INCAPACITATED FATHERHOOD: THE IMPACT OF MASS INCARCERATION ON BLACK FATHER IDENTITY

Dara Lewis¹

Loyola University Chicago

Philip Young P. Hong

Loyola University Chicago

Abstract

Despite the growing body of literature detailing the disproportionate social consequences of mass incarceration to black men, many of whom are fathers, insufficient attention has been given to the extent of damage on fatherhood and father identity in particular. This article examines the consequences of mass incarceration on father identity and the performance of fatherhood among a group of black men. Drawing from rich qualitative data, the study uses the lived experiences and perceptions of a group of formerly incarcerated black fathers. This research found that the incarceration experience significantly disrupted the performance of fatherhood among this group of men resulting in acute harm to their identity as fathers during incarceration and ongoing harm after release.

Keywords: Incarcerated fathers, fatherhood, Black fathers, African-American fathers, and father identity

INTRODUCTION

Many black fathers are not absent, uncommitted, or deadbeats as often portrayed by media and literature, but far too many of them, hundreds of thousands, are in fact, “warehoused in prison, locked in cages” (Alexander, 2010, p.175). Black men and their families have been significantly impacted by mass incarceration, characterized by the unprecedented and disproportionate growth of the U.S. prison population, from 190,794 men in 1970 to over 1.5 million men by 2016 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1982, 2018) and despite recent decline in the growth rate, the prison population remains well over one million people in a given year.

Federal legislation enacted in the 1970s upon which the “War on Drugs” was built, contributed to the emergence of mass incarceration. Drug War policies introduced punitive criminal sanctions to combat drug use and sale instead of prevention and treatment, which substantially increased drug arrests (Mitchell & Caudy, 2015) as well as state and federal drug law sentencing rates that led to longer prison terms. Through what Alexander (2010) characterizes as “the roundup” to “the lockdown” followed by ongoing punishment administered after release, scholars have identified racial disparities at each step of the criminal justice process (Bobo & Thompson, 2010; Mauer, 2011; Western, 2006; Tonry, 1995). Disparities in law

¹ Corresponding Author: Dara Lewis, Center for Research on Self-sufficiency (CROSS), Loyola University Chicago, 1 E. Pearson St., Maguire Hall, 4th Fl., Chicago, Illinois, 60611. Email: dlewis1@luc.edu. This study has IRB approval from Loyola University Chicago.

enforcement practices, arrests, convictions, and sentencing, as well as probation and parole policies, help maintain the system of mass incarceration. The cumulative effect has been devastating, as the government incarcerates ever greater numbers of black men, for longer periods, including many of them for non-violent drug offenses (Miller, 1996).

While black men make up less than 6% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), they supply nearly 39% of the adult, male prison population, and they are imprisoned at a rate six times higher (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). Also, they are at a 7% higher risk to be incarcerated sometime during their lifetime than their white, non-Hispanic counterparts (Petit & Western, 2004). This is particularly concerning for the 52% of state and 63% of federal inmates who reported being parents with minor children, resulting in approximately 810, 000 incarcerated fathers and mothers who are leaving more than 1.7 million children without one or both of their parents each year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). In 2006, fathers made up 92% of incarcerated parents, a disproportionate number of which were black men (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

The removal of fathers disrupts families and weakens social networks within communities. During incarceration, financial and childcare responsibilities that had been previously shared must be shouldered by the other parent or caregiver and place pressure on extended kin and social networks. With more than half of black incarcerated fathers reportedly living with and being the primary financial providers for their children before their incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), the loss of income decreases the family's overall income, leaving their children more vulnerable to poverty (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller & Garfinkel, 2011).

Black children are seven and a half times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) and face a greater risk of homelessness due to paternal incarceration (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014), making them vulnerable to a host of social and emotional problems (Murray & Farrington, 2008; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Wilbur, Marani, Appugliese, Woods, Cabral & Frank, 2007; Barnhill, 1996; Wolf, 2006). Research also indicates that incarceration weakens the bonds between parents and their children, creating insecure attachment, decreased cognitive abilities, and weak peer relationships (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

While the dominant focus of the literature on parental incarceration has been the effects on children and women as primary caregivers, the adverse impact on fathers is lacking in both the literature and in criminal justice policies. Prisons facilitate the "recoding of existence" (Foucault, 1977) and *prisonization* acts as a mechanism of identity deconstruction and reconstruction (Clemmer, 1951). The prison experience subjects fathers to what Crewe (2001) refers to as a "tightness" that, "instead of brutalizing, destroying and denying the self, it grips, harnesses and appropriates it for its own project" (p.524). As Sykes (1958) theorized the "pains of imprisonment"—meaning the psychological pain resulting from the loss of liberty, autonomy, and control over sexuality, alter how men see themselves as men and as fathers. Additionally, spatial and physical contact restrictions imposed by institutions along with financial limitations further impact how fathers engage with their children and see themselves as fathers. .

