk factors than paternal incarceration (Foster & Hagan, 2013; Zhang & Dwyer Emory, 2015), and these 33 observations are dropped in the interest of isolating paternal incarceration. The small sample size experiencing either maternal incarceration or non-maternal care precludes modeling this population separately to identify points of divergence. Finally, 90 observations were dropped due to missing values on the key dependent variable. The analytic sample is 2936 children. Previous research and existing theory suggest that sons may be particularly vulnerable to their father's incarceration. To test whether mechanisms are similarly gendered, the models are run separately on the subsample of families in which the focal child is a boy. The sample of sons is 1,554 for these models, approximately 52% of the analytic sample. Models were fit using full information maximum likelihood estimation with missing values. This method uses information on all variables in the sample, and assumes that missing values on specific variables are either random or a function of observed variables.

The degree to which the family-level implications of incarceration mediate the association between paternal incarceration and child behavior is tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM provides two key advantages. First, SEM is able to create latent variables that incorporate of multiple variables measuring a single construct that would otherwise be too highly correlated to include simultaneously. Latent variables within SEM are similar to variables

constructed from loadings in a factor analysis. This allows for more multifaceted measures of underlying constructs that more closely reflect the theoretical motivation for inclusion. Second, SEM lends itself to a straightforward interpretation of mediation through simple calculations of direct and indirect paths. The association between incarceration and behavior is represented as both a direct (or unmediated) relationship and a set of indirect relationships through father engagement, material hardship, and caregiver stress. In the SEM context, the terms “total effect”, “direct effect”, and “indirect effect” are used to refer to these different paths and do claim a causal interpretation.

Control variables adjusting for selection into incarceration and child aggression levels at the start of the incarceration window are included on each of the structural paths. The structural paths modeling father engagement, economic hardship, and parenting stress also include measures of each construct at Year 3 to adjust for pre-existing levels of hardship and model change between waves.

Goodness-of-fit is determined using three strategies, though the large sample size and number of variables included complicates the interpretation. The chi-squared value is the main fit standard for SEM, testing the difference between a saturated model with all paths and the fitted model. A good fit is indicated by a chi-squared value that is not significant, though with a sample size above 400 this measure of fit is nearly always non-significant (Bentler & Bonnett, 1980). The comparative fit index (CFI), ranging from 0 to 1, measures how well the fitted model compares to a baseline model that assumes no relationships among the variables. CFI values should fall at or above .90 for a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), though this index pays a penalty for each parameter estimated, declining with the inclusion of more variables, and is also sensitive to large sample size (Kenny & McCoach 2003; Chau & Hocevar, 1995). The final and most

reliable goodness-of-fit measure given the sample size and number of variables included in this article is the RMSEA, a measure of how closely the model fits the data based on the ratio of the chi square to the degrees of freedom (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Browne & Cudeck, 1993). This measure should fall at or below .08 for a reasonable fit, with the threshold of .05 for a good fit (MacCallum et al., 1996).

### *Sensitivity Analyses*

Two sensitivity analyses are included varying the timing of incarceration. In a strategy similar to that of Geller (2011), models are rerun using different specifications of the incarceration variable to test variation in treatment. First, currently incarcerated fathers are removed from the sample, limiting it to recent incarceration only. This analysis focuses on the challenges families continue to face after release, distinct from the immediate implications of incarceration and physical separation. Second, the treatment of incarceration is limited to fathers whose first ever incarceration occurred after Year 3. This specification both ensures that all controls predate the incarceration and highlights families' first experience of incarceration. Each sensitivity model includes the same set of control, mediating, Year 3 variables, and specifications as the full SEM model.

### **Measures**

The dependent variable is behavior in nine-year-olds. Child behavior is measured as a latent variable comprised of standardized measures of mother-reported externalizing behavior, child self-reported externalizing behavior, and child self-reported delinquent behavior. Higher scores indicate a worse outcome (i.e. more of the acting-out behavior), which reflects the direction of the underlying items. Findings robust to modeling each measure separately, but underlying theory and the measurement model supports using a latent measure. Mother reported

externalizing is a scale measure ( $\alpha=.67$ ) based on Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist as modified by the Fragile Families Study (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Behaviors measured include rule breaking, not feeling guilty after misbehaving, drinking alcohol without approval, tantrums, physical aggression, and cruelty to others. Child externalizing is a scale based on the Self-Description Questionnaire (Marsh, 1990). Children are asked how true it is that they get in trouble for fighting, get in trouble for disturbing others, have difficulty finishing schoolwork, have difficulty paying attention, are easily distracted, or argue with other kids ( $\alpha=.76$ ). Finally, child delinquent behavior is a scale ( $\alpha=.70$ ) modeled after the Things That You Have Done scale (Maumary-Gremaud, 2000), and includes 17 questions about whether the child has done things like steal, fight, use drugs or alcohol, cheat, or damage property. This delinquency scale is an alternative measure of acting-out behavior, and should not be interpreted as contact with the legal system.

### *Incarceration*

Recent paternal incarceration is the key independent variable. This article uses a combined measure of whether either parent reported the father to be incarcerated at the time of the survey or between waves to mitigate underreporting (Geller et al., 2012). Fathers are considered to have been recently incarcerated if either parent reported an incarceration after the Year 3 survey, including both between survey waves or at Year 5 or 9. Those incarcerated at Year 3 are included if a later incarceration was also reported.

### *Mediating Variables*

Each mechanism is measured at both the Year 9 and Year 3 surveys and is based on mother reports. Both fathers' family engagement and hardship are latent variables, while

preliminary analyses found that maternal parenting stress was best modeled as an observed variable. Specifications of the latent measurement models are available upon request.

Five measures comprise the latent measure of the father's family engagement: how many days the father saw the child in the last month, the father involvement scale ( $\alpha=0.92$ ), the cooperative parenting scale ( $\alpha=.96$ ), parent relationship quality, and maternal repartnering. These measures were selected to measure the construct of father disengagement identified in the existing literature on incarceration: direct declines in father involvement with the child or indirect disengagement through a more strained relationship with the child's mother particularly exacerbated by repartnering. Father involvement measures how often in the past month ( $0=not\ once, 4=every\ day$ ) the father and child did the following 10 activities together: household chores, sports or outdoor activities, watch TV or videos, play video or computer games, read or talk about books, do crafts or games, talk about current events, talk about the child's day, and check on or help with homework. Cooperative parenting, on the other hand, measures how well the child's parents work together by determining the extent to which the mother trusts, respects, and collaborates with the father on matters regarding their child. The parents' reported relationship quality ranges from 1 (*excellent*) to 5 (*poor*). The father involvement, relationship quality, and cooperative parenting scales were comparably measured at Year 3 using age-appropriate items, and these two scales are included in the model to adjust for father engagement before the father's incarceration.

The latent measure of material hardship includes 11 items measuring material hardship, housing instability, and perceived instrumental support. These three measures of economic wellbeing reflect the key material hardships documented in both qualitative and quantitative studies of incarceration. Mothers reported whether the family experienced the following

circumstances in the previous year: received free food, went hungry, did not pay the full rent or mortgage, were evicted for nonpayment, did not pay the full utility bill, had utilities cut off, borrowed money to pay bills, moved in with others because of finances, or stayed at a shelter or place not meant for housing. These items of the material hardship scale are included as separate components to create the latent measure of hardship in SEM. As an additional measure of housing insecurity, the mother reported how many residential moves were made per year. In conjunction with the measures of eviction or nonpayment of rent or mortgage, mothers who move more than once per year have been considered housing insecure in prior literature (see Geller & Walker Franklin, 2014; Geller & Curtis, 2011). Finally, perceived access to instrumental support is a scale ( $\alpha=.81$ ) ranging from 0 (*no support*) to 1 (*maximum support*) in which mothers reported whether they had someone who could provide a loan of \$200 or \$1000, a place to live, emergency childcare, pay for the cost of the child's activities, or cosign a \$1000 or \$5000 bank loan. The instrumental support scale, times moved, and economic hardship scales were comparably measured at Year 3 and are included in the model to adjust for pre-existing economic hardship.

Caregiver stress is operationalized using the parenting aggravation scale ( $\alpha=.66$ ) (Abidin, 1995). The scale ranges from 1 (*least stress*) to 4 (*most stress*), and includes whether the mother is feeling trapped by parenting responsibilities, finds childcare more work than pleasure, finds taking care of the child is harder than she thought it would be, and is feeling worn out by raising a family. The maternal parenting stress scale was also measured at Year 3 and is included to adjust for underlying stress.

TABLE 1.1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF ANALYTIC SAMPLE

| Variables   | Comparison Sample | Recently Incarcerated | N    | SD    |
|---|-------------------|-----------------------|------|-------|
| N   | 2212              | 724                   | 2936 |       |
| Child is boy  | .51               | .55                   | 2936 | .50   |
| <b>Behavioral Outcomes</b>                          |                   |                       |      |       |
| Mother Reported Externalizing Scale ( $\alpha$ .67) | -0.05             | 0.15***               | 2936 | 0.62  |
| Child Reported Externalizing Scale ( $\alpha$ .76)  | -0.05             | 0.15***               | 2936 | 0.68  |
| Child Reported Delinquency Scale ( $\alpha$ .72)    | -0.03             | 0.08***               | 2936 | 0.43  |
| <b>Family Wellbeing (Year 9)</b>                    |                   |                       |      |       |
| Cooperative Parenting Scale <sup>a</sup>            | 2.15              | 1.28***               | 2812 | 1.16  |
| Poor Relationship Quality <sup>d</sup>              | 2.89              | 3.88***               | 2815 | 1.46  |
| Father Involvement Scale <sup>a</sup>               | 1.39              | 0.52***               | 2844 | 1.14  |
| Contact (Days)                                      | 18.10             | 6.49***               | 2885 | 13.88 |
| Repartnering (%)                                    | 27.98             | 49.03***              | 2929 | .47   |
| Maternal parenting stress <sup>a</sup>              | 1.99              | 2.13***               | 2936 | 0.68  |
| Moves Per Year                                      | 0.24              | 0.36***               | 2931 | .31   |
| Instrumental Support <sup>b</sup>                   | 0.74              | 0.65***               | 2933 | 0.29  |
| Received Free Food or Meals                         | .09               | .17***                | 2932 | .31   |
| Went Hungry   | .05               | .11***                | 2933 | .25   |
| Not Pay Full Rent/Mortgage                          | .16               | .25***                | 2931 | .39   |
| Evicted for Nonpayment                              | .02               | .04**                 | 2932 | .16   |
| Not Pay Full Utilities Bill                         | .28               | .40***                | 2932 | .46   |
| Utilities Turned Off for Nonpayment                 | .09               | .15***                | 2933 | .31   |
| Borrow Money for Bills                              | .27               | .41***                | 2933 | .46   |
| Move in with Others for Finances                    | .06               | .14***                | 2934 | .27   |
| Temporary Homelessness                              | .01               | .03***                | 2934 | .11   |
| <b>Selection Variables (Year 3)</b>                 |                   |                       |      |       |
| Child Aggression <sup>d</sup>                       | -.04              | .11***                | 2049 | .74   |
| Paternal Age  | 37.80             | 33.98***              | 2672 | 7.09  |
| Parents Romantically Involved (%)                   | 63.97             | 38.95***              | 2741 | .49   |
| History of domestic violence (%)                    | 11.15             | 24.79***              | 2928 | .35   |
| Prior Incarceration (%)                             | 31.69             | 60.61***              | 2933 | .49   |
| History of Substance Use (%)                        | 12.53             | 28.61***              | 2923 | .37   |
| Father Impulsivity Scale (Year 5) <sup>a</sup>      | 1.95              | 2.86***               | 2601 | 1.02  |
| <b>Paternal Education (%)</b>                       |                   |                       |      |       |
| • Less than HS                                      | 24.18             | 38.96***              | 816  |       |
| • HS or equivalent                                  | 32.91             | 40.05***              | 1019 |       |
| • Some College                                      | 27.17             | 17.17***              | 740  |       |
| • College or More                                   | 12.48             | 0.07***               | 281  |       |
| <b>Couple Race (%)</b>                              |                   |                       |      |       |
| • White   | 18.17             | 7.90***               | 459  |       |
| • Black   | 41.37             | 61.72***              | 1361 |       |
| • Hispanic  | 23.69             | 14.44***              | 630  |       |
| • Mixed/Other                                       | 16.77             | 15.94                 | 486  |       |

<sup>a</sup> Range 1 to 4 <sup>b</sup> Range 0 to 1 <sup>c</sup> Range 0 to 4 <sup>d</sup> Standardized Scale with mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1  
 \* p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001 Significance of difference to reference group determined using linear regression, logistic regression, or multinomial regression of incarceration on the descriptive variable based on the nature of the descriptive variable.

### *Selection Variables*

Variables adjusting for selection into incarceration are included on each structural path of the model. Direct measures at Year 3 of the father's age, fathers' education, couple race, whether the father had ever been incarcerated before, and whether the parents were romantically involved are included. Models also adjust for whether the mother reported the father having been physically abusive toward her or having a substance use problem at the Year 3 survey. To adjust for prior child behavior, mother reported child aggression at Year 3 is also included as a control. Mother reports of father impulsivity ( $\alpha = .84$ ) are asked in the Year 5 survey as a measure of the father's general stability. This list of variables is concise, which is necessary given the sensitivity of SEM to the number of parameters estimated, but accounts for the most salient and consistently identified selection factors (e.g. Haskins, 2014; Turney et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2010). Findings were robust to the inclusion of a wider array of controls, though these variables were ultimately excluded in the interest of parsimony and model fit.

### **Findings**

Children whose fathers were recently incarcerated exhibit observable disadvantage with respect to child behavior, mother stress, father family engagement, and material hardship as presented in Table 1.1. Children who recently experienced paternal incarceration report about 20% of a standard deviation more externalizing behavior and 10% of a standard deviation more delinquent behavior at Year 9. Mother-reported externalizing, child-reported externalizing, and child-reported delinquent behavior load significantly into a single latent measure of child behavior, where higher values indicate worse behavioral outcomes. The CFI and RMSEA indices for the latent measurement models indicate good fit (specifications available on request).

On average, children with recently incarcerated fathers have less cooperative parents with poorer relationships, less engaged and present fathers, and are more likely to have a step or social father. These five measures of the father's role in the family load significantly and relatively equally into a latent measure termed family engagement in this article. Higher values on this measure indicate that the father is more engaged with the child's family as indicated both direct involvement and a relationship with the child's mother more conducive to involvement. The CFI and RMSEA indices for the latent measurement model indicate a good fit allowing the error terms for contact and repartnering as well as for cooperative parenting and relationship quality to covary.

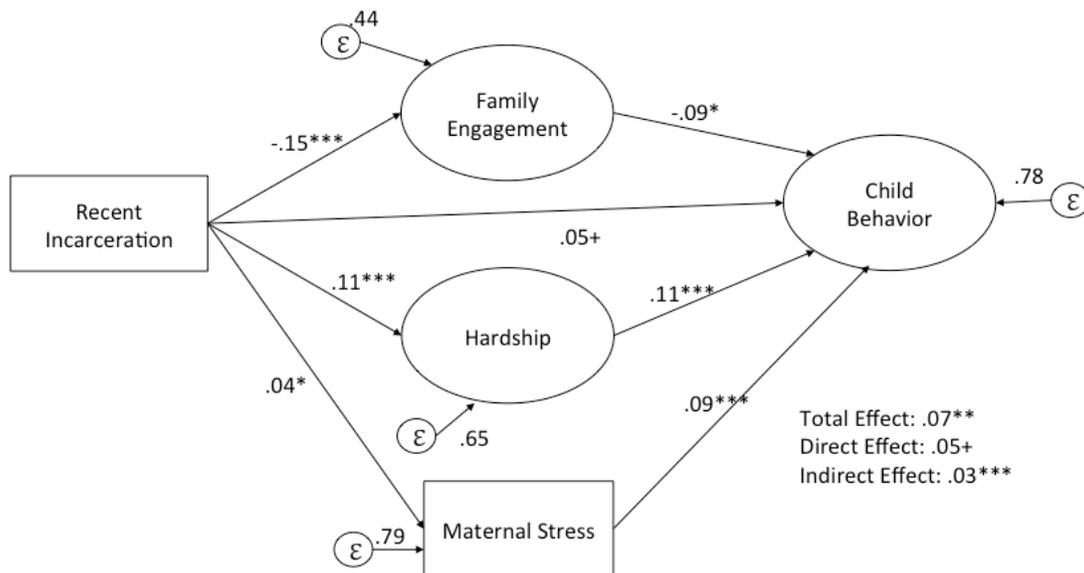
Mothers of children with recently incarcerated fathers also report higher levels of material hardship. A larger proportion reported trouble paying for necessities like food and utilities, as well as problems with housing insecurity. Despite these hardships, these mothers reported significantly less perceived instrumental support, but were also more likely to report borrowing money or moving in with others to make ends meet. These measures of material and instrumental hardship significantly contribute to the latent measure of hardship, and the CFI and RMSEA indices indicate a good model fit. Measures of material distress load positively onto the latent variable while instrumental support loads negatively, indicating that higher values of the latent variable signal more material hardship. The error terms are allowed to co-vary among measures of housing instability and among measures of support provided by family and friends.

