

# Stepping In and Stepping Away: Variation in How Children Navigate Responsibilities Stemming from Paternal Incarceration



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*Despite reasons to believe that paternal incarceration has heterogeneous consequences for children, little research explores the processes underlying variation in children's responses to this adverse event. We use data from the Jail and Family Life Study, an in-depth interview study of incarcerated fathers and their family members (including their children), to understand the heterogeneous processes linking paternal incarceration to children's well-being. Children commonly reported that their father's incarceration restructured their lives by altering their emotional and instrumental responsibilities. Within each of these domains, though, children expressed considerable variation in their responses, with some children seamlessly stepping into new responsibilities stemming from paternal incarceration and other children, especially older children who had witnessed their fathers' frequent entanglements with the criminal legal system, consciously stepping away from these responsibilities. These findings illustrate the range of responses that children have to paternal incarceration, shedding light on processes that have not been observed in survey research.*

**Keywords:** children's well-being, criminal legal system, heterogeneous effects, incarceration, inequality

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The expeditious growth of incarceration over the past half century in the United States means that a historically unprecedented number of children experience parental incarceration over the course of their lives. More than 2.6 million children have a parent, most commonly a father, currently incarcerated, and millions more children have fathers recently released from jail or prison (Sykes and Pettit 2014). More than 16 percent of U.S. adults—some forty million individuals—report their father has been confined in jail or prison (Enns et al. 2019). Among urban children, about one-third experience paternal incarceration by age nine (Turney and Haskins 2019). The concentration of paternal incarceration among children of color and economically vulnerable children, combined with the negative intergenerational repercussions of paternal incarceration, can exacerbate existing inequalities in children's well-being (Wakefield and Wildeman 2013).

Paternal incarceration is an overwhelmingly stressful life event—and a unique form of household disruption—that is often accompanied by trauma, can create internalized stigma, and can facilitate strain within the household and beyond (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Paternal incarceration strains family economic resources (Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011), creates challenges for children's caregivers as they navigate parenting demands (Turney and Wildeman 2013), and fractures relationships between parents (Turney and Halpern-Meekin 2021), all of which can contribute to deleterious intergenerational outcomes from childhood through adulthood. Indeed, research consistently finds that paternal incarceration impairs mental and physical health, reduces educational achievement and attainment, and increases hardship and deprivation, net of characteristics associated with selection into experiencing paternal incarceration (for reviews, see Foster and Hagan 2015; Haskins, Amorim, and Mingo 2018; Johnson and Easterling 2012; Murray, Loeber, and Pardini 2012; Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney 2021; Turney and Goodsell 2018). This research also highlights children's heterogeneous responses to paternal incarceration (Burgess-Proctor, Huebner, and Durso 2016; Foster and Hagan 2013;

Haskins 2014; Turney 2017, 2022; Wildeman 2010).

Despite accumulating evidence of the deleterious intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration, our understanding of these consequences is limited. Perhaps most important, existing research nearly exclusively relies on survey data to estimate differences in outcomes between children who do and do not experience paternal incarceration (for research using qualitative methods, see Johnson and Easterling 2015; Nesmith and Ruhland 2008; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013). This focus on group differences—and the corresponding focus on causal inference despite the challenges of isolating paternal incarceration from other adversities—means that little research systematically considers the processes underlying children's responses to paternal incarceration. A more complete understanding of children's responses could help reconcile inconsistent or heterogeneous findings across data sources, identify places of intervention to reduce inequalities, and inform future survey development.

In this article, we use qualitative data from the Jail and Family Life Study, an in-depth interview study of incarcerated fathers and their family members (including their children), to document the processes through which children respond to their father's jail incarceration. Understanding the repercussions of jail incarceration, where most people incarcerated are awaiting adjudication of their case and have not been convicted of any crime, and are therefore experiencing considerable uncertainty about their release date, is especially important (Turney and Conner 2019). Jail incarceration is six times more common than prison incarceration, meaning that having a father incarcerated in jail is far more common than having a father incarcerated in prison (Sawyer and Wagner 2023). Jail incarceration is also relatively short in duration, with people commonly churning between institutions and communities, a form of instability that can create considerable challenges for children (Cavanagh and Fomby 2019).

Our analysis of longitudinal interviews with thirty-eight children (ages eight to seventeen), two-thirds of whom identify as Latino/a, show

that the carceral system imposes symbiotic harms on children of incarcerated fathers (Condry and Minson 2021). First, we find that exposure to an incarcerated father restructures the lives of children, with children describing how the criminal legal system socializes them to take on emotional and instrumental responsibilities in response to their father's incarceration. Second, we find that within the domains of altered emotional and instrumental responsibilities, children expressed considerable variation in their responses to their fathers' incarceration. Some children reported seamlessly stepping into these new responsibilities and others reported consciously stepping away from these responsibilities (sometimes stepping into new responsibilities as well), and both stepping in and stepping away took considerable energy. Third, these heterogeneous responses stem partially from variation in children's age, particularly differences between those in middle childhood (ages eight to twelve) and those in adolescence (ages thirteen to seventeen), which intersects with variation in their father's incarceration history (for example, duration and frequency of incarceration). These findings, which bring Latino/a children to the forefront of scholarship on the harms imposed by the criminal legal system, illustrate the range of responses children have to paternal incarceration.

## BACKGROUND

The stress process perspective provides a lens for understanding how paternal incarceration can affect children's well-being. We first review the stress process perspective, focusing on the stressor of paternal incarceration, and then describe prior research on the repercussions of paternal incarceration for children's well-being.