This research adds to the body of parental incarceration literature by focusing on the impact of incarceration on fathers. We highlight individual and social dynamics impacting fatherhood among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated black men. Black men father under a particularly racialized experience, constrained socioeconomic status, and often, multiple layers of social arrangements (Coles, 2010). Fatherhood is complex, and father absence resulting from incarceration has tremendous personal impact and social implications. Drawing from the lived

experiences and perceptions of formerly incarcerated black men, we examine the impact of incarceration on how they identify as fathers and enact fatherhood.

LITERATURE

The Impact of Incarceration on the Father-Child Relationship

Factors such as the length and number of prison sentences contribute to the impact of incarceration on the father-child relationship. Drug convictions result, on average, in 12-13 month-long prison sentences (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). The U.S. Department of Justice report (2014) on the recidivism among prisoners released in 30 states in 2005 found that 80.8% of African Americans had returned to prison within five years of their release. Men serving multiple and consecutive stints in prison can end up spending a considerable amount of time away from their children.

Place certainly matters. The physical location of many prisons in rural areas and the tendency to transfer incarcerated men and women to different facilities around the state or country limits the ability of fathers to maintain contact with their children. Sixty-two percent of fathers in state prisons and 84% of those in federal prisons were confined more than 100 miles away from their homes, and 43% of fathers in federal prison were held more than 500 miles away from their homes (Mumola, 2000). Due to the time and distance away from their children, fathers can become disconnected from their roles and responsibilities they previously performed while in prison (Western & Wildeman, 2009).

Dyer (2005) hypothesized that the masculine identity constructed in prison may lead men away from a father identity that supports their children's positive development. In their study of the criminal justice system, race and father engagement, Woldolf & Washington (2008) found a significant negative relationship between incarceration and father engagement. Clayton & Moore's (2003) research provides one explanation for this phenomenon: they argue that prisons erode social skills and prison experiences reinforce the *cool pose*, a coping mechanism characterized by portraying toughness and aloofness that many black men use to manage their presentation of self and establish male identity (Majors & Billson 1992). However, this cool pose inhibits the development of nurturing relationships.

The punishing nature of the prison setting itself presents barriers to the fathers and their children (Dyer, 2005). Hairston's (2001) research found that the rules and regulations required by the prison environment are not conducive to developing or strengthening the behaviors needed for effective parenting. Though federal, state and private prisons can vary by security level, they all place restrictions on physical contact between fathers and their children. Visitation, as with every other aspect of the prison environment, is strictly controlled. Research by Hairston (2001) found that affection, communication, and discipline are inhibited in the prison environment. The policies aimed at maintaining order and control also suppress one hallmark of father-child interaction: rambunctious, stimulating, and emotive play (Lamb, 2004). Other research found that the association between communication and relationship satisfaction has tremendous implications for incarcerated fathers who have limited ability to communicate with their children (Dindia, 1994). According to Braman (2004), incarceration effectively encourages destructive behaviors such as infidelity, distrust, and neglect, which reinforce negative stereotypes that have perpetuated the myth of the missing black father.

In atypical cases such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, the incarceration of fathers can contribute to the safety and well-being of their children (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). However, as Wakefield & Wildeman contend, “parental incarceration is a meaningful and potentially harmful event in the life course of the most disadvantaged children” (2014, p.70).

The Impact of Incarceration on Father Identity

As buildings, prisons physically confine and control people. As institutions, they completely alter individual and social life. According to Goffman (1961), prisoners are subjected to loss of autonomy and to the *mortification of the self*, whereby individuals are stripped literally and figuratively of the life they previously lived, roles performed, and the symbols assigned to them. This loss of personal identity is countered by the acquisition of a new, inmate (institutional) identity, which facilitates assimilation into the institutional culture. However, Tripp (2009) argues that prisoners do not undergo a direct transformation to the new, inmate identity, but instead they simultaneously manage the acquisition and loss of multiple identities. In prisons, men must act/perform in gendered ways to affirm their status and identity as men through behaviors often thought of as hyper-masculine such as aggression and apathy, which impair their ability to maintain pro-social roles.

By altering who men are and what they are able to do, prisons can and do influence the development of individual and father identity. Research on imprisoned fathers and identity indicates that incarceration interrupts the identity confirmation process of men (Dyer, 2005). The identity confirmation process is driven by identification with a father identity standard whereby men identify with and are affirmed in their role as fathers. The identity confirmation process links identity (who one is) and behavior (what one does). In a feedback loop, men enact behaviors meaningful to their identities as fathers. Appraisal (by others) is given for their actions and is then compared to the identity standard (how one believes they should behave as a father), and any stress resulting from discrepancies between the appraisal and the identity standard drives the modification of subsequent behaviors (Burke, 1991). Performance of the essential components of the father identity confirmation process—enacting meaningful behaviors, receiving an appraisal for behaviors, and modification of behaviors—is at best, challenged during incarceration. Research indicates that incarceration interrupts the identity confirmation process in a way that forces, “a change in the nature of his identity as a father and subsequently a change in his sense of self” (Dyer, 2005, p.207). This suggests that incarceration may have an ongoing, long-term effect on identity as men and as fathers.

