

Incarceration and Fatherhood: Adapting to the Change

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Father involvement plays an important role in the development of children, and for fathers who are incarcerated, this presents challenges that seem insurmountable (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008; Arditti, Smock & Parkman, 2005). Recent increases in incarceration rates means even more children are disadvantaged by decreased father involvement (Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005). Because the term involvement can mean many things, we used a three-part definition found in literature: *Accessibility*—being available; *Engagement*—being involved through activities such as play; and *Responsibility*—decision making and financial support (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Many issues create factors that limit incarcerated fathers' ability to remain involved in their children's life during incarceration. Mothers often act as gatekeepers to their children, limiting the frequency of visitation or phone contact with fathers in order to shield children from their father's situation (Arditti et al., 2005). Public and institutional policies have also created barriers to father involvement. For some incarcerated fathers, the high costs of collect calls limit their ability to maintain contact during incarceration. In some prison systems, a fifteen-minute call costs as much as ten dollars (Hairston, 2001).

The legal system can also be a hindrance for fathers to stay involved. Courts may deny visitation during incarceration for a variety of reasons, including location of facility, type of offense committed, and the father's relationship history with his children prior to incarceration (Maldonado, 2006). Present literature focused on larger state and federal correction facilities where location and severity of crimes committed are often a factor (Maldonado, 2006). While county facilities have their share of serious offenses, such as domestic abuse, they are often located in urban settings with easy access to those living in the surrounding community. This

survey research investigated the attitudes of incarcerated fathers in two northwestern Wisconsin county jail facilities towards maintaining involvement with their children during incarceration.

Literature Review

A common theme in existing literature is that positive father involvement has benefits to the overall development of the children socially and emotionally. While many researchers focus on the attitudes of incarcerated fathers in their studies, very few researchers actually set out with the purpose of “giving a voice” to incarcerated fathers. Studies indicate policies and geographical location of correctional facilities may hinder positive father-child relationships during incarceration (Maldonado, 2006; Day et al, 2005). One study in particular, focused on the limitations imposed on fathers by institutional policies (Arditti et al, 2005).

Sarkadi et al. (2008) completed a systematic literature review to better understand an incarcerated father’s involvement in his children’s life. The study focused on the accessibility, engagement, and responsibility of fathers in their children’s lives. A father’s involvement in a child’s life can lead to positive outcomes. For example, children from low income families whose fathers are engaged in their children’s lives have less of a chance of high-risk behavior during their teen years. This article shows how significant it is for incarcerated fathers to be involved in their children’s life (Sarkadi et al 2008).

Maldonado (2006) investigated reasons that hinder the father-child relationship during incarceration and the benefits to society for creating laws and policies which can foster increased involvement during incarceration. One key idea to Maldonado et al (2006) is that incarceration gives policy makers a strong platform for changing attitudes of fathers who are incarcerated over people who are not incarcerated. This conclusion supports the assumption in which father involvement can be facilitated while fathers are incarcerated.

In their pilot study, Day et al. (2005) primarily dealt with incarcerated fathers who were soon to be released and reunited with their families. Day et al.'s research introduces problems that fathers face during incarceration with regards to father involvement. Some of the problems mentioned by Day et al. are the costs and availability of phone calls, the location of the facility, and mothers behaviors (e.g., acting as a gateway to the children).

Arditti et al. (2005) conducted interviews with incarcerated fathers regarding their understanding of being a father and their involvement in their children's lives. The study focused on the relationship between the father and children, the involvement of the father, and the relationship with the mother. While being incarcerated, the father often had feelings of regret and helplessness when it came to being a father. In addition, fathers wanted to rebuild relationships with their children after being released. The involvement of the fathers with their children was limited because of existing jail policies. Since the fathers had little contact with family members, they felt as though they were unable to help the family and to fulfill some of their fatherly functions. The relationship between the incarcerated father and the children's mother became a challenge for the father. The father sometimes had to depend on the children's mother to be able to have a relationship with their children.