### Paternal Incarceration in the Stress Process Perspective

The stress process perspective posits that stressors, events, and disruptions concentrated among vulnerable groups that challenge adaptive functioning can be meaningful for well-being (Carr 2014; Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981). Stressors can be quite consequential for children (Avison 2010). Three aspects of the stress process perspective are especially rele-

vant to understanding the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's well-being: first, inequality in exposure and responses to stressors; second, stress proliferation across people (that is, how stressors proliferate from the person initially exposed to the stressor to those connected to that person); and, third, stress proliferation across stressors (that is, how initial stressors lead to stressors in other domains).

### *Inequality in Exposure and Responses to Stressors*

First, the stress process perspective highlights inequality in exposure to stressors, with exposure to stressors concentrated among historically and contemporarily disadvantaged social groups (Pearlin 1989). Paternal incarceration, rooted in structural inequalities stemming from racism and slavery, is a relatively common adverse childhood experience (Alexander 2020; Gjelsvik et al. 2014; Turney 2018) and form of household disruption. A nationally representative sample of children shows that 8 percent of children (ages zero to seventeen) have experienced the incarceration of a residential parent (Turney 2018). A nationally representative sample of adults finds that more than one-third (34 percent) of those ages eighteen to twenty-nine have experienced parental incarceration (Enns et al. 2019). Given the disproportionate share of men in the carceral system, paternal incarceration is more common than maternal incarceration (Carson 2021).

The commonality of paternal incarceration masks considerable inequality in exposure to paternal incarceration. Paternal incarceration is concentrated among children who endure additional vulnerabilities such as structural racism, residence in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and extreme poverty (Johnson and Easterling 2012). Among those born between 1989 and 1993, paternal incarceration is six and three times more common among Black and Hispanic children, respectively, than among White children (Sykes and Pettit 2014). Paternal incarceration is four times more common among Hispanic children of fathers with less than a high school diploma than among their counterparts of fathers with some college education (Sykes and Pettit 2014). Therefore, though

much scholarship on parental incarceration focuses on Black children (or disparities between Black and White children), Latino/a children are commonly exposed to this stressor.

### *Stress Proliferation Across People*

Second, the stress process perspective postulates that stressors can proliferate across people, that is, from the individual initially exposed to the stressor to those connected to that individual, and that this type of stress proliferation can operate to impair the well-being of both parties. Stressors can proliferate across generations, from parents to children or from children to parents, for example; within generations, from individuals to their siblings; or within nonfamilial connections, from individuals to their caregivers (Pearlin, Aneshensel, and LeBlanc 1997).

Indeed, most currently and formerly incarcerated individuals are embedded within families. Paternal incarceration can have far-reaching symbiotic harms for families (Condry and Minson 2021), with the consequences of incarceration extending beyond the consequences for the incarcerated and extending to the children (Foster and Hagan 2013), parents (Goldman 2019), romantic partners (Turney and Halpern-Meekin 2021), and siblings (Tadros, Fye, and Ray 2020) of the incarcerated. Given the strong bonds between parents and children, as well as the interdependence between parents and children over the life course (Elder 1998), research increasingly explores the deleterious repercussions of paternal incarceration.

### *Stress Proliferation Across Stressors*

Third, the stress process perspective posits that stressors can proliferate to create additional stressors (in addition to proliferating from one person to another, as described). Primary stressors give rise to additional, or secondary, stressors, with both primary and secondary stressors collectively impairing well-being (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981). The primary stressor of paternal incarceration can lead to secondary stressors such as economic hardship, fractured romantic and co-parenting relationships, and impaired caregiver health, all of which can undermine children's well-being.

Paternal incarceration, as a primary stressor, can facilitate economic strain for families, and this secondary stressor may be one pathway through which paternal incarceration impairs children's well-being. Most incarcerated fathers contribute economically to their households (or their children's households) prior to their incarceration (Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011). Incarcerated individuals are mechanically removed from employment and, after release, the stigma of a criminal record makes finding and sustaining employment difficult (Pager 2003). Economic hardship can facilitate unstable living situations, lead to fewer resources for children, and increase the labor-force participation of children's caregivers while decreasing their time for parental monitoring and supervision (Bruns 2019; Geller and Franklin 2014). In turn, economic strain undermines children's well-being (Hill et al. 2013).

The stressor of paternal incarceration also fractures family relationships, including romantic and co-parenting ties, and this secondary stressor may be another mechanism linking paternal incarceration and children's well-being. Most incarcerated individuals are in romantic relationships prior to their confinement, but the liminality associated with the carceral period makes it difficult to sustain romantic relationships while one partner is incarcerated (Comfort 2008). Incarceration creates challenges surrounding intimacy and communication and simultaneously gives partners an opportunity to reevaluate the role of the relationship in their lives (Comfort 2008). Incarceration increases the likelihood of union dissolution, reduces relationship quality, and creates difficulties in co-parenting (Turney and Halpern-Meekin 2021; Turney and Wildeman 2013; Western, Bloome, and Percheski 2008; Widdowson et al. 2020), all of which can damage children's well-being (McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013; Palkovitz, Fagan, and Hull 2013).

The stressor of paternal incarceration can put tremendous strain on children's caregivers (most frequently their mothers), and this secondary stressor—impaired caregiver mental health—may explain the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's well-being. Romantic partners of incarcerated men

may experience considerable distress and worry while their partner is incarcerated (Fishman 1990). They may also be forced to take on additional household and childcare responsibilities in their partner's absence (Braman 2007), which can be distressing or worrisome. Romantic partners may also experience considerable anticipatory stress about if and when their partner will be released and, if so, the role he will play in their lives after release (Fishman 1990; Miller 2021). Research shows that women who share children with recently incarcerated men, relative to their counterparts, have a greater likelihood of depression and life dissatisfaction (Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012). Caregiver mental health, in turn, is a key predictor of children's well-being (Meadows, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008).