Extending West & Zimmerman’s (1987) concept, “Doing Gender,” father identity can be similarly viewed as a social construct. Father identity encompasses not only what a person is but what they do as well. Father identity and correspondingly, fatherhood, is *done* through everyday social interactions. As a social construct, father identity is done, redone, and transformed by ever-changing historical, economic, social, and political forces. We challenge, however, Arditti, Smock, & Parkman’s (2005) characterization of fatherhood lying dormant during incarceration. As research on incarcerated fathers indicates, father identity is neither stable nor fixed (Muth, 2018), and we argue that it is constantly being done, redone and undone. As such, mass incarceration uniquely shapes how black men *do* fatherhood.

METHODS

Cole and Green (2010) have pointed out that black men are more often recognized as fathering children than being fathers to their children. Qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited to challenge this narrative through the experiences of formerly incarcerated black fathers. This paper is part of a larger study examining the impact of incarceration on how black men *do* fatherhood. Research here focuses on men's identity as fathers during incarceration and after their release from prison. The qualitative study was conducted among formerly incarcerated black men participating in a fatherhood program at a local non-profit organization in a mid-sized Illinois city. In providing a way to explore meaning people assign to larger social problems, the use of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009) is particularly applicable to this study, as we were seeking to explore how incarceration impacts fatherhood and father identity.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a fatherhood program at a local non-profit organization. They were informed about the study through posters placed in the program office and by program staff. The researchers then attended orientation and group sessions of the non-profit's fatherhood program to provide information about the study again, answer any questions, and recruit participants. Those willing to participate gave consent and permission to be contacted later for individual interviews.

Given the research indicating incarceration negatively harms the children of men convicted of non-violent offenses (Wildeman & Western 2010) in particular, participants for the study were limited to such men. Of the 68 men who identified as formerly incarcerated fathers, 35 had been convicted of non-violent offenses. The sample of formerly incarcerated fathers was further limited to those who reported serving no more than a total of 10 years in prison over their lifetime for non-violent offenses, resulting in 20 participants for this study.

Participants were black men between the ages of 21 and 40, with the mean age of 33-years-old, who identified as having at least one biological child under the age of 18 at the time of their most recent incarceration. On average, participants reported having three biological children (minimum of 1 and a maximum of 6) under the age of 18 with mothers while serving time. The majority of participants were incarcerated for drug-related offenses (N=19), followed by theft (N=1). Length of incarceration ranged from 27 months to 10 years, with the mean of three years and 11 months.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used for this study to help us better understand the participants' fathering experiences while in prison after release. Interviews were scheduled and conducted within 7 to 21 days after the participants provided consent to participate in the study. Interview questions asked participants about four areas: (1) fatherhood experiences (becoming a father and their relationship their fathers); (2) the meaning they assign to fatherhood; (3) what a father should be and do; (4) what their experiences of fathering were like while in prison; and (5) what their experiences of fathering were like after release.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided oral and written consent to be interviewed and recorded before beginning each interview. Interview participants

were also informed about their right to terminate the interview at any time for any reason. Interviews lasted between 30 and 130 minutes. Interviewees received a \$25 Walmart gift card at the end of the interview. After interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and coded. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

A combined, inductive to deductive qualitative content analytical approach was taken to capture the richness of phenomena of interest: a) components of father identity, and b) the father identity confirmation process. The use of inductive content analysis is recommended when research on a phenomenon, such as father identity, is lacking or fragmented from which inductive models can be developed and tested through deductive analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007).

First, the transcripts were carefully reviewed to obtain a general understanding of the text. Next, analytic codes were generated from the open-ended responses to the specific interview question asking what they thought a father should be and do. Responses with the highest frequency were combined and a focused coding scheme was produced to determine the father identity components that were identified by fathers in the study: 1) being there, 2) being an example, and 3) providing. The father identity-focused coding scheme was then used to analyze transcripts. The transcripts were then carefully reviewed and analyzed again using the focused coding scheme that included father identity confirmation process components: a) modifying or b) abandoning father identity.

The inductively generated categories were deductively validated from the interview transcripts. To assure validity and reliability, an intersubjective and consensual understanding of the text by the authors was achieved through careful review and in-depth discussion rather than using quantitative inter-rater coefficients (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Interviews revealed patterns in the practices that make up how men *do* or enact fatherhood.

