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

### Parenting and Partnership When Fathers Return from Prison: Findings from Qualitative Analysis

#### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Qualitative interviews with participants in the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP) offer insight into family life during and after a father's incarceration, and suggest the need for more robust policy and programmatic supports. Qualitative and mixed-method analysis of pre- and post-release interview data from 170 participants found that:

- Reentering men and their partners reported overwhelming, unmet needs for support to maintain family relationships during incarceration, overcome trauma, meet families' material needs, and find housing and employment after the father's release.
- A variety of criminal justice policies and practices affected family relationships and family financial stability during and after incarceration, including high telephone call rates, restrictive visitation, facility assignment policies that did not take family location into account, and fees, fines, and restitution levied on the justice-involved father.
- Reentering men and their partners expressed frustration with help-seeking experiences and insufficient resources upon reentry. Lack of support led some to believe that systems were designed to return them to prison.
- Partner and parenting relationships were complex and dynamic during and after the father's incarceration. New measurement strategies may be required to follow change in these relationships over time or as a result of intervention participation.

#### BACKGROUND

When individuals – typically men – begin serving time in prison, they often leave behind partners, coparents, and children. Previous qualitative research underscores the importance of family connections during a father's incarceration and reentry. Most incarcerated individuals

#### About This Research Brief

*This brief presents findings on family life after incarceration based on qualitative interviews conducted as part of the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP). The study includes implementation and impact evaluations and qualitative and quantitative analyses of participants in programs funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to provide services to incarcerated fathers and their families.*

*This brief was prepared by Megan Comfort, Tasseli McKay, Justin Landwehr, Erin Kennedy, Christine Lindquist, and Anupa Bir of RTI International, under contract to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Erica Meade is the federal project officer.*

Office of the Assistant Secretary for  
Planning and Evaluation/Office of  
Human Services Policy

Administration for Children and  
Families/Office of Family Assistance

U.S. Department of Health and  
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express desire to maintain their parent-child and intimate partner connections while separated (Hairston, 1991; Patillo, Weiman, & Western, 2004). Family contact during incarceration has positive effects for both the incarcerated individual and his family; however, families of incarcerated persons face many barriers to contact, including geographic distance, limited visiting hours, and lack of money for transportation (Lanier, 1987; Hairston, 1991; La Vigne, Naser, & Castro, 2005; Girshick, 1995; Fishman, 1988). If incarcerated men are able to maintain strong family ties, these relationships can be sources of emotional, financial, and practical support as they serve their sentences (Lindquist et al., 2016a; Lindquist et al., 2016b; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). Interviews with incarcerated individuals and their family members before and after release confirm that family members (including intimate partners) are often a key source of “housing, emotional support, financial resources, and overall stability” during the reentry period (Visher, Kachnowski, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004).

Many Americans face the challenge of attempting to maintain family relationships during and after incarceration. More than half of individuals in state and federal prison in the U.S. (52 percent and 63 percent, respectively) have children under age 18, which translates to an estimated 1.7 million minor children with an incarcerated parent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). These children account for 2.3 percent of all U.S. youth. Nearly half (48 percent) of parents in state prisons reported living with at least one of their children prior to their incarceration, and 46 percent of men in one sample of state prisoners were married or living with a spouse or intimate partner at the time of their arrest—suggesting that incarceration presented a significant disruption in family structure (Lindquist et al., 2015; Mumola, 2000; Visher & Courtney, 2007). Once admitted to prison, more than three-fourths of individuals in state prisons reported some form of contact with any of their children, but less than half (42 percent) had seen them in person during the incarceration.

Prior qualitative research has described the importance of family ties in the lives of incarcerated men and the challenges that incarceration presents to maintaining these connections, the scope and breadth of which have been quantified in some survey-based research. This brief brings together both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, using a sample of reentering men and their partners, to more fully understand family experiences during and after incarceration. It begins to address important research gaps highlighted by the National Academy of Sciences (Travis et al., 2014) about how families experience paternal incarceration in the context of varied pre-incarceration family structures and relationships.

## **STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS**

The Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and Office of Family Assistance (OFA) to document the implementation and impact of relationship and family strengthening programs for incarcerated and reentering men and their partners. Although the analyses described here use data collected for the MFS-IP impact evaluation, the findings are not about the impact of programming, but rather the family experiences and service needs of reentering fathers and their partners.

### **Data Collection Approach**

Beginning in December 2008, the MFS-IP study enrolled couples participating in relationship and family strengthening programming<sup>1</sup> in five program impact sites (Indiana, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota) and a set of similar non-participating couples. Couples (including

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<sup>1</sup> Relationship strengthening programming provided through this initiative is described in detail in “The Implementation of Family Strengthening Programs for Families Affected by Incarceration,” available at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/implementation-family-strengthening-programs-families-affected-incarceration>

1,991 eligible men and 1,482 of their primary intimate or coparenting partners, referred to as “survey partners” throughout this report) were interviewed at baseline and at nine- and 18-month follow-ups, and 34-month follow-up interviews were conducted with over 1,000 couples in two sites. The longitudinal interviews collected quantitative information about parenting, couple relationship experiences, family stability, and reentry. Study participants were asked about all of their minor children, and more detailed questions about a single focal child, selected using a formula that favored children coparented with the study partner and children closest in age to 8.