### **Existing Evidence of Intergenerational Consequences of Paternal Incarceration**

The stress process perspective, with its focus on the unequal distribution of stressors and the proliferation of stressors across both people and stressors, is a useful framework for understanding the intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration. Research highlights the role of paternal incarceration in structuring inequalities—above and beyond inequalities prior to paternal incarceration—between children who do and do not experience this adverse childhood event. Children with incarcerated fathers, relative to their counterparts, have more behavioral problems, including internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and attention problems (Geller et al. 2012; Haskins 2014, 2015; Wildeman 2010). Children with incarcerated fathers also have poor educational outcomes—lower attainment, lower achievement, and higher rates of exclusionary school discipline (Jacobsen 2019; but see Norris, Pecenco, and Weaver 2021). They are also more likely to engage in delinquent behavior or have contact with the criminal legal system themselves (Wildeman and Andersen 2017). The magnitude of the differences between children with and without incarcerated fathers differ across both data sources and outcomes.

Research also demonstrates considerable heterogeneity in children's responses to pater-

nal incarceration. First, boys experience more deleterious consequences than girls, particularly in regard to behavioral and educational outcomes (Haskins 2014; Wildeman 2010). Second, the consequences are concentrated among children who were living with their fathers prior to his incarceration (Geller et al. 2012). Third, the age of exposure to paternal incarceration can also structure children's behavioral and educational outcomes, with paternal incarceration in early childhood being more consequential than paternal incarceration later in the life course (Foster and Hagan 2013; Turney 2022). This survey research provides some understanding of heterogeneous responses to paternal incarceration, but is limited because the data are often underpowered to detect statistically significant differences (which may suggest null results that would not be null if powered appropriately), is only focused on specific outcomes such as behavior or educational attainment, or comes to inconsistent findings across studies.

### **Expanding Our Understanding of Incarceration's Intergenerational Consequences**

Despite increased research attention to how the stressor of paternal incarceration shapes children's lives, opportunities to advance our understanding of how children respond to this stressor are available. Most important, little research examines the processes through which paternal incarceration transforms children, in part because the survey data commonly used to understand these intergenerational consequences (including the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health) are not well positioned to investigate processes. This survey research focuses on differences in outcomes between children who do and do not experience paternal incarceration and, given the stark differences between these two groups prior to the incarceration, often endeavors to strengthen causal inference around this association (Haskins 2014; Norris, Pecenco, and Weaver 2021).

The survey research that does investigate the mechanisms linking paternal incarceration to children's well-being cannot fully explain this



association and is limited by the cyclical nature of incarceration, which makes it especially difficult to identify causal mechanisms. One study finds that familial characteristics—including maternal depression, maternal parenting stress, paternal involvement, and spanking—explain some, but not all, of the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's behaviors, suggesting other mechanisms are at play (Antle, Gibson, and Krohn 2020; also see Dwyer Emory 2018). Qualitative research is ideal for understanding these processes (Johnson and Easterling 2015; Nesmith and Ruhland 2008; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013). Qualitative data, and its associated complexity, is also ideal for providing greater context for the heterogeneous consequences of paternal incarceration that have been identified in survey research (Sampson 2011; Torche, Fletcher, and Brand 2024, this issue).

## DATA AND METHODS

This article advances our understanding of the intergenerational consequences of incarceration by exploring the range of processes through which children respond to paternal incarceration. We use data from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal in-depth interview study of fathers incarcerated in southern California and their family members. Fathers were recruited and interviewed in jail and, during their interview, were asked to provide names and contact information for their family members (including their children, children's caregivers, and mothers). The sample includes 123 fathers and their family members, all of whom we attempted to interview twice, between July 2015 and December 2017. Fathers were eligible for participation if they had contact with at least one child in the month prior to their in-

carceration, although living with children was not a requirement for participation. We conducted baseline interviews with fathers while they were in jail. We conducted most baseline interviews with family members while the father was in jail, though occasionally fathers were released from jail before we were able to conduct these interviews. We conducted follow-up interviews with fathers and family members about two months after the father had been released from jail or, when fathers had not been released or sentenced to prison, about one year after the baseline interview. We asked children's caregivers to provide written consent for both their interview and, if applicable, the interview of their child. Children provided oral consent. We draw on sixty-eight interviews, including thirty-eight baseline and thirty follow-up interviews with children—from ages eight to seventeen—of incarcerated fathers.<sup>1</sup> These thirty-eight respondents come from twenty-six families because we interviewed siblings when possible. It is especially important to incorporate children's voices into the stress process perspective and research on the consequences of paternal incarceration more generally, as children may provide the most direct accounts of their familial experiences (Avison 2010).<sup>2</sup>

After working to establish rapport, we asked children questions about their families, their schools, and their peers, focusing especially on how their lives had changed since their father's incarceration (Turney et al. 2017). We paid attention to children's developmental age when conducting the interviews. We asked similar questions of all children, but varied the question wording and order as necessary to ensure that the interview flowed as much as possible like a conversation. Baseline and follow-up in-

1. Many fathers in the study had children younger than eight, consistent with expectations given the age distribution of incarcerated people. These fathers were eligible for study participation, but we did not interview their children; this is the primary reason we do not have corresponding child interviews for all father interviews.