RESULTS

The findings are organized into three sections. The first section, titled, *Doing Fatherhood*, presents the conceptualization of father identity identified by participants in this study. The second section, *Doing Fatherhood While Incarcerated*, explores ways in which incarceration presented challenges to the identity confirmation process. The third section, *Incapacitation of Fatherhood*, discusses how men attempted to manage their identity as fathers during and after incarceration.

Doing Fatherhood

The *father identity* concept presented here does not represent, “theoretical musings and created standards for identity that do not match the lived experiences of fathers” (Pasley, Petren & Fish, 2014, p.316), but draw from lived experiences and represent what men in this study thought a father should be and do. Collectively, the father identity components identified in the narrative analysis that we will focus on here—1) being there, 2) being an example, and 3) providing—form the *father identity standard*.

Being There. Many fathers spoke of the importance of being physically present in the lives of their children. Physical presence was expressed as being an essential component of

father identity. After serving five years in prison, Adam, a 27-year-old father of three children reflected on the importance of being there for his children:

Just being around. That's the most important part (of fatherhood). People think it's about money, but it's just being around that matters most. Honestly, that's what I think anyway. I think being around is the most important thing.

Half of the men interviewed reported knowing their biological father when they were growing up. However, the majority of the men reported having had a father who was somewhat involved or not involved in their lives at all when they were growing up. Jason, a 30-year-old father, attributed the motivation for being there for his two children to his own experience of growing up without a father in his life.

Well, my dad wasn't in my life. So, I just did everything opposite what happened to me. So, you know, I just wanted to be in their life. Pretty much be there and make sure they have everything that they need.

For some, not living in the home with some or all of their children made being physically present in their lives more challenging. They found participation in rearing activities such as getting the children ready for school in the morning and reading bedtime stories at night to be more difficult to do when not living in the home. For fathers with children by multiple partners, being there physically for all of their children daily was more challenging and, at times, impossible. Anthony, a 37-year-old father, lives with only one of the eight children that he has with five different women. With the other seven children living in different households, he found it difficult to spend as much time with each child as he would like. He explained, "I'm missing out on time each day. I can't be four or five different places at one time... I'm missing out on time with them. Time is very important. [Being there for] School events. [Being there for] Sports events."

The children's mothers can also limit a non-resident father's ability to be there for their children. Maternal gate-keeping, the active process of encouraging or discouraging father involvement, was cited as a source of tense relations and great frustration (Roy & Dyson, 2005). Anthony shared his experience with maternal gate-keeping by one of the five mothers of his children.

With the young lady that has two of mine [children]. I'm very open-minded. I can always adjust my schedule to get my children but if she ain't having a good week or good month. I can't see them...She knows how dear my children are to me, so you would think she would allow me some time. But, the ball is in her court.

Steve, a 28-year-old father of four children, recalled an extended period when, because of a conflict, the mother of two of his children would not allow him to see them said this:

It was like five months when the mother of my two kids, we got into it and she tried to keep them from me. It was depressing cuz', I was with my kids from the beginning. So, it was like, you took my kids away from me. You ripped a whole piece of my heart out.

Being an Example. Fathers spoke of finding value in being an example to their children. Being an example was described as characteristic of what a father should be and what a father should do. Wilson, a 35-year-old father of six biological children, explained how being an example to his children meant, “Being a role model. Being a hero. Being a leader.” By his children looking up to him, he said it, “It make me feel like a hero to my children”.

The ability to set a positive example for their children was reported as being important to their children’s character development. Stanley, a 25-year-old father of two children, remarked, “Everything you say and do teaches them.” Thomas, a 40-year old father of one biological daughter and three step-children, expressed a similar sentiment. His philosophy was that while it is important for fathers to correct children when they are wrong, it is even more important for fathers to model positive behaviors for their children. He described being an example as a legacy he would like to leave to his children in the future.

Not just telling them when they’re wrong but setting a good example. You know how some people say, “Do as I say and not as I do?” I can’t tell them not to do this and I turn around and do it. I can’t tell them not to act a certain way and then turn around and do it. And, if I do, I owe them an explanation of why I did it... So, 10 years from now I want them to say, “He taught me that. He was a good example.”

While men expressed a desire to set positive examples for their children, they were also cognizant of how their involvement with the criminal justice system provided negative examples that they did not want their children to follow. Twenty-three-year-old Calvin’s only child, a son, was three months old when he went to prison for selling drugs. He said this about being an example for his son, “I wanna show him this is the way he should live. According to how I’m living [now], this is how he should live. Not going to prison and catching cases [getting arrested] and selling drugs.”

Providing. Fathers we interviewed discussed the importance of financially providing for their children. Before going to prison, Philip, a 39-year-old father of five children, shared that his financial resources earned in the drug economy allowed him to “give them [his children] everything they wanted. Making sure that their children had what Philip referred to as “the basics” was expressed as an essential part of being a father. The basics are being provided to, “make sure the baby eats, the baby got clothes to wear, and... the baby has a roof over their heads.”