In addition to the longitudinal surveys, a qualitative study was conducted to better understand family relationships during incarceration and reentry and how different study methods and measures affect that understanding. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a subsample of MFS-IP study couples: those in which the male participant was nearing release from prison (who were interviewed twice: both before and after release) or had been released within approximately the prior year (who were interviewed once: after release). Both members of the study couple were invited to participate. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were guided by a semi-structured interview guide. Interviewers also used prompt sheets with information from the participant’s responses to the quantitative MFS-IP survey questions related to family relationships. The interviews, conducted from 2014 to 2015, focused on family experiences and needs during incarceration and reentry, as well as what forms of interpersonal, programmatic, and policy support were and were not helpful during the reentry process.

### Sample Characteristics

The analyses presented in this paper use both qualitative and quantitative data from the MFS-IP qualitative study sample. Data were combined across sites and for treatment and comparison groups, so some sample members received grant-funded relationship and family strengthening programming and others did not. All study participants were subject to the selection criteria for the evaluation (Lindquist et al., 2016c). Characteristics of the qualitative study sample at the time of participants’ study enrollment (on average, two and a half years after the male partner’s admission to prison) are shown in **Table 1**.

Like participants in the full MFS-IP survey sample, most couples in the qualitative study reported being in non-married intimate relationships that were exclusive and long term at the time of study enrollment. Most participants had minor children, most couples coparented at least one child together, and most also coparented with other people (with men reporting on average three coparents and women reporting an average of two coparents). Men tended to have fairly long histories of criminal justice system involvement (beginning on average at age 17), and data suggest that many couples had been through previous cycles of incarceration and reentry together.

**Table 1. Qualitative Sample Characteristics at Baseline**

Characteristic	Men (n=83)	Women (n=87)
<b>Age</b>		
Age at study enrollment (mean)	33.7 years	32.8 years
<b>Relationship with Survey Partner</b>		
Relationship status		
Married	25%	18%
In an intimate relationship	71%	70%
In a coparenting relationship only	4%	12%
In an exclusive relationship	88%	85%
Duration of relationship, if married/intimate (mean)	9.1 years	7.9 years
<b>Parenting/ Coparenting Characteristics</b>		
Number of children (mean)	2.3	2.3
Number of coparents (mean)	3.1	2.2
Age of focal child (mean)	5.8 years	6.2 years
Coparent any children with survey partner	72%	74%
<b>Incarceration History</b>		
Age at first arrest (mean)	17.4 years	(not asked)
Number of previous adult incarcerations (mean)	5.3	1.8
Duration of current incarceration (mean)	3.9 years	(n/a)

## Maximizing the Couples-Based, Mixed-Method MFS-IP Data Structure

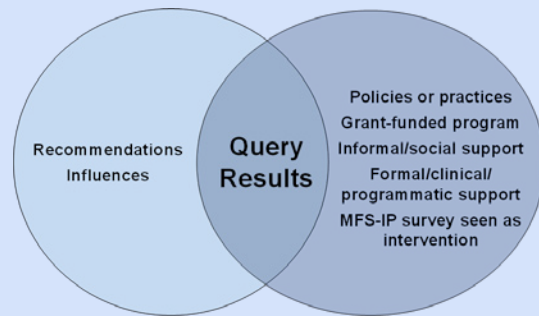
The analyses reported here were designed to leverage the unique, couples-based MFS-IP study datasets, which make it possible to link qualitative and longitudinal quantitative data on each sample member and also link that sample members' responses to those of his or her intimate or coparenting partner. To take advantage of this data structure in addressing the research questions for this paper, we used two distinct samples of qualitative study respondents. General analyses of family experiences, needs, and sources of support incorporated data from the full qualitative study sample (n=170 individuals, including both members of 59 couples).<sup>2</sup>

Coded data were queried in ATLAS.ti, and the resulting text was reviewed by analysts to identify themes and representative quotations. Themes presented in this paper were identified through the query shown at right.

To examine whether qualitative and quantitative data provide congruent or divergent accounts of families' reentry experiences, we carried out an in-depth, mixed-method analysis at the couple level. First, we used congruence scores<sup>3</sup> to identify the three qualitative study couples in which each partner's responses to MFS-IP survey items on family relationship quality and status were most similar to the other's, and the three whose

responses were least similar. Focusing on this subsample enabled us to better examine how qualitative and quantitative methods shaped the information each couple member provided and whether or how their accounts aligned. Family and demographic characteristics of this subsample were very similar to the overall qualitative study sample (see Table 1), except that on average, they had older focal children (7-8 years old versus approximately 6 years old in the full qualitative sample), had not been together as long (approximately 6 years versus 8-9 years in the full qualitative sample), and men in the subsample had been younger on average at the time of their first arrest. The three congruent couples and the three incongruent couples were also similar to one another, except incongruent couples had longer relationship durations, were more likely to report being married, and had more and older children than congruent couples. Also, men in incongruent couples reported more incarcerations and shorter incarceration durations than men in congruent couples.

Focusing on this subsample, we used Stata analysis software to export four waves of quantitative responses to key survey items on family structure and experiences from each respondent into the file alongside quantitative responses from his or her study partner. The analysis team then reviewed each pair of qualitative interview transcripts for the sample, identifying textual data relevant to the constructs captured in the corresponding survey items. Qualitative and quantitative responses for each pair of study partners were identified alongside one another to identify differences and similarities in couple members' accounts of family experiences over time and by method.



