‘You Can’t Be Much of Anything from Inside’: The Implications of Imprisoned Fathers’ Parental Involvement and Generative Opportunities for Children’s Wellbeing

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This study utilises interviews with 64 imprisoned fathers in South East Queensland (Australia) to examine changes in parental involvement since imprisonment. Although the majority of fathers were engaged in parenting their children before imprisonment, during the imprisonment period this parenting ceased for one third of previously involved fathers. The majority of fathers also described difficulties in being positively involved in their children’s lives. Results are discussed in terms of men’s opportunities for role modelling, generative thinking within a prison environment and the potential intergenerational consequences of reduced father involvement for children’s wellbeing.

I INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence that parental imprisonment poses a significant risk to the wellbeing of children and places them at heightened risk of offending and imprisonment.¹ Although the majority of these findings are based on children with imprisoned fathers, there has been little focus on why paternal absence through imprisonment might be so damaging to the wellbeing of children. We do know that parental imprisonment may give rise to family poverty, instability in accommodation, disruption to parental bonds, loss of social support and reduced parental monitoring, among other consequences that have been reasonably well documented.²

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1 Joseph Murray, David P Farrington and Ivana Sekol, ‘Children’s Antisocial Behavior, Mental Health, Drug Use, and Educational Performance after Parental Incarceration: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis’ (2011) 138 *Psychological Bulletin* 175.

2 See, eg, Denise Johnston, ‘Effects of Parental Incarceration’ in Katherine Gabel and Denise Johnston (ed), *Children of Incarcerated Parents* (Lexington Books, 1995); Holly Foster and John Hagan, ‘Incarceration and Intergenerational Social Exclusion’ (2007) 54 *Social Problems* 399; Joseph Murray, ‘The Cycle of Punishment: Social Exclusion of Prisoners and their Children’ (2007) 7 *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 55; Amanda Geller et al, ‘Parental Incarceration and Child Well-Being: Implications for Urban Families’ (2009) 90(5) *Social Sciences Quarterly* 1186; Amanda Geller, Irwin Garfinkel and Bruce Western, ‘Paternal Incarceration and Support for Children in Fragile Families’ (2011) 48 *Demography* 25; Melinda Tasca, Nancy Rodriguez and Marjorie S Zatz,

However, there has been little examination regarding what fathers brought to the parent-child relationship in terms of parental involvement before imprisonment. Therefore, little is known about what is taken away from a child when their father is imprisoned or how fathers' paternal identity changes during imprisonment and what affect this might have on their children.

In Australia, 93% of prisoners are male,³ many of whom are likely to be fathers. However, the paternal identity of these men is typically ignored as correctional departments nationwide do not routinely record or publish how many prisoners have dependent children. A recent study in Queensland estimated that 37% of non-Indigenous men and 53% of Indigenous men in prison have dependent children.⁴ Approximately half of these children were living with their father before his imprisonment.⁵ A survey of a random sample of prisoners in New South Wales revealed that 49% of the 683 respondents were fathers to children under the age of 16 years.⁶ According to the recent publication 'The Health of Australia's Prisoners', 28% of prison entrants reported having at least one dependent child, while 53% reported having no dependent children and 19% did not respond to the question.⁷ Similar figures for paternal imprisonment and residential status have been reported in the United States.⁸ Of fundamental concern is that the capacity for imprisoned fathers to be actively involved in their children's lives is likely to be impaired by a system that does not prioritise or adequately facilitate parenting, particularly in men's prisons, or recognise sufficiently the needs of children of prisoners.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with imprisoned fathers in South East Queensland, the current study extends existing research on involvement in parenting during imprisonment by focusing on *changes* in the role and identity of imprisoned fathers. We do this by examining

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'Family and Residential Instability in the Context of Paternal and Maternal Incarceration' (2011) 38 *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 231; Amanda Geller, Carey E Cooper, Irwin Garfinkel, Ofira Schwartz-Soicher and Ronald B Mincy, 'Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development' (2012) 49 *Demography* 49.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Prisoners in Australia, 2011' (Cat 4517.0, ABS, 2012).

4 Susan Dennison, Anna Stewart and Kate Freiberg, 'A Prevalence Study of Children with Imprisoned Fathers: Annual and Lifetime Estimates' (2013) 48(3) *Journal of Social Issues* 339.

5 Ibid.

6 Simon Quilty, Michael H Levy, Kirsten Howard, Alex Barrett and Tony Butler, 'Children of Prisoners: A Growing Public Health Problem' (2004) 28 *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 339.

7 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'The Health of Australia's Prisoners 2012' (Cat. PHE 170, AIHW, 2013).

8 Laura M Maruschak, Lauren E Glaze and Christopher Mumola, 'Incarcerated Parents and Their Children: Findings from the Bureau of Statistics' in J Mark Eddy and Julie Poehlmann (eds), *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Handbook for Researchers and Practitioners* (The Urban Institute, 2010).

men's self-reports of parental involvement and role modelling before imprisonment and during their prison term. The extent to which changes in parenting are related to intrapersonal or relationship factors versus contact with the correctional system are also examined. The perceived consequences of changes in the type and quality of fathering for children's wellbeing and men's rehabilitation are considered.

A Children's Developmental Systems

Children's development is shaped by bi-directional, reciprocal relationships with persons, institutions, policies and culture across the social ecology.⁹ The proximal social-relational level of family and peers can have both direct and indirect influences on children, and is also affected by changes at other levels of the social ecology.¹⁰ When a father is removed from his proximal influence within the family and placed in prison, changes within each level of a child's developmental system occur. The prison system enters children's developmental systems and regulates and controls the type and timing of contact that fathers have with their children. It influences the ways in which fathers can be involved in parenting, and it can create other shifts across the levels, such as access to social support, changes in school and peer networks, and contact with the legal and welfare systems. The direct and indirect influence of fathers (as opposed to mothers or parents more generally) within children's developmental systems is only recently being theorised and investigated.¹¹ In this article, we consider the potential consequences for children's positive development within a systems theory by examining ways that fathers can engage in enduring and positive interactions or 'proximal processes',¹² with their children before and during imprisonment, and by identifying ways that parental involvement is changed and filtered by interactions with the prison system.

9 Urie Bronfenbrenner, 'Ecology of the Family as a Context for Human Development: Research Perspectives' (1979) 22 *Developmental Psychology* 723; Donald H Ford and Richard M Lerner, *Developmental Systems Theory: An Integrative Approach* (Sage, 1992); Richard M Lerner, 'Relative Plasticity, Integration, Temporality, and Diversity in Human Development: A Developmental Contextual Perspective About Theory, Process, and Method' (1996) 32 *Developmental Psychology* 781; Richard M Lerner and Domini R Castellino, 'Contemporary Developmental Systems Theory and Adolescence: Developmental Systems and Applied Developmental Science' (2002) 31 *Journal of Adolescent Health* 122.

10 Ford and Lerner, above n 9.

11 Ross D Parke, *Fatherhood* (Harvard University Press, 1996); Ross D Parke, 'Father Involvement: A Developmental Psychological Perspective' (2000) 29 *Marriage & Family Review* 43; Joseph H Pleck, 'Why Could Father Involvement Benefit Children? Theoretical Perspectives' (2007) 11(4) *Applied Developmental Science* 196.