#### *Structural Equation Models of Child Behavior*

The SEM of child behavior is shown in Figure 1.1, and the standardized coefficients are reported in Table 1.2. In a model not shown, the unmediated association between recent incarceration and the latent measure of behavior was estimated to be .20 ( $p < .001$ ), though the

total effect of incarceration declines to .07( $p<.01$ ) after adjusting for prior aggression and selection variables. The SEM in Figure 1.1 demonstrates that just over half of this association, .05 ( $p=.08$ ), is a direct or unmediated effect and is only marginally significant. The indirect paths linking paternal incarceration to child behavior are significant (.03,  $p<.001$ ), however, indicating that the association between acting-out behavior and paternal incarceration is mediated by changes in family processes.

FIGURE 1.1: STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL OF PATERNAL INCARCERATION’S ASSOCIATION WITH CHILD BEHAVIOR (STANDARDIZED SOLUTION)



+  $p<.1$  \*  $p<.05$  \*\* $p<.01$  \*\*\* $p<.001$

Model controls for prior incarceration, father education level, father race, father impulsivity, father prior drug use, father age, prior aggression, parent relationship at Year 3, and whether the father was ever abusive toward the mother. Paths from incarceration to the mediating variable control for that variable measured at Year 3. Measurement components of latent variables not shown.

Indirect paths include two components: the association between recent paternal incarceration and the mediating variable after adjusting for controls, and the association between the mediating variable and child behavior after making the same adjustments. The magnitude and significance of these paths indicates the salience of the indirect path for understanding behavioral

problems after paternal incarceration.

The indirect path through maternal parenting stress accounts for only 3% of the total effect and 6% of the indirect effect. This path is by far the weakest of the mediators tested in this model and is only marginally significant at the .07 level. While there is a significant and positive association between caregiver stress and child behavior, the association between recent incarceration and changes in maternal stress is small after adjusting for both child aggression and maternal stress at Year 3.

Both hardship and father family engagement constitute robust mediating paths. The indirect path through hardship accounts for 14% of the total effect of recent incarceration and nearly half the indirect effect. Recent paternal incarceration is associated with 11% of a standard deviation more material hardship in families after taking hardship at year three into account. This hardship, in turn, plays a relatively large role in explaining variation in child behavior (.12,  $p < .001$ ). Father family engagement accounts for another 14% of the total effect of paternal incarceration on behavior and just under half of the indirect effect. Paternal incarceration is associated with decreased family engagement by .15 standard deviations ( $p < .001$ ), which is magnified by the negative association of this latent variable with child behavior problems (-.09,  $p < .05$ ).

As expected given the large sample size, the SEM does not meet the chi-squared goodness-of-fit standard but is within the parameters of both the CFI and RMSEA thresholds for acceptable model fit. The RMSEA (.04) indicates a close fit to the data at a level that would reject model misspecification (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The CFI (.87) falls just shy of the threshold for good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), though this measure is also

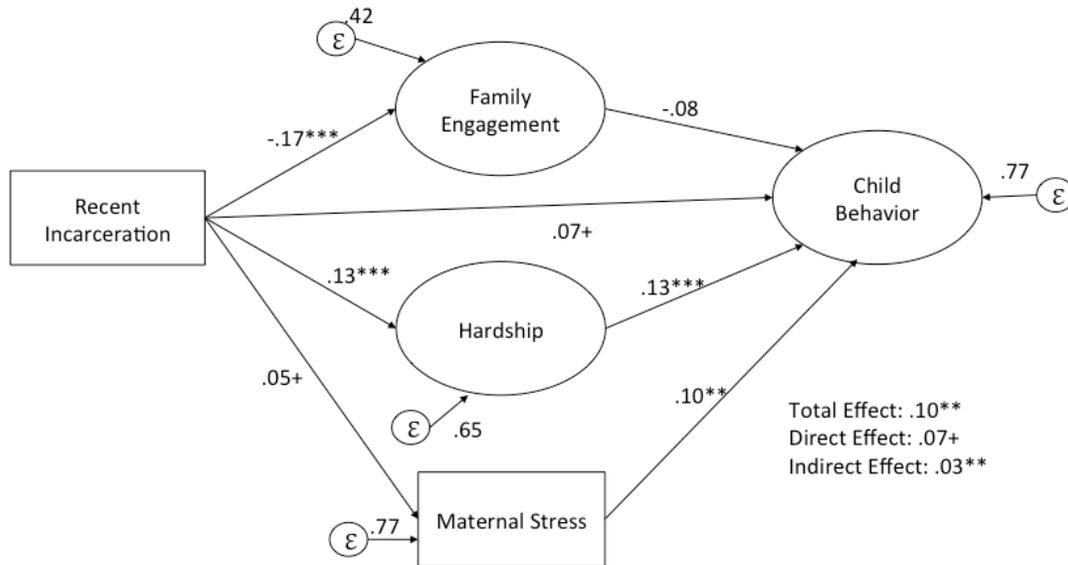
sensitive to the sample size and number of parameters estimated. Together, these two indices suggest the model parameters fit the data reasonably well for the purposes of testing theory, or in this case, testing mediation, rather than perfectly modeling child behavior.

TABLE 1.2: STANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS, STANDARD ERRORS, AND SIGNIFICANCE LEVELS FOR MODELS IN FIGURE 1.1 AND FIGURE 1.2

| Parameter Estimate                             | Full Sample   |     |     | Boys Subsample   |     |     |
|--|---|-----|-----|--|-----|-----|
|  | B   | SE  | p   | B  | SE  | P   |
| <b>Structural Model</b>                        |   |     |     |  |     |     |
| Incarceration → Behavior                       | .05   | .02 | +   | .07  | .04 | +   |
| Hardship → Behavior                            | .11   | .03 | *** | .13  | .04 | **  |
| Family engagement → Behavior                   | -.09  | .04 | *   | -.08   | .04 |     |
| Maternal parenting stress → Behavior           | .09   | .02 | *** | .10  | .03 | **  |
| Incarceration → Family engagement              | -.15  | .02 | *** | -.17   | .02 | *** |
| Incarceration → Maternal parenting stress      | .04   | .02 | *   | .05  | .02 | +   |
| Incarceration → Hardship                       | .11   | .03 | *** | .13  | .03 | *** |
| <b>Measurement model estimates of Behavior</b> |   |     |     |  |     |     |
| Behavior → Mother reported externalizing       | .44   | .02 | *** | .45  | .03 | *** |
| Behavior → Child reported externalizing        | .67   | .02 | *** | .63  | .03 | *** |
| Behavior → Child reported delinquency          | .61   | .02 | *** | .61  | .03 | *** |
| <b>Equation Error Variances</b>                |   |     |     |  |     |     |
| Behavior                                       | .78   | .01 |     | .77  | .02 |     |
| Family Engagement                              | .44   | .01 |     | .42  | .02 |     |
| Hardship                                       | .65   | .02 |     | .65  | .03 |     |
| Maternal parenting stress                      | .79   | .01 |     | .77  | .02 |     |
| <b>Goodness of Fit</b>                         | $\chi^2(515) = 3034.51$<br>$p < .001$ ; CFI = .87;<br>RMSEA = .04 |     |     | $\chi^2(515) = 1960.81$ $p < .001$ ; CFI = .87;<br>RMSEA = .04 |     |     |

+  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Standardized coefficients presented. Behavior, Hardship, and Family engagement are latent measures. Models controls for prior incarceration, father education level, father race, father impulsivity, father prior drug use, father age, prior child aggression, parent relationship at Year 3, and whether the father was ever abusive toward the mother. Paths from incarceration to the mediating variable control for select component variables measured at Year 3 to isolate change during the period over which incarceration is observed.

FIGURE 1.2: STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL OF PATERNAL INCARCERATION'S ASSOCIATION WITH CHILD BEHAVIOR FOR SONS ONLY (STANDARDIZED SOLUTION)



+  $p < .1$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$  Model controls for prior incarceration, father education level, father race, father impulsivity, father prior drug use, father age, prior aggression, parent relationship at Year 3, and whether the father was ever abusive toward the mother. Paths from incarceration to the mediating variable control for that variable measured at Year 3. Measurement components of latent variables not shown.

### *Behavior in Sons*

Both the existing research on aggression and gendered theoretical paths suggests that sons may be differently impacted by paternal incarceration. Limiting the sample to boys changes the model only slightly, as shown in Figure 1.2. The total relationship between paternal incarceration and negative behavior in sons is larger,  $.10$  ( $p < .01$ ). As in the full model, the inclusion of mediating variables reduces the direct path of incarceration to marginal significance ( $.07$ ,  $p < .10$ ). The indirect association is comparable to the full model ( $.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ), though it accounts for a smaller proportion of the total effect. Changes in hardship constitute the most robust path and only significant indirect path for sons, accounting for 17% of the total effect and nearly 51% of the indirect effect. Father family engagement accounts for 14% of the total effect, though is not significant due in part to the non-significant association between father engagement

and behavior in boys. Finally, while maternal parenting stress is associated with negative behavior, this path is also not significant due to a limited association between incarceration and stress. While the patterns of significance for sons are distinct, notably lacking significant paths through either father family engagement or maternal parenting stress, the magnitude and direction of the coefficients are comparable to the full model.

*Sensitivity to the Relative Timing of Incarceration*

Two alternative incarceration specifications are considered in Table 1.3 to test the robustness of the models: recent but not current incarceration, and first incarceration ever. While the primary consideration is the timing of incarceration, these alternative specifications may reflect other differences such as the severity of the offense or sentence length that are not easily distinguished. The sample sizes vary in these models as different individuals fall into the treated and comparison samples under each specification.

Limiting the treatment of incarceration to fathers were recently, but not currently, incarcerated at Year 9 distinguishes between the physical separation and costs of current incarceration and implications that can linger after release. In this model, the total effect of incarceration on behavior is smaller than the full sample. Neither the direct path nor the indirect path through maternal parenting stress is statistically significant. Indirect paths through both material hardship and father family engagement are statistically significant, though family engagement accounts for a smaller proportion of the total effect than in the full model. The exclusion of the most affected fathers, those physical separated from their fathers by current incarceration at Year 9, likely accounts for the reduced relevance of this indirect path.

TABLE 1.3: SENSITIVITY TEST FOR TIMING OF INCARCERATION

| Parameter Estimate                               | Full Sample Model   |     |     | Recent Incarceration  |     |     | No Prior Incarceration  |     |     |
|--|---|-----|-----|---|-----|-----|---|-----|-----|
|  | B   | SE  | p   | B   | SE  | p   | B   | SE  | p   |
| <b>Total Effect of Incarceration on Behavior</b> | .07   | .02 | **  | .05   | .02 | *   | .09   | .02 | **  |
| <b>Structural Model</b>                          |   |     |     |   |     |     |   |     |     |
| Incarceration → Behavior                         | .05   | .02 | +   | .03   | .03 |     | .05   | .03 |     |
| Hardship → Behavior                              | .11   | .03 | *** | .11   | .03 | *** | .14   | .04 | *** |
| Family engagement → Behavior                     | -.09  | .04 | *   | -.08  | .03 | **  | -.08  | .04 | *   |
| Maternal parenting stress → Behavior             | .09   | .02 | *** | .09   | .02 | *** | .08   | .03 | **  |
| Incarceration → Family Engagement                | -.15  | .02 | *** | -.09  | .02 | *** | -.18  | .02 | *** |
| Incarceration → Maternal Stress                  | .04   | .02 | *   | .03   | .02 |     | .04   | .02 |     |
| Incarceration → Hardship                         | .11   | .03 | *** | .09   | .02 | *** | .17   | .03 | *** |
| <b>Goodness of Fit</b>                           | χ <sup>2</sup> (515) = 3034.51<br>p < .001; CFI = .87;<br>RMSEA = .04 |     |     | χ <sup>2</sup> (499) = 2754.77<br>p < .001; CFI = .88;<br>RMSEA = .04 |     |     | χ <sup>2</sup> (483) = 2075.30<br>p < .001; CFI = .87;<br>RMSEA = .04 |     |     |
| Treated N/Untreated N                            | 724/2212  |     |     | 520/2212  |     |     | 237/1503  |     |     |

+ p < .1 \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001  
 Standardized coefficients presented. Behavior, Hardship, and Family engagement are latent measures. Models controls for prior incarceration, father education level, father race, father impulsivity, father prior drug use, father age, child temperament, parent relationship at Year 3, aggression at Year 3 and whether the father was ever abusive toward the mother. Paths from incarceration to the mediating variable control for that variable measured at Year 3. Prior incarceration is not included as a control in the model for no prior incarceration.

Limiting the treatment of incarceration to those who experienced their first incarceration after the Year 3 survey both isolates the time ordering of the incarceration and isolates the treatment to family's first experience of incarceration to preclude concerns about cumulative or diminishing implications for children. In this model, the total effect of incarceration is slightly higher than in the full model (.09,  $p < .01$ ), though the non-significant direct effect comparable (.04,  $p > .10$ ). In this model, the indirect path through economic hardship accounts for a quarter of the total effect and half of the indirect effect, while father disengagement accounts for 16% and 29% respectively and maternal stress is not a significant path. The larger indirect paths are attributable to stronger associations between incarceration and changes in family-level mediating variables. These findings suggest that the nature of the incarceration experience may be relevant for the magnitude of the change, and therefore for the indirect paths, influencing behavior.

### **Discussion**

This article confirms that children whose fathers have histories of incarceration are more likely to act out themselves. Aggressive or rule-breaking behavior in 9-year-olds, especially boys, is especially important to understand as this behavioral reaction to incarceration may have serious consequences for other outcomes like academic achievement, discipline in school, and even later criminal justice involvement (Geller et al., 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Roettger & Swisher, 2011; Wildeman, 2010). This article uses a latent measure of behavior that incorporates both mother and child reports, which may mitigate bias in mother reports induced by the incarceration itself. Using this distinct measure precludes direct comparisons to previous work measuring aggression or externalizing alone, though there are relevant points of comparison. The magnitude of the association is smaller than has been found in research on younger children (see Geller et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2010), though the proportion of variation in

behavior explained by Haskins (2015) also found smaller effect sizes in nine-year-olds. Part of this difference may be attributable to older children being either less reactive or more able to regulate their own behavior. In these models, incarceration accounts for about 15% of the variation in behavior. This magnitude is comparable to Geller et al. (2011), who attribute a 25% decrease in father contributions to incarceration.

This article makes two contributions toward understanding how paternal incarceration shapes child behavior and establishes a foundation for mitigating the negative implications of incarceration for children. First, the incarceration of a child's father co-occurs with changes in father family engagement, household resources, and maternal parenting stress; and accounting for these changes mediates just under half of the total effect of incarceration on child behavior. In each of the models, the direct path linking paternal incarceration to behavior is non-significant or marginally significant after taking these family-level changes into account. For children experiencing their father's first incarceration, these indirect paths play an even more important role. These findings are consistent with theories of incarceration as contributing to strain (see Murray et al., 2012) or stress (see Foster & Hagan 2009) for children. Identifying the mediating role of by material hardship and father engagement allows a glimpse inside the black box of incarceration and provides insight into component sources of strain contained within a child's experience of incarceration. Moreover, conceptualizing incarceration as a package of family stressors ties this body of research into parallel literatures on the implications family stress more broadly for children.

Second, not all family level changes are equally consequential for child behavior after incarceration. As prior research has consistently emphasized, incarceration is associated with a broad set of co-occurring family hardships. The challenges of father disengagement, material

hardship, and caregiver stress are both 1) consistently associated with incarceration using a variety methodologies and 2) independently associated with child behavior in both incarceration and broader family research. Only two of these measures consistently and significantly mediated the implications of incarceration. While maternal mental health has been linked with the father's incarceration (Wildeman et al., 2012), this association is not consistent in these models.

The changes in father family engagement and material hardship associated with paternal incarceration are more consistently consequential for child behavior. Together, these paths account for over a third of the relationship between recent incarceration and child behavior. Recent incarceration is associated with decreased family engagement on the part of fathers and increased material hardship. Each of these constructs is, in turn, significantly associated with more acting-out behavior in nine-year-olds. While the indirect path through hardship is most consistently observed across all models and is larger in magnitude, it is difficult to assess how these two constructs may differ in real terms due to the incorporation of multiple measures into latent variables. The relevant finding, rather, is that each construct constitutes an independent path between paternal incarceration and behavior even when modeled simultaneously. Additional research is needed to add precision to these findings and ensure equivalency in the qualitative meaning of the measures.

The association between paternal incarceration and acting-out behavior in sons was larger in magnitude, as observed in prior research (see Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2015), but indirect paths account for a smaller proportion of the total association. Notably, decreased father engagement did not constitute a significant indirect path for boys. While incarceration decreases father engagement, consistent with the full model, father engagement was not significantly associated with behavior. This finding suggests a nuanced interpretation of the role fathers play

in sons' behavior. The same-sex role model suggests that sons may be particularly attuned to their father's experiences (see discussion in Foster & Hagan 2013). While boys are to be more responsive to paternal incarceration, the mechanism is necessarily directly linked to the fathers' engagement. Qualitative work suggests that fathers who are criminally involved may or may not support positive behavior (Braman, 2004). These divergent reactions may even be masked in mean-based models. The boys' model suggests that the link between father family disengagement and behavior may be more complicated for sons, and future research should focus on understanding these nuances.