Despite the talk of providing financially, when asked what they thought was most important for fathers to provide, fathers identified love. The preeminence of providing love to their children may indicate that fathers in this study are redefining the provider role around emotional and social components and involvement consistent with Bryan’s (2013) study of fatherhood among low income-fathers.

Doing Fatherhood While Incarcerated

Fathers in this study described how being incarcerated prohibited them from enacting behaviors that confirm their identity as fathers. While in prison, they were *not* able to be there, *not* able to be the example they wanted to be to their children and *not* able to provide love, basic needs and protection effectively.

Not Being There. Fathers expressed negative emotions, including sadness, disappointment, and regret, when they talked about not being physically present in the lives of their children during their incarceration. Fathers with young children particularly noted how their children developed rapidly during that time and that they missed many milestones. Year after year, fathers missed birthdays and holidays with their children. They missed hearing the children's first words and seeing them taking their first steps. Some reported missing their child's birth. Others reported missing the first day of school, parent-teacher conferences, and graduations. Reflecting on how it felt during the five years he was in prison, Jason said:

It was hard because I had to watch them grow up on pictures. I'd see them. They came to visit me, but it wasn't as much as I would like to see them...So, I really only seen them 5 or 6 times and then just pictures and stuff like that and phone calls, but really it isn't the same thing as being there.

Rituals, as Durkheim theorized, are important for publicly cementing bonds between fathers and their children and are also essential tools men use to construct their identity as fathers (Burke 2003). Men who are unable to perform such rituals while in prison experience negative consequences to their identity as fathers. The inability to perform rituals compounded with prolonged physical separation can strain even the strongest relationship, affecting the ability of fathers to bond with their children while in prison. Daniel, a 36-year-old father of four biological children, served a consecutive sentence of 4 years in state prison followed by 6 years in federal prison. His youngest child was three months old, and the oldest was five years old when he went away. He described the separation from his children during the ten years he was incarcerated as "horrible." He said, "For a person who truly loves and cares for his children, it was horrible. It was truly horrible...I wasn't able to see them for chunks and chunks of time."

Jason's son was two years old and his daughter an infant when he began serving a five-year sentence in federal prison for possession of a controlled substance. He shared his experience of bonding with his infant daughter while in prison.

When I went in [to prison] she was seven or eight months [old] so, she didn't know me. It was kinda hard to see when she would come visit. She didn't know me, and I'd been gone so long that she would kinda act funny with me. But now she's all, she's a daddy's girl... but like I say, she didn't really know me so, it was hard for us to bond but she got better.

Some men said they were unable to fulfill what they described as their role and duty as a father during their incarceration, particularly where their sons were concerned. According to participants, their sons were raised by mothers or other female caretakers in their absences, leaving their sons without anyone to help them learn "how to be a man" and "get ready for the world." Many shared the sentiment that "only a man can really teach his son how to truly be a man." For these men, training their sons how to be men included teaching their sons how to use the bathroom, play sports, and interact with women. Many lamented not being there to teach daughters what to look for and avoid in a man.

In addition to not being able to teach life skills, they also reported finding it difficult to instill morals and values in their children from prison. Fathers also reported difficulty seeing themselves as possessing authority in their children's lives and being able to administer

correction for breaking rules, due both to their absences and having their status as lawbreakers. Relationships that were damaged before or during incarceration were not immediately repaired upon release. The time missed was time lost for many. Fathers noted how it took time to adjust and reassume roles previously held, such as being an authority figure or disciplinarian in their children's lives. Larry explained his reservations about assuming a disciplinary role upon release with his son, who was just one and a half years old when he went to prison: "You know that's your kid but you be like, 'man, this dude don't even know me.' I haven't seen 'em in three and a half years. Who am I to try and tell him to sit down? I had to build that rapport back with him."

Not Being an Example. Fathers expressed disappointment, regret, and shame regarding their involvement in illegal activities. Adam reflected on how his past involvement in illegal activities affected his children in a way that he did not desire.

I see that they growin' up and that they act like me. They have certain characteristics of me and makes me...I want them to be better than me...All that gang bangin' and that drug selling ain't getting me nowhere but back in prison.

Barry, a 28-year-old father of four biological children, expressed his desire for his daughter not to get involved with a man who is like he had been in the past.

Well, from me havin' a daughter, I looked at her looking at the man I was and seein' me and all the B.S. [bullshit], and I thought about it. And, like, I don't want her to grow up idolizing me or looking up to me and then want to get with a guy like me...I didn't want her to think it was cool to be with a guy like me and the same with my son. I didn't want him to think it was cool to be rippin' and runnin' the streets.

The reality of de-masculinization and dehumanization behind bars further limits fathers' ability to model positive examples for their children. After the first couple of visits by his children, Wilson told his girlfriend not to bring his children back to visit him in prison.