12 Bronfenbrenner, above n 9.

B *The Role of Fathers*

Although research on the importance of fathers in the lives of their children has produced inconsistent findings,¹³ there is increasing evidence that father involvement contributes to children's wellbeing. According to Popenoe, '[i]nvolved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring'.¹⁴ Father involvement can generally be thought of along three dimensions, these being accessibility, engagement and responsibility.¹⁵ *Accessibility* refers to the father's presence and availability to the child; *engagement* involves the father's direct contact, caregiving and shared interactions with their child; while *responsibility* refers to more task-oriented activities such as making appointments, interacting with schools, decision-making, monitoring children and making alternative care arrangements for children when needed.¹⁶

Children's development and wellbeing is greatly shaped by both the quality and quantity of father involvement.¹⁷ Compared to children with low levels of father involvement, high levels of father involvement are associated with a range of positive outcomes for children, including cognition and language, and social and emotional development during early childhood,¹⁸ better psychosocial adjustment in children, better mental health in adulthood, increased cognitive and social competence, increased capacity for self-control, positive self-esteem, social maturity and empathy, as well as better educational and occupational outcomes.¹⁹ Fathers tend to bring a critical dimension of play to their interactions with children, engaging in more physical and unpredictable play than mothers do,²⁰ that not only contributes to the secure attachment of children, but helps to develop emotional regulation and social skilfulness as well as the reduction of aggressive behaviour.²¹

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13 Joseph H Pleck, 'Paternal Involvement: Levels, Sources, and Consequences' in ME Lamb (ed), *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (Wiley, 1997).

14 David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of the Children and Society* (Free Press/parents, 1996).

15 Michael E Lamb et al, 'Paternal Behavior in Humans' (1985) 25(3) *American Zoologist* 883; Michael E Lamb et al, 'A Biosocial Perspective on Paternal Behavior and Involvement' in Jane B Lancaster et al (eds), *Parenting Across the Lifespan* (1987).

16 Ibid.

17 Natasha J Cabrera et al, 'Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century' (2000) 71(1) *Child Development* 127; Katherine R Wilson and Margot R Prior, 'Father Involvement and Child Well-Being' (2011) 47 *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 405.

18 Natasha J Cabrera, Jacqueline D Shannon and Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, 'Fathers' Influence on Their Children's Cognitive and Emotional Development From Toddlers to Pre-K' (2007) 11(4) *Applied Developmental Science* 208.

19 Lamb, 2004, cited in Wilson and Prior, above n 17; Pleck, above n 11.

20 Parke, 2002, cited in Pleck, above n 11.

21 Pleck, above n 11; Wilson and Prior, above n 17.

When a father figure is absent in the family, children are more likely to experience poverty²² as well as adjustment problems and poorer academic outcomes.²³ In relation to research on non-resident fathers, frequency of visitation and how children feel about their fathers do not appear to be good predictors of children's development.²⁴ Rather, positive child outcomes have been identified when non-resident fathers engage in authoritative parenting.²⁵ Time spent with children appears to be less influential to children's wellbeing than how non-resident fathers interact with their children.²⁶ Engaging in instrumental forms of authoritative parenting, such as providing encouragement and talking over problems, is associated with higher life satisfaction in children in contrast with spending time with fathers by engaging in recreational activities.²⁷ Authoritarian parenting styles have been found to be associated with an increased risk of delinquent behaviour and substance abuse compared to authoritative parenting.²⁸

Additional research on the residential status of fathers has found that children had higher levels of conduct problems the less time they lived with their father, but this was only the case when fathers had low levels of antisocial behaviour.²⁹ When fathers had high levels of antisocial behaviour, increased time living with their child was associated with increased conduct problems in the child.³⁰ In a study on the influence of non-resident father involvement on adolescent delinquency, Coley and

- 22 William Marsiglio et al, 'Scholarship on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond' (2000) 62 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1173.
- 23 MG Sawyer et al, 'The Mental Health of Young People in Australia: Key Findings from the Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being.' (2001) 35 *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 806.
- 24 Marsiglio et al, above n 22.
- 25 The authoritative parenting style involves the parent guiding and directing the child using a rational, issues-oriented manner. This style encourages autonomy by considering the child's individual qualities while at the same time asserting clear rules and expectations of behaviour. In contrast, the authoritarian parenting style is characterised by a focus on control, obedience and restricted autonomy, where the parent expects the child to follow orders without providing reasoning: Paul R Amato and Joan G Gilbreth, 'Nonresident Fathers and Children's Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis' (1999) 61(3) *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 557; Diana Baumrind, 'Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior' (1966) 37(4) *Child Development* 887.
- 26 Marsiglio et al, above n 22.
- 27 Margaret H Young et al, 'The Effect of Parental Supportive Behaviors on Life Satisfaction of Adolescent Offspring' (1995) 57 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 813.
- 28 Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Kristin A Moore and Jennifer Carrano, 'The Father-Child Relationship, Parenting Styles, and Adolescent Risk Behaviors in Intact Families' (2006) 27 *Journal of Family Issues* 850.
- 29 Sara R Jaffee et al, 'Life With (or Without) Father: The Benefits of Living With Two Biological Parents Depend on the Father's Antisocial Behavior' (2003) 74(1) *Child Development* 109.
- 30 Ibid.

Medeiros³¹ found that higher non-resident father involvement predicted decreases in adolescent delinquency. Therefore, the residential status of fathers appears to be less important in the context of children's wellbeing, than the capacity for the father to be positively involved in fathering. It is also evident that in some cases, removing risks associated with an antisocial parent, such as poor role modelling, substance abuse and family violence, may be beneficial to families.³²

C Parental Involvement and Generativity of Imprisoned Fathers

In the fatherhood literature, imprisoned fathers rarely rate a mention. Among the permutations of fatherhood and residential status of children, there is no recognition of fathers in prison and the implications of research findings for this population. When we consider non-resident fathers as fathers in prison, it is apparent that opportunities for both authoritative (instrumental) and recreational parenting are likely to be significantly reduced in prison. Nevertheless, imprisoned men do want to continue to have contact with their children³³ and perceive their parental role to be important.³⁴ But time spent together through visitation is often of poor quality and irregular³⁵ and utilising authoritative parenting is likely to be dependent upon the parental skills of the imprisoned father and their contact with both their child and the child's caregiver. Put simply, the capacity for fathers to be involved across each of the dimensions of accessibility, engagement and responsibility is reduced when a father is imprisoned.