2. Children may have different perspectives than their caregivers (Siegel and Luther 2019). We triangulated children's responses with those of their caregivers. These analyses revealed that children and caregiver accounts of instrumental responsibilities (described later) were consistent across reporters. They also revealed subtle differences in emotional responsibilities (described later). Children's accounts showed how children took on emotional responsibilities stemming from the incarceration, whereas caregiver accounts focused on the emotional consequences of the incarceration on the child. This suggests that a reliance on caregiver reports alone would miss the considerable emotional responsibilities described by children.

interviews with children lasted an average of forty-eight and forty-nine minutes (in a range of fourteen to 105 minutes), respectively. The relatively short length of the interviews with children is consistent with expectations from other research (Siegel and Luther 2019). Participants received \$10 cash for each interview. We transcribed interviews verbatim.

### **Analytic Approach**

The analytic approach occurred in three primary stages. First, a team of trained graduate students conducted deductive coding of all child interviews. We primarily derived the deductive codes from the interview questions, and they covered broad topics such as the father's incarceration, contact with the father, and mental health (Deterding and Waters 2021). Second, a team of trained graduate students conducted inductive coding of all child interviews. This involved coding the portions of the child interviews identified in the deductive coding as Incarceration Effects. We engaged in an iterative coding process, with the research team continually refining the codebook and recoding as necessary (Deterding and Waters 2021). We paid careful attention to intercoder reliability in both the deductive and inductive coding, with the research team coding multiple transcripts together until we reached consistency in coding and each transcript being coded by two team members, the larger team working closely together to resolve discrepancies. Third, we wrote analytic memos based on key themes that emerged during this inductive coding. We first wrote analytic memos for each of the key themes and then wrote separate analytic memos across emergent areas of heterogeneity including gender, father-child relationship prior to incarceration, and age.

### **Sample Description**

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the analytic sample. The analytic sample comprises roughly similar numbers of children in middle childhood (ages eight to twelve) and adolescence (ages thirteen to seventeen). Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of the analytic sample identified as Latino/a. Girls made up about two-thirds (66 percent) of the sample.

Most children (71 percent) were living with their biological mother at the baseline interview, and nearly all children (95 percent) were not living with their father immediately before his incarceration.

### **FINDINGS**

Analysis of interview transcripts reveal three key findings. First, children experienced changes in their emotional and instrumental responsibilities resulting from their father's incarceration. Second, children's responses to their father's incarceration were heterogeneous, with many children reporting increased emotional and instrumental responsibilities and others reporting conscious decisions to step away from these responsibilities, sometimes while describing increased responsibilities. Third, these heterogeneous responses stem partially from variation in children's age, particularly differences between those in middle childhood and those in adolescence, which intersects with variation in their father's incarceration history, such as duration and frequency of incarceration.

#### **Emotional and Instrumental Responsibilities Stemming from Paternal Incarceration**

Paternal incarceration, and the related removal of fathers from households, leaves children and their caregivers to manage in their father's absence. Most children responded to these changes by describing a range of emotional and instrumental responsibilities that they took on in response to their father's incarceration. Other children with incarcerated fathers, though, stepped away from these emotional and instrumental responsibilities. Therefore, children have heterogeneous responses to paternal incarceration.

#### *Stepping into New Responsibilities*

First, as expected, most children with incarcerated fathers commonly reported increased emotional and instrumental responsibilities that arose directly from their father's incarceration. These children incurred emotional responsibilities that included concealing their own emotions from their family members (mothers, siblings, and fathers) and providing consolation to these family members. Children

**Table 1.** Descriptive Characteristics of Analytic Sample

	Mean or <i>N</i>	Frequency (%)
<b>Race-ethnicity</b>		
Latino/a	25	66
Black	0	0
White	5	13
Asian-Pacific Islander	3	8
Multiracial-multietnic	4	11
Missing	1	3
<b>Gender</b>		
Boy	13	34
Girl	25	66
<b>Age</b>		
Eight to twelve	20	53
Thirteen to seventeen	18	47
<b>Caregiver<sup>a</sup></b>		
Biological mother	27	71
Grandparent	7	18
Someone other than biological mother	4	11
<b>Household social class<sup>b</sup></b>		
Poor or working poor	33	87
Middle class	5	13
<b>Living with father prior to incarceration</b>		
Yes	2	5
No	36	95
<b>Father previously incarcerated</b>		
Yes	36	95
No	2	5
<i>N</i>	38	

Source: Authors' tabulation.

<sup>a</sup> Percentages do not add to 100 percent because some children live with more than one caregiver.

<sup>b</sup> Poor or working poor children had unemployed caregivers; caregivers who were employed but reported erratic hours, low pay, and few benefits; or caregivers who were employed full time in low-paying positions with some benefits. Middle-class children had caregivers who worked full time in professional or white-collar careers.

engaged in these two types of emotional responsibilities—concealing their emotions and consoling their family members—to protect both themselves and their family members. These children also incurred instrumental responsibilities that included maintaining relationships with the father through visitation and other forms of contact, managing aspects

of their father's incarceration, and taking on caregiving responsibilities for their father and other family members.

Many children reported increased emotional responsibilities in response to their father's incarceration. Consider sixteen-year-old Sean, who described how he conceals his emotions about his father's incarceration to protect



his family members. Sean told us that his father's incarceration—and the accompanying behaviors that led to his father's engagement with the criminal legal system—has taken a toll on his family, especially his three siblings, who are ages twenty-seven, twenty-nine, and thirty-one. Sean describes sadness about his father's year-long absence and worry about the uncertainty of his father's release because his father's release date was still unknown despite more than thirty court appearances. Sean told us that he works hard to keep these emotions from his siblings. "I don't really say much, and I try not to say anything. Because I know that will not affect them on the outside, but I know inside it's gonna hurt them." Sean also described an acute awareness of the struggles that his father's first-time incarceration has created for his mother, and he says that the four of them look out for each other's emotions to lessen the burdens on their mother. "My mom went through so much," he told us.