#### *Limitations*

There are several important limitations of this study. First, measurement of the nature and timing of incarceration is imprecise. Despite the likely relevance for child experience, the data do not currently allow an accurate disaggregation of jails and prisons, pretrial status, sentence length, distance from family, visitation within the facility, the nature of the charges, or the number of incarcerations. Furthermore, children may be influenced by the incarceration experiences of extended family members (Braman, 2004), but such experiences are not measured in the present data. The models are robust to the variation in incarceration introduced in the sensitivity checks: excluding current incarceration sets an upper limit to sentence length, while isolating those who were not incarcerated before Year 3 excludes fathers with chronic histories of incarceration. These models, however, speak broadly to the average experience of paternal incarceration and may mask important distinctions between diverse incarceration experiences.

Second, this article only examines family-level mechanisms, mechanisms external to family such as increased scrutiny from institutions or authorities may also influence child behavior after incarceration but are difficult to measure accurately in the current data. The

combination of mother and child reports of behavior mitigates the possibility that measured behavior reflects changes in detection alone. Additional questions were asked on a broader set of issues in the Year 9 survey, but were not asked at the Year 3 making measuring change impossible.

This study speaks to the average experience of incarceration for relatively disadvantaged urban families given the sampling frame of the Fragile Families Study. These families reflect the characteristics of families most likely to experience paternal (see Wildeman, 2009), but are not necessarily representative of all criminal justice involved families. Just as incarceration is not a single treatment, nor is the experience of incarceration universal for different communities and populations. The study limitations preclude drawing a strong causal conclusion from the models. Most conservatively, the analyses highlight that incarceration and the changes in the mediating variables co-occurred over the same window and are associated with one another.. Future research should engage wherever possible with nuanced experiences of incarceration to diversify our understanding of how mechanisms may vary by context.

### **Implications**

This study takes an important step toward identifying the mechanisms linking paternal incarceration to child behavioral outcomes. Developing a comprehensive understanding of these mechanisms is essential for using scarce resources efficiently for disrupting cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. Nearly half of the total relationship between children's behavior and their father's incarceration can be accounted for by changes within the child's family. While the unmediated half suggests that at least some of the mechanisms linking paternal incarceration to child behavior may be external to the family, this association was only marginally significant while the indirect paths were consistently relevant for child behavior. Changes in material

hardship and father disengagement were the most consistent indirect paths. These findings are suggestive that addressing the declines in family resources and relationship strain that occur when a child's father is incarcerated may help mitigate the collateral consequences children face.

The importance of both father family disengagement and material hardship for child behavioral responses to incarceration suggest that two approaches may be most productive in interrupting the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage. First, maintaining relationships through incarceration is difficult, both due to the separation and difficulty and cost often associated with either supporting relationships through communication or visits (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002). Programs aimed at supporting or strengthening positive relationships between incarcerated men and their families on the outside may be a productive strategy for minimizing this indirect path. Second, addressing changes in material hardship that families face during and after a paternal incarceration would address the largest and most consistent indirect path. While families are called upon almost immediately to provide support for incarcerated family members (see Braman, 2004, Comfort, 2008), there are few, if any, automatic systems in place to provide support for families. Incarceration can be a sudden change, as well as one associated with both stigma and a host of other co-occurring financial hardships. Many services already exist in the community to assist families facing financial hardship, including formal support programs like TANF and SNAP. Families facing incarceration may qualify for these programs, possibly for the first time. These families may require additional support to identify and access community resources to mitigate the financial and thus behavioral toll of incarceration.

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## CHAPTER 2

### **Better Together? Relationship Instability and Maternal Wellbeing after Paternal Incarceration**

Each year, the incarceration of a romantic partner brings millions of mothers in the United States to a crossroad; some women continue their relationships, while others breakup or seek a new partner. Yet the implications of these different relationship outcomes for women have remained unclear. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, this article identifies the relationship trajectories mothers take after their partner's incarceration and compares these mothers' wellbeing both post-incarceration and longitudinally. Five measures of maternal wellbeing are considered: poverty, domestic violence, relationship supportiveness, parental engagement, and cooperative parenting. The results indicate that most mothers exit their relationships, typically becoming single mothers rather than repartnering. Women whose relationships persist fare better post-incarceration, largely reflecting enduring pre-incarceration advantages despite minor losses accrued over the incarceration. Finally, repartnering can improve maternal wellbeing and offset disadvantage reported by single mothers in the areas of relationship quality and parenting.

## Introduction

The incarceration of a romantic partner has become a common experience for poor women in the United States, with a conservative estimate suggesting nearly 3 million women have imprisoned partners (Comfort et al., 2005). A large and growing body of research has identified the collateral consequences of incarceration for these women and their families, including material hardship (Braman, 2004; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999), social isolation (Braman, 2004; Comfort 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2012), and declining father involvement (Geller, 2013; Turney & Wildeman 2013; Swisher & Waller, 2008). Yet few of these studies have considered variation in the trajectories women's relationships take over the course of their partner's incarceration. Relationships with incarcerated men are particularly vulnerable to instability and dissolution (Bacak & Kennedy, 2015; Braman, 2004; Nurse, 2002; Turney, 2015a; Waller & Swisher, 2006; Western et al., 2004), though whether this instability exacerbates or alleviates the collateral consequences of incarceration for women remains unclear.

This paper identifies the prevalence of three maternal relationship trajectories after the incarceration of their child's father, and asks how those whose relationships take different trajectories fare relative to one another. Maternal wellbeing is compared across five measures: household poverty, parental engagement, relationship supportiveness, exposure to domestic violence, and cooperative parenting with the biological father. Analyses use data from Year 1 and Year 5 of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW), which provides rich longitudinal data on family relationships, wellbeing, and paternal incarceration experiences.

Three key findings emerge. First, most women exit their relationships (67%), typically becoming single mothers (48%) rather than repartnering (19%). Relationships that persisted were associated with greater family engagement before the incarceration, suggesting a selection

process through which women end, or choose not to maintain, less satisfactory relationships when incarceration occurs. Second, with some important nuances, women whose relationships persisted fared better after the incarceration than their counterparts. This advantage, however, largely reflects the endurance of pre-incarceration strengths despite minor declines reported over the incarceration period. Third, in some select measures, repartnering can offset disadvantages reported by single mothers and even improve maternal wellbeing. Notably, social fathers had higher education and fewer risk factors than recently incarcerated biological fathers, and repartnered women reported improvements in relationship quality and parenting.

### **Background**

Perhaps because of the negative outcomes families face, as well as concerns about family instability, relationship dissolution associated with incarceration is usually perceived as a negative outcome. For fathers and for the children who miss them, this perception is likely accurate. Incarcerated and recently released men rely on family resources as a key source of support (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Uggen et al., 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003; Western & Wildeman, 2009), meaning maintaining these relationships is in the best interest of most fathers. Paternal incarceration separates fathers from their children, and whether ties are maintained can depend on the father's relationship with his child's mother. During the incarceration, mothers are typically responsible for facilitating contact through visits, letters, or phone calls (Arditti et al. 2005; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Edin et al., 2004). Relationship dissolution often corresponds with a reduction, if not cessation, of mothers' facilitation of the father/child relationship (Nurse, 2002). Even after release, the parents' romantic status is closely linked to the father's involvement (Geller, 2013; Wildeman & Turney 2013), and father

engagement declines precipitously after separation or maternal repartnering (Nurse, 2002; Swisher & Waller, 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2013; Western & Wildeman, 2009).

The story may be somewhat more complicated for women, who shoulder much of the emotional and financial costs incurred throughout the incarceration process. In many cases, the inmate's behavior before incarceration harmed the family through violence, addiction, or antisocial behavior (Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Wakefield & Powell, 2016). For women in this situation, as well as their children in cases of domestic violence, the man's incarceration can be a temporary respite (Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Turney, 2015b; Wakefield & Powell, 2016). The incarceration can provide time to rebuild damaged relationships (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Turney, 2015b; Wakefield & Powell, 2016), though short stays may further destabilize families (Comfort, 2016). During the incarceration, women are called upon to manage interactions with prisons and related service providers as well as pay for communication and inmate needs (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Goffman, 2014). This task is made all the more difficult by other collateral consequences families face outside the facility (Braman, 2004; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Reincorporating inmates into families after release can pose additional problems. Many men reenter society with high need and impaired economic prospects, which can make them a drain rather than a boon to family resources (Arditti et al., 2003; Comfort, 2016; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Pager, 2003; Wakefield & Powell, 2016; Western, 2001). Given this context, women may not benefit from maintaining relationships to the same extent as their incarcerated partners or children.

Women on the outside typically determine whether to continue or end relationships rather than their incarcerated partners (Nurse, 2002; Comfort, 2008), but these decisions are often fraught with uncertainty (Comfort, 2008; Braman, 2004; Goffman, 2014). Relationships that do

survive are typically weaker than if no incarceration had occurred (Turney, 2015b). While relationships can be strengthened during incarceration, such improvements may only be temporary (Comfort, 2008; Turney, 2015b). In this context, it is unsurprising that many romantic relationships stall or dissolve around the time of an incarceration (Apel et al., 2016; Bacak & Kennedy, 2015; Nurse, 2004; Turney, 2015a; Western et al., 2004). Most women end their relationships (Turney & Wildeman, 2013), and are most likely to do so soon after the incarceration occurs (Turney, 2015a). Descriptively, women end relationships if men have many risk factors (Waller & Swisher, 2006) or when relationship quality declines (Turney, 2015a).

The decision to maintain or end a relationship can be particularly complex for women who share a child with an incarcerated man. For these mothers, ending the relationship is associated with losing the support of the father and his family (Geller, 2013; Turney, 2014; Wildeman & Turney, 2013). The repartnering literature suggests these losses may be particularly acute if the mother introduces a new social father to the household (Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Tach et al., 2010). Whether repartnering can offset the dual hardships of incarceration and single motherhood, however, is unsettled (see Edin et al., 2004; Nurse, 2004; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Broadly, women tend to repartner with higher quality social fathers who contribute positively, though perhaps not financially, to the household (Berger et al., 2008; Bzostek et al., 2012; Carlson & Berger, 2013). In the context of incarceration, these advantages may mitigate collateral consequences experienced by the family. Conversely, the “sticky stigma” of incarceration (Braman, 2004) may function like other disadvantages to limit the stability or quality of new partners (see Graefe & Lichter, 2007).

This article investigates the prevalence of different relationship trajectories among mothers whose partners experience incarceration, and compares the wellbeing of women whose

trajectories diverge using cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. The existing literature suggests three hypotheses. First, relationships that persist through incarceration are likely to decline in quality (Turney, 2015b), though the stability of these relationships may also protect families from the hardships of instability (Cooper et al., 2009) or reduced father contributions (Turney, 2014; Wildeman & Turney, 2013). This would suggest the interests of mothers align with those of incarcerated fathers and, in many cases, their children. Second, while some evidence suggests that separation exacerbates hardship (Turney, 2014; Wildeman & Turney, 2013), breaking up could also shield families from resource depletion or victimization. Within the context of incarceration, the benefits of stability may be undermined by the costs born by romantic partners (Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Nurse, 2002), limited ability of recently incarcerated men to reciprocate (Braman, 2004; Pager, 2003), or men's history of destabilizing behavior (Braman, 2004; Wakefield & Powell, 2016). Third, social fathers are expected to improve the wellbeing of mothers whose relationships end, mitigating the collateral consequences of the biological father's incarceration. This hypothesis, which places the mothers' interests at odds with their former partners, draws from research suggesting that women end riskier or lower quality relationships (Turney, 2015a; Waller & Swisher, 2006) and posits that the incarceration does not impair women's ability to partner with higher quality men (Carlson & Berger, 2013).

### **Data, Measures, and Methods**

This study uses data from FFCW to examine the wellbeing of families with young children before and after paternal incarceration. FFCW is a longitudinal birth cohort study of unmarried parents and comparable married parents in large urban areas. Weighted data are representative of births in large U.S. cities in the late 1990s, and models use the provided Year 5

city weights. Measures of post-incarceration wellbeing are drawn from the Year 5 mother survey, while covariates and comparable measures of pre-incarceration wellbeing are taken from the Year 1 survey. Response rates for these waves were 87 percent and 91 percent, respectively.

The analyses use the subset of families experiencing paternal incarceration between the Year 1 and Year 5 surveys (N=631). To focus on families where a relationship decision coincided with the incarceration, the sample is further restricted to families in which the mother reported a romantic relationship with the father at the time of the Year 1 survey, the focal child resided with the mother at both waves, and observations had complete answers on relationship and incarceration status at both waves (N=393). In the final analytic sample, most (73%) variables had complete information. Fewer than 3% of observations were missing for all but one parent demographic or Year 1 wellbeing measure. Cooperative parenting at Year 1 is missing for parents from two cities in the Fragile Families sample (N=52), but these observations are proportionately distributed across relationship trajectory and analyses adjust for city using the provided city level weights. Missing data was imputed using chained equations in Stata to retain the largest sample possible. Reported estimates are pooled across twenty imputed datasets.

### *Measures*

Families are considered to have experienced incarceration during the observation window if the father meets the following criteria: a) incarcerated for the first time since their child's birth between the Year 1 and Year 5 surveys, b) not currently incarcerated at the Year 1 survey, and c) not incarcerated for the first time at the Year 5 survey. Excluding those currently incarcerated at Year 1 ensures a pre-incarceration measure, and excluding those incarcerated for the first time at the Year 5 ensures stable post-incarceration exposure measures of wellbeing. The incarceration is included if either the mother report or the father self-report are consistent with these criteria.

This article contrasts family wellbeing across three family structures observed at Year 5: mothers who remained in a romantic relationship through the incarceration, mothers whose relationship ended, and mothers who repartnered. Mothers report at Years 1 and 5 the status of their relationship with the biological father of the focal child; responses are collapsed into romantic relationships (married, cohabiting, or dating/visiting) or no romantic relationship. Mothers also report whether their current partner is the child's biological father or not. As several wellbeing measures are only asked of women with coresident partners, only cohabiting or married mothers are considered repartnered.

These criteria frame an incarceration window in which women face both their partner's incarceration and the question of whether to continue that relationship. Imprecise measurement of the timing, duration, and frequency of incarceration make establishing an accurate time ordering impossible. While mothers report incarceration and separation dates, only 14% of the sample has complete information on the years both events occurred. Nevertheless, a time ordering approximation shown in Appendix A suggests that the majority of separations occur during the same period as the incarceration or follow the first recorded incarceration. Uncertainty about the timing of incarceration may reflect the underlying ambiguity of criminal justice involvement. During this window, women may experience a variety of stressors associated with family instability, including disruptive criminal behavior, long or multiple spells of incarceration, or the stress of the reentry period (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Naser & La Vigne, 2005). The status of romantic relationships through this period of criminal justice involvement may also be temporarily fluid (Braman, 2004; Goffman, 2014; Nurse, 2002). The incarceration window bookends the ambiguous period of family stress surrounding paternal incarceration.

*Maternal Wellbeing.* Five measures of maternal wellbeing are considered: household poverty, domestic violence, relationship supportiveness, parental involvement, and cooperative parenting between the biological parents. These measures reflect the constructs of resources, relationship quality, and parenting support identified by the existing literature as key for understanding wellbeing in complex families (Berger et al., 2008; Carlson & Berger, 2013; Tach et al., 2010; Turney, 2015a; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Each construct is measured consistently at both Year 1 and Year 5, allowing for a pre- and post- comparison. Financial resources are measured as the ratio of the mothers' household income to the poverty line. This measure is constructed by FFCW to account for household composition and income at each wave. A household measure both reflects resources available to children within the household and provides a consistent measure of the family's financial wellbeing over a period where household composition may shift.

Two measures assess the quality of the mother's relationship. Domestic violence is a dichotomous measure constructed from three sets of questions. Mothers reported whether their romantic partner had hit, kicked, or physically harmed or threatened them in the last month. This captures abuse by either the biological father or resident social father in two separate panels of questions. Mothers also reported whether the biological father had physically harmed them since the last survey regardless of their relationship status. Mothers answering yes to any of these questions are considered to have experienced violence. Relationship supportiveness is a measure of positive relationship attributes. The mother reported how often, ranging from 0 (never) to 2 (often), her romantic partners' behavior was consistent with the following statements: he is fair and willing to compromise, expresses affection or love for you, encourages or helps you do things that are important to you, listens to you when you need someone to talk to, and

understands your hurts and joys. Mothers not in a romantic relationship at Year 5 are coded as never (0) on each of these statements. Responses are aggregated into a scale measure of the supportiveness of her current partner, whether the biological father or social father ( $\alpha = .98$  for Year 5,  $\alpha = .96$  for Year 1), ranging from 0 (not supportive) to 2 (highly supportive).