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- 31 Rebekah Levine Coley and Bethany L Medeiros, 'Reciprocal Longitudinal Relations Between Nonresident Father Involvement and Adolescent Delinquency' (2007) 78 *Child Development* 132.
  - 32 Peggy C Giordano, *Legacies of Crime: A Follow-Up of the Children of Highly Delinquent Girls and Boys* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Christopher Wildeman, 'Paternal Incarceration and Children's Physically Aggressive Behaviors: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study' (2010) 89(1) *Social Forces* 285; Jillian Turanovic, Nancy Rodriguez and Travis C Pratt, 'The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration Revisited: A Qualitative Analysis of the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents' (2012) 50 *Criminology* 913.
  - 33 Creasie F Hairston, 'Fathers in Prison: Responsible Fatherhood and Responsible Public Policies' (2001) 32 *Marriage & Family Review* 111; Gwyneth Boswell and Peter Wedge, *Imprisoned Fathers and Their Children* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001).
  - 34 Charles S Lanier, 'Affective States of Fathers in Prison' (1993) 10(1) *Justice Quarterly* 49; Kathryn Edin, Timothy J Nelson and Rechelle Paranal, 'Fatherhood and Incarceration as Potential Turning Points in the Criminal Careers of Unskilled Men' in Mary Pattillo, David Weisman and Bruce Western (eds), *Imprisoning America* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004) 46.
  - 35 Maruschak, Glaze and Mumola, above n 8; Creasie F Hairston, 'The Forgotten Parent: Understanding the Forces that Influence Incarcerated Fathers' Relationships with their Children' (1998) 77(5) *Child Welfare* 617; Karen Healy, Denise Foley and Karyn Walsh, 'Families Affected by the Imprisonment of a Parent: Towards Restorative Practices' (2001) 26(1) *Children Australia* 12.

The extent that men are able to engage in parenting from prison may also be linked to opportunities for generativity within the individual and within the prison system. Erikson³⁶ first used the term 'generativity' to refer to a stage of psychosocial development where adults become more outward looking in terms of caring for others as well as products and ideas. Snarey³⁷ applied this term to fathers and suggested that generative fathers 'contribute to and renew the ongoing cycle of the generations through the care that they provide as birth fathers (biological generativity), childrearing fathers (parental generativity), and cultural fathers (societal generativity)'.

This framework focuses on what fathers do in response to the needs of their children and posits that the generative work of fathers involves 'a desire to facilitate the needs of the next generation' as well as responsible caring and locating fits between men's activities and children's needs.³⁸

The concept of generativity has only recently been explored within the field of criminology, with a particular focus on desistance from crime.³⁹ However, it is generally recognised that the prison environment by its very nature is not conducive to generativity.⁴⁰ In their analysis of signs of generativity in young imprisoned men in South Australia, Halsey and Harris⁴¹ identified parenthood as an expression of generativity, whereby at least one of the 16 individuals interviewed began to consider the impact of his behaviour on his children. However, the authors suggested that for imprisoned fathers 'their capacity to "do" fatherhood is fundamentally restricted', thereby giving rise to degenerative rather than generative dispositions.⁴² While engaging with children is likely a key mechanism for developing a generative outlook while in prison,⁴³ barriers across the dimensions of accessibility, engagement and responsibility can leave fathers feeling isolated from their children and from fatherhood in general.

Existing research with imprisoned fathers has focused on parental involvement during the imprisonment period. For example, in a study in the United States, 51 imprisoned fathers in two minimum-security correctional facilities who were due to be released in one month were interviewed regarding their experience of being a father in prison.⁴⁴ The

36 Erik H Erikson, *The Life-cycle Completed* (Norton, 1982).

37 John Snarey, *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation: A Four-decade Study* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

38 Marsiglio et al, above n 22.

39 Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives* (American Psychological Association, 2001).

40 Mark Halsey and Vandra Harris, 'Prisoner Futures: Sensing the Signs of Generativity' (2011) 44(1) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 74.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Joyce A Arditti, Sara A Smock and Tiffaney S Parkman, "'It's Been Hard to Be a Father": A Qualitative Exploration of Incarcerated Fatherhood' (2005) 3(3) *Fathering* 267.

authors identified themes of helplessness in terms of opportunities to be a good father in prison, lack of availability to their children, uncertainty about being involved in decision-making, and self-doubt as to whether they should even attempt to be fathers while imprisoned.⁴⁵ The imprisonment period largely represented a dormant time of fatherhood for many men, with a tendency for caregivers to act as gatekeepers to father involvement with their children.⁴⁶ For a few men, their imprisonment represented a time to take stock of their lifestyles and to consider the importance of their role as fathers. Meanwhile, fathers' impending re-entry into the community was viewed as an opportunity to start again with their children.⁴⁷

In another study utilising interviews with 43 fathers in English prisons, opportunities for father involvement were considered in relation to father-child contact.⁴⁸ Common themes included not being available for their children and feeling like they were not good at being a father while in prison. Almost half of the fathers never received a visit with their children. For some, this was a conscious decision to protect their children from a hostile prison environment, which the authors noted might be a form of responsible fathering.⁴⁹

Research on how father involvement before imprisonment *changes* during imprisonment is virtually non-existent, although Clarke and colleagues⁵⁰ noted that fathers reported a reduction in their capacity to be a good father while imprisoned. The reduction or absence of ongoing father involvement may be felt more keenly by children whose fathers were previously highly involved in the care of their children, with more acute disruptions in attachment when regular contact is no longer possible.⁵¹ High father involvement before prison as well as frequency of contact, high quality family relationships, and quality communication between imprisoned fathers and their children are factors that have been found to predict children's positive psychological, emotional and behavioural adjustment upon the release of their father.⁵² These factors also predicted more positive relationships between fathers and their children as well as children's better school achievement and being in less trouble with the police.⁵³ Family contact and parental involvement is also associated with

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45 Ibid

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Lynda Clarke et al, 'Fathering Behind Bars in English Prisons: Imprisoned Fathers' Identity and Contact with Their Children' (2005) 3(3) *Fathering* 221.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 See, for example, Julie Poehlmann, 'Attachment in Infants and Children of Incarcerated Parents' in J Mark Eddy and Julie Poehlmann (eds), *Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Handbook for Researchers and Practitioners* (The Urban Institute, 2010).

52 Friedrich Lösel et al, 'Risk and Protective Factors in the Resettlement of Imprisoned Fathers with Their Families' (University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, 2012).

53 Ibid.

positive outcomes for fathers, with quality of the parent-child relationship, close attachment to children and family support being predictors of reductions in reoffending, re-incarceration and drug use.⁵⁴ Therefore, positive father involvement with their children can contribute to the wellbeing of children during the imprisonment period and post-release, as well as the successful re-entry of fathers into the community.

D *The Current Study*

As researchers and policy makers begin to consider the impact of parental imprisonment on children, an understanding of the ways father involvement changes as a result of imprisonment is essential. The purpose of the current study is to examine how imprisoned fathers engaged in parenting before imprisonment and to identify how and why their paternal involvement has changed during imprisonment. By using a developmental systems approach, we consider how the prison system shapes the potential for father involvement and generative thinking. We look for signs of generativity in terms of expressions of future parental involvement with children, but also in tangible ways that men are attempting to care for their children from inside prison. Equally important is considering the ways that men perceive their imprisonment has affected their child or children. Taking these findings together with existing research, we discuss the potential intergenerational consequences of lack of father involvement for children’s wellbeing and identify opportunities to enhance paternal involvement and generativity within the correctional system.