Similarly, many children reported an increase in instrumental responsibilities in response to their father's incarceration. Children commonly reported the labor they engaged in to maintain contact with their father, which was often coordinated through their caregivers. All but three children sustained some form of contact with their incarcerated father during his most proximate incarceration, through visits, phone calls, and letter writing. Nearly two-thirds reported visiting their father in jail during his most proximate incarceration stay. For example, sixteen-year-old Renee told us about the instrumental responsibilities she and her three sisters took on to maintain contact with their father during his time in jail. Renee and her siblings, like many children we spoke with, visited their father, accepted his frequent collect calls, and wrote him letters. Renee told us that she worked hard to maintain contact with her father and also frequently put money on his books. "I was always there for him," she said. "[I thought] if we were there for him and giving him support, it would help him through it. . . . If he needed any money or food, if he needed money on his books, I put money on it. And, I'd write him whenever I could. Like, I was just always there for him, you know, to make sure—so, he knew that we were there for him and sup-

ported him." Renee's discussion of maintaining contact with her father was typical among children.

Another type of instrumental responsibilities that children commonly report is managing aspects of their father's incarceration. Children did so by attending court dates, passing messages along to those on the outside, and relaying or disclosing information about their father's whereabouts and well-being to his friends and family. Renee described the many ways she and her siblings managed their father's incarceration. They attended about ten of his court dates in the past year, each time sitting in court from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. only to learn that their father's case had been postponed. Renee and her siblings also communicated with her father's public defender, questioning why their father had been incarcerated so long on a probation violation, which contrasted with their online research suggesting he should spend no more than forty-five days in jail for this violation. When their father's case was finally adjudicated, after multiple postponements, and he was scheduled for immediate release given the length of time he had served, the sisters took responsibility for meeting him upon release. Renee and her sisters arrived at the jail at their father's scheduled release time of 10:30 p.m. and took him to a hotel when he was eventually released at 3 a.m.

### *Stepping Away from New Responsibilities*

Although many children described taking on increased emotional and instrumental responsibilities during their father's incarceration, notably by concealing their emotions and consoling distressed family members, adopting them was not universal, perhaps expected given research demonstrating children's heterogeneous responses to paternal incarceration. Instead, some children described consciously stepping away from these emotional and instrumental responsibilities to protect themselves, even as a number simultaneously engaged in some emotional and instrumental responsibilities. Many of these children described making decisions to minimize contact with their father—thereby partially lessening their potential for emotional and instrumental responsibilities—or minimize the support they

provide to their mothers, siblings, or other family members. They describe scaling back their duties over time or being selective about the responsibilities they incur. Violet, twelve years old, is an exemplar of a child who reports stepping away from emotional and instrumental responsibilities during her father's most recent incarceration. Her father had been in and out of jail most of her life and, when he requested that she visit him, by writing this in a Christmas card, she decided that she did not want to see him. She told us, "He doesn't exist. I try to forget about him. I try to not focus on the past and focus on the present. I don't want to know about my dad anymore cuz it's too much information." Therefore, Violet, like many children we interviewed, described not wanting to incur additional responsibilities related to her father's incarceration.

### Explaining Variation in Heterogeneous Responses to Paternal Incarceration

Our analyses show that many children step into emotional and instrumental responsibilities stemming from their father's incarceration and that others step away from these responsibilities sometimes while also stepping into some responsibilities. Why do some children step into these responsibilities and others step away? We systematically examined variation in children's responses to their father's incarceration, focusing on similarities and differences across child gender, the father-child relationship prior to the father's incarceration, and child age, particularly differences across middle childhood and adolescence, given some evidence from survey research that familial processes underlying paternal incarceration may vary across these dimensions.

#### *Child's Gender*

Our analyses show little evidence that the processes through which children respond to paternal incarceration—at least with respect to their emotional and instrumental responsibilities—vary by child's gender. Contrary to expectations, both boys and girls similarly described both incurring and stepping away from emotional and instrumental responsibilities. For example, both boys and girls commonly worked to conceal their emotions and spend

time consoling family members. Both boys and girls also similarly described stepping away from such responsibilities. Therefore, although some children described stepping into these responsibilities, others described stepping away, and still others described both stepping into some and stepping away from others, we found no evidence that these decisions are patterned by gender.

Luke, a nine-year-old boy, reported increased emotional and instrumental responsibilities in response to his father's incarceration. Luke took on the emotional responsibility of consoling his distressed family members. Like many of the children we interviewed, family members—including children's caregivers and siblings—commonly expressed distress, worry, and fear about the father's time in jail. Children were commonly aware that their family members were experiencing these emotions, and this knowledge often translated into increased emotional responsibilities. Luke told us that he and his siblings often witness his mother crying as a result of their father's incarceration. "We would cheer her up," he said. This type of emotional responsibility, consoling distressed family members, was common among both boys and girls in our sample.

In addition to children, like Luke, telling us they console their distressed family members, both boys and girls described an awareness that their siblings are protecting them. Nikki, a thirteen-year-old girl whose father experienced a series of short incarceration stays, provides an example. Nikki told us that her older sister, who experienced considerable distress related to her father's incarceration, does not bring up events related to the incarceration to avoid triggering Nicole. "My sister . . . tried to hide it so I wouldn't get sad," she said. Children, like Luke and Nikki, take on emotional responsibilities for protecting their family members or express an acute recognition of the emotional responsibilities that others are incurring, which is perhaps an emotional responsibility itself.