Hairston (2001) breaks down the idea of what a "good father" is and identifies components that go into being a "good father." In the study, Hairston suggests that even though incarcerated fathers may not be able to give financial support during incarceration, they may still be able to fulfill other important roles. Although nurturing roles, such as emotional support or children guidance, can pose unique challenges because of limited contact due to incarceration, they may still be accomplished to a certain degree. Most importantly, Hairston argues

institutional policies may be a significant barrier to whether or not incarcerated fathers have involvement of any kind.

Current literature demonstrated the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children (Sarkadi et al 2008; Maldonado 2006; Hairston 2001) and factors that hinder fathers' involvement in their children's lives during incarceration (Arditti et al 2005; Day et al 2005; Hairston 2001). However, all of these studies deal with larger state prisons where incarceration is typically longer than a year. Neither do these researchers consider short-term incarceration at smaller facilities, nor do they assess inmates' attitudes towards being involved in their children's lives. The present study focused on fathers who were incarcerated short term, less than a year, in county jails where distance to the facility and accessibility will be less of a factor.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Ecological Theory as the theoretical framework, which states that environmental forces impact families. This theory assumes the levels in an ecosystem interact in different ways depending on their relation to each subsystem. For example, the father is normally involved with his children's microsystem and has direct contact. When a father is incarcerated, he is now placed in the exosystem and has little or no influence on his children's life. Central to this theory is the idea in which when changes occur at any point in the ecosystem, the subsystems survive through adaptation (White & Klein, 2002).

As applied to our study, this theory supports the idea that adaptation in the family system is needed to maintain paternal involvement during incarceration. This theory also predicts when the father is incarcerated, the family needs to adapt to the environment to maintain paternal involvement. It also assumes the new environment of incarceration needs to adapt as well so that the family system can stay intact as a subsystem. Ecological Theory predicts successful

adaptation for the father-child relationship depends not only on the adaptation of the micro system (family) but also on the exosystem (jail facility).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of our study was threefold. The first was to investigate the attitudes of fathers towards involvement with their children during incarceration and what they feel would help improve their ability to maintain involvement while in jail. The second reason was to develop a reliable survey instrument to measure the involvement. The third purpose was to provide results that would allow county level jail facilities to foster father during incarceration. Additionally, the study hoped to pinpoint specific types of programs (e.g., fathering programs, relationship and children development classes) may be beneficial for smaller county jails to encourage father involvement.

The research question of this study was “What were the attitudes of incarcerated fathers towards maintaining involvement with their children while incarcerated in a county jail?” We predicted fathers, who had higher levels of involvement with their children and a positive relationship with the primary caregiver before incarceration, would have higher levels of involvement during incarceration.

Method

Participants

The two sites of this study were at two Northwestern Wisconsin county jail facilities. The participants were 55 incarcerated fathers who were either on work release or in secure lock up.

Table 1

Participants N=57

Age	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+		
	16	28	7	6	0		
Number of Children	1-2	3-4	5+				
	38	11	8				
Children under 18	Yes	No					
	57	0					
Relationship Status	MLP	MNLP	SEP	DIV	ULP	UNLP	PRI
	8	3	4	5	15	21	1

Note: (MLP) = Married living with Primary Caregiver; (MNLP) = Married Not Living with Primary Caregiver; (SEP) = Legally Separated; (DIV) = Divorced; (ULP) = Unmarried Living with Primary Caregiver; (UNLP) = Unmarried Not Living with Primary Caregiver; (PRI) = Primary Caregiver

Research Design

The purpose of this research was to be able to simplify to a population that some inferences could be made about characteristics, attitudes, or behaviors of this population of incarcerated fathers in a county jail facility (Babbie, 1990). The survey design type is best described as a cross-sectional study design because it was used to capture the attitudes of incarcerated fathers at one point in time. The form of data collection used for this research was self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most efficient method to gather the data directly in a county jail facility due convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data. The population surveyed is incarcerated males in two Northwestern Wisconsin county jail facilities; the sample consists of inmates who are fathers. The study used a non-random probability design because the sampling took place in the jail setting where all incarcerated fathers were included. The study used purposive sampling because its purpose was

to gather data on attitudes of incarcerated fathers in county jail facilities. Because of the inaccessibility of the sample used, this study also used the snowball sampling method for data collection. Snowball sampling is a method in which the surveys were given to jail coordinators, and then jail coordinators gave the surveys to inmates who were fathers. We used an inside contact in order to access the incarcerated fathers used for the sample. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection Instrument

A survey was designed to address the attitudes of incarcerated fathers towards maintaining involvement with their children.