II METHOD

A *Sample*

1 Characteristics of Fathers

This study comprises interviews with 64 male prisoners, each serving a sentence in one of three prisons in South East Queensland between April and September 2009. Participants’ ages ranged from 20-51 years, with a median of 34 years ($M = 34.09$, $SD = 7.68$). Twenty-five per cent of participants were Aboriginal, 3.1% were both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 71.9% were non-Indigenous. Forty-four per cent of participants were serving sentences at a high security facility and 56% were serving sentences at one of two low security facilities. The median sentence length was 33 months (2.75 years) and ranged between three and 300 months ($M = 66.10$, $SD = 77.31$). Sixty-five per cent of participants had served a prior sentence, with the number of prior sentences ranging from

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54 Stephen J Bahr et al, ‘The Reentry Process: How Parolees Adjust to Release from Prison’ (2005) 3(3) *Fathering* 243; Christy A Visser and Shannon ME Courtney, ‘One Year Out: Experiences of Prisoners Returning to Cleveland’ (Urban Institute 2007).

0 to 14 ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 3.51$). Sixty-five per cent were either married or in a steady relationship before their imprisonment. The highest education level obtained was either TAFE (15.6%) or some university (3.1%), and the majority of participants had left school by grade ten (61.0%). Before imprisonment, most participants were working either full-time (48.4%) or part-time (15.6%), while 32.9% were unemployed or receiving government benefits, and one (1.6%) participant was studying.

2 Characteristics of Children

Collectively, participants were fathers to 153 children under the age of 18, with the number of children per participant ranging from one to seven ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.57$, *Median* = 2). Children's ages ranged from one month to 17 years and a median of eight years ($M = 7.91$, $SD = 4.85$). Fifty-nine per cent of the children were male. Participants reported being the biological father in 87.6% of cases and the remaining were stepfathers for 12 months or longer. Participants identified 77 children (50.3%) as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. More than half (55.6%) of the children were living with their father before his imprisonment. Forty per cent of the children were not living with their father, and of these children, fathers had joint visitation rights with 67.8%, limited visitation rights with 25.4%, and no visitation rights with 6.8%. Five per cent of the children were born while their father was in prison. During the imprisonment period, one third (34.9%) of children visited their father at least weekly, fortnightly or monthly, 67.6% had phone contact at least daily, weekly, or fortnightly, and 67.7% had at least some letter contact with their father.

B Materials

Participants responded to a brief (10-minute) pen and paper questionnaire, administered by the interviewer. The questionnaire comprised 20 questions relating to demographic information about the participants and their children. Questions relating to the participants included age, ethnicity, marital status, education, and employment status before their imprisonment. Questions relating to the participants' children included the number of children, their gender, ethnicity, age, and living and visitation arrangements before their father's imprisonment. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were then conducted to examine parental roles of the prisoners. Topics included: fathers' parental involvement before imprisonment (play, day-to-day care and discipline); the extent to which participants were able to have parental involvement while in prison (eg, decision-making); and the extent to which the participant considered himself to be a role model before, versus during, his imprisonment. In addition, participants were asked whether they believed their imprisonment had changed their child's life and, if yes, in what ways. Each interview took approximately one hour to complete. If participants required prompting, examples were provided.

C Final Variables

Our final dataset included both father- and child-level variables drawn from the brief questionnaire and the interviews. Father-level variables were whether or not fathers considered themselves to be a role model to their children before (yes/no) and during their imprisonment (yes/no/no, but intends to be upon release). Child-level variables included parental involvement before imprisonment (regular play, day-to-day care or discipline; yes/no), parental involvement while in prison (involvement in decision-making processes or discipline; yes/no), father-caregiver relationship problems, and perceived negative impact of fathers' imprisonment on children (yes/no).

D Procedure

The study sought male prisoners who were serving the last quarter (approximately) of their sentence and were a father to at least one child under 18 years. We included stepfathers in the study if they reported being the child's stepfather for more than 12 months at the time of the interview. Prisoners serving sentences relating to their child (eg, physical or sexual abuse) were excluded from participation. Queensland Corrective Services granted permission to recruit participants from the three correctional centres and the General Managers of each centre granted permission for the interviews to be conducted. Because the researchers were not permitted to be involved in the recruitment process, prison staff involved in offender development approached eligible prisoners directly. Eligible prisoners were provided with a brief overview of the study and were advised that they could submit their name as an expression of interest in participating. There was no form of personal incentive or reward for participation. The number of prisoners approached for participation was not recorded.

Interviews were conducted between April and September 2009. Before commencing the interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the aims of the study and the nature of the interviews, and a consent form. The consent form outlined the voluntary nature of the study, the right to withdraw participation at any time, and the limits to confidentiality (eg, suspected harm to the participant or others). The same female, non-Indigenous research assistant conducted all interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private room in the correctional centre with only the interviewer and the participant present. Permission to audio-record the interviews was denied by the General Manager of each correctional centre. Therefore, responses were recorded in note form during the interview and additional notes added within 24-hours of the interview. These expanded interview notes were used to code quantitative variables and to examine qualitative responses. Where direct quotes are used in our results section, these were written verbatim during the interview. On a small number of occasions, participants raised concerns regarding harm to their children (eg, neglect by caregiver). In each of these cases, the interviewer ensured that formal concerns had been lodged with appropriate personnel within the prison.

E *Analytic Strategy*

The number of fathers who participated in this study allowed for a quantitative approach to be taken with some analyses, such as change in parental involvement since imprisonment. At the same time, it is the men's narratives that illustrate their experiences of parenting before and during imprisonment and give meaning to fatherhood in prison. We have combined these two analytic strategies to provide as comprehensive an account of their experiences of parenting as possible.

For the quantitative analyses, we conducted three 2 x 2 chi square analyses to examine the following relationships: (1) whether the child lived with their father before imprisonment and parental involvement before imprisonment; (2) parental involvement before imprisonment and parental involvement during the imprisonment period; and (3) father-caregiver problems and parental involvement during the imprisonment period. These analyses were conducted at the child level using Stata (version 12) software package. We used Stata to account for the family clustering effect at the father level. For these three analyses, the assumption that the expected count for each cell is equal to or greater than 5 was met.⁵⁵ This assumption was violated for analyses at the father level due to the small sample size. This meant that we were unable to examine the relationship between fathers' role modelling before and during the imprisonment period using chi square analyses. Therefore, we examined this relationship by looking at a 2 x 3 contingency table, without testing for statistical significance.

For the qualitative analysis, we used both deductive (theory driven) and inductive (data driven) processes to thematically group and code variables from interview responses.⁵⁶ Taking into account the research questions and the general findings that emerged from the quantitative analyses, we used frequency data to search for additional common themes among our interviews to demonstrate the variability in the men's experiences of fatherhood. We use direct quotes, where possible, and aliases to protect the identity of the fathers.

III RESULTS

A *Parental Involvement and Generativity Before Imprisonment versus During Imprisonment*

Fathers reported parental involvement with the majority of their children (78%) before their imprisonment, although this was associated with whether the child resided with them before imprisonment. Fathers were significantly more likely to report parental involvement with their child

⁵⁵ William G Cochran, 'The χ^2 Test of Goodness of Fit' (1952) 23(3) *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics* 315.

⁵⁶ Matthew B Miles and Michael A Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Sage Publications, 2nd ed, 1994).

before their imprisonment if they had been living with their child (92%) than if they had not (59%; see Table 1). The odds of fathers reporting parental involvement before their imprisonment were eight times higher if the child had been living with them. This is not surprising, since residing with children is likely to afford greater opportunities and responsibilities for parental involvement.