## Analytic Approach

To better understand partner and parenting experiences and needs for support and services before and after a father's reentry from prison, this analysis used MFS-IP data to answer the following research questions:

1. *Partnerships and Parenting: How are relationships between partners and between fathers and their children formed and maintained during and after incarceration?*

<sup>2</sup> Efforts were made to interview both members of the couple in all cases. However, for 48 respondents, we were unable to complete an interview with the partner.

<sup>3</sup> A congruence score was used to assess how similar or different the survey responses were from each member of a couple. First, the absolute value of the difference between male and female reports was calculated for key variables (relationship status, relationship happiness, father-child relationship quality, impact of incarceration on relationship with partner, and impact of incarceration on father's relationship with focal child), and the average and standard deviation was calculated for each variable across all couples. Then, for each couple, the number of standard deviations from the mean was calculated and the deviations were averaged across all variables to arrive at the congruence score.

2. ***Needs for Support:** What are families' needs during incarceration and reentry? What forms of support made or would have made the most difference in addressing those needs?*
3. ***Experiences of Support:** How do families experience support during and after incarceration? In what ways do correctional, probation/parole, and human services policies and practices support or undermine family relationships?*
4. ***Method-Specific Insights:** Where do qualitative and quantitative data provide congruent accounts of families' reentry experiences? Where do they diverge?*

All qualitative interviews were digitally recorded, audio files were transcribed verbatim, and transcriptions were uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package. A codebook was created using deductive codes<sup>4</sup>, including codes pertaining to relationships (e.g., partnership, parenting) and time period (e.g., incarceration, reentry). Inductive codes<sup>5</sup> were developed iteratively based on interviewer and analyst memos and coder meetings. We used a combination of traditional, query-based qualitative analysis and a more innovative, within-couple, mixed-method analysis strategy to address these four research questions (see text box, "Maximizing the Couples-Based, Mixed-Method MFS-IP Data Structure" above for more detail on the mixed-method analytic approach to each question).

## **PARTNERSHIP AND PARENTING DURING AND AFTER INCARCERATION**

### **Forming and Maintaining Relationships with Partners**

Qualitative study participants described their relationship status through a range of partnership formations that did not correspond to standard measurement categories (e.g., married, single, divorced). Although their narratives had much in common with those of contemporary families throughout the United States, participants identified many ways that men's incarceration had distinctly shaped their intimate ties.

#### ***Partnerships during incarceration***

Across interviews, many respondents articulated how cycles of imprisonment had shaped their relationships over time. Couples experienced major obstacles to maintaining contact via phone and in-person visits when the male partner was in prison, and thus communication was greatly reduced or eliminated entirely while he served his sentence. Although some respondents continued to consider themselves in an exclusive partnership during this time, others incorporated these periods of separation into the characterization of their relationship, often using the phrase "off and on" when asked about their relationship status. As one man explained:

***"We just off and on...Yeah. It's like we're kind of seeing each other still... I told her at first like, 'You can just go on [with your life] and go, like, I catch up with you whenever I get out [of prison].'"***

Evident amid participants' descriptions of these cycles were the distinct relationship pressures that arose during times of incarceration, pre-release, and reentry. For people who could maintain some form of contact during imprisonment, both male and female participants frequently understood this to be a period when men were reliant on women for emotional and practical support. However, relatively few men identified the difficulties this could pose for their partners:

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<sup>4</sup> Deductive codes are created based on study research questions and prior research, before reviewing the data.

<sup>5</sup> Inductive codes are created based on unexpected constructs or patterns that emerge during review of the data.

*“I didn’t understand that her working all the time, and I didn’t understand the time because I always wanted time. I wanted her to make time for me. To answer the phone or to sit down and write a letter – a long letter to me to explain to me what is going on, how she is doing and how our daughter is doing. But with her work schedule and school and our daughter, it was just like, it was a lot on her and I didn’t understand that. So I would get frustrated and upset. For me on my part, it was probably a struggle for me because I always thought like, well if you don’t have time for me now then are you ever going to have time for me when I come home?”*

In addition to straining partnerships by overburdening women, prisoners’ high needs for money, toiletries, extra food, and emotional connection were seen as disruptive to primary relationships because the constraints on an individual woman to meet these needs encouraged men to reach out to multiple women for support. One woman who had limited time and money to dedicate to her currently incarcerated partner recalled a former partner’s analysis of this phenomenon:

*“A lot of men that go to jail, they seem to juggle women when they’re in jail, incarcerated. Because...this one might put money on the phone all the time, this one might be able to visit all the time, and then this one might be my commissary person. So they play a lot of mind games when they’re incarcerated. ... [My former partner told me] ‘Every man does it, you know. Every man that can get away with it, however many [women] he can pull and get away with, that’s what he’s gonna do. Cause we don’t have nothing but time in there, you know. So of course we want somebody to come and see us every single day that visits are allowed. We want to be able to go out to that phone and call out to whoever is gonna answer, you know.’”*

Distance and lack of communication also created relationship tensions by fueling men’s suspicions about their partners’ activities, and particularly the possibility that women could be involved in another relationship:

*“I do believe if he would have been here in Toledo, it would have been a lot different. I would have been able to visit. I would have been able to get some calls... There would have been communication, a line of communication [and] actual visits. It wouldn’t have been a whole long period of absences... which caused nothing but, ‘What were you doing? Where were you at? You left me. You abandoned me. You didn’t care. You had somebody else.’ And all the accusations that come along next. Which has been nothing but caused us problems since.”*

