

Formerly-Incarcerated Parents and their Children

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Abstract

The negative effects of incarceration on child well-being are often linked to the economic insecurity of formerly incarcerated parents. Researchers caution, however, that the effects of parental incarceration may be small in the presence of multiple partner fertility and other family complexity. Despite these claims, few studies directly observe either economic insecurity or the full extent of family complexity. We study parent-child relationships with a unique data set that includes detailed information about economic insecurity and family complexity among parents just released from prison. We find that stable private housing, more than income, is associated with close and regular contact between parents and children. Formerly-incarcerated parents are less likely to regularly see their children in contexts of multiple partner fertility and in the absence of supportive family relationships. Significant housing and family effects are estimated even after controlling for drug use and crime which are themselves negatively related to parental contact. The findings point to the constraints of material insecurity and family complexity on the social support provided by formerly incarcerated parents to their children.

In the context of historically high incarceration rates in the United States, parental incarceration has become highly prevalent for poor children, particularly for African Americans whose parents have little schooling. Sykes and Pettit (2014) estimate that 62 percent of black children whose parents have not completed high school will experience the imprisonment of a parent by age 17 (see also Wildeman 2009). The great prevalence of parental imprisonment motivated research on the effects of incarceration on child well-being. Parental incarceration was found to be associated with reduced family income for children, an increased risk of child homelessness, aggressive behavior, depressive symptoms, and diminished school achievement (Foster and Hagan 2015; Travis et al. 2014; Johnson and Easterling 2012 review the literature).

Lying behind research on parental incarceration are assumptions about the material well-being of formerly-incarcerated parents and the complexity of their family relationships. Researchers often appeal to the economic insecurity of incarcerated fathers to explain the negative effects of parental incarceration. Diminished earnings and employment after prison may undermine parental support (e.g., Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Geller et al. 2011; Turney and Wildeman 2013). Family complexity, on the other hand, may be a source of heterogeneity in incarceration effects. Incarceration effects may be small where parents are non-resident, less engaged with their children before incarceration, or provide for the children of multiple partners. Indeed, some studies find that the negative consequences of incarceration for children are largest in stable, well-resourced families, with resident parents who are positively engaged with their children prior to incarceration (Wildeman and Turney 2014; Turney 2016; Wakefield et al. 2016).

Although researchers claim that economic insecurity and family complexity shape the relationships between parents and children after incarceration, there is little direct evidence. Most research is based on child-centered data designs in which the life conditions of non-custodial parents are often unobserved. The network of family relationships in the presence of multiple partners is also typically unobserved and unanalyzed.

We contribute to research on parental incarceration by studying parental co-residence and other contact with children at a vital moment of transition—in the year after imprisonment. Our analysis uses a unique data source, the Boston Reentry Study (BRS), that records the material life conditions of formerly-incarcerated parents and all their children. The data design extends earlier research in two ways. Analysis includes detailed information on the socioeconomic status of formerly-incarcerated parents, regardless of whether they are living with their children. We also observe the constraining influence of multiple partner fertility and the status of relationships with multiple partners. Our quantitative analysis is supplemented by qualitative interviews that illuminate the content of survey measures of residence and parental contact. By analyzing a specialized sample in which all parents have been recently released from incarceration, the analysis helps explain heterogeneity in parent-children relationships in the year after parental imprisonment.

The analysis yields three main findings. First, regular contact between formerly-incarcerated parents and their children depends closely on parents' housing. Unstably housed parents are less likely to be in regular contact with their children and stable housing, more than income, is related to positive parent-child relationships. Second, complex and unsupportive family relationships are associated with reduced contact with children.

Complex family structures can be a source of relationship conflict that limits parental contact with some children but not others. In contexts of family complexity, other family members—particularly children’s grandmothers—can support relationships between parents who go to prison and their partners and children. Third, family relationships face the ongoing stress of drug use and crime. Hard to capture in a regression model but clearer in qualitative data, housing insecurity, relationship stress, and drug use often operate together to reduce contact between formerly-incarcerated parents and their children.