The majority of fathers were engaged with their children in some form before their imprisonment. Most fathers (80%) reported being involved in disciplining at least one child before their imprisonment. Examples include imposing family rules, discussing with their child when rules have been broken, and punishing inappropriate behaviour. Half of the fathers (55%) described regularly playing with at least one child (including playing games, taking them to parks/beaches, engaging in sporting activities etc). Three-quarters of fathers (76%) reported being involved in the day-to-day care of at least one child before their imprisonment (including meal preparation or feeding young children, changing nappies, bathing or dressing children, assisting with homework, assisting with school pick-ups/drop offs etc). It is therefore clear that for the most part, the fathers in this study were involved in various aspects of raising their children.

Table 1 Chi square contingency analyses of parental involvement before and during imprisonment.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	DEPENDENT VARIABLE		N	χ^2 (df)	p-value	OR
LIVED WITH CHILD	PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PRIOR					
	No (%)	Yes (%)				
No (%)	22 (41.5)	31 (58.5)	53	21.70 (1)	0.001	8.52
Yes (%)	6 (7.7)	72 (92.3)	78			
Total	26 (21.4)	103 (78.6)	131			
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PRIOR	PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT DURING					
	No (%)	Yes (%)				
No (%)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	29	15.84 (1)	0.02	5.93
Yes (%)	35 (34.7)	66 (65.3)	101			
Total	57 (43.8)	73 (56.2)	131			
FATHER-CAREGIVER PROBLEMS	PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT DURING					
	No (%)	Yes (%)				
No (%)	20 (24.4)	62 (75.6)	82	34.53 (1)	0.0005	11.37
Yes (%)	33 (78.6)	9 (21.4)	42			
Total	53 (42.7)	71 (57.3)	124			

Note: OR = odds ratio, df = degrees of freedom.

Unsurprisingly, parental involvement was reduced once fathers were imprisoned, with fathers reporting parental involvement with 57% of their

children. Over a quarter of fathers (27%) reported that they had no contact with at least one child. But most fathers (81%) said that they were kept up-to-date with information about at least one child, by the caregiver, other relatives or the child themselves. Participants were significantly more likely to be involved in parenting from prison if they were involved in parenting before their imprisonment, than if they were not (see Table 1, *previous page*). The odds of fathers reporting parental involvement during their imprisonment were six times higher if they had also reported parental involvement before imprisonment. However, of fathers who were involved before prison, only two thirds described parenting involvement while in prison, while almost a quarter of men who were not involved before imprisonment became involved in parenting during the imprisonment period. Examples of parental involvement from prison included being part of decision-making processes, giving their child advice, being actively engaged and up-to-date with school and social activities and disciplining their child.

Fathers that did maintain parental involvement often described a united front with their child's primary caregiver. One father, Alan, described being involved in all aspects of caring for his two children before his imprisonment. Alan worked night shifts and described taking on the main parental role during the day. He discussed taking his children to school, assisting with homework, preparing dinner, preparing the children for bed and reading bedtime stories. During his imprisonment Alan's children were under the care of their paternal grandparents, with whom Alan described a positive relationship. He reported that during his imprisonment he was still involved in all decision-making processes in his children's lives but said, 'Sometimes I take a step back though and let Mum and Dad deal with it ... They're doing a great job with my children'.

Alan also described using creative ways to engage in parenting from prison. He reported that he was in contact with both of his children's teachers who sent him their homework a week in advance so that he was aware of their progress and could help them during visits and over the phone: 'I have spent hundreds of dollars on phone calls to help my children with their schooling but you can't put a price on my children's welfare'. The teachers also sent him his children's timetables so that he knew specifically what to ask them about on the days that he spoke to them. Additionally, Alan reported that his daughter had trouble sleeping since his imprisonment due to his absence and the fact that he was no longer there to read bedtime stories. Since being in prison he would write short stories to send to his own father to read to her before she went to bed, and when possible would also record stories on audiotapes to send to her. These strategies helped Alan maintain his role as a parent and also maintain relationships with his children. This father also illustrates that parental generative behaviour is possible in the context of prison through his ongoing care and concern for the wellbeing of his children. However, it was evident from our interviews that most fathers did not have this degree of involvement in their children's home or school life

while in prison. Many fathers in prison do not have equivalent resources for phone calls or possess the strategies and confidence to be actively engaged with their children's teachers or able to assist with homework, particularly if they have not had this degree of involvement before imprisonment. Nevertheless, this case illustrates the possibilities that exist for imprisoned fathers to be involved in parenting their children. However, to realise these possibilities many fathers are likely to require support from within the prison system as well as from the caregivers of their children.

Of children whose fathers were involved in parenting before their imprisonment, one-third no longer had parental involvement from their father while he was in prison. Chris reported that before his imprisonment he was a 'full-time dad' to his two children who lived with him and his wife. He reported being involved in all of their school activities and that even on weekends 'I didn't do me own stuff ... the kids are really sporty so I'd go and watch them'. Chris also reported that he was involved in disciplining his children. But he noted the difficulties of parenting from prison. Although he maintained regular contact with his wife and children during his imprisonment, in relation to current parental involvement he reported that he was 'not really involved in much stuff'. With regards to decision-making, his wife had told him, 'listen, I'm out here and you're in there', presumably meaning that he was not in a position to be making decisions in relation to his children. Chris reported that he felt that he did not have much of an influence on his children's lives while in prison. These lack of opportunities to be engaged in parenting illustrate how previous generative behaviour can become stagnant during the imprisonment period. Another father, Bill, said that while in prison he leaves all of the decision-making up to his ex-wife: 'She's on the front line, I wouldn't question her. She's a good mother'. However, he did say that he is regularly updated on anything that is happening in his children's lives and is given their report cards and 'anything else she thinks I would be interested in'. But Bill noted, 'It's near impossible to be a dad from in here ... I have to rely on her for everything when it comes to my kids'.

Some fathers cited problematic relationships with their children's caregiver as the main barrier to parenting from prison. Participants were significantly more likely to have parental involvement with their child during their imprisonment if they did not report problems with the caregiver than if they did report problems (see Table 1 on page 73). The odds of fathers reporting parental involvement with their child during their imprisonment were 11 times higher if they did not report problems with the caregiver. Dave reported parental involvement with his two youngest children (aged five and seven) whom he lived with before his imprisonment. This included getting his children ready for school in the morning and taking them to school, playing games and sports with them and being the primary parent to discipline them. However, he reported that since his imprisonment he was unable to have any parental involvement and said, 'It is very hard for me to do this [parenting] from in here'. Since his imprisonment, he and his partner had separated and Dave

reported that their strained relationship, and limited contact with his children as a consequence, were the primary reasons for why he was no longer able to have any parental involvement in his children's lives.