The survey consisted of six demographic questions relating to age, number and age of children, relationship with the mother of child/children, and the involvement with the children before incarceration. Participants were given twelve closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). Participants were also given three open-ended questions based on existing literature and theories regarding attitudes of incarcerated fathers maintaining involvement with their children.

The survey instrument had both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the instrument questions having a logical connection to the concept and research question. Content validity refers to the instrument statements' coverage of the full range of concepts under the larger topic. The questions addressed had a broad range of issues regarding incarcerated fathers' involvement with their children. To increase validity, the survey was piloted to a schoolteacher and a businessman who were both fathers. The received feedback suggested the stated relationship demographics were confusing, so changes were made to clarify each

statement. This was done by adding separate categories for married and unmarried, with choices for living with primary caregiver and not living with primary caregiver.

Procedure

Surveys were dropped off at each county jail and instructions for administering the survey was given to the program directors with regards to confidentiality, risks of participating, the statement of implied consent, and pressure from program directors or correctional officers while participating. Program directors at each facility explained the purpose of the study, risks of participating, and the statement of implied consent to potential participants; participants had twenty-four hours to complete the survey in private.

Data Analysis Plan

The data from the surveys was reviewed and checked for missing data and then completed surveys were coded using acronyms for each variable. The survey had seven demographic variables: *Gender (GEN)*; *Age (AGE)*; *Number of children (NOC)*; *I currently have children under the age of 18 (CCU)*; *Please indicate number of children in each age range below (NCR)*; *Relationship status with mother of your child/children prior to incarceration (RSM)*; *Involvement with children prior to incarceration (IPI)*. Each statement measured a variable and was given an acronym name: *The jail supports parents having contact with their children (SPC)*; *The correctional staff supports visitation with children (SSV)*; *Rules of the facility limit my involvement in my children's life (FLI)*; *My children's primary caregiver limits my ability to be involved with my children while incarcerated (PLA)*; *My children's primary caregiver does his/her best to assist me in staying involved with my children while incarcerated (PAI)*; *I have a good relationship with my children's primary caregiver in the best interest of the children (GRP)*; *My involvement with my children is mostly through phone calls (ICP)*; *My involvement*

with my children is mostly through visitations (ICV); Having physical contact with my children during incarceration would improve my ability to stay involved with my children (PCI); I am satisfied with the amount of visitation time with my children while in jail (SAV); I am able to be a positive influence in my children's life while incarcerated (APC); I am able to have contact with my children at least weekly while incarcerated (CCW).

The computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 18 (SPSS) was used to analyze the collected data. The individual was used as the level of analysis. Since the study did not compare groups, data analysis included only frequencies, mean-comparisons, and correlations. A Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was also conducted.

Results

Twelve variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated missing data was found. From the original sample two surveys were discarded. One survey was discarded because the respondent indicated he was unfamiliar with facility policies due to being incarcerated less than a week. The second survey was eliminated due to the respondent indicating he was the primary caregiver and failed to answer any questions concerning the primary caregiver. The final sample size was N=55. For the variable PCI, a large majority, 92.8%, of the respondents strongly agreed and/or agreed by having physical contact with their children during incarceration would improve their involvement. For the variable FLI and GRP, respondents also agreed and/or strongly agreed the rules of the facilities limit the involvement with their children and they have a good relationship with the primary caregiver. A large number of respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with having weekly children contact.

For the variables PLA and PAI, respondents were mixed whether the primary care giver limits their ability to be involved with their children or the primary caregiver aids their

involvement while incarcerated. For the variables ICP, respondents were mixed that contact with their children was mostly through phone calls. Respondents were also mixed for the variable ICV, indicating contact with their children was mostly through visitations.

