



Paternal Incarceration: Motivations and Co-Parenting

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Abstract:

There is a complex relationship between incarcerated fathers, their children, their larger family networks, and substance abuse. Understanding this relationship and the potential negative impact of paternal incarceration is of critical importance during the era of mass incarceration and in the wake of multiple drug epidemics. The concept of fatherhood shifts due to many factors brought on by incarceration, substance abuse, communication, and contact barriers. Motivations for staying abstinent from drugs, rebuilding a life, and repairing relationships are all informed by fatherhood, demonstrating the importance of the father-child relationship (Swanson, 2013). Eighty-eight incarcerated men were interviewed while in prison, 51 were interviewed again post-prison release. The transcripts were coded in the software NVivo to determine the overarching themes and repeating patterns related to fatherhood and parenting present in the lives of these incarcerated men. Some significant themes include communication during incarceration, challenges of the parent role, reconnection with the child(ren) post-release, and children as a vehicle of motivation. In addition, one of the most significant challenges found among incarcerated and reentering fathers is gatekeeping, which occurs when the mother bars the child from reconnecting with their father (Pajarita, 2019). These themes will be used to further analyze the connections between substance abuse, fatherhood, and incarceration, specifically in the motivations for reentry and desistance. The implications this has will be important for possible reform of the prison system as well as the formation of better support systems to allow for incarcerated men to regain their footing in society post-release.

Methods:

The project consisted of reading, reviewing, and coding transcripts of interviews with incarcerated men in Pennsylvania state prisons who were participating in a substance abuse treatment program. The interviews were completed in two waves: one during the period of incarceration and one during early community reentry. Eighty-eight incarcerated men were interviewed while in prison, and 51 were interviewed post-release. Previously, three coders identified all portions of the transcripts that related to fatherhood and parenting. Two additional coders used the previously identified fatherhood narratives to do more detailed coding within the fatherhood theme using the software program NVivo. The two coders independently identified emergent themes within the broad fatherhood narratives. Each theme was coded into a node, and once the point of saturation occurred, where no new codes were created, the codebook was finalized based on the most frequent themes. Our coding process is still in progress, but initial findings illustrate important motivations, challenges, and barriers related to the fatherhood role for incarcerated men. Once coding is finished with our finalized codebook, we will calculate inter-rater reliability statistics and use our findings to inform a future paper.

Gatekeeping:

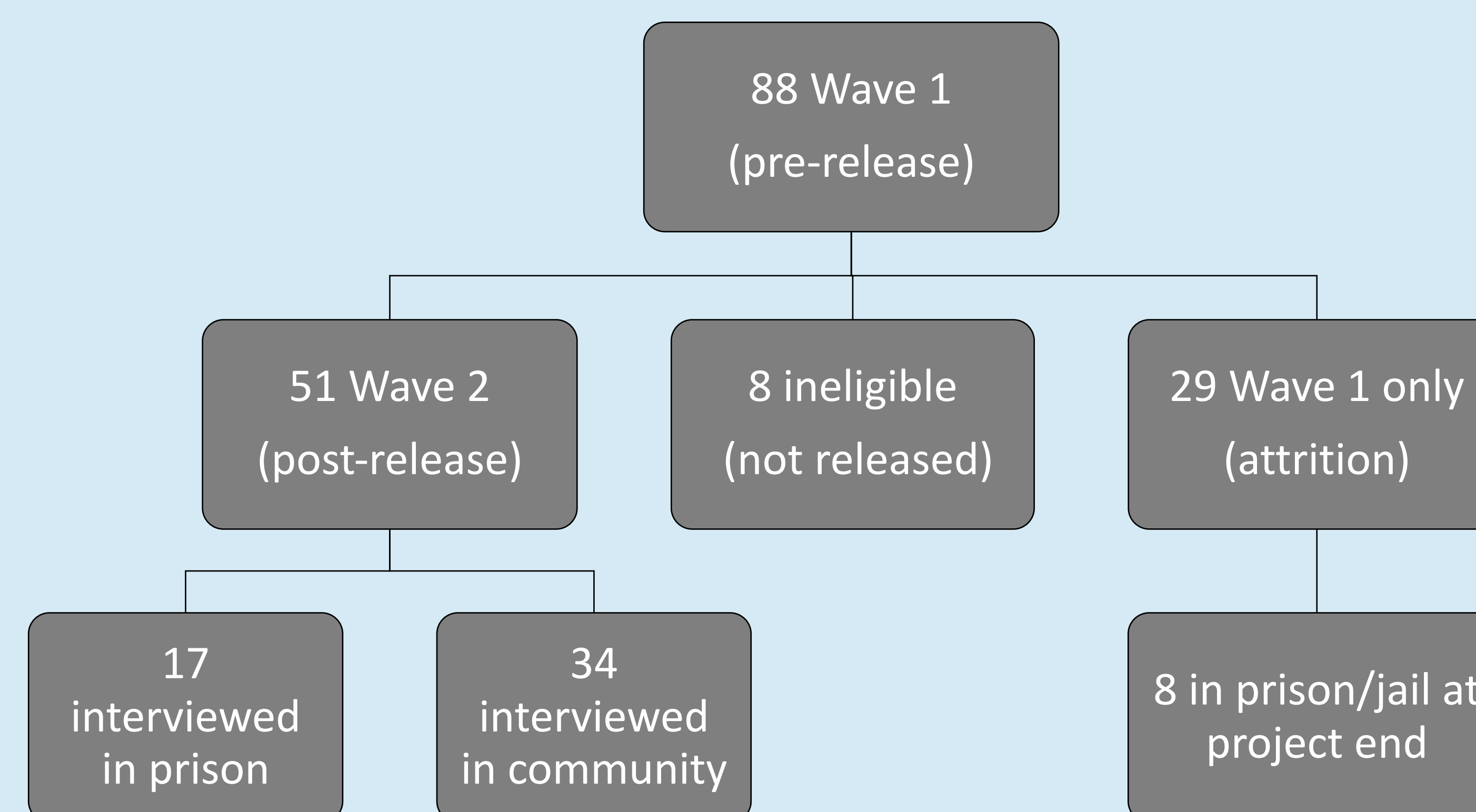
"I ain't get to see my daughter yet. My daughter's mom she be trying to turn my daughter against me. Like man, I tell my daughter every day, don't only come when you want to come, call me just to check on me. I mean, just to say, dad how you doing, I love you. I said, don't, whatever you do, whatever your mom is telling you, that's a lie, I said whatever I got, I'm going to make sure you got."