CONTACT BETWEEN CHILDREN AND FORMERLY-INCARCERATED PARENTS

Research on the effects of parental incarceration have studied samples of children, comparing those whose parents have and have not been incarcerated. Studies have relied on data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (e.g., Foster and Hagan 2009; Geller et al. 2012; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Wakefield 2015; Turney 2016). Child samples have contributed significantly to our understanding of the effects of parental incarceration, but the data design has two limitations. First, when parents are non-resident and uninterviewed, little information is available about their life conditions after incarceration even though those conditions may influence parental support of children. Second, complex family relationships—involving multiple partner fertility and nonresident parenthood—may be major sources of variation in the relationship between children and formerly-incarcerated parents, but analysis of a focal child excludes other parent-child relation-

ships from analysis (Sykes and Pettit 2014). For example, a father with two children, each from a different mother, may be highly involved with one child but uninvolved with another (Tach et al. 2014). The structural context of multiple partner fertility is often unobserved with a child-centered design. As a result, a low level of parental contact might be misunderstood as a low level of parental commitment. Indeed, multiple partner fertility likely has an important influence on child well-being, but there are few estimates of the rate of multiple partner fertility among formerly-incarcerated parents (cf. Sykes and Pettit 2014).

Both limitations of data design are addressed by the the Boston Reentry Study. The BRS followed a cohort of men and women for one year after release from prison in Massachusetts to the Boston area (Western et al. 2015). The BRS sample is representative of prison releasees in Massachusetts. The sample is small ($N = 122$) but includes respondents whose socioeconomic and demographic characteristics resembles those of prison releasees across the United States. BRS respondents were asked at the baseline survey, one week before prison release, to list all their children. To study their roles as social parents, respondents were also asked to name all other children to whom they felt like a father figure or a mother figure. Those named as social children were mostly the sons and daughters of relatives and partners. At each wave of the survey, respondents were asked about contact with all biological and social children.

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics on the parental status of all the BRS respondents. In a sample of 122 men and women just released from prison, 78 percent reported they had at least one biological child or one social child. Two-thirds of all respondents reported biological children, naming on average 2.1 children. The children had a mean age of 14 years (median

Table 1. Mean parental status of formerly of incarcerated men and women, Boston Reentry Study.

Relationship to child:	Percentage With Children (1)	Mean Number of Children (2)	Mean Children's Age (3)	Number of Other Partners (4)
Biological	66.4	2.1	14.7	1.9
Partner's	9.0	1.2	17.2	1.5
Relative's	34.4	2.0	14.0	1.4
Any social	41.8	1.9	14.4	1.5
All relationships	77.9	2.8	14.6	2.2
Sample size	122	95	270	70

Note: Samples sizes for each column are based on: (1) all respondents, (2) respondents with children, (3) all reported children, and (4) all respondents with two or more children. Biological children includes all the respondents' own children reported at the baseline interview. Social children includes all children that respondents felt like "father/mother figure to" at the baseline interview, including the children of partners and relatives.

age of 13), somewhat older than the children studied in earlier research on parental incarceration.¹ Finally, Table 1 reports the average number of other parental figures for those formerly-incarcerated parents with two or more children. Respondents with two or more biological children reported an average of 1.9 other partners and 68 percent had children with at least two partners, a rate of multiple partner fertility significantly higher than the estimated rates in other studies.² In short, children of BRS respondents are somewhat older than those studied in earlier research and multiple partner

¹Our analysis of parent-child relationships includes minor and non-minor children. Of the 173 biological children in the sample, 134 were aged 21 or under and 116 were aged 18 or younger at the time of prison release. Of the 97 social children in the sample, 75 were aged 21 or younger and 63 were aged 18 or younger.

²Sykes and Pettit (2014) estimate from the Survey of Inmates of State and Federal Correctional Facilities that five percent of the prison population had multiple partner births in 2012. Given that 31.6 percent report having two or more children, the corresponding multiple partner fertility rate is around 16 percent ($5/31.6 = .158$).

fertility is modal among parents with at least two children.