Finally, two measures address parenting support available to mothers after the incarceration of their child's father. The parental engagement scale measures the frequency with which children engage in activities with a parent figure. Mothers report how many days in the last week (from 0 and 7) she, the biological father, or the resident social father if one is present, participated in eight age-appropriate activities with the focal child. For each parent, a scale measure was created ranging from 0 to 7 to capture how many days, on average, the parent engaged with the child. A score of seven suggests that the parent participated in each activity every day, while a score of 4.5 could indicate that the parent participated in half the activities every day or all of the activities several times in the past week. These scales are then aggregated among the child's parents, with a possibility of three parents, to produce a combined measure of parent involvement. Cooperative parenting with the biological father is used to measure the parenting relationship between the child's biological parents as distinct from the parents' romantic relationship. Cooperative parenting is a scale measure ( $\alpha = .91$  for Year 5,  $\alpha = .83$  for Year 1) ranging from 0 (least cooperative) to 3 (most cooperative). Mothers report whether the biological father acts like the father she wants for her child, she trusts the father to take good care of the child, the father respects schedules and rules set for the child, the father supports the way the mother wants to raise the child, the parents talk about problems that come up with the child, and the mother can count on the father for help looking after the child.

*Parent Demographic Characteristics.* To account for maternal attributes that may guide selection into trajectories, models adjust for maternal characteristics measured at Year 1. Adjustment variables include mother self-reported impulsivity (range 1 to 4, with 1 being least impulsive), whether the mother was married to the biological father at the time of the child's birth, whether there are grandparents in the mother's household, whether the mother lived with both parents at age 14, mother's race and ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, Other), mother's age, and mother's education (less than high school, high school, some college, college or more).

While not included as controls to adjust mean wellbeing, a similar set of variables provides a descriptive portrait of father characteristics. For both social and biological fathers, the following variables are measured: education (less than high school, high school, some college, college or more), race and ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, Other), whether he was working for pay in the previous week, whether his substance use interferes with daily life, whether he shares a biological child with the mother, and whether he has a prior history of incarceration. Characteristics are measured at Year 1 or at the first wave of co-residence for social fathers with the exception of age and marital status, both measured at Year 5. These measures provide important context, but are excluded from the adjusted models to guard against over-controlling for important variation and potentially masking the underlying selection process. For example, controlling for social father attributes would absorb variation associated with mothers repartnering with more advantaged men.

### *Methods*

Paralleling the strategy of Carlson and Berger (2013) in analyzing complex families, the analyses consist of calculating the mean level of each wellbeing measure by relationship

trajectory. For the cross sectional analysis, the mean level at Year 5 is calculated for each family structure using coefficients produced by weighted OLS or logistic regressions. Models specify parents remaining together as the omitted category, and a Wald test following model fit is used to compare the remaining two categories. To adjust for differences in the pre-incarceration characteristics, additional sets of regressions were estimated controlling for maternal demographic attributes and adjusted means were calculated holding all covariates at the mean using the margins post-estimation command in Stata. The longitudinal analysis re-estimates these two sets of models using the difference score rather than the Year 5 level as the main dependent variable. The difference score is created by subtracting each Year 5 wellbeing measure from the comparable Year 1 measure. Change over time modeled by controlling for Year 1 wellbeing rather than using a difference score are reported in Appendix B; estimates are consistent though less straightforward to interpret than the difference scores.

TABLE 2.1: RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS AMONG FAMILIES EXPERIENCING PATERNAL INCARCERATION BETWEEN THE YEAR-ONE AND YEAR-FIVE SURVEYS (N=631, UNWEIGHTED)

|                              |                        | Year 5 Maternal Relationship |                        |            |         |
|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|------------|---------|
|                              |                        | With Biological Father       | Resident Social Father | No Partner | Total N |
| Year 1 Maternal Relationship | With Biological Father | 136                          | 84                     | 173        | 393     |
|                              | Resident Social Father | 0                            | 18                     | 18         | 36      |
|                              | No Partner             | 16                           | 54                     | 132        | 202     |
|                              | Total N                | 152                          | 156                    | 323        | 631     |

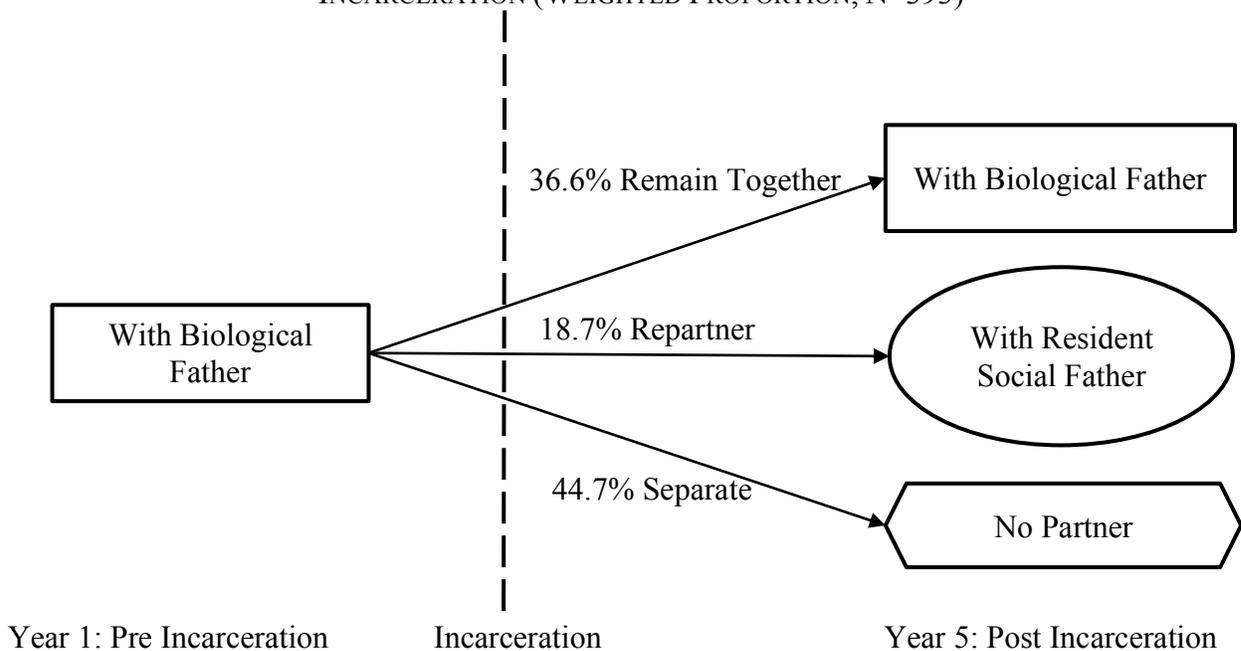
## Findings

The majority of couples in romantic relationships before the father's incarceration have separated by the close of the incarceration window. As shown in Table 2.1, 631 families in the urban FFCW sample experienced paternal incarceration between Year 1 and Year 5. Most (62%) of these women entered the incarceration window in a relationship with the father of their young child, and these 393 women constitute the analytic sample for the following analyses. Figure 2.1 traces the trajectories these women take and applies survey weights. Only 36.6% of women maintain their romantic relationship through the incarceration window. It is far more common for these relationships to end: 44.7% of women have become single mothers and 18.7% of women have repartnered by Year 5. While the timing of relationship dissolution relative to incarceration is imprecisely measured, the largest proportion of separations occurred within the same 2-year window as the incarceration itself (see Appendix A). Couples observed in FFCW have high risk for relationship dissolution, though incarceration has a well-documented role in exacerbating that risk (Bacak & Kennedy, 2015; Western et al., 2004). In a comparison sample of families not experiencing incarceration, nearly 83% of women in relationships at Year 1 continued those relationships at Year 5, 13% separated without repartnering, and 4% reported a resident social father. While separation was the modal experience for women whose partners were incarcerated, remaining together was modal for couples without incarceration experiences.

All families in this incarceration sample report some hardships, yet across most measures those who remain together report better post-incarceration outcomes than their counterparts whose relationships ended. The weighted means for each of the five maternal wellbeing measures are presented in Table 2.2. On average, all mothers who experience the incarceration of a partner report incomes close to the poverty line, face a high incidence of domestic violence

(20%), claim to have relatively supportive relationships if they have one, note regular involvement with children, and report mid-level cooperation between parents. Across these measures, however, mothers who remained with the father reported better outcomes at Year 5 than the sample average. The picture is somewhat more complicated for mothers who end their relationships, as single and repartnered mothers' experiences diverge. Relative to those who repartner, single mothers appear to fare better with respect to violence, poverty, and cooperation with the biological father but worse with respect to relationship supportiveness and parental engagement. This variation demonstrates that relationship trajectories are relevant for mothers' wellbeing after incarceration.

FIGURE 2.1. RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORIES AMONG FAMILIES TOGETHER BEFORE THE FATHER'S INCARCERATION (WEIGHTED PROPORTION, N=393)



Families appear similar at Year 1, before the incarceration, though families that ultimately remain together have some important advantages. Women taking different trajectories reported similar levels of poverty, supportiveness, and cooperative parenting before the

incarceration. Consistent with a selection interpretation, mothers who remained in their relationships entered the incarceration window reporting more parental engagement and lower levels of violence than the full analytic sample. Women who ultimately became single mothers reported the highest levels of abuse at Year 1, and those who repartnered reported the lowest levels of parental engagement at Year 1. These pre-incarceration differences motivate using both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses to develop a full understanding of variation in women’s wellbeing.

TABLE 2.2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MATERNAL WELLBEING, BY MATERNAL RELATIONSHIP STATUS AT YEAR-5 SURVEY

|                                   |                                     | Maternal Relationship Status at Year 5 |                        |            | All Trajectories |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------|------------|------------------|
|                                   |                                     | With Biological Father                 | Resident Social Father | No Partner |                  |
| <b>Family Wellbeing At Year 5</b> | Poverty Ratio                       | 1.38                                   | 1.07                   | 1.19       | 1.23             |
|                                   | Domestic Violence                   | 11.78%                                 | 31.23%                 | 23.04%     | 20.45%           |
|                                   | Partner Supportiveness <sub>1</sub> | 1.54                                   | 1.92                   | 0.00       | 0.92             |
|                                   | Parental Engagement <sub>2</sub>    | 8.20                                   | 8.43                   | 4.93       | 6.78             |
|                                   | Cooperative Parenting <sub>3</sub>  | 2.45                                   | 0.89                   | 1.24       | 1.62             |
| <b>Family Wellbeing At Year 1</b> | Poverty Ratio                       | 1.08                                   | 1.27                   | 1.24       | 1.19             |
|                                   | Domestic Violence                   | 4.60%                                  | 0.09%                  | 11.55%     | 6.86%            |
|                                   | Partner Supportiveness <sub>1</sub> | 1.62                                   | 1.53                   | 1.48       | 1.54             |
|                                   | Parental Engagement <sub>2</sub>    | 8.62                                   | 4.63                   | 5.53       | 6.49             |
|                                   | Cooperative Parenting <sub>3</sub>  | 2.11                                   | 2.02                   | 1.94       | 2.02             |
| Total N                           |                                     | 136                                    | 84                     | 173        | 393              |

Notes: standard deviation in parentheses, N=393. Survey weights applied.

1 Range from 0 (no support) to 2 (high support)

2 Range from 0 (no engagement from any parent) to 14 (engagement 7 days/week from both parents) for no social father or 21 (engagement 7 days/week from three parents)

3 Range from 0 (no cooperation) to 3 (high cooperation)

4 Range from 1 (least impulsive) to 4 (most impulsive)

*Parental Demographic Differences by Trajectory*

Families who experience incarceration are disadvantaged relative to those who do not (Geller & Franklin, 2014; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011, Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999), but there are few demographic differences by trajectory among families who experienced incarceration. Most observable differences in parent's pre-incarceration demographic characteristics, shown in Tables 2.3 and 2.4, are small and few reach statistical significance. Across family types, parents who experienced incarceration predominantly have a high school education or less (78% of mothers, 58% of social fathers, and 81% of biological fathers). Biological fathers were nearly all employed and had low rates of substance abuse prior to their incarceration, though those associated with women who repartnered were most likely to have a prior history of incarceration. These similarities are reflected in the small effects adjusting for maternal attributes have on mean wellbeing estimates in the comparison analyses.

Race and ethnicity present a notable exception to the observed demographic similarity. While the majority of parents were from racial minorities, non-Hispanic white women make up only a fraction (4.72%) of the families who remain together through an incarceration. Non-Hispanic whites make up a significantly larger portion of women who separate- accounting for 40% of repartnered women and 31% of non-repartnered women despite being 23% of the analytic sample. This racial difference is observed among the fathers as well, where white fathers are significantly less likely to remain in a relationship with their child's mother.

Parents who remain together have more attributes associated with stability than social father households, though social fathers have more favorable characteristics than the men they replaced. While around one-quarter of women in each trajectory were married at their child's

birth, by Year 5 approximately 42% of parents who remained together through the incarceration had married. New social fathers were primarily introduced to the household through cohabitation rather than marriage, and just under half of social fathers share a biological child with the mother. Despite the less stable ties among these families, social fathers have other attributes consistent with mothers selecting higher quality new partners. Relative to the women’s former partner, new social fathers are less likely to have a prior history of incarceration (8% vs. 51%) or drug use (0% vs. 18%) and are more highly educated.

TABLE 2.3: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MATERNAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, BY MATERNAL RELATIONSHIP STATUS AT YEAR-5 SURVEY

|   | Maternal Relationship Status at Year 5 |                        |                    | All Trajectories |
|---|--|------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
|   | With Biological Father                 | Resident Social Father | No Partner         |                  |
| Mother self-reported impulsivity <sub>1</sub> | 1.64 <sub>a</sub>                      | 2.00 <sub>a</sub>      | 1.85 <sub>a</sub>  | 1.81             |
| Mother Education                              |  |                        |                    |                  |
| Less than high school                         | 40.91 <sub>a</sub>                     | 30.44 <sub>a</sub>     | 34.52 <sub>a</sub> | 36.10            |
| High school/GED                               | 38.22 <sub>a</sub>                     | 50.22 <sub>a</sub>     | 47.57 <sub>a</sub> | 44.64            |
| Some college                                  | 20.14 <sub>a</sub>                     | 18.74 <sub>a</sub>     | 14.75 <sub>a</sub> | 17.47            |
| College or more                               | 0.73 <sub>a</sub>                      | 0.61 <sub>a</sub>      | 3.15 <sub>a</sub>  | 1.79             |
| Mother race                                   |  |                        |                    |                  |
| NH White                                      | 4.72 <sub>a</sub>                      | 40.15 <sub>b</sub>     | 31.32 <sub>b</sub> | 23.24            |
| NH Black                                      | 47.13 <sub>a</sub>                     | 33.23 <sub>a</sub>     | 33.41 <sub>a</sub> | 38.41            |
| Hispanic                                      | 38.59 <sub>a</sub>                     | 23.28 <sub>a</sub>     | 32.44 <sub>a</sub> | 32.98            |
| Other   | 9.55 <sub>a</sub>                      | 3.32 <sub>a</sub>      | 2.82 <sub>a</sub>  | 5.37             |
| Grandparent in household at Year 1 (%)        | 12.42 <sub>a</sub>                     | 13.52 <sub>a</sub>     | 27.49 <sub>a</sub> | 19.36            |
| Parents married at birth (%)                  | 29.35 <sub>a</sub>                     | 25.37 <sub>a</sub>     | 23.37 <sub>a</sub> | 25.94            |
| Focal Child is Boy (%)                        | 61.41 <sub>a</sub>                     | 45.64 <sub>a</sub>     | 40.17 <sub>a</sub> | 48.97            |
| Mother Age at Year 1                          | 29.84 <sub>a</sub>                     | 28.27 <sub>a</sub>     | 31.22 <sub>a</sub> | 30.16            |
| Mom living with both parents at 14 (%)        | 29.85 <sub>a</sub>                     | 37.94 <sub>a</sub>     | 41.43 <sub>a</sub> | 36.54            |
| Total N                                       | 136                                    | 84                     | 173                | 393              |

Notes: standard deviation in parentheses, N=393. Survey weights applied.

1 Range from 1 (least impulsive) to 4 (most impulsive)

*Cross-Sectional Comparison after Incarceration*

Mothers' wellbeing after paternal incarceration is linked to the trajectory their relationship took over the incarceration window. All women in the sample were in a romantic relationship with their child's father before the incarceration, and either continued that relationship (36.6%), became single mothers (44.7%), or repartnered (18.7%). The mean value of each wellbeing measure at Year 5 is presented in the first two columns of Table 2.5, and subscripts indicate where means differ significantly by family structure. The cross-sectional analysis suggests that, with some important nuances, women who remained with their child's father fare better after the incarceration than those who did not.

Women's relationship status after the incarceration of their child's father is only weakly associated to household resources. The ratio of income to the poverty line is close to one for each family type, indicating resources at the federal poverty level. This level is robust to adjusting for maternal demographic characteristics. The adjusted poverty ratio indicates that mothers who remained with their child's father report incomes significantly further from the poverty line (1.52) than mothers who repartnered (1.04), while single mothers fall in between (1.36). The observed education and criminal-record advantages of social fathers relative to biological fathers, apparently failed to translate into financial advantage for these families

The predicted probability of domestic violence was lowest (0.06) among women who remained in their relationship with their child's recently incarcerated father. Holding maternal characteristics at the mean, the predicted probability of reporting abuse was more than three times as high for repartnered mothers (0.22) while single mothers again fell in between (0.13). The difference between repartnered mothers and those who remained with their child's father only becomes significant after adjusting for maternal characteristics. Despite ending the

relationship, single mothers still report violence from their ex-partner. As shown in Figure 2.2, the abusers of repartnered women were equally likely to be their new partner (15%) as their ex-partner (16%), with only 1% reporting violence from both.