I told their mother not to bring them anymore. I loved them, but I didn't want them to see me like that. It hurt. I don't know if they understood...I didn't want then to see what we have to go through for visits. I just wanted them to be children. I told my girl she could still come, but not the kids.

Similar to Wilson, others said they did not want their children to see them in a prison jumpsuit or see and know what they as prisoners "go through," such as being strip-searched or being treated in a demeaning way by prison guards.

Often, men framed their past involvement in illegal activities as a "mistake" or as a consequence of falling in with the wrong crowd. Going to prison was not the example that they wanted to set for their children and they expressed a desire to make personal changes to stay out of trouble and be a positive role model.

The stigmatization of being marked as a "criminal" or "felon" weighed heavily on the minds of many fathers and resulted in expressions of shame and embarrassment. Many fathers made comments about hating to have to "check the box" on job applications and feeling as though people held their criminal past against them. Still, many expressed hope in finding employers who might "give them a chance" and allow them to prove themselves.

Not Providing. Prior to incarceration, many fathers had been involved in providing for their children's basic needs but were limited in their ability to provide while in prison. A few fathers reported sending money home to their children from funds received while in prison or providing through family members using money that they had stashed away and had not been seized by law enforcement. However, for the majority, not being able to provide for their children's basic needs while they were incarcerated was expressed as a source of stress and frustration. When 28-year-old Shawn went to prison, his three children by three different women were all three years old. He had an additional child with a fourth woman after returning home. He expressed how the pressure to pay child support for two of his four children in addition to financial instability after serving one year and three months in prison, affected his ability to provide for all of the children.

I tried to do everything to keep my financial stability, but it's hard not having a job. I had a job working at Buffalo Wild Wings but I paid child support for two kids...With the job I was working, after they take out child support, it's like I wasn't making no money. You know? I would get put out of where I was living. By me being a dad, it was hurting me...It's just financially. I don't always be able to do what I want for my kids.

For some, the pressure to provide for their children's basic needs could lead them back to criminal activity, such as selling drugs or theft. Shawn divulged that he took risks from time to time in order to provide for his children's needs:

I can't provide for them like I want to but everything they want, I always manage to get it. Not always the right way but I manage to get it. I don't always want to have to take a risk to get stuff for my kids. I should be able to work for it. I try to keep them happy. One day it's gonna catch up...I don't want them hurting for nothing or have to want for nothing, to have to ask for nothing.

Incapacitation of Fatherhood

Interviews revealed ways in which incarceration limits the enactment of fatherhood and disrupts the father identity confirmation process, in effect incapacitating fatherhood. As previously mentioned, prison identity—the masculine identity constructed in prison—may lead men away from a father identity that supports their children's positive development (Dyer, 2005). The assumption of a prison identity harms the maintenance of father identity among incarcerated men. Prison culture, policies, and procedures prohibit men from enacting behaviors that confirm their identity as fathers, which ultimately disrupts the identity confirmation process, producing stress. By *modifying* or *abandoning* the identity standard, fathers seek to ameliorate the resulting stress.

Modifying the Father Identity Standard. For some, modification of the father identity standard translated into lowering their expectations and requirements of themselves as fathers while incarcerated. Unable to physically be there for their children, the majority of fathers interviewed attempted to “do what they could” to maintain relationships with their children while incarcerated. Consistent with prison data indicating that the majority of parents in prison maintain contact with their children primarily through letters and phone calls and visits (Glaze &

Maruschak 2008), fathers in this study also described their efforts to make regular phone calls, writing letters to and having visits with their children as a mechanism to enact fatherhood. Several fathers reported maintaining communication with their children despite cutting off physical contact through visitation. Even after Wilson cut off visitation with his children, he continued to, “write them every weekend and send them cards and drawings.” Similarly, Zeke cut off prison visits from his children to avoid experiencing additional stress: “I told them don’t come visit me because it’s painful to see them coming and leavin’ without me, so, I told’em that I don’t do visits. I just handle that for myself but I called home. Got a lot of letters. So, that kept me going.”

In being moved around in the federal prison system, Larry found doing fatherhood by enacting behaviors to confirm his identity as father especially challenging.

I was like all the way across the country. Feds send you anywhere. You might be down south and then out west...So, it’s kinda hard to nail down letters and keep track of your mail and stuff...I ain’t even gonna lie. I felt like wasn’t a dad during that period of my life cuz’ like I said I was constantly being moved around. I didn’t have a set facility... It’s kinda hard tryin’ to be a dad.”

Despite the challenges faced in maintaining contact with his family, Larry reported doing whatever he could do to maintain a relationship with his infant son despite his physical absence. This included attempting to contact his son’s mother whenever he got situated in a new facility and writing letters that initially took up to a year for her to receive.

In scaling back requirements and lowering the expectations they place on themselves for what they should be and do as fathers—i.e., modifying the father identity standard—they were able to confirm their modified identity as fathers and avoid identity stress.