Patterns of contact and co-residence in the year after prison are reported in Figure 1. These measures form the dependent variable for this paper. The figure reports data at five time points. The baseline interview in prison recorded contact with children during incarceration—including phone calls, letters, and visits—and co-residence prior to arrest. Follow-up interviews were conducted at one week, two months, six months, and a year after prison release. The top panel of Figure 1 shows that only 10 percent of all biological and social children were living with their formerly-incarcerated parents or social parents in the year after prison. A similar proportion reported occasional contact, measured by any contact between survey waves. Around half of all children were in weekly contact with their formerly-incarcerated parents. Few parents lived with their biological children immediately after incarceration, but 60 to 70 percent were in weekly contact.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AFTER INCARCERATION

Three main theories account for variation in parent-child relationships following parental incarceration. First, building on labor market studies of the effects of incarceration, researchers have emphasized the economic insecurity of parents after release from prison. Second, incarcerated parents are often embedded in a complex network of family relationship involving multiple partners who sometimes act as gatekeepers, controlling access to children. Third, researchers have examined the influence of sample selection into incarceration and the confounding influence of criminal involvement and other anti-social behavior.

The negative effects of parental incarceration on child well-being are

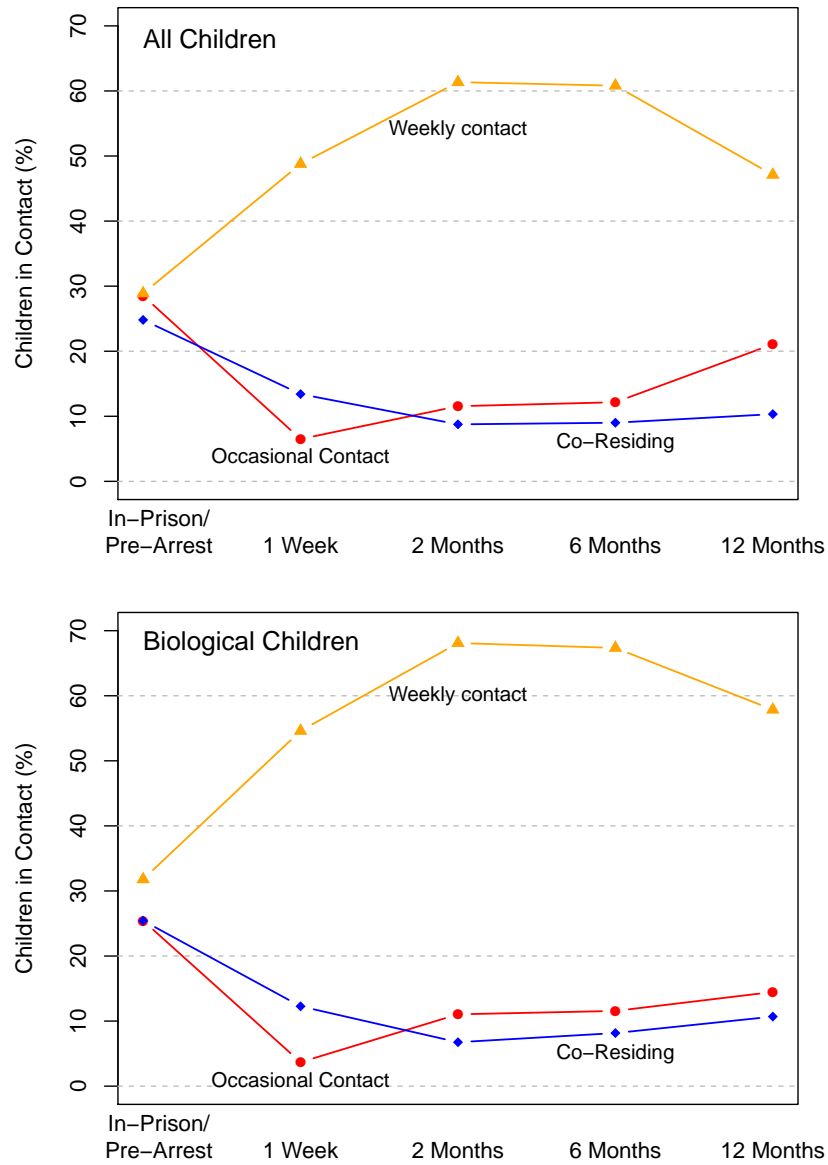


Figure 1. Children's rates of contact with formerly-incarcerated parents in the first year after prison release. (Total number of children=270; total biological children=173.)