For the variable SAV, a strong majority, 92.8%, of the respondents strongly disagreed and/or disagreed with being satisfied with the amount of visitation they had with their children. For the variables SPC and SSV, the majority of respondents disagreed and/or strongly disagreed that the jail supports involvement or the staff supports visitation with their children. With both of these variables, there was a high percentage of respondents indicating they were undecided about the jail or staff supporting their involvement or visitation. For the variable CCW, the majority, 54.5%, of respondents disagreed and/or strongly disagreed with having contact with their children on a weekly basis. For the variable APC, the majority, 58.2%, of the respondents disagreed and/or strongly disagreed with their ability to be a positive influence in their children's life. However, 20% of APC responses were undecided.

Table 2
Frequency Distribution

Variable	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
SPC	45.5%	14.5%	27.3%	7.3%	5.5%	100.0%
SSV	27.3%	29.1%	20.0%	14.5%	9.1%	100.0%
FLI	9.1%	5.5%	10.9%	14.5%	60.0%	100.0%
PLA	32.7%	9.1%	9.1%	10.9%	38.2%	100.0%
PAI	41.8%	1.8%	7.3%	9.1%	40.0%	100.0%
GRP	16.4%	5.5%	20.0%	16.4%	41.8%	100.0%
ICP	29.1%	10.9%	16.4%	27.3%	16.4%	100.0%
ICV	52.7%	12.7%	5.5%	12.7%	16.4%	100.0%
PCI	1.8%	0.0%	5.5%	5.5%	87.3%	100.0%
SAV	87.3%	5.5%	5.5%	0.0%	1.8%	100.0%
APC	49.1%	9.1%	20.0%	10.9%	10.9%	100.0%
CCW	54.5%	10.9%	10.9%	21.8%	1.8%	100.0%

Note. (SPC) = The jail supports parents having contact with their children; (SSV) = The correctional staff supports visitation with children; (FLI) = Rules of the facility limit my

involvement in my child’s life; (PLA) = My child’s primary caregiver limits my ability to be involved with my child while incarcerated; (PAI) = My primary caregiver does his/her best to assist me in staying involved with my child while incarcerated; (GRP) = I have a good relationship with my child’s primary caregiver in the best interest of the child; (ICP) = My involvement with my child is mostly through phone calls; (ICV) = My involvement with my child is mostly through visitations; (PCI) = Having physical contact with my child during incarceration would improve my ability to stay involved with my child; (SAV) = I am satisfied with the amount of visitation time with my child while in jail; (APC) = I am able to be a positive influence on my child’s life while incarcerated; (CCW) = I am able to have contact with my child at least weekly while incarcerated.

Table 3

Compare Means

	<u>SPC</u>	<u>SSV</u>	<u>FLI</u>	<u>PLA</u>	<u>PAI</u>	<u>GRP</u>	<u>ICP</u>	<u>ICV</u>	<u>PCI</u>	<u>SAV</u>	<u>APC</u>	<u>CCW</u>
Mean:	2.13	2.49	4.11	3.13	3.04	3.62	2.91	2.27	4.76	1.24	2.25	2.05
SD:	1.23	1.23	1.33	1.75	1.86	1.48	1.49	1.59	0.72	0.72	1.44	1.31
Range:	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

Note. (SPC) = The jail supports parents having contact with their children; (SSV) = The correctional staff supports visitation with children; (FLI) =Rules of the facility limit my involvement in my child’s life; (PLA) = My child’s primary caregiver limits my ability to be involved with my child while incarcerated; (PAI) = My primary caregiver does his/her best to assist me in staying involved with my child while incarcerated; (GRP) = I have a good relationship with my child’s primary caregiver in the best interest of the child; (ICP) = My involvement with my child is mostly through phone calls; (ICV) = My involvement with my child is mostly through visitations; (PCI) = Having physical contact with my child during incarceration would improve my ability to stay involved with my child; (SAV) = I am satisfied with the amount of visitation time with my child while in jail; (APC) = I am able to be a positive influence on my child’s life while incarcerated; (CCW) = I am able to have contact with my child at least weekly while incarcerated.