Another father, Eddie, illustrates how an entire parenting role can be taken away from some fathers upon imprisonment. Eddie was the sole caregiver of his seven-year-old daughter at the time of his imprisonment and had been since she was six months old. His youngest daughter (aged six) was under the care of her biological mother who left Eddie when she was pregnant. He did not see his youngest daughter until she was four years old and after that he saw her rarely, and thus had no parental involvement with this child. He spoke little of this child in the interview. In contrast, Eddie had a very close relationship with his eldest daughter and was involved in every aspect of parenting before his imprisonment, including day-to-day care, discipline and play. He said, 'She's a real cluey kid ... she raised me more than I raised her ... she made me wake up to myself ... be a good person and a good dad'. However, since his imprisonment, this daughter was under the care of her biological mother and Eddie no longer had any parental involvement. He said that he asks his ex-partner how his daughter is coping 'but she just brushes it off ... doesn't answer me ... doesn't tell me nothing'. He said that he is kept up-to-date by his daughter over the phone but that he is not able to be involved in decision-making processes.

In sum, fathers had parental involvement with the majority of their children before imprisonment and continued to have some parental involvement with approximately half of their children while imprisoned. It was evident that the extent to which these fathers were able to parent from prison was largely dependent on the quality of relationships with their children's caregivers. Furthermore, many fathers were careful not to undermine the parental role of the caregivers, recognising the limitations associated with parenting from inside. From the accounts provided by the fathers, it appears that many potentially positive aspects of their involvement with their children had dissipated over the prison term, meaning that children may be missing out on positive developmental experiences and potentially experiencing profound loss as a consequence of the imprisonment of their father.

B Role Modelling and Parental Generativity

Three-quarters of fathers (75%) said that they considered themselves to be a role model to their child or children before their imprisonment. Fathers' perceptions of what being a role model meant varied, but included working hard and instilling work ethics, cultural engagement and teachings, abstaining from drugs or alcohol in their children's presence, teaching honesty, respect and manners, providing for their children and helping out at home, being a friend to their children, being athletic and encouraging sporting activities, providing security, and high parental engagement.

More than half of the fathers (56%) stated that they considered themselves to be a role model during their imprisonment. Of the 38 men who reported being a role model before imprisonment, 74% still considered themselves to be a role model. However, the ways in which they identified being a role model while in prison were notably different to before imprisonment and primarily involved using their own imprisonment to encourage good behaviour and decision-making from their children. These included guiding their children on the right path so that they would not make the same mistakes as their father (eg, engaging in criminal activity, going to prison etc), teaching right from wrong and the importance of good behaviour, teaching everyday life skills (eg, managing money) and wisdom, teaching not to use violence, abstaining from drugs and alcohol and teaching about the negative consequences of these substances. For example, Nathan reported that he saw himself as a role model to his children ‘in some ways ... I would teach ’em what’s right ... I’m a good listener to them and tell me kids to always tell the truth even if they are right or wrong’. When asked if he continued to see himself as a role model while in prison, Nathan said, ‘Yeah, I can tell them first-hand about jail so they don’t ever wanna come here’. Similarly, Kevin reported that he saw himself as a role model to his five children before his imprisonment and that he still considered himself to be a role model to them. He said that he would teach his children ‘don’t follow the same path [as their father], stay away from drugs, stay in school, be polite and respect others, always look after your little sister’. Kevin also stated that he had ‘been clean [from drugs] for two years’.

One in four fathers (26%) did not see themselves as a role model before their imprisonment. Reasons included their criminal activity, consumption of drugs and alcohol, modelling antisocial behaviour, not spending time with their children, and not respecting authority. For example, Paul said that before his imprisonment he was ‘a good father but not excellent ... an average father’ to his two sons (aged two and eight). He said that he ‘could’ve been there more for them’ and that before his imprisonment he was ‘drinking a lot [and] would only spend about 30 minutes with me boys each day’. Paul said that he realised that he was not ‘doing right by my boys when my little boy [two-year-old] picked up a beer bottle pretending to take a swig like me’.

One in three fathers (34%) did not consider themselves to be a role model during their imprisonment. Ten of these fathers had seen themselves as a role model before their imprisonment but no longer did, while four fathers did not see themselves as a role model before or during imprisonment. Reasons included not being available to their children, unable to support them, lack of contact with their children, and their criminal activity leading to their imprisonment. These men demonstrated some signs of generative thoughts, by considering the impact of their behaviour and lifestyle on their children, but struggled to engage in generative behaviour. For example, Robert, who had regular contact and parental involvement with his 16-year-old son while in prison said, ‘Every mistake

in life, I've made it ... try to teach kids but kids don't listen'. Robert also did not consider himself to be a role model before his imprisonment because of limited contact due to multiple imprisonments. Similarly, Ian did not see himself as a role model to his 14-year-old son before his imprisonment due to multiple imprisonments over the previous 11 years: '[I could not be a] role model to myself, there was no way I could be one for him'. Ian had no contact with his son during the current episode, and noted, 'You can't be much of anything from inside'. Another father, Simon, reported that before his imprisonment he was a role model to his two stepsons by providing them 'with a manly influence in their lives', something he reported they did not have before 'I came along'. But when asked whether he still considered himself to be a role model, Simon laughed and said, 'I'm in jail ... what sort of a role model is that?'

Over a quarter of fathers (29%) acknowledged that being a role model from prison was difficult for various reasons (eg, restricted contact, the nature of the crimes they committed and being in prison in general), but were able to see how they could be a role model upon release. Again, their descriptions of role modelling frequently included using their imprisonment as a way to teach their children the importance of good behaviour. For example, Matt reported that before his imprisonment he saw himself as a role model to his four sons, with whom he maintains a good relationship and speaks to regularly. He said that before his imprisonment he was a hard worker but that he 'got in the wrong crowd ... stealing stuff. When I'm not with me mates I'm always there for me kids'. But while in prison, Matt did not see himself as a role model to his children 'cause I'm not there to support 'em'. He did, however, report that he would be a good role model after release by 'teaching 'em ... talking to them about the right things from the wrong things. They ask me what jail's like and I just say, "You don't wanna be here"'. Similarly, Tom reported that while he saw himself as a role model to his three sons before his imprisonment, he did not see himself as a role model while in prison. He did, however, want to help his children and 'guide them on the right path' when he is released so that 'they don't make the same mistakes that I did'. It was evident that for some men, their ability (and possibly perceived ability) to positively influence their children was stalled while in prison, but their hopes for the future included descriptions of generative behaviour in attempts to offer better lives for their children.

Interestingly, six of the 14 fathers who said they were not a role model before imprisonment considered themselves to be a role model while in prison. It is possible that the experience of imprisonment provided a space in their lives to think about their role as fathers. These fathers described overcoming addictions, learning that violence and antisocial behaviour is wrong and realising what they have lost due to imprisonment. One father, William, said, 'Jail has made me a better man ... I don't take things for granted. One day you're living the life dream then the next day you're in here with nothing'. He said that he would pass on 'what not to do' to his children. Another father, Zach, said that he is a 'patient and loving' person

and that since his imprisonment he 'developed insight ... it makes you a better parent'. Since his imprisonment, Zach had abstained from drugs and completed some distance education. Paul, discussed earlier, said that his Alcoholics Anonymous course during his imprisonment helped him to be a better role model to his two children.

C Perceived Negative Impact of Imprisonment on Children

Eighty per cent of the children were aware that their father was in prison. More than two-thirds of fathers (70%) believed that their imprisonment was having a negative impact on the wellbeing of at least one of their children. Fathers reported specific concerns about the impact of their imprisonment on the wellbeing of almost half of their children (48%), but had no concerns for 34% of their children. For the remaining children, fathers were either unsure whether their imprisonment had an impact due to little or no contact with the children (5%) or they did not discuss their children's wellbeing (13%).