often traced to the employment problems of formerly-incarcerated fathers. Unemployment and low wages erode fathers' capacity to support their children (Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Geller et al. 2012). Economic insecurity, however, takes many forms that may interfere with parental support. Certainly, unemployment and low incomes regularly follow incarceration (Western 2006; Pager 2003; Kling 2006). Beyond the labor market, housing insecurity is also likely to limit parental involvement. Formerly-incarcerated men and women are often living in shelters, transitional housing programs, or are homeless on the streets (Western et al. 2015; Herbert et al. 2015). Unstable housing reduces the possibility of shared custody, overnight visits, or regular meetings with children. Seldom explored in earlier research, housing insecurity also includes re-incarceration. Over 20 percent of those released from state prison return to incarceration within a year, eliminating the possibility of co-residence and reducing regular contact between parents and children (Durose et al. 2014). The analysis below examines how co-residence and regular contact with children are associated with income, unstable housing, and re-incarceration after prison release.

Relationships between formerly-incarcerated parents and their children often unfold in a complex network of family relationships. We can think of family complexity as encompassing the demographic structure of family relationships, and the quality of those relationships. Multiple-partner fertility, biological and social parenthood, and the distinct bundle of relationships accompanying motherhood and fatherhood all index the complex structure of family relationships for parents who are sent to prison. Descriptive statistics indicate a high rate of multiple partner fertility in the BRS sample (see also Carlson and Furstenberg 2006). Managing relationships with several partners and maintaining contact with children across several households

presents challenges for nonresident parents (Tach et al. 2010). Laura Tach and her colleagues (2014) have observed how parenting is distributed unevenly across the children of two or more partners in a study of poor fathers. We hypothesize that levels of parental involvement—co-residence and regular contact with children—will be lower for parents with with more than one partner.

Although social parenthood has been widely observed alongside biological parenthood in poor communities (Stack 1974), parents tend to have longer and deeper histories of support with their biological children. In our interviews, respondents' emotional energies were more often absorbed by their biological children; investments of time and money in the parental role were concentrated more among biological than social children. The analysis below includes biological and social children, but we expect parents to be more involved with their biological children. Our analysis also includes formerly-incarcerated mothers as well as fathers. The custodial role of formerly-incarcerated mothers has been observed in research on women's incarceration (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003; Kruttschnitt 2010). We expect that mothers are more likely to be co-residing with their children, even in cases where they do not have formal custody.

Under conditions of economic insecurity and complex family relationships, partners can play a gatekeeping role in access to children. The quality and history of the relationships between parents have been linked to co-residence and regular contact between and their children after incarceration (Nurse 2002; Braman 2004; Edin and Nelson 2013). Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson describe the gatekeeping role of partners as part of the “new package deal” in which nonresident fathers—motivated by a relationship with their children—must navigate relationships with their children's moth-

ers. We expect that formerly-incarcerated mothers and fathers will be in close contact with their children when they have good relationships with the other parent. One measure of relationship quality in the analysis below is based on retrospective reports of parental support prior to incarceration. Because visits and phone calls with children during incarceration typically require the active support of the un-incarcerated parent, we also study how contact with children after release varies with contact with children during incarceration. In the transitional year after prison release, relationships with partners are often highly fluid. We try to capture the ebb and flow of romantic relationships after incarceration with a measure of feelings towards one's partner that is updated at each wave of the survey.

Finally, men and women who go to prison often have histories of criminal involvement, domestic violence, and heavy drug or alcohol use. Research on the effects of parental incarceration tries to account for this nonrandom selection into incarceration (Murray and Fingleton 2008 review these efforts). Recent studies also emphasize the heterogeneity of incarcerated parents depending on drug use and involvement in crime (Wildeman and Turney 2014; Wakefield, Lee, and Wildeman 2016). We examine the heterogeneity of formerly-incarcerated parents with data on restraining orders before incarceration, arrest histories, and drug use after incarceration. These three variables, covering prior family violence, substance abuse, and police contact, provide more detailed measurement of the behavioral correlates of incarceration than in prior research.