Correlations were run on each pair of the 12 variables (SPC, SSV, FLI, PLA, PAI, GRP, ICP, ICV, PCI, SAV, APC, and CCW). There appears to be a large significant relationship

between GRP and PAI. GRP, ICV, PAI, and CCW had a medium significant relationship between each pair. A small significance was also found between the pairs APC, CCW, and SAV.

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	PAI	ICV	APC	CCW
PAI		.354**		.403*
GRP	.765**	.350**		.477**
ICV				.348**
SAV			.298*	.281*

Note. (PAI) = My primary caregiver does his/her best to assist me in staying involved with my child while incarcerated; (GRP) = I have a good relationship with my child's primary caregiver in the best interest of the child; (ICV) = My involvement with my child is mostly through visitations; (SAV) = I am satisfied with the amount of visitation time with my child while in jail; (APC) = I am able to be a positive influence on my child's life while incarcerated; (CCW) = I am able to have contact with my child at least weekly while incarcerated.

~N=55

**Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the 12 variables (SPC, SSV, FLI, PLA, PAI, GRP, ICP, ICV, PCI, SAV, APC, & CCW) were a reliable index to measure the major concept: attitudes of incarcerated fathers towards maintaining involvement with their children. Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of reliability and in this analysis was -.089. This value indicates that the survey questions were an unreliable measure of the major concept. Reliability of the survey questions would increase to .394 if the variable PLA would be removed; the implications of removing PLA are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Incarcerated fathers having higher levels of involvement with their children and a positive relationship with the primary caregiver before incarceration will help the father to have higher levels of involvement during incarceration than if there was little involvement and the relationship with the primary caregiver was negative before incarceration was supported by the data. A significant correlation was found between having a positive relationship with the caregiver, primary caregiver aiding involvement, and involvement with children mostly through visitations.

Statistically significant correlations were found ($p < 0.01$ level) between several variables. Variables that dealt with having a good relationship with the primary caregiver and involvement with the children through visitations and contact with children at least weekly showed a significant correlation. This correlation is supported by the Ecological Theory that the family (ecosystem) will adapt to changes to maintain itself (White & Klein, 2002). A significant correlation (.765) between having a good relationship with the primary caregiver and the primary caregiver aiding involvement with the children support what is found in the literature concerning primary caregivers acting as gatekeepers. Correlations show by having a good relationship with the primary caregiver, which in most cases is the mother, improves the father's ability to stay involved during his incarceration. Current findings support the idea that the primary caregiver often acts as a gatekeeper and decides whether or not the father will be allowed visitation with his children (Arditti et al., 2005; Day et al., 2005). This finding suggests the quality of the relationship to the primary caregiver influences decisions made by the primary caregiver relating to visitation; thus, the better the relationship with the primary caregiver, the greater the frequency of visitations. Variables dealing with jail facility and policies show statistically significant correlation between the incarcerated father's satisfaction with amount of visitation, contact with

children at least weekly, and his ability to be a positive influence on his children's life. Existing literature suggests that fathers often feel they are unable to be a positive influence in their children's life when they have low or limited involvement during incarceration (Arditt et al., 2005; Hairston, 2001).

Respondents reported they strongly disagreed or disagreed that the jail supports contact with their children. In fact, policies in place at many facilities do not support incarcerated fathers being involved with their children (Maldonado, 2006; Day et al., 2005; Arditti et al., 2005). Respondents reported having a short amount of visitation time (20 minutes) with no physical contact. For the variable SSV, the majority of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the survey question. These results are also supported by literature which states that jail policies and the attitudes of staff are often stated barriers to incarcerated fathers' involvement with their children (Maldonado, 2006; Day et al., 2005; Arditti et al., 2005). This question also returned a higher percentage (20%) of undecided responses. We hypothesize this may be due to the literacy of the inmates and the complicated language (such as incarcerated) used for the survey questions or participants feeling uncomfortable answering questions negatively. The latter may be caused by the differences in power between inmates, staff members, or the institution at large. Variables dealing with the jail or staff returned higher percentages of undecided responses than other variables. This may lead one to wonder if the perception of fear of unfair treatment from the correctional staff may have played a part in their responses to these questions regardless of the steps taken to keep the participants identity from being discovered by staff members.