### **Partnerships pre- and post-release**

Relationship pressures and expectations shifted as men’s prison sentences came to an end. The pre-release period was often described with trepidation, as men and women felt anxious about their individual and joint preparedness for post-prison life and worried that they did not have access to necessary supports. This was also a volatile moment in relationships because the level of support provided by women during men’s imprisonment did not always correspond to plans made during the pre-release and reentry periods. Certainly, for some couples, maintaining contact during incarceration translated into anticipation and enactment of reuniting post-release. However, some female participants described having provided robust practical and emotional support during a man’s imprisonment only to have him end the relationship just before or after his release from custody, often in order to join another partner. Others found themselves a sudden object of affection, when men tried to secure housing and stability for their return to society:

*Female participant: “Of course the first time [he was released] he needed me. So everything was...I mean [he did] anything that you could think of to try to woo me. Because like I say he really needed me. He didn’t have a place to go to besides his mother’s house.” ...*

**Interviewer:** “Any advice that you would give to a woman who is in a relationship with someone who is incarcerated?”

**Female participant:** “Beware.”

**Interviewer:** “Beware?”

**Female participant:** “Beware.”

**Interviewer:** “Now, what do you mean?”

**Female participant:** “Of all things. Don’t feel like nothing isn’t possible, ‘cause it is. Beware of everything. Beware of being manipulated.”

Men and women often characterized the reentry period as challenging due to the emotional and logistical awkwardness of reintegrating their partners into their lives, particularly when communication had been restricted during incarceration. The phrase “we have to get to know each other again” was used frequently by participants who were struggling to reconnect:

*“We’re still separated just because I feel like me and him, we have to get to know each other again, because four and a half years is a long time to be separated from someone. And then I’ve gotten so used to doing things on my own, I kind of, I don’t know, it seems like I get offended by the things that he does. I’m not saying that he does it on purpose, but it just almost makes me feel like he’s like questioning my parenting. Which I know he probably isn’t, but I’m just so guarded because I’ve been doing it for so long by myself that I kind of don’t know how to accept his help. So we’re kind of just, we’re moving slow. We live separately, but he’s helping me out with the kids a lot.”*

### **Comparing men’s and women’s perspectives**

Despite the evident challenges and complexities of partnership after reentry, the mixed-method comparison of couple members’ accounts of the status and quality of their relationships found that both usually aligned during this time, even among the three couples with the least congruent accounts overall. This relative alignment contrasted with the often strikingly divergent accounts that couples offered of their relationships during the incarceration—with qualitative data suggesting that the removal of barriers to communication they experienced after the male partner’s release may have helped them “stay on the same page” by sharing daily routines, challenges, and expectations of one another. Indeed, some couples showed a striking degree of overlap in their descriptions of post-release life, even providing compatible narratives of ambivalence about each other and the future of the relationship.

### **Forming and Maintaining Relationships with Children**

Qualitative participants also described a wide array of relationships with children. Some couples only had children they conceived together, but many navigated family constellations that included children from other partnerships. Among female sample members who coparented with other men (in communities heavily impacted by incarceration), it was not uncommon for those men to be justice-involved as well, such that women might be coping with the incarceration and reentry of multiple coparents at once.

### **Challenges for father-child bonding during incarceration**

As in their accounts of their partnerships, participants emphasized how distance and lack of communication made it difficult to maintain relationships with children during incarceration. When asked what was hardest about being a father in prison, many men focused simply on the physical separation from their children:

*“Being away, not being able to be a dad. Not being able to be there and protect my daughter from anything. Like, just being a dad. That was the hardest thing for me... [My child’s greatest challenge was] getting to know me. And an attachment. Like I think she was young, so she didn’t have me there, and her biggest struggle probably would have*

*been, like, where is her dad at. So I think she just had a problem with me not being there.”*

Women often perceived men’s absence not only to limit their ability to bond with children, but also to learn how to parent. The partner of the man quoted above commented:

*“[His incarceration] made him and [our daughter] fall apart. I mean, there’s a whole barrier there. Like he doesn’t know how to be a father. Like he doesn’t understand that kids talk back, that they try to push your buttons. ...He went to jail the day after I had her [then] he was home for maybe about a year and then he went back [in prison]. And that’s when he got that seven years. So he has never really done anything more than like a year. So, I mean, he has missed everything, and because of that, they don’t have that bond.”*

Nonetheless, some mothers felt that their incarcerated partners managed to be helpful coparents. One woman described how she felt more supported by her incarcerated study partner than she did by the biological father of her child:

*“[Study partner] was coparenting while he was locked up. I mean, he was doing a whole lot more than what [child’s] dad was doing out here, which was, he [the biological father] was only ten minutes away. I mean, if somebody can call me that is locked up and I can get money out of this man that is locked up before I can get some money out of that man out here, that says a lot.”*

Women also articulated making difficult decisions about whether to bring children into the prison environment to visit their fathers. Some women spoke about their efforts to protect their children from the negative effects of visiting a correctional facility, while others chose to not have their children undergo this experience, even though that meant not seeing their fathers:

*“I never took them to see their own father. I just felt like that, I didn’t want them to be introduced to that [prison] in no kind of way. Because it’s pretty hard when you go in there. You know they gotta strip search you and take off your shoes. And, you know, I kind of felt like they damn near treat you like an inmate, you know. And that was just something I didn’t want my kids to experience.”*

### **Comparing parents’ perspectives**

Men’s and women’s qualitative interview responses also helped to contextualize differences in their survey reports of parenting. Earlier quantitative analysis indicated that men tended to view their relationships with their children somewhat more positively than did their partners (Lindquist et al., 2016a). Comparing men’s and women’s responses in qualitative interviews suggested that men often wished to downplay the impact of their incarceration on their children and remain optimistic about life together after prison, while women – who had watched their children struggle during the prison period – were keenly aware of their children’s sense of loss. Couples often gave factually matching accounts of the father’s post-release relationships with his children, while offering these very different emotional frames, as in the example in **Table 2**.