In sum, economic insecurity, the complexity of family relationships, and crime and drug use are all likely to be closely related to parental contact after incarceration. Testing these hypotheses requires direct observation of parent-child relationships after incarceration with data from the network

of kin relations that includes children from multiple partners. Such data should also measure the material conditions of life for formerly-incarcerated parents, even when they are not living with their children.

DATA AND METHODS

Child-centered sampling designs have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the effects of parental incarceration but analysis has often been incomplete. Characteristics of noncustodial parents are often unobserved, and the child-centered design has bracketed the full network of family relationships from analysis. Thus theories of economic insecurity following incarceration and the role of family complexity in parental involvement are often conjectured but rarely studied directly.

Data from a cohort of men and women newly-released released from prison adds a new dimension to research on parental incarceration. By recording all the children, biological and social, of a respondent close to prison release and following up for a year, the BRS includes rich data on family complexity and the evolution of family relationships immediately after incarceration. At each interview wave, respondents were asked about their contact with all children named at the baseline in-prison interview. Data were collected on co-residence with children and parental support after incarceration. Data are also available on the respondents' positive or negative feelings towards the other parent of each child. In addition to interviews with formerly-incarcerated respondents, we conducted supplementary interviews with family members. Interviews were largely structured, though qualitative data are also available that helps illustrate the empirical content of the quantitative measures.

The dependent variable for this analysis is a four-category measure of the parent-child relationship for all children reported at baseline. At each interview wave, each child is coded as: (1) living with the respondent, (2) in weekly contact, (3) in occasional contact, at least once between interviews, or (4) out of contact altogether. The four-category measure of parental contact is modeled with a multinomial logistic regression in which the level of contact is contrasted with the baseline category of no contact between parent and child. We report results for all biological and social children and for biological children separately. Regression standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the child level.

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics on the key covariates used in the regression analysis. Part of the utility of the BRS derives from its very high response rate for a highly marginal population (Western et al. 2016). Analyses below use data for 259 out of 270 children reported at baseline by BRS respondents for whom data are reasonably complete. The economic insecurity of formerly-incarcerated parents is captured by measures of housing and income. Unstable housing is indicated by residence in a shelter, transitional housing, dividing time between different residences, or homelessness on the street. About a quarter of children have insecurely-housed parents at any point in the year after prison release. Half of all parents in the sample live in unstable housing at some point in the year after release. Another measure of housing instability indicates parental re-incarceration in the time since the previous interview. Although a return to custody is only reported in three percent of child-wave observations, 16 percent of all BRS parents had returned to custody at some point by the 12-month interview. Economic status is measured by total income from employment, government programs, support from family and friends, and illegal activities. Parents

Table 2. Means of covariates used in regression analysis, by child's relationship to formerly-incarcerated parent.

	Biological Children	Non-Biological Children	All Children
<i>Parent's Life Conditions After Prison</i>			
Unstable housing	.310	.194	.269
Re-incarcerated	.032	.034	.033
Income (\$100s)	12.23	10.71	11.69
<i>Demographics of Incarcerated Parent</i>			
Female	.179	.194	.184
Number of other partners	2.390	2.800	2.535
<i>Quality of Family Relationships</i>			
Contact in prison	.828	.791	.815
Pre-arrest support	3.091	3.172	3.120
Feelings to partner	3.550	3.069	3.482
<i>Parent's Crime and Drug Use</i>			
Using drugs/alcohol	.450	.665	.526
Arrested	.093	.086	.090
Prior restraining order	.528	.458	.503
Children (N)	162	97	259
Child-waves (N)	593	325	918

Note: Number of children reported by respondents is 270. Number of parent respondents is 95. Pre-arrest support and feelings to partner are measured on five-point scales.

report mean monthly incomes between \$1,100 and \$1,200 and nearly all record poverty-level incomes at some point in their year after incarceration.

Family complexity is measured by the number of partners reported by the respondent. Each child in the sample has a formerly-incarcerated parent who has, on average, 2.5 partners.³ The demography of family structure is controlled by an indicator for mothers in the BRS sample (11 out of 95 parent respondents), and a dummy variable for biological children.