#### *Father-Child Relationship*

We also find little evidence of variation in children's emotional and instrumental responsibilities by their relationship with their father,

as measured by both father's residential status prior to his incarceration and the quality of the father-child relationship. All but two children we interviewed were not living with their father immediately beforehand. Given the energy that nearly all children spend on navigating new responsibilities in the wake of their father's incarceration, or stepping away from responsibilities, which also takes considerable energy, children are clearly not shielded from the repercussions of incarceration when their father lives in a separate household. We also examined variation in children's emotional and instrumental responsibilities based on their relationship with their father before his most proximate incarceration, comparing children with low-quality relationships with their fathers and those with high-quality relationships.<sup>3</sup> We found that children with both low- and high-quality relationships with their fathers engage in emotional and instrumental responsibilities in the wake of their father's incarceration. That is, even children with virtually no relationship with their fathers commonly describe having to manage the emotions of other family members, conceal their emotions from these family members, or reject their father's desire to connect with them. Likewise, we found that children step away from emotional and instrumental responsibilities regardless of their relationship with their father.

Children who report low-quality relationships describe emotional and instrumental responsibilities that stem from their fathers' incarceration. Ernesto, sixteen years old, provides an example. Ernesto reported having virtually no relationship with his father, both before and during his father's incarceration. Ernesto last visited his father in jail a year ago earlier, and although his father occasionally wrote him letters, he did not write back. Even so, Ernesto described the emotional responsibilities that come with consoling his mother and brother. Like Luke, Ernesto told us about the sadness

his mother experiences because of his father's incarceration. He said that he consoled his mother, who was especially sad about the lack of father figure for Ernesto and his brother, by telling her that she was solely responsible for the fact that he "grew up good." He also reassures his mother that his younger brother will similarly persevere during his father's incarceration, and tells her that "I could be the father figure for my little brother." He went on to describe how he comforted his brother, saying, "Gotta keep my brother in a happy place. I'ma make him happy and keep him here by my side." This consolation of both his mother and brother is similar to how many children describe reassuring and encouraging family members experiencing incarceration-related distress.

Children who report high-quality relationships with their fathers describe emotional and instrumental responsibilities that stem from their fathers' incarceration. Alexis, sixteen years old, was similar to the many children who reported high-quality relationships with their fathers. Alexis's parents divorced when she was in eighth grade and, although she had not lived with her father immediately before his incarceration, she talked to him on the phone every day. Now that he was incarcerated, she visited him as often as possible, telling us that she scheduled her weekends around these visits. Alexis described tremendous sadness regarding her father's absence, a sadness exacerbated when she visits him in jail. Alexis told us that she has hidden this sadness while visiting her father over the past three years, going to great lengths to obscure her tears from him and encouraging her younger sister to do the same. She told us, "It messes him up more because he knows what he did. He knows that he has to fix some things. With [my sister] crying or whatever, it just makes it that much harder for him. Yeah, it's hard for us, but we can make it easier for us and make it easier for him, that way it's just not as stressful on everyone." Alexis

3. We create two relatively crude categories for this analysis. We consider children to have low-quality relationships with their fathers if they reported not seeing their father for an extended period before incarceration, if their father had minimal involvement in daily tasks (such as taking the child to school or playing with the child), or if they reported negative feelings toward their father (such as resentment or anger). We consider other children to have high-quality relationships.

and her sister are exemplars of children who endure the labor of concealing their emotions to protect their fathers.

### *Child's Age*

Finally, despite little evidence of heterogeneity by child gender or father-child relationship, we find that age is a key factor in understanding how children respond to paternal incarceration via emotional and instrumental responsibilities, with the differences especially pronounced for instrumental responsibilities. We find that children's age matters for two reasons. First, children develop agency over time, to either take on more responsibilities or step away from these responsibilities. Second, children's age often dovetails with their father's incarceration history, with age being positively correlated with cyclical or lengthy incarceration. Children become better positioned to take on instrumental responsibilities as they age. We find that younger children often played a supportive role to other family members but, as they get older, they undertake instrumental responsibilities that are independent of their mother's or caregiver's involvement. They take a more active role in supporting their father and other family members and, similarly, are more forceful in stepping away from these responsibilities. The combination of age and father's incarceration history becomes especially pronounced when children choose to step away from these responsibilities, because older children have both agency to step away and often report being worn down from their father's cyclical incarceration. More broadly, this suggests an intersection between heterogeneous treatments (duration of incarceration) and heterogeneous responses (children's age).

Young children, ages eight to twelve, commonly describe taking on responsibilities during their father's incarceration. Chocolate, nine years old, described how her father's confinement—his second time experiencing incarceration—means that she now had the responsibility of walking the family dog. She said, "It was hard to take care of our dog. And just hard to do a lot of other things that [my dad] used to do." More commonly, children described how they incurred additional responsibilities for their siblings or caregivers (as Luke described,

for example). Similarly, twelve-year-old Paula, whose dad had been incarcerated for just over four months when we interviewed her, described emotional responsibilities incurred during his incarceration. Perhaps most notably, she told us about how she had to conceal her knowledge of the reason for her father's incarceration, a detail she overheard via eavesdropping. Paula also told us, though, that she was frustrated with her father's frequent incarcerations; his most recent time in jail was his fourth. She told us that she had visited him but that, should he be incarcerated a fifth time, she would not. She also said that she was going to tell her mother to stop putting money on his books "cause you really don't deserve it if you're gonna be going in here in and out." Therefore, though Paula has incurred emotional and instrumental responsibilities during her father's incarceration, she planned to pull back at least some of this support in the future. Children alter—or, in Paula's case, plan to alter—their instrumental responsibilities because they become worn down by fathers who frequently cycle in and out of jail.