Abandoning the Father Identity Standard. Those abandoning the father identity standard were men who disassociated from their identity as fathers and relationships with their children while incarcerated. When asked what it was like being a father from prison, Larry responded, “I wasn’t a dad during that period of my life.” A small group of fathers reported not having any contact with their children. They reported not caring about their relationships with their children and intentionally cutting off contact with them. Adam said, “I wouldn’t allow it [visits]. My son came one time, I told him, don’t ever do that! I wouldn’t allow it. I didn’t write nobody. I was just at the point that I didn’t care none,” and had no additional contact with his son during the five years he spent in prison.

In theory, changes to father identity resulting from incarceration might be reversed when fathers return home and resume the enactment of the behaviors they performed before going to prison. However, incarceration’s reach extends itself into the lives of fathers and their children after release. Probation and parole housing assignments and movement restrictions can continue to limit the father’s ability to be there physically. Calvin had been the custodial parent and caretaker of his infant son before prison. While in prison, he did not have visits with his son and was unable to enact the behaviors meaningful to his identity as a father. Upon release, parole conditions subjected him to electronic monitoring and restricted his movements away from his parole address between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm and limited his travel to 60 miles. These conditions prevented him from being able to visit his son who lived in a town 90 miles away. Unable to see his son, he attempted to abandon his father identity. He went on to share that he primarily used

alcohol, among other things, when trying to “erase” his son. He rationalized this behavior as something he did to cope and relieve the stress of not being able to be a part of his son’s life.

Me being a father, it means so much to me but it’s just so little right now...sometimes, I leave out the house and feel like I’m not even a father at all... I try to erase him for a while, but it don’t work. I don’t think it’s a good thing to try and erase him either but it just be so hard. I be tryin’ to find any method I can to get through it but it just don’t work.

Fathers who modified or abandoned their father identity while incarcerated found it challenging to pick up where they left off with their children when they came home. Many found that not being in their children’s lives during period(s) of incarceration had altered the nature of their relationship. Some fathers noted that not being there to help to raise their children made their children be raised by others and they had learned different and sometimes conflicting value systems. This presented challenges in bonding with children when they returned home. Reflecting on his relationship with his children after being in prison for 10 years, Daniel said:

See, when you’re incarcerated, your children are growing up in a certain culture depending on whatever environment they in. And, I have children by different mothers who are thinking different things. So, when I came home, being that I had did a “360” on myself, it was kind of hard for a couple of my children to adapt to what I was trying to teach them because that was something they wasn’t getting on the environment they grew up in...They had experienced me but they really, really hadn’t experienced me (when he was in prison). A lot of the experiences came from what others around them told them about me...So, when I came home and was giving them something different, it wasn’t received at first. But as time went on and on and on, I was able to catch on. But, I wasn’t able to catch my oldest son.

Even as fathers attempted to make up for the lost time when they returned, many expressed experiencing ongoing emotional distance from their children. Some described it as a continuation of the distance created by their incarceration. Daniel did not think that the bond with his son could be repaired because his son was now “grown” and did not need him any longer. His incarceration changed him and their relationship. For fathers recognizing that their role as fathers was no longer central to their children, they attempted to redefine what it means to be fathers from the periphery of their lives.

DISCUSSION

The criminal justice system impacts relationships between fathers and their children from the point of arrest to sentencing and throughout the prison term and beyond. Even children too young to fully understand what is going on can pick up on the underlying emotions of confusion, anger, and fear and experience loss when their father is removed. While the harm to children should in no way be minimized, adverse impact on fathers should also be recognized. From a two-way street developmental perspective of the parent-child relationship (Erickson, 1963), the pain and trauma resulting from the absence due to incarceration are experienced by children as well as their fathers.

The warehousing of black men in prison has an outsized effect on the relationships between fathers with their children. Physical separation from their children alone increases the likelihood of fathers experiencing depressive symptoms and poorer health outcomes compared to fathers living with their children (Eggeben & Knoester, 2004). While locked in cages, fathers are certainly limited and, in some cases, prohibited from enacting behaviors needed to confirm their identity as fathers. Despite the limitations and challenges to the father identity confirmation, this study found evidence of active and not dormant fatherhood while in prison. Findings here challenge notions of stable and fixed father identity—being either good or bad; present and active or absent and inactive/dormant. Father identity is neither stable nor fixed, and it is constantly being done and undone behind prison walls.

The *father identity standard* presented here is a conceptualization of what the men in this study thought a father should be and what fathers should do. They viewed: being there, being an example, and providing as essential components of their identity as fathers. While in prison, they were prohibited from enacting these behaviors and confirming their father identity. They were *not* able to be there, *not* able to model behaviors that they wanted their children to follow and *not* able to provide for their children. Unable to meet the father identity standard, some attempted to modify their behaviors by lowering expectations and requirements of themselves as fathers. Others abandoned their father identity, completely disassociating themselves from their identity as fathers and relationships with their children while incarcerated.