The quality of family relationships is measured by three variables. Prior to prison release, the first measure indicated respondents who had contact with their children—through phone calls, letters, or visits—during incarceration. The second measure of relationship quality, recorded at baseline, counts respondents' reports of providing daily care, play and activities, emotional support, discipline, and financial support to form a five-point scale for support to children prior to incarceration. The third measure, recorded at each post-release interview, is a five-point scale capturing the respondents' feelings towards their partners, from very positive to very negative. Not measured for all social children, feelings to partner can only be included in the analysis of biological children.

Finally, the analysis controls for the respondents' involvement in crime, domestic violence and drug use. Criminal involvement is measured with a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was arrested since the last interview. Drug and alcohol use is self-reported, and over the half the sample reports substance use throughout the survey period. The analysis also includes a time-invariant measure of domestic violence, indicating those respondents who have ever had any prior restraining order listed in their

³The number of other partners is larger in the child-level data than the respondent-level because multiple-partner children are relatively over-represented in the child-level data.

official criminal record. About half the sample had a restraining order that restricted contact with former partners, crime victims, or family members.

In addition to these covariates all the regression analyses control for the age of the formerly-incarcerated parent and their race or ethnicity. A wide variety of other specifications were also estimated, including regressions with covariates for length of prison stay, parole or probation status, mental illness, pre-incarceration housing, employment, and child's age and sex. The reported results are robust to the inclusion of these other variables. We also conducted another analysis restricted to just the fathers in the sample. The results for fathers only, similar to those below, are reported in the Appendix.

Several of the hypotheses are causally motivated but we present the following results as a description of the relationship between parents and children after incarceration. Some predictors measured before prison release are clearly causally prior. Still, relationships with partners after release are likely to be endogenous to parent-child relationships and any causal effect is over-estimated. Even without a strong causal interpretation of the results, a detailed description of parent-child contact remains informative about the well-being of families with formerly-incarcerated parents. Qualitative data also help to reveal the social process of parental contact after incarceration and illustrate the content of variables used in the quantitative analysis.

RESULTS

Quantitative and qualitative evidence from the BRS describe the patterns of contact and support of formerly incarcerated parents with their children. Quantitative evidence come from a regression on panel data collected through the year after prison release. Qualitative interviews with respon-

dents illustrate the varieties of parental support, beyond the quantitative indicator of parental contact.

Regression Results

Table 3 reports the multinomial regression results from the analysis of the full sample of biological and social children reported by the BRS respondents. Regression coefficients describe the log odds of contact between parent and child compared to the baseline category of no contact between survey interviews. Among the measures of economic insecurity after incarceration, contact with children is most closely related to the housing situation of formerly-incarcerated parents. Parents who were unstably housed in shelters, transitional housing, or were homeless were very unlikely to be in regular contact or co-residing with their children. Return to incarceration is also related to separation between parent and child. Although the coding of contact with children might include prison visits and phone calls, these are highly unlikely for children whose parents whose have returned to incarceration. In contrast to the housing variables, income is largely unrelated to the odds of parent-child contact.

Patterns of post-release contact are also closely related to the complexity of family relationships. While in prison, respondents regularly reported feeling like a parent figure to a friend or relative's child, but after incarceration they stayed in closest contact with their own biological children. In the analysis of all social and biological children, mothers were not significantly different in their patterns of contact from fathers. Still, the point estimates show that mothers were more likely to be co-residing with their children than their fathers, but nonresident mothers were less likely to be in regular contact than nonresident fathers. Finally, a parent's multiple partners is

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression analysis of contact with formerly-incarcerated parents, all biological and social children, Boston Reentry Study. (Absolute z statistics in parentheses.)

