THE EFFECT OF CURRENT FAMILY CONTACT AND PAST CLOSEDNESS WITH PARENTS ON INCARCERATED FATHERS MENTAL HEALTH AND ATTITUDES TOWARD FATHERHOOD

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ABSTRACT

America’s prison population are parents of nearly 1.5 million minor children (Manuschak et al., 2021). Because much of the incarcerated population are men, relationships between fathers and children are often fragmented, creating challenges for fatherhood and mental health. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of child and family contact on the mental health and attitudes toward fatherhood among incarcerated fathers and the effect of closeness to a mother or father during childhood on mental health and attitudes toward fatherhood. Data are from 1,720 justice-involved men with at least one child who participated in the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MSF-IP). The study was a cross-sectional survey design that gathered data such as personal demographics, child and family contact, paternal closeness, depression, and attitudes toward fatherhood. A series of multiple linear regression analyses were performed to determine the relationship between the study variables. Child contact was found to be significantly related to less depressive symptoms and more positive attitudes toward fatherhood. Awareness of these outcomes can guide social workers to advocate for policies and programs that foster father-child contact during incarceration and address barriers to contact for justice-involved clients.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of Study
- Parental incarceration has severe implications for the emotional well-being of the individual, their family, and children (Arditti et al., 2005).
- Knowledge of how past and current family factors influence incarcerated fathers’ mental health and fatherhood attitudes will inform how to mediate such problems during incarceration.

Research Questions
1. What is the effect of child and family contact on mental health among incarcerated fathers?
2. What is the effect of paternal and maternal relationship for mental health among incarcerated fathers?
3. What is the effect of child and family contact on attitudes toward fatherhood among incarcerated fathers?
4. What is the effect of child contact on paternal and maternal relationships on attitudes toward fatherhood among incarcerated fathers?

Hypothesis
Higher rates of child and family contact will be associated with lower rates of depression and more positive attitudes toward fatherhood among incarcerated fathers. Decreased child paternal and maternal relationships will be associated with higher rates of depression and more negative attitudes toward fatherhood among incarcerated fathers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child Contact & Father’s Childhood Relationships
- Incarcerated fathers experience patterns of absence, substance use, incarceration, and poor attachment styles in caregiver relationships, and the accumulation of childhood risk factors is associated with less contact with their children during incarceration (Fairchild, 2009; Galardi et al., 2017; Rashburn & Mackrthur, 2010).

Incarcerated Father’s Mental Health & Attitudes Toward Fatherhood
- Incarcerated fathers are twice as likely to experience depression as their non-incarcerated counterparts, as well as feelings of helplessness and regret as imprisonment prohibits them from fulfilling the duties of parenthood (Arditti et al., 2005; Turner et al., 2012).

Research & Knowledge Gaps
- Research often relies on non-incarcerated caregiver reports to explore the father-child relationship during incarceration.
- Many studies focus on the impact of visitation or contact on children and caregivers and do not fully encompass the incarcerated father’s experience of these concepts.
- Current research on past family relationships among the incarcerated is limited.

Research Design and Data Collection

The current study is a secondary data analysis of baseline data from the Multi-site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MSF-IP). The MSF-IP was a longitudinal survey design that used a large sample size to evaluate concepts such as relationship quality and stability, parenting, financial well-being, and recidivism.

Sample and Sampling Method
- The MSF-IP study used purposeful sampling methods to select male inmates who participated in prison family programs.
- 2,991 currently or recently incarcerated men and 1,482 female partners were interviewed at five U.S. state prisons.
- 1,720 men with at least one child were selected for this study.

METHODS

Independent Variables
Child Contact
- Child contact was measured using a composite score of four items including the frequency of personal visits, phone calls, receiving mail, and receiving photos or audiotapes from any children.

Parent Contact
- Parent contact was measured using a composite score of three items indicating the frequency of personal visits, phone calls, and receiving mail.

Other Family Contact
- Other family contact was measured by a five-point Likert scale and included one self-report item.

Father’s Paternal and Maternal Relationships
- Parental relationships were measured by one self-report item for each parent, indicating feelings of closeness with a parental figure or biological parent.

Dependent Variables
Depression
- Depression was measured by a four-point Likert scale and included nine self-report items for depressive symptoms (α = .73).

Attitudes Toward Fatherhood
- Attitudes toward fatherhood were measured by a four-point Likert scale and included seven self-report items (α = .61).

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis
Depression
- Child contact, age, and educational attainment were found to be significant predictors of less depressive symptoms.

Attitudes Toward Fatherhood
- Child contact, father closeness, and educational attainment were significant predictors of more positive attitudes toward fatherhood.

RESULTS

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings
- Fathers who have more contact with their children during their incarceration report less depressive symptoms and more positive attitudes toward fatherhood.
- Fathers who had a close relationship with their father during childhood report more positive attitudes toward fatherhood.
- Fathers who have more partner contact during incarceration report less positive attitudes toward fatherhood.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice
- This study lends strong evidence for the importance of maintaining father-child contact during incarceration.
- Further research should examine the effect of various types of contact on similar outcomes.
- On a policy level, social workers should advocate for visitation programs and policies in the criminal justice system to maintain father-child contact.
- On a practice level, social workers should address barriers to contact for their justice-involved clients and their families.

Strengths and Limitations
- The current study’s strengths include a cross-sectional design, retroactive nature of the study, which impacts reliability, and reliance on self-report data.
- The current study’s strengths include a large sample size, utilizing incarcerated-caregiver data to report contact and which is uncommon in the research literature.

REFERENCES (SELECTED)


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