Three quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the facility limited their involvement with their children. The responses suggest that institutional policies may indeed limit father's ability to stay involved (Maldonado, 2006; Day et al., 2005; Arditti et al., 2005).

These limiting facility policies were consistent with results previously discussed, although they lack the high percentage of undecided responses, suggesting that respondents had difficulties understanding the previous questions.

In the survey there were three statements that dealt with primary caregivers; responses were across the scale. The statement “my children’s primary caregiver limits my ability to be involved with my children while incarcerated” was split with responses clustering both ends of the scale. Responses to “My children’s primary caregiver does his/her best to assist me in staying involved with my children while incarcerated” were also split with having the majority being strongly disagree and strongly agree. Findings of our literature supports having a good relationship with the primary caregiver improved the amount of involvement (Arditti et al., 2005). The results in regard to the primary caregivers varied; this may be because it is specific to each incarcerated father. Each father’s relationship with his children’s primary caregiver can be positive or negative. In the qualitative section of our study, fathers commented on the mothers of their children not bringing their children to see them and they were not in control of it. The findings are in line with Arditti et al.’s (2005) assessment that mothers often act as gatekeepers by limiting the amount of visitation and accessibility of the children to the father. The last statement on the survey referring to the primary caregiver, “I have a good relationship with my primary caregiver in the best interest of the children,” had the highest responses being strongly agree or agree. The results reflect both father and primary caregiver as wanting what is in the best interest of the children.

Responses to incarcerated fathers having the main source of involvement be through telephone calls varied from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Based on previous research, most inmates would have disagreed due to the high costs of phone calls (Day et al., 2005; Arditti et al.,

2005). Qualitative comments indicate that inmates on work release are able to have phone contact while they are on the outside, a fact that may account for the differences of the study at hand's findings and previous research; Day et al.'s study, for example, did not deal with facilities that offered work release programs.

The results for involvement being mostly through visitation had a majority of strongly disagreed or disagreed. There was also a significant amount of inmates that did respond as agree or strongly agree. Responses of agree or strongly agree for both of these variables are not supported by current literature and may be reflective of the differences the work release program has on the attitudes of incarcerated fathers. Incarcerated fathers who participated in the work release program may have more opportunity to visit with their children while they are on release. This would account for the high frequency of those responding agree or strongly agree. Incarcerated fathers who are on work release are able to find ways to adapt to the changes in their family life, increasing their involvement during incarceration. In fact, Ecological Theory suggests there are levels, or subsystems, that act on each other, which can depend on their relation to each level or subsystem. Ecological Theory also assumes that subsystems will adapt to maintain their existence when changes occur (White & Klein, 2002).

A high percentage of inmates agreed or strongly agreed having physical contact would improve their involvement with their children while incarcerated. Physical contact can be defined to the inmates by being able to hug, play with their children, and the father being able to have physical touch. Respondents reported that visitation with their children occurs through a glass window with no physical contact. Many respondents felt this punishes the children for the crimes their fathers committed. Physical contact may also reduce fathers' feelings of helplessness, emotions often experienced by incarcerated fathers (Arditti et al., 2005).

The majority of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that incarcerated fathers are satisfied with the amount of visitation time they are allotted in jail. Fathers' dissatisfaction is also reflected in qualitative comments in which respondents indicated that the visitation time was not long enough. The statement, "I am able to have contact with my children at least weekly," also relates to the statement with satisfaction of visitation time. The majority of respondents strongly disagreed with both statements relating to the amount of time during visitations and having weekly contact with their children.

The results for the statement "I am able to be a positive influence on my children's life while incarcerated" had majority of the responses being strongly disagreeing or disagreeing. Analysis of qualitative questions shows an emerging theme of fathers wishing to express to the correctional staff that they are not bad fathers. The fathers state they do not want to be bad father and also would like to have the opportunity to be a positive influence in their children's life. This is also supported in qualitative responses; fathers commented they would like to have classes to aid them in becoming a better father.