	Occasional Contact (1)	Weekly Contact (2)	Co-Residence (3)
Constant	-1.269 (1.01)	-.776 (.67)	2.165 (1.52)
<i>Life Conditions After Prison Release</i>			
Unstable housing	-.376 (1.16)	-.823 (2.87)	-1.781 (3.47)
Re-incarcerated	-1.816 (2.41)	-2.393 (3.47)	-16.143 (21.20)
Income	-.007 (.54)	.004 (.39)	.008 (.54)
<i>Demographics of Incarcerated Parent</i>			
Biological child	.514 (1.50)	1.860 (5.50)	.901 (1.99)
Female	-.074 (.16)	-.585 (1.23)	.962 (1.53)
Number of other parents	-.084 (.70)	.021 (.18)	-.466 (1.87)
<i>Quality of Family Relationships</i>			
Contact in prison	1.114 (3.17)	2.618 (7.05)	3.441 (4.06)
Pre-arrest support	.168 (1.74)	.329 (3.57)	.294 (1.65)
<i>Crime and Drug Use</i>			
Using drugs/alcohol	.327 (.91)	-.120 (.37)	-1.093 (2.65)
Arrested	.760 (1.34)	.140 (.23)	.444 (.63)
Restraining order	.201 (.62)	.466 (1.37)	-.256 (.53)
Pseudo- R^2		.259	
Children (N)		259	
Child-waves (N)		918	

Note: Regressions also control for parent's age, race and ethnicity, fixed effects for each survey wave. Standard errors adjust for clustering by child.

associated with reduced co-residence. Although just falling below statistical significance, each additional partner is associated with a 40 percent reduction in the odds of co-residence ($1 - \exp[-.466] = .37$). Notably, multiple partner fertility does not appear to dilute weekly contact for non-resident parents; the effect is confined to co-residence.

The quality of family relationships prior to prison release is also closely associated with contact with children in the following months. For each point on the five-point scale of pre-arrest parental support, the odds of regular contact with children after incarceration rises by about a third. Contact between parent and child during incarceration is also strongly related to parental involvement after incarceration. In short, parents are likely to be living with their children or seeing them regularly where there was a history of contact before and during incarceration, and where relations between parents were warm.

Finally, the heterogeneity of formerly-incarcerated parents is measured by their arrest records and other indicators of anti-social behavior. The estimates show that contact with children is not related to either current arrests or a record of prior domestic violence. However, parents who are using drugs or alcohol are relatively unlikely to be co-residing with their children.

When the analysis is restricted to biological children (about two-thirds of all children in the sample), associations between covariates and child contact become somewhat stronger. Among the measures of socioeconomic insecurity, only unstable housing is strongly related to all levels of child contact. The odds of regular contact with children for parents with unstable housing is only about a quarter as high as the odds of child contact for stably housed parents ($\exp[-1.462] = .23$). Re-incarcerated parents have virtually

Table 4. Multinomial logistic regression analysis of contact with formerly-incarcerated parents, biological children only, Boston Reentry Study. (Absolute z statistics in parentheses.)

	Occasional Contact (1)	Weekly Contact (2)	Co-Residence (3)
Constant	-.380 (.18)	.183 (.10)	-5.931 (1.72)
<i>Life Conditions After Prison Release</i>			
Unstable housing	-.908 (1.47)	-1.462 (2.68)	-3.600 (3.45)
Re-incarcerated	-3.993 (2.85)	-3.330 (3.65)	-18.472 (17.02)
Income	.001 (.05)	.007 (.36)	.029 (1.39)
<i>Demographics of Incarcerated Parent</i>			
Female	-2.394 (2.64)	-.642 (.98)	3.010 (2.86)
Number of other parents	.021 (.10)	-.095 (.59)	-.531 (2.11)
<i>Quality of Family Relationships</i>			
Contact in prison	2.094 (3.02)	3.676 (6.43)	3.661 (1.75)
Pre-arrest support	-.177 (.98)	.112 (.87)	.856 (2.81)
Feelings to partner	.141 (.77)	.394 (2.43)	.806 (3.20)
<i>Crime and Drug Use</i>			
Using drugs/alcohol	-.697 (1.27)	-1.007 (2.02)	-2.773 (3.82)
Arrested	1.752 (2.14)	.661 (.89)	1.694 (1.67)
Restraining order	-.633 (1.12)	.145 (.31)	-.709 (1.05)
Pseudo- R^2		.391	
No. of children		157	
No. of child-waves		525	

Note: Regressions also control for parent's age, race and ethnicity, fixed effects for each survey wave. Standard errors are clustered by child.

no likelihood of being in regular contact with their biological children ($\exp[-3.330] = .04$). Similar to the results for all children, parent's income is unrelated to contact with biological children. Having a place to stay, it seems, is more important than financial means for regular contact with children.