TABLE 2.4: CHARACTERISTICS OF BIOLOGICAL FATHERS AND SOCIAL FATHERS BY FAMILY TYPE

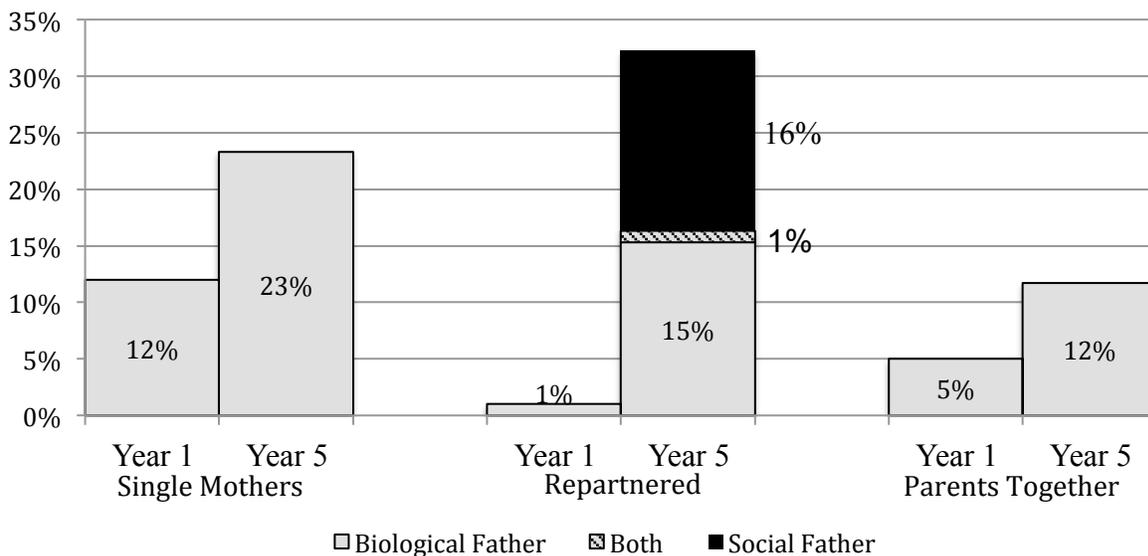
| Paternal Characteristics At Year 1 or Year of First Coresidence | Maternal Relationship Status at Year 5 |                          |                      |                          |
|---|--|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
|   | With Biological Father                 | Resident Social Father   |                      | No Partner               |
|   | <i>Biological Father</i>               | <i>Biological Father</i> | <i>Social Father</i> | <i>Biological Father</i> |
| Father Education  |  |                          |                      |                          |
| Less than high school   | 53.88 a                                | 30.71 a                  | 8.51 b               | 34.53 a                  |
| High school/GED   | 26.96 a                                | 55.07 a                  | 49.60 a              | 44.79 a                  |
| Some college  | 11.78 a                                | 14.22 a                  | 38.66 b              | 20.50 ab                 |
| College or more   | 7.37 a                                 | 0.00 b                   | 3.23 a               | 0.18 b                   |
| Father race   |  |                          |                      |                          |
| NH White  | 3.29 a                                 | 24.57 b                  | 20.71 b              | 8.79 ab                  |
| NH Black  | 53.13 a                                | 40.45 a                  | 46.05 a              | 34.58 a                  |
| Hispanic  | 42.88 a                                | 34.98 a                  | 32.20 a              | 54.87 a                  |
| Other   | 0.69 a                                 | 0.00 a                   | 1.04 a               | 1.76 a                   |
| Employment  | 95.88 a                                | 96.16 a                  | 99.91 a              | 95.72 a                  |
| Substance use   | 6.24 a                                 | 17.96 a                  | 0.00 b               | 3.73 a                   |
| History of Prior Incarceration                                  | 32.64 ac                               | 51.26 c                  | 8.42 b               | 19.44 ab                 |
| Mother and Resident Father Share Children at Year 5             | 100.00 a                               | 0.00 c                   | 39.50 b              | 0.00 c                   |
| Age at Year 5   | 31.47 a                                | 30.03 ab                 | 27.88 b              | 32.68 a                  |
| Married to Mother at Year 5                                     | 42.30 a                                | 0.00 c                   | 17.07 b              | 0.00 c                   |
| <b>Total N</b>  | 136                                    |                          | 84                   | 173                      |

Notes: N=393, standard deviations in parentheses, survey weights applied

Weighted means that share a subscript within a row are statistically similar, while those with differing subscripts are different at the .05 level or greater. Subscripts omitted if there are no statistical differences within the row. Means lacking subscripts have no statistically significant differences between groups.

With respect to measures of relationship quality and parental engagement, introducing a new social father may mitigate disadvantages associated with relationship dissolution. Repartnered mothers report more supportive relationships on average than those whose relationship weathered the father’s incarceration (1.92 and 1.54, respectively). This difference is small, but is both significant and robust to adjusting for maternal characteristics. Repartnered mothers also report levels of parental engagement with children comparable to families in which parents remained together (8.43 and 8.20, respectively). These data cannot distinguish whether mothers are choosing higher quality relationships or enjoying the frisson of a new relationship, though findings are consistent with research suggesting women select social fathers for attributes like parenting (Bzostek et al., 2012; Carlson & Berger, 2013). Single mothers, in contrast, report approximately one-third fewer activities with children than other families and have no romantic partner to provide support. In this particular area, repartnering appears to mitigate some of the non-financial hardships faced by single mothers after paternal incarceration.

FIGURE 2.2: UNADJUSTED PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG FAMILIES TOGETHER AT YEAR 1 (N=393), BY YEAR 5 FAMILY TYPE AND ABUSER



Introducing a social father, however, is associated with risks as well as benefits. Relative to other families, repartnered women reported a higher prevalence of domestic violence and the lowest levels of biological father involvement. Mothers reported the biological fathers to be highly cooperative when they remain together after his incarceration, an average of 2.29 on a scale of 0 to 3 after adjusting for maternal characteristics. While cooperation is lower for single mothers (1.35, adjusted), it is lower still among repartnered mothers (0.88, adjusted). Women who remain with their child's father consistently reported the best outcomes, though the relative advantage of repartnering or remaining single is more complex.

*Longitudinal Analysis of Change in Wellbeing*

Documenting how wellbeing changed over the incarceration window is equally important for understanding how women fare post-incarceration. To capture this context, a difference score is calculated for each observation comparing post- and pre-incarceration wellbeing. The mean and adjusted mean scores are presented in the final two columns of Table 2.5. A positive score indicates that the measure increased over the incarceration window, while a negative score indicates a decline. For most families and across most measures, the incarceration window is associated with declining wellbeing. For repartnered women, however, the incarceration may also provide an opportunity for improvement.

Mothers who ended their relationship with their child's father reported a decline in financial resources consistent with the existing literature (Pager, 2003; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). Women who repartnered reported the greatest average decline in income relative to the poverty line (-0.19 unadjusted, -0.32 adjusted). Mothers who did not repartner fell between the two other relationship trajectories and were statistically similar to both, though the mean difference also indicates loss (-0.06 unadjusted, -0.26 adjusted). Mothers who remained in a

TABLE 2.5: WELLBEING AMONG FAMILIES TOGETHER AT YEAR 1 FOLLOWING SEPARATION DURING INCARCERATION WINDOW

|  | Weighted Mean Value |                              |                                  |                                  |
|--|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|  | Unadjusted Year 5   | Adjusted Year 5 <sub>1</sub> | Difference Between Years 1 and 5 | Adjusted Difference <sub>1</sub> |
| <b>Ratio of Mother’s Household Income to Poverty Line</b>        |                     |                              |                                  |                                  |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 1.38 a              | 1.52 a                       | 0.30 a                           | 0.23 a                           |
| Resident Social Father   | 1.07 a              | 1.04 b                       | -0.19 b                          | -0.32 b                          |
| No Partner   | 1.19 a              | 1.36 ab                      | -0.06 ab                         | -0.26 ab                         |
| <b>Domestic Violence Exposure <sub>2</sub></b>                   |                     |                              |                                  |                                  |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 0.12 a              | 0.06 a                       | 0.07 a                           | 0.07 a                           |
| Resident Social Father   | 0.31 a              | 0.22 b                       | 0.31 b                           | 0.27 b                           |
| No Partner   | 0.23 a              | 0.13 ab                      | 0.12 ab                          | 0.08 ab                          |
| <b>Relationship Supportiveness <sub>3</sub></b>                  |                     |                              |                                  |                                  |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 1.54 a              | 1.58 a                       | -0.08 a                          | -0.03 a                          |
| Resident Social Father   | 1.92 b              | 1.96 b                       | 0.39 b                           | 0.46 b                           |
| No Partner   | -0.04 c             | -0.02 c                      | -1.48 c                          | -1.46 c                          |
| <b>Parental Engagement with Children <sub>4</sub></b>            |                     |                              |                                  |                                  |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 8.20 a              | 8.18 a                       | -0.43 a                          | 1.52 a                           |
| Resident Social Father   | 8.43 a              | 8.24 a                       | 3.80 b                           | 4.14 b                           |
| No Partner   | 4.94 b              | 4.64 b                       | -0.59 a                          | -0.75 c                          |
| <b>Cooperative Parenting with Biological Father <sub>5</sub></b> |                     |                              |                                  |                                  |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 2.45 a              | 2.29 a                       | 0.35 a                           | 0.21 a                           |
| Resident Social Father   | 0.89 b              | 0.88 b                       | -1.13 b                          | -1.14 b                          |
| No Partner   | 1.23 b              | 1.35 c                       | -0.71 b                          | -0.61 c                          |

N=393. Weighted means that share a subscript within a column and variable are statistically similar, while those with differing subscripts are different at the .05 level or greater.

1 Adjusting for mother impulsivity, parents married at birth, grandparents in the household, whether the mother lived with both parents at age 14, mother race, mother age, and mother education

2 Predicted probability holding all else at mean

3 Range from 0 (no support) to 2(high support)

4 Range from 0 (no engagement from any parent) to 14 (engagement 7 days/week from both parents) for no social father or 21 (engagement 7 days/week from three parents)

5 Range from 0 (no cooperation) to 3 (high cooperation)

relationship with their child's father were an exception to this economic picture. Women in this category reported positive change in income over the incarceration window even after adjusting for mothers' demographic characteristics (0.30 unadjusted, 0.23 adjusted).

For repartnered mothers, introducing a new social father is associated with improvements in both relationship supportiveness and parental engagement over the course of the incarceration window. These women reported their new relationships to be more supportive than those with their child's father before his incarceration even after adjusting for maternal demographic characteristics (.39 unadjusted, .27 adjusted). In contrast, mothers whose relationships spanned the father's incarceration reported a small decline (-0.08 unadjusted, -.03 adjusted) and women who become single mothers lost all partner support (-1.48 unadjusted, -1.46 adjusted). Each of the differences in relationship supportiveness were statistically significant. Social father households are also associated with a consistent improvement in parental engagement (3.80 unadjusted, 4.14 adjusted), while unadjusted engagement declined in both single mother households. Adjusting for maternal characteristics changes the small decline reported by mothers who remained in their relationships to a larger positive (1.52). These families reported significantly less change, however, than did social father families. These differences indicate that the same observed parent engagement level at Year 5 represented a small change, or even loss, for families who remained intact but a large gain for families with new social fathers.

Repartnering is not an unqualified improvement, as these families also experienced the greatest increase in reports of domestic violence and decline in cooperation between the biological parents. The unadjusted prevalence of domestic violence increased for all women, though the increase was significantly greater for repartnered women even after adjusting for maternal characteristics (0.27 adjusted). Mothers in the other family structures reported levels of

violence three times lower, though the difference between repartnered and single mothers did not reach statistical significance. Repartnered women also reported less cooperation with the recently incarcerated father than before his incarceration (-1.14, adjusted), while other women reported an improvement or slight loss in this area after adjusting for maternal characteristics. This finding parallels research on repartnering in non-incarceration families suggesting that co-parenting is more sensitive to repartnering than to relationship dissolution alone (Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Tach et al., 2010).

### **Discussion**

The implications of incarceration for relationships are varied and well documented; relationships can be strengthened, destabilized, or strained to the breaking point by the experience (Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016; Massoglia et al., 2011; Turney, 2015a). Research and policies concerned with reentry or father disengagement often emphasize the importance of strengthening relationships or reuniting incarcerated men with their partners and children (Visher & Travis, 2003; Sampson et al., 2006; Uggen et al., 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Western & Wildeman, 2009). For fathers, returning to their family has distinct advantages (Naser & La Vigne, 2005). Yet the implications of reunification or relationship dissolution for women have thus far remained unclear. This article sheds light on this question, and adds nuance to the existing research by emphasizing that mothers' relationship trajectories when exposed to incarceration are consequential for wellbeing, and that mothers' interests may diverge from those of incarcerated fathers and their children.

Over the incarceration window, more women transitioned to single motherhood (44.7%) than remained in their relationships (36.6%) or repartnered (18.7%). While women in the analytic sample were demographically similar, with the notable exception of race, they did not

enter the incarceration window on equal footing. Those who remained together reported more supportive and involved partners before the incarceration, attributes that may either sustain families through the stress of criminal justice involvement or make women reluctant to cut ties.

Consistent with the emphasis on family reunification, couples that remained together typically fared better than those whose relationships ended. After the incarceration, women in these families reported higher incomes, lower prevalence of domestic violence, more supportive relationships, and high levels of both parental engagement and cooperative parenting. In two key areas- poverty and cooperative parenting- these mothers reported a consistent improvement over the incarceration window. Many of these relationships even proceeded to marriage, a signal of underlying relationship quality and stability (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). In other areas, however, wellbeing declined over the incarceration window as suggested in previous research (see Turney, 2015b). Mothers reported waning relationship supportiveness and increased exposure to domestic violence, though declines in parental engagement disappeared after adjusting for maternal characteristics. These declines are comparable to or smaller than those experienced by other women, however, indicating that the interests of women whose relationships persist may align with that of their incarcerated partners despite the hardships.

The story is more complicated for the majority of women who end their relationships with incarcerated men despite social pressure to remain together (Goffman, 2014) or policies focused on reunification (Visher & Travis, 2003; Sampson et al., 2006). Mothers whose relationships ended during the incarceration window typically fare worse at Year 5 than those whose relationships continued. For the plurality of women who became single mothers, the fathers' incarceration coincided with a net loss in wellbeing. The possibility of repartnering, however, adds an important nuance and demonstrates how women's interests may diverge from

those of incarcerated men. Only a third of mothers whose relationships end repartner and fewer repartner through marriage, a finding consistent with considering the incarceration of a former partner to be a disqualifying attribute (see Graefe & Lichter, 2007). For mothers who do repartner, however, wellbeing can improve rather than decline over the incarceration window.

After incarceration, women introduce higher quality partners in ways consistent with the broader literature on social fathers. Social fathers are more highly educated, less likely to have a history of incarceration, and less likely to have abused substances than the recently incarcerated men they follow. Moreover, repartnered mothers report an improvement in both relationship quality and parental engagement over the incarceration window, consistent with research suggesting mothers select new partners on the basis of parenting quality (Bzostek et al., 2012; Carlson & Berger, 2013). These improvements in wellbeing place relatively disadvantaged women on par with those whose relationship persisted. Social fathers' attributes further suggest that mothers are able to select higher quality partners despite the potentially disqualifying "sticky stigma" of incarceration identified by Braman (2004).

In three measures of wellbeing – poverty, cooperative parenting, and domestic violence – repartnering failed to translate into improved wellbeing. Women with new partners were closest to the poverty line, and grew closer over time. This finding is consistent with research suggesting social father families have fewer economic resources (Carlson & Berger, 2013) or questioning the extent to which social fathers pool resources within the household (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Edin & Lein, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Social fathers can also bring new challenges to households. Consistent with the broader family complexity literature, cooperative parenting between the biological parents is closely tied to repartnering (Bzostek et al., 2012; Carlson et al., 2008). Mothers who remain with their child's father through his incarceration

report the most cooperative parenting relationships, indicated by trust, communication, and respect. This cooperation is lower among single mothers and lowest among repartnered mothers, indicating that high levels of parental engagement in social father households may come at the cost of the biological fathers' involvement. Some social fathers were also abusive, and the risk of domestic violence was greatest in these families and increased over the incarceration window.

These findings highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of both the relationship trajectories mothers take when their child's father is incarcerated and the implications of those trajectories. Families that face paternal incarceration experience disadvantages, but there is also meaningful variation associated with whether mothers remain in their relationships, become single mothers, or repartner. The importance of selection, both in exiting relationships and repartnering, complicates the question of whether couples should be encouraged to remain together. Women who remained in their relationships reported their partners to be more supportive and more engaged with their children before the incarceration, perhaps signaling underlying family resiliency robust to incarceration-related hardships and a lowered risk of dissolution. Women whose relationships ended had pre-incarceration disadvantages, including a higher prevalence of domestic violence and lower parental engagement, which worsened over the incarceration window. Disregarding the important role selection plays risks isolating the most vulnerable families, who by ending their relationships may also forego resources and support aimed at reentering men. Rather than a proscriptive focus on preserving families despite weak foundations, these findings highlight the need for policies that support the majority of families navigating changing family roles and resources after incarceration.