**Table 2. Example Perspectives on the Father-Child Relationship within an MFS-IP Couple**

Father's Statements	Mother's Statements
<p><i><b>Father:</b> They love me more than their mother. ...I'm a big kid when I'm with my kids.</i></p> <p><i>Interviewer: What has made it easier to be a good parent?</i></p> <p><i><b>Father:</b> I'm always there. It's the, that's the easiest part, just being there. And it ain't about, be about no money. It never about no money. Because my kids don't care about no money. ...But just being there, man, like, my car, I'll take the bus to go see my kids. You feel me. It's about my kids, man.</i></p> <p><i>Interviewer: What has made it harder to be a good parent?</i></p> <p><i><b>Father:</b> Sometimes their mothers. Because, they want me to do more, like we into a [romantic] relationship. And I won't allow it. ...I don't need [study partner] or [other child's] mom, I don't need neither. I got my kids. I got all the love I need. I don't need you all, period... I sit down with my kids on a daily basis, you feel me, on a daily basis. "What's going on? Talk to me. What's going on? What's up?"</i></p>	<p><i>The kids are a little reserved around him now...his relationship with the kids is what's kind of my biggest concern. Because when he can be, he's a really good father, when he's there...</i></p> <p><i>He has to learn, and they're just now learning each other, although they're about to be five [years old]. It's like they just now met their dad and, you know, they're just not used to having a dad or calling somebody dad. So, it's all new for them.</i></p> <p><i>And the boys, my oldest son, he remembers his dad being in jail and going to see him... And I think that [my son] is scared to get so attached again and then [the father] go back to jail, is what makes him nervous...</i></p> <p><i>[Father] wants his kids to be able to depend on him, to know that he's going to be there. So pretty much when they call he tries to show up. Or if he can't do something that day if he tells him that they're going to do something [later and] he tries to stick to his words.</i></p>

**Adding qualitative context to quantitative reporting**

In the mixed-method analysis, qualitative data helped to contextualize apparent factual inconsistencies in survey reports of parenting, and drew attention to experiences that were missed by the extensive battery of survey questions about parent-child relationships. For many couples, survey reports of aspects of parenting as “concrete” as the number of children they had could fluctuate irregularly across survey waves or differ between the two partners. In one couple, both partners reported having a total of two children in their surveys, but in qualitative interviews, the male partner also spoke extensively of two older sons who had not been previously reported, and whom he perceived his incarceration to have most deeply affected:

*“Like I said, I got twins. One of the twins, he in jail. He got ten years. And I just never forget -- I will always tell them, like, man I will be home to see you graduate. This was even when they was young. Like man, by the time you graduate, I will be there. I will see you walk that stage. So finally that time came, it was 2008, which was the year that my twins would graduate. And I went to the parole board I think in January ... Long story short, they didn't let me out. They gave me four more years. So I had to get on the phone and I remember I called them and my son, the one that is in jail now, he was crying so bad. And he was like, he just kept, he said, ‘Dad, I don't care no more.’ I said, ‘What you mean?’ He said, ‘I don't care, I don't care. Man, mommy out here on crack, you in there, you got to do four more. Man, I can't do this no more. I am done. I am done. It is over.’ ... And he just spiraled down after that.”*

These relationships and the father's feelings about them appear not to have been captured at all in the parenting-related survey questions the male partner answered, many of which focused on

a single “focal child”<sup>6</sup> (his former partner’s daughter) whom he did not bring up at all when asked in the qualitative interview to describe his family and parenting relationships.

This analysis suggested that the evolving status of intimate relationships was a common reason for non-birth-related changes in the number of children reported by a participant in MFS-IP surveys, as the nature of coparenting interactions could prompt people to begin or cease identifying a child as theirs or their partner’s. Qualitative data included in this analysis also suggested that interactions with child protective services, while not readily expounded on by participants, might have been responsible for apparent factual inconsistencies in survey reports of parenting (such as an unexplained decrease in the reported number of biological children from one survey to the next).

## **FAMILIES’ NEEDS FOR SUPPORT DURING INCARCERATION AND REENTRY**

Qualitative interview participants indicated that staying in touch was prohibitively difficult during men’s incarceration. The chief barriers to communication were lack of transportation to correctional facilities, institutional policies that felt invasive or objectionable (e.g., searches, lack of child friendly spaces), the high cost of visiting (transportation, food, child care, and long distances between the prison and the home community) and phone calls, and logistical difficulties coordinating times to connect. One man expressed the toll it took on him when he couldn’t reach his family by phone:

*“I talked to them every day, a couple of times a day. But there would be times where I wouldn’t get a hold of them and I would just be frustrated and upset. Like, you are not at work again or why can’t you answer your phone. And like the timing of me trying to get a phone and get on the phone and the atmosphere I was in was upsetting enough as it was and then not – hearing it ring and not getting no answer, it was like, it was like a let-down.”*

Another man responded to a question about what was hardest in his relationship during his incarceration by speaking to the emotional challenges he and his partner faced when she came to visit:

*“The visits. I used to hate it. Yeah. Like, because especially when she came, [with] my momma, like seeing them leave. And she’d leave, yeah it used to mess with me. ... It just used to hurt like, and then every time she came up here she like, ‘They treat me like a criminal,’ searching her and make her take off her shoes. ... I mean, lucky I wasn’t too far from here. She didn’t have to drive too far, but I just used to hate having her, making her go through that. Even though I used to want to see her, but it was always bittersweet, every time.”*

When asked what help they wanted during the incarceration period, men and women consistently identified assistance maintaining contact as a primary need. Repeatedly voiced suggestions included: financial assistance with the costs of visiting and telephone calls, including gas cards, phone cards, and transportation and food subsidies; vans, shuttles, organized carpools, or other forms of collective transportation to prison facilities; lowering the costs of phone calls and providing opportunities for video calls with minor children, who had difficulty concentrating on a telephone call; and implementing family-friendly policies at the

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<sup>6</sup> The MFS-IP impact survey collected basic information about all of a father’s children and then additional detail regarding a single “focal child.” The focal child was selected by a formula that favored children coparented with the study partner and children closest in age to 8.

prisons, including reduced security screenings for children, longer visits, and play areas in visiting rooms.

Qualitative study participants also noted a need for emotional and psychological support. Women in particular raised this issue, frequently saying that they would welcome opportunities to participate in a support group with other partners of prisoners or in individual or couples counseling. Their narratives about their emotional suffering suggested a need for support in addressing the specific trauma each partner experienced during and after the incarceration:

***“I know being incarcerated isn’t something easy to do. It’s a whole different mindset from being in society. But then I also think it’s hard for him to understand everything I went through. You know what I mean, like it was just something traumatic for both of us.”***

Accounts of children’s traumatized reactions to visiting their incarcerated fathers also indicated an urgent need for counseling and support specifically focused on this experience:

***“After the visit like you’re allowed to sit from across each other and you’re allowed to touch, but when the visit’s over, you know, they stand the inmates up and put their handcuffs on and walk them out. [My son] flipped out to see his dad like that. ... He’s like ‘Come on Daddy, we going home.’ He wanted him to come with him. Like, why he not coming? And when he seen the police he just, ‘Oh my God, Daddy?’ He had a big old conniption fit. And I was embarrassed ‘cause I had two little babies in the car seat and he was like kicking and screaming... So the visits started getting really hard for me. Even though I know they did him good to see the kids, it was really hard for me afterwards to explain that to the boys or try to calm them down. So after a while we just agreed that we would cease the visits altogether.”***

Participants who received grant-funded services as well as those who did not suggested that incarcerated men needed more access to education, job skills training, and legal resources, as well as instruction on parenting and other topics:

***“I feel like maybe jails could offer more ‘how to’ classes. How to be a dad. How to be a husband. How to be a man.”***

Participants indicated that the families of incarcerated men needed relief from incarceration-related costs such as phone calls and putting money on prisoners’ accounts, and help compensating for lost income and support from the incarcerated partner. Men and women advocated that financial assistance for housing, child care, food, and transportation as well as practical support such as after-school programs, tutoring, and summer camps be made available to families to prevent what were common stories of destabilization when a father was lost to incarceration:

***“We moved because we had just moved and we were trying to like do this rent-to-own and purchase this condo, townhouse. But then he went to jail and I couldn’t afford the payments so I got evicted. ... [and] financially that took a big blow. So instead of two incomes, one. And then mentally, everything was on me. Just everything that I depended on him for or no, I don’t have to go and pick the kids up, he’ll do it. Just I’m doing everything which I wasn’t used to. Cause all my parental duties were split as long as he was around. ...And then to do it with four kids was something I never did before.”***

For men reentering the community, employment and housing assistance were repeatedly identified as dominant needs. In addition to these very common and centrally important needs, participants shared a variety of important needs that affected smaller groups of people. Individuals with current or previous experiences of their own or their partner’s mental health

challenges, substance dependency, and partner violence articulated the desire for support specific to these situations. One woman summed up the need for individualized support within larger resource structures:

***“As an individual, we all want something different out of prison. But collectively, the prison could find more ways for people to do things that they think will help them in life before they leave here. Reentry is one thing. Teaching them how to reenter is another thing.”***

## **EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT DURING AND AFTER INCARCERATION**

When asked about sources of support for themselves and their families during and after the incarceration, participants emphasized self-reliance, rather than outside sources of support. Individuals described their own efforts at resiliency and a strong drive to hold their lives together despite difficult circumstances. Many participants also identified their family members as invaluable sources of support; among men, this usually included the female partner as well as other relatives, whereas women were more likely to express that they turned to extended family for help while navigating incarceration-related challenges involving their partners. (A few participants felt that their male or female partners had impeded their well-being, particularly when drug use was present, and remarked that breaking up their relationships had helped them to move in a more positive direction.)