Findings here support previous research examining fatherhood and incarceration. Similar to previous studies, fathers in this study described how the prison structure constrains their relationships with their children (Arditti et al., 2005; Tripp, 2009; Kelly-Trombley, Bartels, & Wieling, 2014). Men in this study also found it difficult to identify as fathers while in prison (Dyer 2005; Tripp 2009). Findings from this study suggest that father identity confirmation is limited at best during incarceration and faces continued challenges after release. Insecure housing, unstable employment, unreliable transportation, mental illness, substance use disorders, and even lack of access to their children present ongoing barriers that can limit and prevent fathers from enacting behaviors to confirm their identity as fathers.

After release from prison, fathers in this study attempted to reenter their children's lives and were met with challenges in picking up where they had left off and making up for the lost time. The cumulative stress and strain placed on fathers' relationships with their children over the days, months, and years of separation resulted in pervasive and, for some, irreparable damage.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

The moral justification for prison is founded in a belief that individual lawbreakers should be punished and removed from society. However, as this work attests, the consequences of incarceration extend far beyond prison walls, inflicting harm into the lives of children, families, and communities. Though we are careful not to overgeneralize the findings of this one-site study, this work suggests that incarceration harms father identity among black men. Building on the conceptualization of father identity as defined by the fathers in this study, additional research might examine the role of father identity in supporting a successful reentry process. Future research might also conduct comparative qualitative studies.

Prison doors are often, pushing people in and out of prison and in and out of their children's lives. Far too many fathers between the ages of 20 and 40 do their time, are released,

and then are rearrested and re-incarcerated for parole or probation violations. The current research suggests that the revolving door does not stop until men reach their mid-forties (Freeman, 2003), but the persistent harm to fathers, their children, and communities continues beyond the term of physical confinement, resulting in what are effectively life sentences. This, arguably, constitutes a form of social violence.

Though fighting crime is touted as the supposed basis for incarceration, racial animus contributing to hyper-policing in black communities, disparities throughout the criminal justice, and the socially disabling effect of laws impacting the lives of returning citizens should not be minimized (Middlemass, 2017). As Bulow (2013) contends, the state has a moral obligation to protect its citizens, and not harm them. The collateral damage inflicted on fathers and their children by mass incarceration violates their right not to be harmed. As such, the continued use of incarceration gives rise to residual obligations by the state to those harmed which include making amends, and the obligation to ameliorate the conditions that produced the harm.

Multiple approaches can be taken to address the damage inflicted by mass incarceration on fathers and their children. Given the research indicating that incarceration is particularly harmful to men convicted of non-violent offenses and increases rates of recidivism (Spohn & Holleran, 2002), alternatives to incarceration for this group should be prioritized. A “no-entry” public policy framework should be adopted that treats addiction as a brain disease and provides resources for treatment and application of unbiased drug laws and enforcement (Lurigio & Loose, 2008). Punitive sentencing measures and socially disabling policies (restrictions on housing, education, employment, voting, public assistance, etc.) should be repealed. A complete departure should be made from policies that reduce but do not eliminate sentencing disparities such as the 2010 Fair Sentencing Act, which significantly reduced (from 100:1 to 18:1) but did not eliminate the sentencing disparity between powder and crack cocaine.

At a minimum, a concerted effort should be made to increase contact between fathers and their children while in prison. This could be accomplished through prison facilities being made more father-friendly and more accessible with efforts to place fathers as close to home as possible; removal of barriers to communication such as exorbitant telephone costs; the expansion of the use of e-mail and video visitation to support, but not replace contact visits; additional programming for fathers; financial support to children; programs to work with families to address their needs; and family therapy in reentry programs (Burlow, 2013). This research further supports the theory that reentry efforts and programming need to begin at the point of entry and include education, job, and vocational training, substance abuse treatment, and counseling. According to Travis (2012), prison re-entry programs are a “low-cost way to prevent crimes” (p.10). Travis (2012) also suggests reallocating reentry resources to provide more support during the first six months of release, when the risk of recidivism is highest. A more comprehensive model would also include long-term post-release job training and placement, counseling, housing support, and family case management. If guided by the principles of prevention and diversion, the criminal justice system might be re-orientated to *consider the common good* and ultimately contribute to the maintenance of father identity by supporting healthy relationships between fathers and their children.

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Dara Lewis is the Assistant Director and Research Associate at the Center for Research on Self-Sufficiency at Loyola University Chicago, School of Social Work. She received her PhD in Sociology from Loyola University Chicago. Her research interests include the impact of incarceration on families, poverty and racial inequality, applied and community-based research, and public policy.

Philip Young P. Hong is a Professor and Associate Dean for Research at Loyola University Chicago, School of Social Work and the Founding Director of the Center for Research on Self-Sufficiency. His research interests include poverty, workforce development, social exclusion and practice-based, bottom-up social change.