### *Limitations*

There are three key limitations to these findings. First, the sample contains only families with young children and might not be generalizable to families with older children, those observed over a longer period, or women without children. Data limitations also preclude examining other relevant family structures like nonresident social fathers, extended family member households, or families with multiple relationship transitions. Second, the precise timing, duration, and type of incarceration cannot be isolated in these data. Analyses necessarily conflate prison and jail spells and cannot speak to the conditions or duration of confinement. Finally, while Appendix A suggests that relationship dissolution occurred around the same time as incarceration, the precise timing and motivation underlying the observed relationship transitions are unavailable.

### **Conclusion**

Women have little choice as to whether their child's father becomes incarcerated, but are faced with a decision about whether continue a relationship with him, become a single mother, or seek a new partner. This article examines the implications of this decision point for the wellbeing of women themselves. Three key findings emerge that provide a nuanced picture of life after incarceration. First, most women exit their relationships, typically becoming single mothers (48%) rather than repartnering (19%). Second, women whose relationships continue through the incarceration report better outcomes afterwards, reflecting stronger pre-incarceration relationships despite small declines over the incarceration window. Third, repartnering can offset some, though not all, of the hardship faced by women who end their relationships. While women were able to introduce higher quality social fathers, their advantages were limited to higher quality relationships and improvements in engagement with children. In contrast, single mothers

reported more cooperative relationships with their child's father and slight, though non-significant, advantages in poverty and domestic violence risk over those who repartnered.

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APPENDIX A: TIMING OF SEPARATION RELATIVE TO INCARCERATION, WEIGHTED PROPORTION AND UNWEIGHTED N

|   |  | Mother Relationship Status at Year 5 |                        |                  | Full Sample       |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|   |  | With Biological Father               | Resident Social Father | No Partner       |                   |
| Timing of Breakup Relative to First Incarceration | Separated Before the Incarceration     | 0.00%<br>(N=0)                       | 42.60%<br>(N=20)       | 27.28%<br>(N=41) | 20.15%<br>(N=61)  |
|   | Same Year                              | 0.00%<br>(N=0)                       | 8.59%<br>(N=10)        | 3.81%<br>(N=14)  | 3.31%<br>(N=24)   |
|   | Separated After Incarceration          | 0.00%<br>(N=0)                       | 9.70%<br>(N=8)         | 19.17%<br>(N=36) | 35.63%<br>(N=44)  |
|   | Separated within same window (2 years) | 0.00%<br>(N=0)                       | 37.21%<br>(N=46)       | 47.83%<br>(N=82) | 38.70%<br>(N=128) |
|   | No Separation                          | 100.00%<br>(N=136)                   | 0.00%<br>(N=0)         | 0.00%<br>(N=0)   | 2.21%<br>(N=136)  |
|   | Total N                                | 136                                  | 84                     | 173              | 393               |

APPENDIX B: DIFFERENT CHANGE SPECIFICATIONS

|  | Weighted Mean Value  |   |  |   |
|--|--|---|--|---|
|  | Difference Score<br>Difference<br>Between<br>Years 1 and 5 | Adjusted for<br>Maternal<br>Background <sub>1</sub> | Regression Adjustment<br>Year 5<br>adjusting for<br>Year 1 | Adjusted for<br>Maternal<br>Background <sub>1</sub> |
| <b>Ratio of Mother's Household Income to Poverty Line</b>        |  |   |  |   |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 0.30 <sub>a</sub>  | 0.23 <sub>a</sub>                                   | 1.38 <sub>a</sub>  | 1.98 <sub>a</sub>                                   |
| Resident Social Father   | -0.19 <sub>b</sub>   | -0.32 <sub>b</sub>                                  | 1.07 <sub>b</sub>  | 1.48 <sub>b</sub>                                   |
| No Partner   | -0.06 <sub>ab</sub>  | -0.26 <sub>ab</sub>                                 | 1.19 <sub>ab</sub>   | 1.75 <sub>ab</sub>                                  |
| <b>Domestic Violence Exposure <sub>2</sub></b>                   |  |   |  |   |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 0.07 <sub>a</sub>  | 0.07 <sub>a</sub>                                   | .09 <sub>a</sub>   | .06 <sub>a</sub>                                    |
| Resident Social Father   | 0.31 <sub>b</sub>  | 0.27 <sub>b</sub>                                   | .34 <sub>b</sub>   | .24 <sub>b</sub>                                    |
| No Partner   | 0.12 <sub>ab</sub>   | 0.08 <sub>ab</sub>                                  | .16 <sub>a</sub>   | .11 <sub>a</sub>                                    |
| <b>Relationship Supportiveness <sub>3</sub></b>                  |  |   |  |   |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | -0.08 <sub>a</sub>   | -0.03 <sub>a</sub>                                  | 1.48 <sub>a</sub>  | 1.51 <sub>a</sub>                                   |
| Resident Social Father   | 0.39 <sub>b</sub>  | 0.46 <sub>b</sub>                                   | 1.89 <sub>b</sub>  | 1.93 <sub>b</sub>                                   |
| No Partner   | -1.48 <sub>c</sub>   | -1.46 <sub>c</sub>                                  | -0.02 <sub>c</sub>   | -0.00 <sub>c</sub>                                  |
| <b>Parental Engagement with Children <sub>4</sub></b>            |  |   |  |   |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | -0.43 <sub>a</sub>   | 1.52 <sub>a</sub>                                   | 8.21 <sub>a</sub>  | 8.20 <sub>a</sub>                                   |
| Resident Social Father   | 3.80 <sub>b</sub>  | 4.14 <sub>b</sub>                                   | 8.39 <sub>a</sub>  | 8.31 <sub>a</sub>                                   |
| No Partner   | -0.59 <sub>a</sub>   | -0.75 <sub>c</sub>                                  | 4.91 <sub>b</sub>  | 4.68 <sub>b</sub>                                   |
| <b>Cooperative Parenting with Biological Father <sub>5</sub></b> |  |   |  |   |
| Biological Parents Together                                      | 0.35 <sub>a</sub>  | 0.21 <sub>a</sub>                                   | 2.45 <sub>a</sub>  | 2.25 <sub>a</sub>                                   |
| Resident Social Father   | -1.13 <sub>b</sub>   | -1.14 <sub>b</sub>                                  | 0.87 <sub>b</sub>  | 0.86 <sub>b</sub>                                   |
| No Partner   | -0.71 <sub>b</sub>   | -0.61 <sub>c</sub>                                  | 1.24 <sub>c</sub>  | 1.35 <sub>c</sub>                                   |

N=393. Weighted means that share a subscript within a column and variable are statistically similar, while those with differing subscripts are different at the .05 level or greater.

1 Adjusting for mother impulsivity, parents married at birth, grandparents in the household, whether the mother lived with both parents at age 14, mother race, mother age, and mother education

2 Predicted probability holding all else at mean

3 Range from 0 (no support) to 2(high support)

4 Range from 0 (no engagement from any parent) to 14 (engagement 7 days/week from both parents) for no social father or 21 (engagement 7 days/week from three parents)

5 Range from 0 (no cooperation) to 3 (high cooperation)

## CHAPTER 3

### **Agency and Constraint: Navigating Jail Incarceration in Rural America**

Jails occupy a liminal place in the criminal justice system, one that is both part of the legal process and a form of incarceration. These two facets of the system, as well as the situation that precipitated the inmate's case, collide within county jails. For families, however, these parts of the legal system are associated with very different models of involvement. While inmates' families can play an active part in navigating the pretrial or legal process, the constraint of incarceration limits family members' activities to mitigating the collateral consequences experienced by inmates and families alike. Using qualitative interviews with family members and romantic partners of inmates in a rural county jail (N=41), I identify three distinct approaches to navigating jail incarceration that reflect different perceptions of both inmate needs and the ability to customize the system accordingly. Families are deeply involved in county jails, blending the strategies appropriate to these different aspects of criminal justice involvement in response to family needs.

## **Introduction**

For inmates and their families, county jails represent a liminal stage of criminal justice involvement in which the legal process, incarceration, and precipitating situation intersect. Unlike state or federal prisons, county jails house inmates serving short sentences or being held pretrial. Family involvement is well documented and consequential throughout the legal system, from arrest and pretrial processing (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992; Goffman 2014) through spells of incarceration in state or federal prisons (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002). While nearly 11 million admissions to U.S. jails occur annually (Minton & Zeng, 2016), little is known about family involvement within the jail context. Within jails, families must respond to the constraints of imposed by incarceration while also engaging with the complexities of the legal process. This paper identifies the strategies family members and romantic partners use to navigate these intersecting aspects of legal system involvement in a rural county jail.

Models of family involvement in either the legal process or incarceration predict different engagement strategies, though both aspects of system involvement are present in jails. Navigating the legal system can involve active negotiations with attorneys, court officials, and other authorities to understand and resolve cases (Feeley, 1992; Blumberg, 1967; Felstiner et al., 1980; Miller & Sarat, 1980). Families can be deeply involved in this process by influencing the initial arrest (Goffman, 2014), informing decisions about whether and how to pursue legal claims (May & Stengel, 1990; Sandefur, 2007), sharing the frontloaded costs of pretrial processing (Feeley, 1992), or influencing plea negotiations and pretrial decisions (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992). Reflecting the dominance of prisons in incarceration research, families navigating incarceration are typically described as constrained by the regulations of correctional facilities rather than negotiating the process (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). Inmate's families develop

strategies to mitigate hardship by coping with the collateral consequences of incarceration (Arditti et al., 2003; Braman, 2004; Goffman 2014), providing for inmate needs (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008), and maintaining relationships despite distance and restricted access (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002). Short jail stays expose families to a different incarceration context than prisons (Comfort, 2016), one in which strategies responsive to the constraint associated with incarceration may be in tension with the active negotiation strategies relevant for pretrial processing. Relatively little work, however, has identified how the many families who encounter county jails navigate this intersection of incarceration and legal processes.

Nearly one-third of jail admissions occurred in small or rural facilities (Minton & Zeng, 2016). These small rural jails account for a growing proportion of inmates (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016; Minton & Zeng, 2016), perhaps reflecting the vulnerability of these areas to social problems like unemployment and drug addiction in the post-industrial economy (Sherman, 2009; Lichter & Schafft, 2015; USDA, 2016). Little is known about how families engage with jails, but even less is known about the growing proportion of families encountering rural jails. Most previous work on incarceration or legal processes has focused on prison incarceration (Comfort, 2008; Fischman, 1990; Nurse, 2002) or urban areas (Braman, 2004; Feeley, 1992; Goffman, 2014). Rural jails, however, operate in a different context. Rural areas often emphasize reliance on family-based strategies to resolve issues (Sherman, 2009; Weisheit et al., 2005), but also have close economic ties to correctional facilities (Eason, 2010; Lichter & Brown, 2011) and historically less bureaucratic courts than urban areas (Feld, 1991; Weisheit et al., 2005).

To examine how families navigate this context, I conducted 41 qualitative interviews with the family members of inmates in one such jail, stratifying the sample by the pretrial status of the inmate. Three family approaches emerged for navigating jail incarceration, each associated

with a different set of strategies for navigating the incarceration and addressing family needs.

Those in the correctional constraint category deferred to the authority of the jail, and developed strategies to manage the collateral consequences of the incarceration and care for the inmate within the constraints of jail regulations. Family members in the legal processing category were actively involved in navigating the legal process on the inmate's behalf, compensating for the inmates' confinement by acting as primary negotiators or legal strategists. Finally, the jail engagement category describes families who incorporated the jail into a broader strategy to address inmate needs, treating the jail like a service provider to coordinate or an aspect of the legal system open to negotiation. These approaches affirm that families play a key part in navigating jail incarceration, and families in each blended the strategies appropriate to different aspects of criminal justice involvement in response to family needs and perceived opportunities. In reconciling the different strategies needed to address inmates' legal, personal, and incarceration related needs, family members recognized the jail as both an important resource as well as a source of constraint and frustration.

## **Background**

### *Families in the Legal Process*

The legal process encompasses how cases originate, move through the courts, and are ultimately resolved through dismissal, plea, or sentencing. Families can play an active role in navigating this process by shaping how individuals enter into the system (Goffman 2009, 2014), how legal claims or disputes are pursued (May & Stengel, 1990; Sandefur, 2007), and the resolution of pretrial processing (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992). At each point in the process, families are faced with making consequential decisions about how best to interact with the complex and often ambiguous legal system.

Invoking the criminal justice system can be a key strategy for families struggling to control difficult behavior, though rarely a preferred option. Families, especially those with few resources, often prefer to manage conflicts and administer informal social control outside of the legal system, and can take on a role of service coordinator or shield family members from system involvement (Comfort, 2016; Goffman, 2014; Braman, 2004; Sandefur 2007). When these efforts fail, however, some turn to the legal system as “social agency of first resort” to manage negative behavior (Comfort, 2008, p. 168), provide a strong sanction (Goffman, 2009), or even protect inmates or their families from dangerous situations (Goffman, 2014). Involving the criminal justice system in this way, however, is typically framed as invoking formal control or stability rather than accessing rehabilitative services (Comfort, 2008; Goffman 2014). While some facilities are able to provide services like medical care, family skills, or addiction treatment (Edin et al., 2004; Rocque et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 2008; Visher & Travis, 2003), correctional facilities are not primarily designed to be rehabilitative institutions (Comfort, 2008; Wacquant, 2010).

The legal process itself is complex, costly, ambiguous, and often operates through informal negotiations and discretion despite its bureaucratic framework (Feeley, 1992; Felstiner et al. 1980). Feeley’s pretrial process model (1992) emphasizes that opportunities for shaping outcomes, as well as the costs of engaging with the legal system, are frontloaded in the earliest and most discretionary phases of the process. Navigating this consequential pretrial process requires negotiating with various system actors, advocating for personal interests, and making strategic decisions (Feeley, 1992). Models of legal engagement further illustrate how individuals’ interactions with the legal system are informed by strategies like consulting family and knowledgeable professionals for advice (Felstiner et al., 1980; May & Stengel, 1990) or

weighing perceived power and resources against the costs of involvement (Feeley, 1992; Felstiner et al., 1980; May & Stengel, 1990; Sandefur, 2007). The pretrial process model echoes this concern about costs, positing that minimizing direct costs like fines and indirect costs like pretrial incarceration motivate defendants to accept plea deals as a way to shorten the process (Feeley, 1992).

Throughout the legal process, families can play a key strategic role as advisors, influencers, resources, and decision makers. At the most basic level, family members often share the frontloaded costs of involvement in the criminal justice system. Yet, families can also influence the legal process and participate in its navigation. Family members can be involved in organizing attorneys and paying legal costs (Comfort, 2008, p187; Feeley, 1992), negotiating or encouraging plea deals (Blumberg, 1967; Comfort, 2008, p188; Feeley, 1992), and raising money or collateral for bail to minimize pretrial incarceration (Braman, 2004; Clark, 2014; Goffman, 2014). Feeley also argues that merely being present in the courtroom can improve how influential system actors like prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges perceive the inmate's case (1992).

### *Families and Incarceration*

While family's involvement in the legal process is characterized by active negotiation with the criminal justice system, involvement in incarceration is typically described as reluctant acquiescence to that system. Incarceration imposes costs on inmates and their families, but there is often little room to resolve these problems through negotiation with the correctional facility. While families are often deeply involved in the incarceration, this involvement typically takes the form of mitigating hardship. This situation is captured by the secondary prisonization model, which describes how the formal control exerted over inmates both applies to visitors and extends

beyond prison walls to affect families in the community (Comfort, 2008). Within this framework, constraint permeates everyday activities outside the prison as family members' lives become regulated by the rules, location, and dynamics of the institution holding their loved one (Comfort, 2008). Instead of active negotiation with the system, this framework emphasizes how families conform to the regulations imposed upon them.

Incarceration incapacitates inmates, but also disrupts family life, imposes costs and fees, and exposes inmates and their families to a highly regulated correctional environment. Families are faced with collateral consequences like relationship instability (Massoglia et al., 2011; Swisher & Waller, 2008; Turney, 2015), material hardship (Arditti et al., 2003; Braman, 2004; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011), housing instability (Geller & Walker Franklin, 2014; Geller & Curtis, 2011), and social isolation (Braman, 2004; Fischman, 1990; Morris, 1965). Relationships with inmates must be conducted within the formal structure of the correctional facility, and are subject to regulations about contact (Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002). Some families may benefit from the stability associated with this formal control, and in these cases, the incarceration can provide appreciated relief or even strengthen relationships temporarily (Comfort, 2008; Turney, 2015b; Wakefield & Powell, 2016). Yet the constraints imposed on inmates, who have few assets or sources of income while within jail or prison, mean that families can also be essential sources of material support as well as connection to the outside world (Clemmer, 1958; Naser & La Vigne, 2005; Uggen et al., 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003). Romantic partners may even use that reliance to incentivize compliance with institutional rules to protect limited access to the inmates (Comfort, 2008).