Participants often said that they were forced to rely on themselves and family members because formal supports were not available, were very limited, or were focused on continued punishment and not on the rehabilitative help that people felt they needed. When asked what had been unhelpful in her partner’s relationship with his children, one woman identified a lack of outside resources available to support his reentry process:

***“I believe he should have got evaluated into a halfway house and help him adapt. You know, because when he went in, he was a child. When he got out, he was twenty-nine. To adapt for him being an adult, being a grown man, you know what I am saying, I think they should have offered more resources, and I think he should have been helped. ... [He needed] communication skills. Help him find a job, you know. Counseling.”***

Some men spoke poignantly about returning from long prison sentences and not being able to use new technology, being overwhelmed by the density and rush of urban life, and not being accustomed to operating outside of the regimented prison environment. One man in this situation acutely felt the lack of support available to him:

***“Like I said, I got thirty years in the system. And I had just came home off of nine years and I didn’t go through a halfway house. I didn’t go through a step process back into society.”***

Other men shared that the dearth of reentry resources left them feeling like agencies and authorities were not invested in their success. Some expressed views that the criminal justice system was deliberately unsupportive with regard to employment, housing, and family because formerly incarcerated men were expected to return to prison. One man described this feeling of being set up to fail as “crooked”:

***“It is crooked, man. There is no job opportunities out there for us, there is no living arrangements out there for us. They don’t give you nothing, no type of help, man.”***

When talking about family programs, participants noted that there was a strong need for such programs to be specifically tied to the pre-release period so that families could reestablish communication and plan for a father's return home. As one man suggested:

***"I think there should be more programs where you can get closer to your family. ... Not something that is just once a year or two times a year. Every other week or every week. You know, especially like a reentry program that you can have with your family. That way when you get home you are not, 'Who are you, man? I don't know this guy!'"***

Indeed, many participants expressed a need for greater continuity of services between the final months of a man's prison sentence and the early months of his reentry. Several people referred to a feeling of momentum that could be built during the pre-release period and that then would propel men forward once they left prison. As one man said, reentry assistance ***"should be rolling already"*** when a person reaches his release date.

Participants were critical of pre-release and reentry programs that primarily provided outdated information about available housing and employment and did not help connect formerly incarcerated men to current resources suited to their individual needs. Many men described receiving a leaflet listing employers or landlords who would accept people with felony records, only to discover that the places no longer existed or excluded based on conviction history. Being turned down in this manner felt demoralizing, particularly when men were actively working to move beyond their incarceration experiences and avoid recidivism:

***"If you want us to really come home or as they say, they want us to come home and be productive citizens, they want us to be rehabilitated, then show us that you want that."***

Experiences with probation and parole sometimes contributed to the sense of demoralization that men felt in connection with formal service delivery systems. Some participants stated that they were charged parole fees, which exacerbated their destitution. Probation and parole officers frequently were described as apathetic or hostile.

### **Experiences with Federally-Funded Family Strengthening Programs**

Over half of MFS-IP study participants took part in couples-based relationship and family strengthening programs funded as a demonstration initiative by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The MFS-IP study was funded as an impact evaluation of these programs, which are described in detail in *The Implementation of Family Strengthening Programs for Families Affected by Incarceration*.

Many participants referred to these programs in their qualitative interviews, and highlighted aspects of the programs they had found particularly helpful. In one woman's words:

*"What really stands out the most [from the retreat] is they, we learned, or I learned, how to communicate with one another because they teach you that if you have a disagreement, that is okay, but each person has to, has the right to have the floor and speak their feelings. ... So what I have learned from that retreat is how to communicate. I think it has helped our relationship a lot."*

Another woman reflected:

*"He took a marriage counseling program while he was incarcerated. So I think that helped him. I think that helped him a lot to just kind of learn how to listen to me and kind of understand my side of things. 'Cause we used to argue a lot. Now we don't so much. Now we talk a lot, which is shocking to me, his willingness to listen. So I think that helped, that program."*

In addition to describing experiences in the OFA-funded demonstration programs, qualitative study participants often spoke about the MFS-IP survey itself when asked about helpful "programs" in which they had participated: *"I want to say this. This program you all got is the best program, one of the best programs I've been in. 'Cause you all go to the house. You all go to the other spouse."*

Several people noted that they talked to their study partners about the survey questions, using them to structure discussions about reentry planning. Others remarked that it was comforting to be able to talk with someone who was non-judgmental about their experiences, or that efforts by study staff to locate and follow up with them over time felt meaningful in the context of general dislocation from outside resources: *"I have been out [of prison] for three years and you guys are the first people that have gotten in contact with me."*

Still, a few participants noted that interactions with community supervision authorities who shared an understanding of the difficulties of reentry and of how factors such as mental health and substance dependency contributed to criminal justice system involvement had inspired them to seek treatment and avoid recidivating.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND INTERVENTION**

Earlier analyses of MFS-IP survey data indicated that couple and parent-child relationships tended to deteriorate over the course of incarceration and reentry (Lindquist et al., 2016a; Lindquist et al, 2016b). The qualitative interview data presented here bring these quantitative patterns of loss painfully to life. They also offer new insight into policy and intervention approaches that could better support families.

**Addressing policy barriers at the federal, state, local and facility levels could support healthy family reunification at reentry.** Reentering men and their partners reported that couple relationships and other family connections were an important source of support during reentry. Yet they observed that a variety of barriers made it very difficult to maintain these connections, including high telephone rates,<sup>7</sup> restrictive visitation policies, child-unfriendly prison visitation environments, facility assignment policies, and costs incurred by families from the criminal justice system to families during incarceration and reentry. Addressing these barriers could give families the best possible chance at healthy reunification, and reentering men the best possible chance at success.

**Programs to support healthy family relationships during incarceration and reentry are seen as helpful and important.** Many participants felt that family-strengthening programs helped them, or could have helped them, to preserve or improve the family relationships that in turn supported their success. Respondents who participated in the relationship and parenting education programs that were the focus of the MFS-IP impact evaluation often described their positive effects on family relationships, while others suggested pre-release programs that focused on helping prepare families for reintegration.