- 37-year-old black male respondent, 3 children

"So now it's like, you are not allowed to have contact with them. So now they got him watching the older brother, like if you see anything happening with him talking to dad, tell us, you know what I mean? Because that's not supposed to happen. I mean, so they instilled that in him for the past four years."

- 38-year-old Hispanic male respondent, 3 children

Number of Interviewees:



Child as Motivation:

"It makes it worth it. That's how I deal with it. I think, you know, this is what it's all about, you know what I mean? That he can call his father and say, "Listen, I need this." Cuz I haven't been there all the time, you know, so, that's basically how I deal with it and that's what keeps me going every day, keeps me going into work, you know? Cuz I don't want to. I told him over and over again. I got to quit three times and he begs me to stay, so, but I wouldn't - if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be there, you know what I mean? But I gotta to make sure I can take care of what he needs to be taken care of, you know?"

- 37-year-old white male respondent, 2 children

"I don't know if I would have this same ambition to be clean and do the things - and go down the road if I didn't have them. I mean they say, you have to do it for yourself in a sense. But definitely my children would be the motivation."

- 35-year-old white male respondent, 1 child

"That just made it all real like my son wants me in his life. I need to be home. I need him too. That's my main thing that's driving me now. I wanna be a father."

- 27-year-old Hispanic male respondent, 1 child

Fatherhood Codes:

Challenges of the Parent Role	Actualized Challenges	24
	Damage to Relationship	14
	Expected Challenges	16
Child as Motivation	Gatekeeping	32
	Negative Co-Parent Relationship	18
	Positive Co-Parent Relationship	19
Co-Parenting	Support from Family	11
	Negative Incarceration Contact	9
	Positive Incarceration Contact	15
Goals and Expectations	Changing Priorities	26
	Desire to Reconnect	25
	Provide Financially	18
Reconnecting Post-Release	Negative Post-Release Reconnection	11
	Positive Post-Release Reconnection	30

Discussion:

Through the use of qualitative coding, certain themes and patterns were identified in the portions of the interviews with the incarcerated men discussing fatherhood. Most significantly, the child(ren) as a source of motivation appeared throughout both pre- and post-release interviews. For these men, their child(ren) seemed to be the prominent reason as to why they wanted to stay abstinent from substances and rebuild their life. However, the co-parent relationship had a significant impact on if the father could actually see their child(ren) that they essentially tied their lifeline toward. Instances of gatekeeping, in which the mother barred the father from seeing their child at all, appeared frequently throughout the post-release interviews. As a result of this gatekeeping, the likelihood of returning to old habits, such as substance abuse, increased. The father-child relationship is very important in maintaining a connection to society post-release and in general, positively impacts the reentry process.

The role of the father, in light of mass incarceration in America, can often be overlooked, but the emerging data demonstrates that fatherhood for incarcerated men represents motivation to change their priorities, goals, and expectations so that they can fulfill that role. This research is still preliminary, however; in exploring the current themes in the data, forthcoming findings show the importance of reunion with family, and the negative impact that barriers have on the father-child relationship. Given the potential importance of the status of fatherhood on desistance processes, further exploration of the perspectives of incarcerated and reentering fathers is critical.

References:

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- Pajarita Charles, L. M. (2019). Parenting and Incarceration: Perspectives on Father-Child Involvement during Reentry from Prison. *Social Service Review*.
- Tucker, Jill. "Captive Lives." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 Sept. 2016, <https://projects.sfchronicle.com/2016/captive-lives/>.

Bound by blood: Children of incarcerated parents