Families are actively involved in incarceration, though they typically rely on strategies to mitigate hardship rather than shape the process. Families develop strategies to

maximize communication while economizing to compensate for the costs of incarceration (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008), provide funds and packages to connect with inmates (Comfort, 2008), and make long treks for visits (Braman, 2004; Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008). Few engage with the correctional officers or prison directly to protest conditions of confinement or other concerns (Comfort, 2008). Families develop another set of strategies to mitigating the collateral consequences of incarceration by managing stigma (Braman, 2004; Fischman, 1990), responding to changing resources (Braman, 2004; Geller, 2014; Morris 1965; Roque et al. 2011), or restructuring daily life to care for dependents left behind (Arditti et al., 2003; Braman, 2004).

These strategies and the secondary prisonization framework, however, may reflect the dominance of large prisons in this literature. With some notable exceptions (see Arditti et al., 2003; Comfort, 2016), studies of incarceration either focus on prisoners' families (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Fischman, 1990; Nurse, 2002) or rely on datasets like the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study or the Adolescent to Adult Health Study that conflate jail and prison incarceration (see Wildeman et al. 2016). While these studies provide insight into the hardships of incarceration, prisons represent a more static phase of criminal justice involvement than jail incarceration and may have different implications for inmates' families (Comfort 2016).

#### *Families and Rural Jails*

Families interacting with rural jails encounter both the legal process and incarceration, and must adopt strategies to navigate this intersection within the rural context. While all jail inmates are incarcerated, over 60% nationally are in jail pretrial and thus navigating the legal process while incarcerated (Minton & Zeng, 2016). Whether an individual is incarcerated while awaiting trial or released on community supervision is a function of the seriousness of the arrested offense, previous offenses, community ties, their ability to raise bail, and county

supervision resources (Clark, 2014; Crime and Justice Institute, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. Those serving short jail sentences are often not far removed from either the legal process or community. In most states, including the study site in New York, those with sentence under one year remain in local jails while those with longer sentences are transferred to state or federal prisons (New York State, n.d.).<sup>2</sup>

The tension between the active navigation strategies families' use in the legal process and the hardship mitigation strategies common to incarceration may be exacerbated in small rural jails. Small jails have the highest inmate turnover rates, signaling shorter stays, more admissions relative to the inmate population, and higher overhead costs than larger jurisdictions (Minton & Zeng, 2016). For families, short frequent jail spells compound stress, as this form of incarceration can have implications similar to long prison stays but without the benefits of stability (Andersen, 2016; Apel, 2016; Comfort, 2016; Wildeman et al., 2016). The higher administrative costs may place additional strain on the local jurisdictions responsible for funding jails, especially in rural areas where the economic landscape has shifted to less desirable industries like landfills and prisons (Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Sherman, 2009; Lichter & Schafft, 2015; Lichter & Brown, 2011; Eason, 2010). In this context, rural jails may shift more of the burden of inmate care onto families through strategies like outsourcing phone and other services (Weisheit et al., 2005), or be less able to provide programming to address inmate needs than state or federally funded prisons (Solomon et al., 2008; Mellow et al., 2008; Weisheit et al., 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> While there are not national estimates on the average duration of pretrial incarceration, inmates can be held pretrial until their case is resolved and data available on felony offenders in urban areas suggests that process takes an average of 4 months (Reaves, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> California is a rare exception due to the realignment policy (AB109) introduced in 2011, which assigned certain categories of offenders to county jails regardless of sentence length as a strategy to address prison overcrowding. (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation)

Families in rural areas are facing a host of social problems, but may have limited options to respond without the legal system. Rural areas have high rates of partial unemployment and low wages (Lichter & Jensen, 2002; Slack, 2010) as well as elevated rates of drug and alcohol use (Rudd et al., 2016; USDA, 2016; US DHHS, 2016; Sherman, 2009). These areas may also lack the infrastructure to respond to these problems (Pruitt, 2008; Weisheit et al. 2005) or have populations resistant to public interventions (Lichter & Schafft, 2015; Sherman, 2009). While rural populations may be disinclined to reach beyond the family or interpersonal levels to resolve issues (Ellickson, 1994; Weisheit et al., 2005), engaging with the legal system in these areas may also be less formal, influenced by personal relationships, and potentially tailored to individual needs (Feld, 1991; Weisheit et al., 2005, Ch. 5). Informality within the legal system is associated with the active negotiation observed in the pretrial process model (Feeley, 1992), suggesting this strategy may be even more salient in rural systems. These social problems and the limited opportunities to address them outside the legal system may in part account for the growing proportion of inmates observed in small rural jails (Minton & Zeng, 2016; Kang-Brown, 2016; Karber & James, 2005). However, the implications of these nuances for how families engage with the jail have remained unclear.

### **Data and Methods**

This paper asks what strategies families use to navigate incarceration in a rural jail, with particular attention to how families reconcile the different approaches predicted by the pretrial process and secondary prisonization frameworks. This question is addressed through interviews I conducted with 41 family members of male inmates held in a rural county jail over a six-month period from 2015 to 2016. The study site is given the pseudonym Lake County, and participant names and identifying details are obscured to protect confidentiality.

*Lake County*

Lake County is typical in many ways of a moderately rural county; the vast majority of the land is officially rural while nearly half of the population resided in one of the county's small towns (US Census, 2016). At the time of the study, the population was over 90% white (US Census, 2016). The county also faced challenges typical of rural areas. Most residents were employed in blue collar, agricultural, or service jobs, though only 60% of the adult population worked in full time year round jobs (US Census, 2016). Many county residents, including family members of some study participants, were employed in the criminal justice system through law enforcement or one of the six prisons located within an hour's drive of the study site. Lake County was also experiencing the opioid epidemic firsthand. Heroin related arrests and deaths were common in the local newspapers throughout the study period. The downtown areas and jail itself were dotted with fliers advertising addiction support organizations, and the county had trained both law enforcement officers and civilians in the use the overdose reversing drug NARCAN. While the county had a rich social service ecosystem, study participants were often unaware of the available programs or had not been successful at securing the assistance they needed through these programs.

The Lake County Jail was small but recently built, with an average daily population typically hovering well under capacity at around 75 inmates (NY DCJS, 2016). Approximately two-thirds of the inmates in the jail were not yet sentenced (NY DCJS, 2016), paralleling the proportion of pretrial jail inmates at the national level (Minton & Zeng, 2016). Nearly 20% of the inmate population were federal pretrial inmates (NY DCJS, 2016), which both generated revenue for the jail and brought families from other counties into the study.

*Study Design*

I recruited study participants in person over a six-month period in the lobby of the Lake County Jail, where friends and family congregated before each of the seven Saturday visiting hours. A purposive sample, stratified by the sentence status of the inmate being visited, was recruited from among the family members and romantic partners who came to the jail to visit a

male inmate.<sup>3</sup> Jail administrators estimated that approximately 75 percent of inmates had visitors on a typical weekend, a rate much higher than the 52 percent national estimate (BJS, 2006). Inmates were only eligible for visits, however, after the three-day classification period. These included inmates ineligible for pretrial release, those unable to raise the required funds in less than a week, and those serving jail sentences. The median incarceration at the time of the interview was 3.5 weeks, ranging from three days to over a year for some pretrial inmates.

TABLE 3.1: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

|                               | N          | Proportion of Sample |
|-------------------------------|------------|----------------------|
| <b>Relationship to Inmate</b> |            |                      |
| Parent/Grandparent            | 18         | 44%                  |
| Wife/Girlfriend               | 15         | 37%                  |
| Sibling                       | 6          | 15%                  |
| Other                         | 1          | 2%                   |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b>         |            |                      |
| White                         | 31         | 77%                  |
| Black                         | 7          | 17%                  |
| Hispanic                      | 2          | 5%                   |
| <b>Gender</b>                 |            |                      |
| Male                          | 6          | 15%                  |
| Female                        | 35         | 85%                  |
| Age mean (range)              | 42 (19-83) |                      |
| <b>Education</b>              |            |                      |
| Not Reported                  | 5          | 12%                  |
| High School or less           | 10         | 24%                  |
| Some College                  | 19         | 46%                  |
| College or More               | 6          | 15%                  |
| <b>Legal Status of Inmate</b> |            |                      |
| Pretrial                      | 25         | 61%                  |
| Sentenced                     | 16         | 39%                  |

*Note:* County of residence refers to where the interviewee resides at the time of the interview, not necessarily where the incident occurred or where the inmate resided at the time of arrest.

<sup>3</sup> The families of incarcerated women were excluded from the sample, though one respondent was associated with both an incarcerated man and woman. The incarceration of men and women has different implications for families (see Johnson & Waldfogel 2004; Zhang & Dwyer Emory, 2015), but the number of incarcerated women in the Lake County Jail was too small to include a sufficient sample in the study period to investigate these differences.

Recruiting continued until the point of saturation (Weiss, 1994), where additional interviews ceased to provide new insight. This point was reached after I conducted 41 interviews with the parents, grandparents, siblings, wives, or girlfriends of inmates at the Lake County Jail. Approximately one-third of all eligible visitors participated in the study, either at the first contact or after several months of building rapport, and those who refused typically cited distance or time concerns. As shown in Table 3.1, approximately two-thirds of family members in the study fell into the pretrial sample stratum. The few families associated with convicted but unsentenced inmates are included in the pretrial category, as their experiences closely parallel those in the pretrial category. Reflecting county demographics, study participants were largely non-Hispanic white (77%) and minority respondents were predominantly from surrounding counties.

I conducted in-person interviews with all study participants, either in a private corner of the jail lobby after their visit, in private homes, or in public restaurants. Interviews were semi-structured using a “tree and branch” design (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) to focus on the same set of topics across interviews. This type of interview is conducted as a guided conversation to develop rapport with the interviewee and elicit rich narratives while allowing new themes and information to emerge (Weiss, 1994). Interviews averaged 62 minutes long, ranging from 28 minutes to just over 2 hours.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis using ATLAS.ti qualitative software. The analysis began with open line coding of individual transcripts, and proceeded to more analytic or focused coding as data collection continued and themes began to emerge (Charmaz, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Weiss, 1994). Codes were developed inductively, informed by themes identified in previous work in the areas of legal processing and

incarceration. Memo writing and visual displays were used throughout the analysis to assess emerging themes, identify meaningful categories, and make sense of small segments of data like interactions with lawyers or jail staff (Charmaz, 2001; Weiss, 1994). In this stage of the analysis, comparisons were also made between various populations within the sample, like parents and partners or those in different sentence-status strata. Finally, through inclusive integration (Weiss, 1994) a framework was developed for understanding how families navigate the legal processes and constraints of jail incarceration.

### **Findings**

Family members of inmates within the pseudonymous Lake County Jail blended family involvement strategies and innovated new approaches to navigate the intersection of the legal process, incarceration, and family needs. Three categories of family members emerged, each with a distinct perspective that shaped how they navigated jail incarceration and responded to family needs. The approach taken by those in the *correctional constraint* category closely followed the secondary prisonization framework. These family members emphasized how the correctional setting restricted their activities to mitigating hardship, though the formal control of the inmate could also have indirect benefits for families. In contrast, families in the *legal processing* category were actively involved in the inmate's legal case, mirroring the legal or pretrial process models. The strategies central to this category included managing the inmate's legal situation and negotiating with system actors like attorneys, efforts necessitated by the inmate's incapacitation within the jail. Finally, families in the *jail engagement* category incorporated the jail into their broader strategy to address the inmate's underlying problems. These individuals treated the jail like a community service provider to be coordinated or negotiable part of the legal system. The strategies utilized by family members in these different

categories are summarized in Table 3.2.

Despite these varying approaches to jail incarceration, most families understood the inmate’s present legal situation to be part of a larger constellation of problems often including addiction, mental illness, or negative relationships. Reflecting the challenges facing Lake County and other rural areas, nearly one-third of study participants reported the inmate to have a drug addiction, one-quarter reported alcoholism, and one-third reported a history of victimizing the family. Many family members across categories described efforts to address inmate problems before the incarceration, though existing county programs were often insufficient interventions

TABLE 3.2: JAIL NAVIGATION STRATEGIES BY FAMILY CATEGORY

| <b>Managing the Incarceration</b>  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mitigating collateral consequences for family</li> <li>• Providing commissary funds, packages, and clothes for inmate</li> <li>• Providing emotional support through regular visits</li> </ul>  |   |
| <b>Navigating the Legal Process</b>  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling and writing to lawyers, public defenders, and probation officers</li> <li>• Organizing documents</li> <li>• Attending court proceedings</li> <li>• Arranging bail</li> <li>• Strategic bail decisions based on time-served calculations</li> <li>• Contributing to plea decisions</li> </ul>  |   |
| <b>Engaging with the Jail</b>  |   |
| <b>Collaboration</b>   | <b>Conflict</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiating incarceration by reporting an offense or technical violation</li> <li>• Choosing not to post bail due to behavior concerns</li> <li>• Calling the jail to identify programs and encourage participation</li> <li>• Alerting jail staff to inmate health problems, relevant health history, or mental health crises</li> <li>• Phone calls or conversations with jail staff to discuss inmate</li> <li>• Seeking assistance in identifying rehabilitation or post-release placements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting local journalists to write stories</li> <li>• Calling sheriff or sheriff staff to lodge complaints</li> <li>• Reaching out to local and state politicians or agencies</li> <li>• Appealing to other authority figures to intervene (doctors, lawyers, hospital staff)</li> <li>• Filing complaints against the jail with national or state accrediting agencies</li> <li>• Keeping records of official inmate grievances</li> </ul> |

or families were unaware of these alternatives. The incarceration itself was seen as a continuation of an ongoing family crisis or even a temporary respite. What distinguishes families in different categories, however, is how they perceived their own involvement with the inmate's needs to translate into the jail context.

*Constrained by the Correctional Setting*

The first category of family members described the most salient aspect of the incarceration to be the constraint of the correctional context, though the jail had short stays and lax visitor rules relative to prisons (see Comfort, 2008). Approximately 40% of study participants fell into this *correctional constraint* category. These family members perceived no way to influence either incarceration or legal system outcomes, and instead developed strategies to mitigate incarceration-related hardship for both inmates and themselves. These strategies worked within the jail's regulations, which individuals in this group saw no way to alter. These strategies align closely with the secondary prisonization framework for involvement (Comfort 2008), in which families adapt their lives around the regulations of the prison and work within those regulations to achieve a semblance of normality and domesticity. Deference to the jail's authority could be a matter of choosing to 'do nothing' as a legal strategy (Sandefur, 2007), relief in relinquishing responsibility for the inmate's behavior, or a reflection of perceived powerlessness. The individuals in this category were disproportionately romantic partners with young children, not residents of Lake County, and associated with inmates either facing federal charges or serving jail sentences.

For individuals overwhelmed by inmate needs, relinquishing that responsibility to the jail could be a relief. This was the case for Denise, who described searching her boyfriend's pockets for drugs after he fell asleep to protect their two young sons before his incarceration. Denise had

been working to locate a rehabilitation center and convince her boyfriend to seek help for his addiction, but these activities ceased when he was sent jail for a technical violation. While the incarceration came as a blow, Denise was also relieved that she no longer had to balance his needs against those of her children. She described his incarceration as “Bittersweet. Bitter because I love him and he loves his kids. Sweet because I know he needed it, he was on a downward spiral. I couldn’t help him and he wouldn’t leave us alone.” In the jail, her boyfriend was alive, safe, and not using drugs which provided the family with some temporary stability. Denise was able to focus on mitigating the collateral consequences for her children of both his addiction and incarceration, and she was finding summer programs for them instead of rehabilitation programs for their father. This experience was common among the study participants, for whom substance abuse was often a real and present part of daily life. For Denise and others in her situation, relinquishing responsibility to the jail could be a relief from the hardship associated with managing issues like addiction, transportation to probation meetings, or disruptive and dangerous behavior with limited resources. While she brought her children to visit their father in jail, Denise was neither involved with his legal situation or care nor saw a need for such involvement during his incarceration.

While Denise’s involvement ended at the entry into the jail, for Dolores the jail was a constant source of frustration as she attempted to help her grandson endure his six-month sentence. Like most interviewees, Dolores was very involved in her grandson’s incarceration. She visited at the same time every week to check on her grandson and “boost his spirits,” provided what money she could for commissary, purchased and mailed in the clothing that complied with jail regulations, and had made extensive plans for how to stabilize his life after release. Efforts like these were costly for families, often placing great strain on already tight

budgets and leaving little room for extras like phone calls during the week. Yet Dolores felt her efforts were constrained at every turn by the regulations of the jail, explaining, “I’ve learned there’s nothing I can do to change the rules. We just act the way they tell us to.” The Lake County Jail had only a short list of rules compared to prison facilities (see Comfort, 2008), but while visit times and rules about providing money or items for inmates were rigidly enforced, laxer regulations about visitor screening were enforced inconsistently by different correctional officers. Dolores and others in this category felt demeaned by what she called the “Mickey-Mouse rules” of the jail, which could seem like arbitrary acts of control despite the efforts made by many correctional officers to provide guidance on rules or relax unnecessary regulations.

Dolores’ experience is characteristic of others in this group, where individuals were actively involved in the incarceration but perceived few, if any, viable strategies to address the inmate’s legal situation or needs. Instead, the strategies described by those in the *correctional constraint* category involved managing the collateral consequences of incarceration families and maintaining supportive relationships with inmates within the regulated correctional setting. It is important to note that family members in the following groups share these strategies for managing the incarceration itself, but do not share the same sense of constraint.