**Fathers and families need assistance meeting basic needs during incarceration and reentry.** During the father's incarceration, partners on the outside struggled to meet basic subsistence and parenting-related expenses without financial contributions from the incarcerated father—and at the same time, to absorb the additional costs associated with maintaining contact with him. Men and women in the qualitative study felt that families urgently needed assistance with housing and employment-seeking, but noted that sources of such support were rare or nonexistent in their communities.

**Systems, programs, and services that do not have the resources to provide individual help to reentering persons may do them more harm than good.** Many reentering men and their partners shared that they had invested practical and emotional energy in attempting to access resources that were not helpful: programs for which they were ineligible, employers who were touted as hiring people with felony records but did not, or probation officers who collected supervision fees without supporting them in meeting employment- and housing-related requirements. Respondents expressed intense frustration and disappointment in their contacts with criminal justice and social services systems, recounting how these experiences had a cumulative, demoralizing effect. They also reported a variety of needs requiring individualized assistance that was not readily available, including trauma-informed counseling support for all

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<sup>7</sup> New Federal Communications Commission rate and fee ceilings, which were implemented beginning in January 2016, had not gone into effect at the time the qualitative interviews were conducted. However, it is possible that telephone rates could remain an issue for very low-income families like those in the MFS-IP sample.

affected family members, treatment for substance dependency, and safety support for those experiencing partner violence. In light of these needs and of the emotional and material costs that low-investment “supports” may exact from those who can little afford them, these findings suggest that reentry referrals must be adequately vetted, and that reentry-related programs may need to prioritize provision of tailored assistance over reaching more people with less intensive services.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the analyses reported here confirmed some findings evident in prior quantitative analyses, they also called attention to aspects of intimate relationship and parenting experiences that were not captured in the MFS-IP survey data or in previous quantitative work on this topic. These findings suggest new strategies for future research to understand family relationships in communities affected by incarceration and evaluate intervention effectiveness.

**Different measurement approaches could enable intervention studies to better capture program effects on couples.** Interventions that are designed to support couple relationships in populations where such relationships are both highly dynamic and fluidly defined requires measures capable of capturing change within this fluidity. More traditional measurement approaches—for example, asking respondents to report on whether they are still in an intimate relationship, whether they have gotten married, whether they have broken up—may be such an imperfect fit for respondents’ relationship self-definitions as to introduce measurement “noise” that makes detection of program effects more difficult.

**Focusing on changes in relationship behaviors and affective responses, rather than relationship status categories, might better capture the fluid and dynamic nature of family identification.** Quantitative measures might better elicit this richness by assessing the specific sets of actions and feelings that make up different relationships—for example, *How many nights per week do you spend in the same house? How often do you share meals? How often do you experience a conflict?*—rather than only asking about family relationship “status” using predefined, traditional relationship categories (spouse, partner, biological child, non-biological child). Such an approach would help to make visible a greater diversity of family roles and relationship strategies, and enhance a study’s ability to accurately quantify change and stasis (as well as couple congruence and incongruence) in more complex or fluid relationships.

**Measuring father engagement at the household level could lead to a better understanding of parenting in the context of criminal justice involvement and multiple partner fertility.** The MFS-IP survey collected basic information about all of a father’s children and detailed information about a single “focal child.” Findings from the couples-based, mixed-method analysis, however, indicate that a father’s relationship quality and level of parenting engagement with his children in one household (with one mother) may be quite different than with his children in another household (with another mother). This gap in parent-child relationship experiences calls into question the idea of using a single parent-child relationship to represent a father’s parenting experiences or assess change in parenting over time. Asking parenting and child well-being questions by household or coparent (as in, *Your children with A, Your children with B*, etc.) might equip researchers with a richer picture of parenting and a better chance of capturing change in both residential and non-residential parenting over time.

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## About the MFS-IP Study

Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP) is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

**Implementation Study:** Annual site visits entailing in-depth interviews and program observations were conducted with all 12 grantee programs through fall 2010. The implementation evaluation comprehensively documented program context, program design, target population and participants served, key challenges and strategies, and program sustainability.

**Impact Study:** From December 2008 through August 2011, couples participating in MFS-IP programming and a set of similar couples not participating in programming were enrolled in the national impact study conducted in five of the grantee program sites. Study couples completed up to four longitudinal, in-person interviews that collected information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes.

**Qualitative Study:** A small qualitative study was added in 2014, in which in-depth interviews were conducted with 54 impact study couples to capture detailed information about the families' experiences during the male partner's reentry.

**Predictive Analytic Models:** Using the impact study sample of more than 1,482 couples (from the 1,991 men who did baseline interviews), a series of analyses is being conducted to examine the trajectories of individual and family relationships and behaviors before, during, and after release from incarceration. A public use dataset will be released for further analysis at the completion of this project.

This brief and other publications related to the MFS-IP evaluation are available from the HHS ASPE website: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/evaluation-marriage-and-family-strengthening-grants-incarcerated-and-reentering-fathers-and-their-partners>.

For additional information about the MFS-IP evaluation, contact Anupa Bir: (781) 434-1708, [abir@rti.org](mailto:abir@rti.org); Christine Lindquist: (919) 485-5706, [lindquist@rti.org](mailto:lindquist@rti.org); or Tasseli McKay: (919) 485-5747, [tmckay@rti.org](mailto:tmckay@rti.org).

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