Considerably more evidence of heterogeneity is in response to paternal incarceration as children age, with some older children (thirteen to seventeen) stepping into emotional and instrumental responsibilities and other older children stepping away. Two siblings (fourteen-year-old Nellie and seventeen-year-old Madeleine, as well as their eleven-year-old brother Ruben) described how they stepped into new responsibilities during their father's incarceration. They explained how they worked to care for their mother emotionally—by letting her express her sadness, fear, and loneliness about the father's incarceration; by providing a sounding board for her emotions; and by comforting her that everything would be OK—to protect their mother's emotional health. These siblings all described how they worked to manage their mother's emotions to keep her from ending her own life, an act she had previously expressed as a possibility. Madeleine said, "It was really hard. She would say, 'I just wanna give up. I wanna give up at life.'" Madeleine and her siblings, like many children we spoke to, took on considerable emotional responsibilities following their father's incarceration.

Older children also reported stepping away from emotional and instrumental responsibilities (and this was more common among older children than younger children). Nikki, the thirteen-year-old who expressed an acute recognition of the emotional responsibilities incurred by others, told us that her primary emotional responsibilities—of worrying about her father—decreased when her father was incarcerated for the tenth time. She said, “I feel like I would rather him be in jail because I know he’s safe there. And I know he’s eating and I know he’s getting medical attention if he needs it. And I don’t have to worry.” This sentiment of relief accompanying a father’s jail stay, and corresponding decline in emotional responsibilities, was commonly reported, even by children who also reported incurring emotional responsibilities. Therefore, some children, especially older children who had experienced their fathers cycling in and out of jail and prison over many years, described consciously stepping away from these emotional and instrumental responsibilities (even as a number simultaneously engaged in some emotional responsibilities).

## DISCUSSION

Research on the intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration comes to two broad conclusions. First, on average, paternal incarceration is a disruption with deleterious repercussions for children’s well-being (for reviews, see Foster and Hagan 2015; Haskins, Amorim, and Mingo 2018; Johnson and Easterling 2012; Murray, Loeber, and Pardini 2012; Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney 2021; Turney and Goodsell 2018). Second, there is considerable variation in how children respond to this stressor in terms of the magnitude of the differences between children with and without incarcerated fathers, differences across outcomes, and subgroup variation in associations (Foster and Hagan 2013; Geller et al. 2012; Haskins 2014; Norris, Pecenco, and Weaver 2021; Turney 2017). The processes underlying these average and heterogeneous repercussions are less understood, in part because of a reliance on survey data that lacks contextual information to understand these processes. In this article, we use qualitative data from the Jail

and Family Life Study, which includes in-depth interviews with thirty-eight children enduring paternal incarceration, the majority of whom identify as Latino/a, to provide a systematic accounting of the processes linking paternal incarceration to children’s well-being.

The first key finding is that children consistently identify sometimes overlapping emotional and instrumental responsibilities related to the stressor of paternal incarceration. Emotional responsibilities often include concealing their emotions and consoling their family members. These increased emotional responsibilities were in addition to the emotions such as distress, worry, and fear that children had regarding their father’s incarceration (Geller et al. 2012). Instrumental responsibilities commonly entailed maintaining relationships with their father through visitation and other forms of contact, managing aspects of their father’s incarceration, and taking on caregiving responsibilities for their father and other family members. These findings highlight how children of incarcerated fathers undertake adult responsibilities to help themselves and their families adapt to their father’s incarceration (Burton 2007). This is consistent with other research showing how those experiencing paternal incarceration are more likely than their counterparts to experience subjective adulthood, that is, report feeling older than their biological age (Turney and Lanuza 2017). These increased responsibilities took a toll on these children, who were often navigating their father’s incarceration alongside other responsibilities in their lives. Some of these increased responsibilities may be unique to the adverse event of paternal incarceration, given the shame sometimes stemming from family member criminal legal contact (Braman 2007) and the considerable uncertainty associated with jail incarceration (Walker 2022). Future research should systematically examine how children’s responses to paternal incarceration mirrors or diverges from their responses to other adverse events such as parental job loss or relationship dissolution.

This finding—that children commonly step into new roles to manage the emotional and instrumental responsibilities demanded by their father’s incarceration—sheds consider-



able light on the processes underlying the consequences of paternal incarceration. Indeed, these increased responsibilities may explain the deleterious consequences that paternal incarceration has for children's behavioral and educational outcomes. The incarceration may shift roles and responsibilities and, in turn, the stress associated with these increased demands could impair mental health (potentially increasing anxiety and depression), leave less time for educational achievement, or facilitate delinquency. Children's extensive discussions of their increased responsibilities occurred simultaneously with their relative silence on other mechanisms commonly posited in prior research, such as challenges for children's caregivers (Antle, Gibson, and Krohn 2020) and fractured relationships between parents (Dwyer Emory 2018).

The second key finding, consistent with the stress process perspective that people's reactions to stress unfolds within a broader social context (Pearlin 1989), is that children reported considerable variation in emotional and instrumental responsibilities. Most children report that their father's incarceration increases their emotional and instrumental responsibilities in at least one but sometimes both domains. Many, however, even those who report some increased responsibilities, report stepping away from responsibilities during their father's incarceration. That is, many both step into and step away or, less commonly, only step away.

The third key finding is that children's age, by both their increased agency to make decisions and its correlation with their father's incarceration history, structured their heterogeneous responses. Their gender and their relationship with their incarcerated father did not. These findings complement the relatively small body of research that considers how age of exposure to paternal incarceration conditions responses. Most of this research considers paternal incarceration occurring within a narrow time frame (Wildeman 2010) or at some point in childhood (Foster and Hagan 2007). Much of it comes to inconsistent conclusions depending on the data sources or outcome variables (Turney 2022). Children's greater agency as they age may facilitate making conscious choices to step away from increased responsi-

bilities, and these responses may begin to explain other heterogeneity identified in survey research (Foster and Hagan 2013; Geller et al. 2012; Turney 2017, 2022). It may also explain null findings for certain groups of children (Turney 2017). Future research should consider the role of this heterogeneity in structuring responses in traditionally examined indicators of children's well-being, such as externalizing behaviors and test scores.