#### *Navigating the Legal System*

For the 30% of study participants in the *legal processing* category, strategies for managing jail incarceration centered on navigating the inmate’s legal situation. Individuals in this category were mostly associated with pretrial inmates, and thus involved in the phase of legal processing where negotiation and family involvement can shape case outcomes (Feeley, 1992). These families interpreted the inmate’s incarceration during this phase to mean that navigating the legal process fell to those on the outside with the time and resources to manage

the negotiations. Nina, whose cousin was being held on a violent charge, aptly phrased the problem: “trying to go through the legal situation when you’re inside is harder than it is if you were outside, because you have to have other people contact your lawyer whenever you want to try something.” Families in this category demonstrated more involvement in the legal process than predicted by the pretrial process model, acting as substitutes or proxies for the inmate rather than merely advisors in many cases (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992). Due to the high cost of communication and limited phone and visit times, this legal legwork occurred with limited inmate input facilitated by signed waivers authorizing full access to the inmate’s legal case. While many of inmates were reported to have problems with addiction or untreated mental illness, these concerns were secondary to the main tasks of avoiding prison, securing alternative sentences or diversions, or concluding the legal process in order to address the inmates’ needs privately.

The legal processing category consisted mostly of inmate’s parents, and included both individuals encountering the legal system for the first time and those drawing on previous experience. While many of these individuals had extensive social capital, few had connections with law enforcement in Lake County and interactions with jail staff were limited to information gathering. Family members utilized similar resources to navigate the inmate’s legal situation as those noted in the legal dispute literature. Namely, individuals tapped into their own social networks to identify lawyers or other experts with relevant knowledge (Felstiner et al., 1980; May & Stengel, 1990), hired and engaged with lawyers (Blumberg, 1967; May & Stengel, 1990), and mobilized personal resources to fund the legal process (May & Stengel, 1990). It is important to note that few family members protested the inmate’s innocence, focusing instead on minimizing the long-term repercussions of their criminal justice involvement.

Sandra's management of her son Leigh's case demonstrates how families both made sense of and strategically influenced the legal process. Leigh was incarcerated pretrial on a serious offense, one Sandra framed as a manifestation of his addiction. Like the other interviewees with limited criminal justice experience, Sandra struggled to learn basic information like the charges against her son, the status of his case, the timeline of the legal process, and whether to hire a lawyer. While a public defender was assigned to the case, he was of little assistance to Sandra in the early phases of pretrial processing. Sandra explained:

The stressful part is that the public defender is not getting back to Leigh or to me, he will only see his client when he's being offered a plea deal. So I called in my friend to see what he could find out.

Difficulty reaching public defenders was a common complaint, and making frequent calls to the public defender to catch them on the phone was a key strategy used by many family members since it was difficult for inmates to make calls and messages were seldom returned. Despite lacking money for a private lawyer, Sandra was able to reach out to her personal network and found an acquaintance who could do some legal legwork to help her make sense of the situation. Those without Sandra's personal resources relied more heavily on jail staff to provide insider information on the status of the inmate's case, and correctional officers served a similar role as accessible yet sometimes inaccurate guides much like court officers in the pretrial process model (Feeley, 1992).

Many of the family members in this group became the inmate's primary legal strategist, engaging in activities well beyond information gathering or influencing inmate decisions. Armed with information gathered from her acquaintance and internet searches, Sandra decided the best strategy for avoiding prison, a prospect that brought her to tears, was to not raise bail. She decided "it is in his best interest to stay in the jail because it's gonna count for time served. He's

gonna get time, but I have to keep him out of the prison system.” Sandra hoped that counting pretrial incarceration time would reduce the remaining sentence below the one-year prison threshold, a strategy with deep roots (Feeley, 1992). This decision caused tension within the family as her son’s girlfriend had been raising bail to secure his release before the birth of their child, though she ultimately deferred to Sandra’s legal strategy. This strategic planning was also a key part of Scarlett’s strategy, who drew on her personal experience with plea negotiations to encourage her husband to hold out for a better deal despite her being nearly 9 months pregnant at the time of the interview. Scarlett thought they could negotiate something more favorable with a shorter incarceration, explaining:

If it wasn’t for me, he probably would’ve took that deal. You’ve got to realize that just because you have a public defender and they work for you doesn’t mean they’re goin’ to do everything right by you.

Scarlett’s wariness of public defenders highlights a key tension identified in earlier work on pretrial processing (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992), that attorneys and their clients can have conflicting interests and that decisions to maximize efficiency and minimize the upfront costs of pretrial processing may have long-term repercussions. Families bear the frontloaded costs of the pretrial process (Feeley, 1992); both Sandra and Scarlett faced hardships like financial distress, lost income, postponed healthcare, and in both cases the prospect of a birth without the inmate’s presence. Yet, these families were willing to endure these incarceration-related hardships to minimize the long-term implications of criminal justice involvement for the family. For families in this category, the legal process and the necessity of navigating that process was the salient part of jail incarceration, rather than the constraint of incarceration.

*Engaging with the Jail*

Individuals in the *jail engagement* category innovated strategies beyond the existing models of family involvement, and engaged with the jail throughout the incarceration as part of a larger strategy to manage inmate care. Rather than an arbitrary or distant institution, the 30% of study participants in this category saw the jail as a tool or customizable service provider. This group disproportionately contained inmates' parents and romantic partners who felt responsible for the inmate's wellbeing, many of whom had roots in Lake County that facilitated a familiarity with local institutions. Many had long histories of managing the inmate's addiction or mental health, often by engaging with different county programs, regional service providers, courts, and even law enforcement or probation. Perhaps due to this history, family members in this category rarely distinguished the inmate's legal and underlying problems. Rather, interactions with the jail resembled how family members coordinate with service providers in the community (Comfort, 2016) or an extension of the negotiations with legal system actors observed in the *legal processing* category. Strategies developed to address the inmate's legal or personal needs continued through the incarceration, sometimes supported by the constraint imposed by the jail on the inmate's behavior and sometimes at odds with jail regulations.

For nearly one-fifth of the study participants, and just over half of the family members in jail engagement category, the incarceration itself was an intentional strategy. These family members reported either calling the police, reporting a technical violation, or choosing not to post bail as a way to control the inmate's behavior and access resources. This was the case for Sheryl, who instigated her son's incarceration as a last effort to contain his heroin addiction before he either died or put the family's housing at risk. Both fears were well founded, as a heroin related death occurred in Sheryl's town soon after his arrest and a felony drug charge

would disqualify the family from the public housing support needed to make ends meet. Sheryl described how she made her decision, saying, “As bad as I didn’t want to, I’m the one who pressed charges... I wanted him to go to rehab. It’s easier to get it court ordered for him to go.” By using the criminal justice system, Sheryl was able to secure assistance from staff at the jail to locate a rehabilitation center that could provide the kind of long-term residential care needed to treat heroin addiction, keep him alive while a placement was found, force him to attend despite his resistance, and protect her family from further victimization. Most family members in the jail engagement category saw no way to achieve these ends outside the criminal justice system.

For other families in this category, engaging with the jail became a strategy to address the inmate’s personal and legal problems only after the incarceration occurred. Ed’s regular communication with the jail counselor about his grandson’s care provides a clear example of this approach. Ed’s grandson had a long history of both mental illness and drug use, and Ed’s own history of mental illness made him reluctant to cut ties as the rest of the family had done. Upon hearing of the incarceration, Ed began taking steps to minimize the consequences of the legal situation by gathering bail funds so his grandson could remain enrolled in community college. During his first visit to the jail, however, Ed became concerned that his grandson had problems beyond the legal situation so changed strategies to coordinate with the jail rather than secure release. Ed explained:

He had this odd look about him, like a con man. The first week I would’ve set bail. But after getting into it, talking to the jail counselor, she said [his behavior in the jail] has got everyone all stirred up. Right now, I’m monitoring him by talking to the jail counselor.

Ed reached out to both the jail counselor and a variety of other jail staff and volunteers whose accounts confirmed his suspicion that his grandson might get into further trouble if

released. Instead, he began working closely with the jail staff to identify appropriate mental health and addiction support for his grandson. Others in this category reported less dramatic collaborations, though all interactions went well beyond the information-gathering characteristic of the legal processing category. Family members reported regularly discussing inmate behavior with correctional officers or other jail staff, calling to report specific issues like suicide threats or conflict with other inmates, working with jail staff to find an appropriate placement after release, and both identifying and encouraging participation in programming relevant for inmate needs.

Partnerships do not always work smoothly, however, and a small number of family members reported more adversarial strategies when their attempts to coordinate with the jail were frustrated. This pattern is consistent with the escalation of legal conflicts when interpersonal approaches fail to resolve disputes and participants feel they have sufficient power or resources to press the claim (see Felstiner et al., 1980; May & Stengel, 1990; Sandefur, 2007). Margot's attempt to force the jail to provide her son's medication epitomizes one such dispute. Margot reported initial relief at no longer having to manage his probation schedule, but this was quickly tempered by her fear that her son's health would deteriorate while off his medication. Her direct complaints to the jail staff did not resolve the issue, nor did her attempt to appeal to her son's doctor as a higher authority. She explained how her efforts escalated, saying:

They keep messing around with his meds. I don't know if that's even legal. So I wrote to the commissioner of jails. I had called them first and they told me to put it in writing, a formal complaint. So I did. And I'm not going to give up.

In addition to filing a report with the state, an action several individuals reported during the study period, Margot had also called other local and state politicians, and spent an unproductive afternoon calling the state department of corrections, which has no authority over county jails. Other individuals reported activities like calling the sheriff and other officers in

department to lodge complaints, bringing in a local reporter to write a story about the jail, reporting the jail to state and national accrediting agencies, threatening to sue the jail, and securing documentation sent by inmates to use as evidence. For the most part, these strategies were framed as an attempt to correct a problem in the jail on behalf of all families, not as a challenge to the legitimacy of the institution. This advocacy typically failed to produce the desired response, however, due in part to the short duration of jail incarceration.

### **Discussion**

Within county jails, the legal system, incarceration, and the situation that precipitated the inmate's case intersect. Unlike the literatures addressing these separate aspects of criminal justice involvement, jail incarceration requires families to navigate these contexts simultaneously. Inmates' families must manage the intricacies of pretrial processing and legal decision-making (Feeley, 1992; Blumberg, 1967), the behavior of an addicted or disruptive family member (Braman, 2004; Goffman 2014), the challenges of incarceration itself (Arditti et al., 2003; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008), and the instability of short and frequent jail spells (Comfort, 2016). Families are deeply involved in navigating jail incarceration, blending the strategies appropriate to these different aspects of criminal justice involvement in response to family needs and perceived opportunities.

Family members and romantic partners of the inmates in the Lake County Jail fell into three distinct categories; each encapsulating a distinct approach to the jail and subsequent strategies for navigating incarceration, legal processing, or inmate needs. The strategies used by family members in the correctional constraint category demonstrated that the secondary prisonization framework of mitigating damage within the constraints of a correctional facility (Comfort, 2008) could resonate in small jails as well as large prisons. The legal processing

category emphasized the inmate's pretrial process or legal case, expanding on the strategies allocated to family members in legal process models (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992) to compensate for the inmate's incapacitation. Finally, the jail engagement category highlighted distinctive strategies to incorporate the jail as a partner in addressing inmate needs. Despite these different approaches to jail incarceration, and the proliferation of strategies therein, each family member had to reconcile the competing pressures of agency and constraint within the jail context. The regulations of the jail could be inflexible and bewildering, but could also moderate ongoing family crises by restraining difficult inmates and providing access to scarce resources. Family members demonstrated agency through their involvement in navigating the criminal justice system to improve inmate outcomes, yet this could be a daunting or even unimaginable approach for families with limited experience and resources. While families' perceive the strategies open to them differently, each of their experiences underscores the importance of family members' involvement within the jail context.

For Dolores and others in the correctional constraint category, the regulation of incarceration spilled over into daily life in ways consistent with the secondary prisonization model (Comfort, 2008). Family members developed strategies centered on mitigating the collateral consequences of incarceration for both families and inmates within the regulated correctional structure that were strikingly similar to those described in studies of prisoners' families (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Fischman, 1990). These families were very involved, but either chose not to engage with the legal system or saw no opportunity to do so, perhaps reflecting reluctance similar to that observed in lower income families' interactions with the legal system (Sandefur, 2007). Denise's example demonstrates that the inmate's confinement could also bring relief from difficult domestic situations. This indirect benefit echoes Comfort's

(2008) finding that prisoners' partners can appreciate the stability incarceration brought to their relationships, and may also shed light on findings that the collateral consequences of incarceration for families can be minimal in cases of addiction or violence (Wakefield & Powell, 2016; Wildeman, 2010).

For families in the legal processing category, incarceration was approached as an aspect of the pretrial or legal process that made enhanced family involvement in legal negotiations necessary. The legal process literature describes navigating the system as challenging, paradoxically bureaucratic yet informal, complex, and frontloaded with important decisions and negotiations as well as costs (Feeley, 1992; Felstiner et al., 1980; Miller & Sarat, 1980). Families can be involved in this process by invoking arrest (Goffman, 2014), raising bail (Braman, 2004; Clark, 2014; Goffman, 2014), influencing plea decisions (Blumberg, 1967; Feeley, 1992), and coordinating with lawyers or other system actors (Blumberg, 1967; Comfort, 2008; Comfort, 2016). The inmate's incarceration necessitated an expanded set of strategic or autonomous negotiations for family members that went well beyond the documented involvement of family members in the legal process. Individuals, including Sandra and Scarlett, used a wide set of strategies to steer the legal process and negotiate with system actors, acting as a proxy or substitute for the inmate. Family members developed legal strategies, weighed in on plea decisions, and acted as the primary point of contact for often difficult to contact attorneys. This expanded involvement drew upon resources identified in the models of legal conflicts, including social capital, system knowledge, resources, and protection from risk (Felstiner et al., 1980; May & Stengel, 1990; Sandefur, 2007). In some cases, these strategies prolonged pretrial incarceration in order to secure a more favorable case resolution and minimize long-term costs.

The strategies developed by families in the jail engagement category may be most reflective of the rural context of the Lake County Jail. These individuals developed a new model of family involvement, a jail collaborative model, which draws upon strategies used to manage behavior in the community (see Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2016; Goffman, 2009; Goffman 2014) as well as the idea of incarceration as rehabilitation or a turning point (Edin et al., 2004; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Solomon et al., 2008; Visser & Travis, 2003). Family members in this group integrated the jail's access to resources and control over inmate behavior into a broader strategy to manage inmate needs, both coordinating efforts with jail staff and pushing back when the jail's response was unsatisfactory. Some, like Sheryl, even instigated the incarceration with the intent of accessing resources only available through the legal system.

These strategies are embedded in the broader context of rural areas like Lake County, where populations have both a different relationship with the criminal justice system and are facing family crises with limited resources or access to services. Many of the individuals in the jail engagement category trusted the criminal justice system, had family members working within it, and perceived a role for themselves in shaping that system. Previous research on rural criminal justice suggests that these areas are often accustomed to less bureaucratic legal systems which rely more heavily on personal connections (Feld, 1991; Weisheit et al., 2005), a relationship further informed by the predominance of criminal justice careers and prisons in rural economies (Eason 2010; Lichter & Brown, 2011). Many of the family members in this group had been actively engaged in coordinating the inmate's needs before the incarceration, but their involvement continued through the incarceration unlike in studies of more urban areas (see Comfort, 2016). As rural areas continue to struggle with social problems like unemployment or

chronic substance abuse, and responding falls to families with few alternatives beyond the criminal justice system, strategies to engage with the jail in this way are likely to persist.

Families are key players in navigating jail incarceration, and the strategies they develop vary in response to family needs and perceived agency to navigate the system. For the family members and romantic partners of inmates at Lake County Jail, the jail's position as both an aspect of the legal process and type of incarceration could be a resource as well as a source of punishment or constraint. Jails could be temporary respites, access points for resources to address the needs of troubled individuals and families, and mechanisms for responding to chronic community problems. The hope that the jail can serve a positive function echoes the conceptualization of incarceration as a turning point or access point for services (Edin et al., 2004; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Solomon et al., 2008; Visser & Travis, 2003), an idea which has given way to the more pessimistic view of prisons as warehouses imposing hardship, though some stability, on families (Coates, 2015; Comfort, 2008; Wacquant, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009).

Jails are not primarily designed to serve a rehabilitative function, and providing programming or stability can be more difficult in jails than prisons given higher turnover rates (Comfort, 2016; Mellow et al., 2008; Minton & Zeng, 2016; Solomon et al., 2008). Among the families of the Lake County Jail, the jail's response to inmate needs often did not reflect the goals of family members. Yet the persistent hope and limited alternatives available to these families suggests another way jails could operate to better serve local community needs. Jails' structure can provide unique access to other institutions like rehabilitation or services, or temporarily halt difficult situations to provide time to respond appropriately. These attributes are shared with few other institutions in rural areas. Integration with service providers in this context

could provide needed support to families in crisis (see Solomon et al. 2008), who are often intimately aware of inmate's needs but unaware of or unable to access support in the community to address the problem. Rural counties are in a prime position to re-envision how jails operate in the United States to provide the support families seek and address chronic social problems.

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