Fathers cited various ways that they believed their imprisonment was affecting their child's wellbeing. These included behavioural problems, mental health problems (eg, anxiety, depression), academic problems, missing out on a childhood, concerns of neglect and abuse by the caregiver, suicidal ideation, loss of motivation for activities the child is usually interested in, being bullied, missing school, lack of contact with their father and missing out on having a father-figure/influence, feeling rejected and expressing hurt or anger because their father is not around and because contact is limited, and worrying about their father being in prison.

Fathers that reported that their child was experiencing behavioural problems described children acting out at school and at home as a response to their father's imprisonment or absence from their daily lives more generally. For example, when Michael was asked whether he believed that his children (aged 10 and 14) were experiencing any problems since his imprisonment he said, 'For sure ... because Dad's in jail they think "I can do whatever I want" ... but I tell them "think before you act"'. He also recounted a time when one of his sons did not want to visit him in prison and reported that his son said, 'I hate you Dad ... you're gonna be in jail forever'. Ben said that since his imprisonment his four-year-old son 'won't leave his mum's side ... he won't listen to her ... just does what he wants'. Ben said that his son might be experiencing these difficulties because 'he would always do stuff with me ... but now I'm not there'. He reported that his partner also told him that his son would not go to day-care anymore. Another father, Jim, reported that since his imprisonment his 14-year-old son was 'playing up a bit more ... hitting the grog. He isn't doing his community work [for a juvenile justice charge]. He gets away with it when I'm not there'.

Chris, discussed earlier, reported that for the first two months of his imprisonment, his son was in 'detention every day ... throwing chairs at the teacher, beating up other kids'. He believed that this was his son's

way of 'releasing a lot of anger because I'm not there' and that his son now 'really has a mouth on him ... back chats'. He said that his son had 'five different behaviour charts at school ... his grades were dropping ... he was just struggling'. Chris stated that once his son's teacher became aware that he was in prison, the school organised counselling for his son: 'It's really helped his behaviour ... he's not got any behaviour charts anymore ... he's on the student council for next term.' He said that he is now a 'really firm believer about schools knowing when a kid's got a dad in jail'.

Emotional difficulties and children missing out on a father figure while their father was in prison were also common themes among our interviews. Alex said that he believed his imprisonment had 'changed' his nine-year-old son's life: 'He's missed out on heaps of things ... not having a dad. [He] craves a male figure head and has attached himself to his footy coach ... 'cause I'm not there. He sees other kids with their dads and gets upset'. Alex said that he told his son that he is sorry for all the hurt that he caused him because of his crimes and that his son gave him a hug and said, 'But you aren't like that anymore, are you Dad?'

Ian (discussed earlier) had been in and out of prison for 11 years of his son's life and had no contact with him during his current episode. He said that his imprisonment 'would have to' have affected his son's life: '[He] must have so much doubt and wonder about me ... he hardly ever gets to see me'. He also said that he feels guilty that his son has missed out on 'the normal father-son stuff ... playing football together ... just hanging out'. Jim (discussed earlier) said that his two-year-old daughter's eating patterns have changed: 'She loses weight when I'm in here ... puts it back on when I get out. She's just missing her dad'.

Another father, Benjamin, had been in prison for more than six years of his eight-year-old stepson's life but had regular parental involvement and was kept up-to-date on all aspects of his life while in prison. He said that for the first couple of years of his imprisonment his stepson 'didn't know who I was until he started visiting me ... then he remembered me as his dad'. Benjamin reported that his stepson's grandmother (and caregiver) said that he had been hurt when Benjamin went to prison: '[He] felt discarded you could say'. Benjamin's partner had passed away 12 months before the interview and his stepson was 'coping with her (his mother's) impending death ... my son had to watch that'. His son's grandmother had told Benjamin that his son 'felt like everyone was turning their back on him ... he got very sad and didn't want to talk'.

Academic struggles and difficulties at school more generally such as problematic friendships and bullying were other common themes. For example, Zach (discussed earlier) reported that his seven-year-old daughter was being teased at school about 'not having real parents' as she was in foster care. Zach believed that his daughter 'is just hoping that one of us (parents) comes through for her'. He reported that his daughter had also started to fall behind in school 'but she doesn't get teased anymore ... her grades are good now'. Zach said that during phone conversations his daughter was 'always worried about whether I was okay. [I told her]

“I’m fine ... your job is just to be a kid and have fun ... don’t worry about things”. He also expressed concerns that his daughter ‘was pretending that she was okay’ when they would speak on the phone but that this was not the case (her being okay) and that she has a number of coping strategies. He reported that he has it ‘in writing [that] me having contact with her has put her at ease. [Child Safety⁵⁷ officers have said that] I have a completely 100% positive effect on her’.

IV DISCUSSION

In order to begin to address the question of why paternal imprisonment is a risk factor for children’s wellbeing, we examined how paternal involvement with children and generative opportunities for fathering change through imprisonment. This is not a longitudinal study and therefore we cannot begin to discuss causal processes or effects associated with paternal involvement. However, we can begin to identify changes in parenting involvement following imprisonment and consider, at least from the father’s perspective, whether these changes give rise to behavioural or emotional problems in their children. To date, the degree, type and changes in paternal involvement have not been examined in longitudinal research on children of prisoners. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to have informed discussions regarding the best interests of children with imprisoned fathers or to consider ways in which parental involvement and parental generativity can and should be fostered from within prison.

Most of the fathers in our study described parental involvement with at least one of their children before imprisonment, although more fathers were involved if they lived with their child. But the difficulty in remaining involved during imprisonment was highlighted by the fact that one-third of previously involved fathers were no longer involved in parenting their children during imprisonment. This finding suggests that some children are losing an important family member in their lives when their father is imprisoned, one that was engaged in various aspects of caregiving. Previous research has demonstrated that positive parenting interactions are associated with positive child outcomes.⁵⁸ With the exception of a few cases, most fathers struggled to find ways to be positively involved in their children’s lives from prison. The reasons for this appeared to be a complex array of difficulties associated with parental involvement before imprisonment, the personal skill set of fathers for communicating with children and caregivers, and the attitude of the caregiver towards the role and entitlement of the father in their child’s life. The men also expressed some degree of guilt and shame associated with their offending and a sense of letting their family down, as well as a potential diminishing of parental identity and generative opportunities within prison.

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57 Child Safety Services is the Queensland Government agency for child protection and adoption services.