That children's emotional and instrumental responsibilities did not vary by their gender or relationship with their father prior to his incarceration is inconsistent with survey research that the repercussions are concentrated among boys (Wildeman 2010) or those living with their fathers prior to his incarceration (Geller et al. 2012). Two explanations for these seemingly diverging findings are possible. First, the qualitative nature of this study and the small number of participants make it difficult to identify differences in the way that is possible with a large sample quantitative study. Second, the process of taking on additional responsibilities or choosing to step away from them is quite different from the outcomes commonly considered in survey research; a lack of differences in the domains of emotional and instrumental responsibilities may not translate into differences in behavior problems or test scores between children who do and do not experience paternal incarceration.

Future research should continue to investigate variation in children's responses to paternal incarceration based on their position in the social structure. Stress unfolds within a social context and, accordingly, children respond to stressors based on their position in the broader social structure (Pearlin 1989). Children in relatively disadvantaged social positions—such as poor children or those whose fathers have experienced cyclical incarceration—may experience the most severe consequences of stressors, particularly if they lack resources to protect against such stress (Torche, Fletcher, and Brand 2024, this issue). Alternatively, children in relatively advantaged social positions may experience the most severe consequences of stressors, especially if the stressors are unanticipated or unexpected (Torche, Fletcher, and Brand 2024; also see Turney 2017). These data

do not provide an opportunity to consider such variation given the limited variation in children's socioeconomic status (thirty-three of the thirty-eight children were living in poor or working-class households) and father's incarceration history (thirty-six had fathers who had been previously incarcerated). That said, it is not clear that these structural conditions would condition children's emotional and instrumental responsibilities stemming from paternal incarceration. Children across the socioeconomic spectrum may engage in emotional responsibilities (such as concealing their own emotions and consoling their family members) and instrumental responsibilities (such as maintaining relationships with their father, managing aspects of their father's incarceration, and taking on caregiving responsibilities for their fathers or other family members).

This analysis provides one of the first qualitative examinations of the intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration from the perspective of children, shedding light on processes that have not been observed in survey research in part, by asking semi-structured questions and allowing for open-ended responses. The findings have implications for survey research on families and children. First, because the qualitative nature of the study generated findings not previously documented in a systematic way, results suggest that future surveys should incorporate measures of emotional and instrumental responsibilities into questionnaires, both as outcomes themselves and as mediators in the relationship between paternal incarceration and other traditionally considered outcomes such as mental health, educational attainment, or delinquency. The primary stressor of paternal incarceration may lead to the secondary stressor of increased emotional and instrumental responsibilities, which together may impair children's outcomes (Pearlin 1989). Indeed, research documents that caregiving responsibilities among youth and adolescents can limit educational and occupational pathways (DeLuca, Papageorge, and Boselovic 2024, this issue; Wiggins, Harrington, and Gerstel, 2022; also see Burton 2007; McMahon and Luthar 2007). For example, a longitudinal study of fifty Latino/a high school seniors shows that caring for siblings

and parents comes at the expense of educational success in postsecondary pathways (Ovink 2014). Second, the findings suggest the importance of understanding children's heterogeneous responses to paternal incarceration (and, likely, other stressors), highlighting the need for large-scale surveys that have enough power to detect statistically significant differences across groups (and allow researchers to, for example, tease out differences between children's age and father's incarceration history). These findings show that surveys should consider both heterogeneous treatments (such as duration of father's incarceration, distance between child's home and father's facility) and heterogeneous responses (such as child's age).

### Limitations

Several considerations should be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, like most all qualitative research, these findings are not generalizable. Future research should work to extend these findings across contexts. A sample that included Black children might yield different conclusions, for example, given that some research finds differences in Black and non-Black children's responses to paternal incarceration (Craigie 2011; but see Haskins 2014; Turney and Haskins 2014). Our predominantly Latino/a sample—coupled with the commonality of familism, and the associated privileging of family needs over individual needs, among Latinos (Desmond and Turley 2009)—may yield an overrepresentation of emotional and instrumental responsibilities incurred by children. Our analysis of responses between Latino/a children and non-Latino/a children did not suggest meaningful differences across groups, but race-ethnic variation in children's responses should be investigated with larger and more diverse samples. Similarly, a sample that included children experiencing prison incarceration—rather than jail incarceration—may yield different conclusions. Those incarcerated in jail are often closer to their children, which could potentially increase the responsibilities these children incur. The focus on jail incarceration is unique in that most research on the intergenerational consequences of incarceration fo-

cuses solely on prison incarceration or conflates jail and prison incarceration. Second, access to children depended on the consent of fathers, children's caregivers, and children. Those who participated may have better relationships with their fathers than those who did not, which may influence the incarceration-related responsibilities children incur and heterogeneity in these responsibilities.

## Conclusion

By documenting the processes through which paternal incarceration affects children's well-being and how these processes vary across children, these findings provide new insights into how the unintended consequences of the expanding penal system transforms the life course of children. That is, paternal incarceration is both a stressor that is unequally distributed and one with consequences that are unequally experienced. Children have both differential vulnerability and differential responses to paternal incarceration. Understanding the processes linking paternal incarceration and children's well-being provides direction about how to intervene most successfully to improve well-being. Furthermore, understanding heterogeneity in processes provides both insight about which children most need and most benefit from interventions and guidance about how to allocate resources.

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