Qualitative comments revealed recurring themes which are shared by many of the respondents. A very common response for the first qualitative question, "What would help you to improve your relationship with your children while incarcerated?", was having phone calls be less expensive and longer. In addition, other themes such as wanting longer visits and a child-friendly, larger visitation area also emerged. As discussed in Day et al. (2005), a significant problem for inmates is the cost of phone calls, which can be as much as ten dollars for fifteen minutes of talk time. Similarly, Arditti et al. (2005) states that jail policies (e.g. visitation length, phone call expenses, and having restrictions on them) limit the ability of involvement the father can have.

The second qualitative question, “What do you feel would increase your ability to stay involved with your children during incarceration?,” had many of the same answers as the first, but fathers also indicated that having a more positive relationship with the primary caregiver would be beneficial. Day et al. (2005) discovered that primary caregivers often act as a gateway to their children. Without a positive relationship the incarcerated father would be unable to see their children. One father stated, “A lot of mothers will use the children as a pawn to hurt the father is the worst way.” This comment reinforces Arditti et al.’s (2005) findings, suggesting that fathers have to depend on the primary caregiver to see their children. The response to the last qualitative question, “What would you want the program director and the correctional staff to know or understand from your perspective as a father?,” were similar as well because many respondents answered that even though they are incarcerated, their children still mean a lot to them.

Limitations

Major limitations for this study are the small sample size and the number of undecided responses. Undecided responses may be the result of misunderstandings to statements due to the complicated language of the survey. Reading levels also limited responses which may have been helped by using qualitative interviews. In the qualitative responses some incarcerated fathers needed tutors while they took the survey because they were unable to understand the survey. Respondents may also have feared unfair treatment as many of the questions returned undecided response dealt with the facility or staff. Using a 7-10 point Likert scale could have helped gather data by increasing the variability of responses.

Implications of Practitioners

Sarkadi et al (2008) supports the need of encouraging father involvement for the positive impact it will have on the children. Findings show that incarcerated fathers perceive facilities to limit their involvement with their children. Respondents reported they do not feel the facility or the staff encourages positive and meaningful father-child relationships. Short visitation times and limited space during visitation do not only place children in situations they may not fully understand but also reduce the amount and quality of father involvement. Qualitative responses show the majority of fathers do want to maintain involvement in their children's life despite their incarceration. Policies limiting father involvement also limit fathers' ability to feel as if they are making a difference in their children's life.

Current policy in regard to visitation and phone calls could be reviewed in light of this study to find new ways to promote father involvement. For example, visitation policies could be modified to include physical contact and less expensive phone calls could help increase involvement by providing an affordable means to stay in contact.

Implications for Future Research

To help reduce generalizing to a specific area having a sample that is nationwide and is random would be more beneficial to future research. Also for the many undecided responses it may be more helpful to use a Likert Scale ranging from 1-7 or 1-10 to increase variability.

In addition, and to supplement the survey, it would be helpful to conduct interviews with incarcerated fathers to assess their understanding of, feelings towards, and experiences with fatherhood. Conducting a survey in jails can have limitations because of varying literacy degrees of incarcerated fathers. Through qualitative interviews, interviewers can make sure inmates fully understand the questions. Additionally, surveys should be written at a reading level that is more appropriate for all of the fathers who are incarcerated.

Another suggestion would be to omit the question “My children’s primary caregiver limits my ability to be involved with my children while incarcerated.” Once we removed this statement from the survey, the Cronbach’s Alpha actually went from a 0.089 to a 0.394. Perhaps the statement does not fit well with the others because the responses were too broad, and there were too many outliers. Improving the reading level of the survey and providing more assistance to inmates in taking the survey would improve the reliability overall.

Conclusion

Father involvement has a positive influence on the lives of children. Children who have low levels of father involvement often become engaged in behaviors that may lead to their own incarceration. For children of fathers who are incarcerated, the threat of risky behavior increases (Sarkadi et al., 2008). For incarcerated fathers, the opportunities to remain a present and active influence in their children’s lives are limited. These factors include their relationship with the primary caregiver, as well as policies of the jail facilities. Along with existing research, findings of the study at hand suggest that incarcerated individuals could play an active role in reducing the chance of generational incarceration (e.g., the cycle of incarceration in a family).

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