58 Amato and Gilbreth, above n 25.

While this study did not examine contact issues, we do know that only a third of children had any regular visitation with their fathers, while two-thirds of children had at least fortnightly phone and/or letter contact. But even for fathers who mentioned speaking with their children on the phone, it was evident that being an involved parent was still difficult. While parents typically have the greatest potential direct influence on children's developmental systems,⁵⁹ prison processes and negotiations with caregivers now filter the proximal relationship that existed between fathers and their children before prison. Despite prior parental involvement, some fathers stepped aside from parenting while in prison, not wanting to interfere with the role of the caregiver. They recognised the additional burdens they had placed on the caregiver through their imprisonment and did not want to make the process more difficult. Other fathers were distanced from parenting by caregivers who either felt the father did not deserve to parent from prison or could not effectively parent from prison. Such findings accord with research on imprisoned fathers in the United States⁶⁰ and England.⁶¹

For some fathers, the nature of the prison system itself made it difficult for them to identify as a father. As Halsey and Harris⁶² note, the degenerative situation of disconnect with family members that arises in prison means that 'each prisoner's life story is slowly but surely set adrift from the life stories of those who matter the most to them'. For virtually every father in this study, they reported that their identity as a father and role model for their children changed through imprisonment. We found five variations in the ways their identity changed. First, some fathers identified themselves as role models before imprisonment and continued to see themselves as such, but typically in a different way. Because they could no longer be as involved in their children's lives from prison, they looked to their time in prison for opportunities to guide their children away from problem behaviour and to deter them from following their father's path. Using their own mistakes to guide children away from making similar mistakes may be a limited form of role modelling, but it highlights their desire to find a way to be a role model within prison and to contribute positively to their children's futures.

Second, there were fathers who identified themselves as role models before imprisonment but no longer saw that capacity in them due to their offending and imprisonment. Unlike the first group, they did not identify any knowledge or experiences they could share with their children as a consequence of their imprisonment. Third, some fathers did not consider themselves to be role models before, or during imprisonment, largely due to their lack of involvement with their children which was often tied in with substance abuse and/or offending. They were aware that they were

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59 Ford and Lerner, above n 9.

60 Arditti, Smock and Parkman, above n 44.

61 Clarke et al, above n 48.

62 Halsey and Harris, above n 40.

not available as fathers or engaged with their children and did not identify any capacity to be a role model or offer guidance in the future.

Other fathers identified generative opportunities through their imprisonment or displayed generative thinking towards their children. The fourth group of fathers did not consider themselves to be role models before imprisonment but considered that they now were role models by either demonstrating to their children the consequences of poor choices, substance use and antisocial behaviour or by taking steps to improve themselves through education and rehabilitation programs. Their commitment to change and improve was a strength they could impart to their children. The fifth and final group were fathers who did not consider that they were role models before or during imprisonment but planned to be in the future. Similar to the men in Arditti and colleagues’ study,⁶³ time in prison had provided an opportunity for these men to reflect on their role as fathers and they expressed a desire to have a more positive influence on their children upon their release.

It was clear that any role modelling during imprisonment was tied to fathers’ experiences of imprisonment in efforts to deter their children from following in their footsteps. It was almost impossible for any fathers to consider their identity as anything other than a prisoner and to continue to provide mentoring, advice or other positive modelling outside of this identity. However, there was considerable variation in the degree that their imprisonment appeared to impact upon their identity and capacity for generative parenting. Often those fathers who appeared to be more positively involved in their children’s lives before imprisonment struggled the most to retain their identity as a father and to be involved in parenting. These fathers may have possessed a broader concept of role modelling and could no longer identify with that role while in prison. Further research is needed to examine whether the risks of poor developmental outcomes are heightened for these children. Prior research on the impact of paternal imprisonment on children has found that increases in children’s aggression were greater if the child was living with their father before imprisonment.⁶⁴ While it is possible that this is associated with the antisocial behaviour of the father,⁶⁵ it may also be a consequence of the grief and loss associated with the imprisonment of a father who had been regularly involved in their lives.

While we must interpret fathers’ accounts of the impact of their imprisonment on their children carefully, since they are their subjective accounts and not independently measured, we identified an array of concerns that fathers had for their children’s wellbeing. Approximately half of the children reportedly experienced negative outcomes as a consequence of their father’s imprisonment. In particular, fathers emphasised the effect they believed their absence had on their children, either through

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63 Arditti, Smock and Parkman, above n 44.

64 Geller et al, ‘Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development’, above n 2.

65 See, for example, Jaffee et al, above n 29.

a lack of effective discipline or by acting out as a response to the loss of their father. Fathers' inability to be engaged in their children's lives, to take them to play sports, to help with homework, to read stories and to generally be a presence in their children's lives were cited as profound losses experienced by some children. This needs to be carefully examined in future research and through the voices of children and young people themselves. Yet it nevertheless highlights the potential importance of many of these fathers in their children's lives. Identifying ways for fathers to be positively involved in parenting during imprisonment may be critical to the wellbeing of these children. It may assist in the child's positive adjustment during and post the imprisonment of their father⁶⁶ and contribute to the rehabilitation and desistance of the father.⁶⁷

Caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings of this study. First, we do not know how representative these fathers were to all imprisoned fathers. Men self-selected to be included in the study, and it is possible that they were those men who were most involved with their children or most concerned about their children's wellbeing. A recent survey of 303 imprisoned fathers to 753 children in Queensland found that 48% of the children were living with their father before his imprisonment.⁶⁸ As only slightly more children (56%) were living with their father in the current study, it appears that the experiences of resident and non-resident fathers were reasonably well-represented. A second caveat is that we do not know the quality of fathers' reported involvement with their children. While fathers did appear to speak quite frankly about their perceived positive and negative influences in their children's lives, we must be conscious that these are the men's accounts of their parenting. We do not know the extent of positive parenting or the degree to which antisocial behaviour was modelled at home. Longitudinal research that draws information from multiple sources (ie, father, caregiver, child, teacher) is essential to understand the effect of paternal imprisonment on children, their developmental system including caregivers, and on the capacity of fathers to engage positively in parenting their children.

In this study we have identified tangible ways that parental involvement has been diminished through the imprisonment process. Reduced accessibility and opportunities for engagement with children appears to be a consequence of prison life. Strained relationships with caregivers lead to regulation in parental involvement. For some men, opportunities for generative fathering become stagnant in the face of the obstacles of the prison setting and interpersonal circumstances. Men's identities as fathers and role models changed in five key ways over the course of imprisonment. For some this meant the loss of their identity as a father and as a positive influence in their children's lives, while for other men, almost unexpectedly, their time in prison allowed them to positively redefine their current or future role as a father. There was tentative evidence that

66 See, for example, Lösel et al, above n 52.

67 Bahr et al, above n 54; Visher and Courtney, above n 54.

68 Dennison, Stewart and Freiberg, above n 4.

the physical absence of their father and his reduced parental involvement gave rise to behavioural and emotional problems in some children. While additional research is required, particularly that which includes caregiver and child perspectives, this study found that at least some, if not many, children of imprisoned fathers experience a significant loss in terms of the involvement of their father in their daily lives. How this loss of a father figure shapes their long-term developmental outcomes is not yet understood.

Rather than waiting for developmental outcomes to unfold, we need to act now to examine ways for previously involved fathers to remain involved in parenting and to positively engage with their children, where it is determined to be in the best interests of their child. We also need to examine the potential benefits (or otherwise) of previously uninvolved fathers connecting with their children and developing a generative outlook while in prison. Enhancing parental opportunities for fathers may involve modifying prison policies to better recognise and foster quality father-child relationships, developing parenting skills, identifying ways for fathers to connect with their children’s schools and schooling, repairing relationships and improving communication between the father and the child’s caregiver. Each possibility needs careful examination, but it is important to take steps in this direction with both the wellbeing of the child and opportunities for offender rehabilitation in mind.

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