Estimates of the effects of family complexity for biological children are stronger than those observed in the full sample of biological and social children. Consistent with other research on the custodial role of formerly-incarcerated parents, mothers in the reentry study are more likely to be living with their children compared to fathers (cf. Travis 2005, 124; Kruttschnitt 2010). The estimates also indicate that mothers who are not co-residing are unlikely to be in any sort of contact with their children. The "visiting relationship" of formerly-incarcerated parents with their partners and children describes fathers but not mothers. As for the full sample, multiple partners are also associated with a reduced odds of co-residence with biological children. This result seems more due to the difficulty of maintaining multiple residences than a reduced commitment to children. Thus respondents with more than one partner are just as likely to remain in weekly contact with their biological children as respondents with a single partner.

A history of family support, prior to and during incarceration, is also closely related to regular contact with biological children after prison release. Marginal effect calculations show that contact with children during incarceration is associated an increased probability of .45 of regular contact in the year after incarceration, calculated at the mean level for other covariates. Estimates also indicate that positive feelings towards the child's other parent is closely associated with regular contact, though this association likely depends in part on how contact with children affects the relationship

between parents. While feelings towards a partner and parental contact are likely endogenous, the probability of close and regular contact with children is highest for those with a positive relationship with the child's other parent.

Finally, among the measures of crime and other anti-social behavior only alcohol and drug use show the expected negative and significant associations with parental contact. The drug and alcohol coefficient for co-residence is particularly large. The estimate indicates that the odds of co-residence are 16 times higher for parents who are not using drugs or alcohol compared to those who are ($\exp[2.773] = 16.0$). Neither arrest nor prior restraining orders are associated with reduced contact with biological children.

Qualitative Interviews

Although the quantitative results have only a descriptive interpretation, additional evidence for the causal effects of housing, family complexity, and crime and drug use are indicated by qualitative observation. Over the course of the survey follow-up period, interviewers exchanged many phone calls with respondents, interviewed other family members, and often began and ended structured interviews with informal conversations. While our quantitative measure of contact captures the frequency of interactions with children, it does not take into account the content of these interactions. The following cases suggest that the nature of contact varies greatly between the children of an individual respondent, as well as across the wider array of parent-child relationships in the sample. Although identification as a "parent" can be largely subjective, qualitative observation suggests that relationships with children contributes to child well-being and can affirm one's capacity to play a positive social role.

Bobby's girlfriend was pregnant with their daughter when he got arrested.

A young Puerto Rican man, Bobby was 18 and living half the time with his girlfriend and the other half with his mother, Isabel. Bobby was making a good living selling drugs and he told us that he was driving a Lexus on his earnings. By the time he was sentenced to prison on drug charges, his daughter was four years old and she had become as much a presence in Isabel's life as in Bobby's. She regularly stayed over with her grandmother and this continued through Bobby's two-year incarceration.

Bobby kept in regular contact with his daughter while he was in prison. He would call Isabel when his daughter visited, speaking to his mother and his daughter two or three times a week throughout his incarceration. Isabel made a photo-album with pictures of Bobby which his daughter carried everywhere in her backpack.

On the day he was released, Bobby's girlfriend and their daughter picked him up from prison, an hour's drive from Isabel's place where a family cookout was planned to celebrate his release. "His daughter was basically hanging on his neck, she wouldn't let him go," Isabel said. That first week home, Bobby stayed mostly with his mother, but also spent a night with his girlfriend and their daughter, now six, and another night with a girl he had met since getting out.

A few months later, Bobby had settled into a routine. He was living with Isabel but was in daily contact with his six year-old who stayed with them two nights a week. By the summer, about six months after his release, Bobby was taking his daughter to camp and, with Isabel's help, he was providing her with financial support. We asked Isabel what was the best part about Bobby being out. "I think it's the bond he has with his daughter," she said. "For me as a single parent I feel good that I've taught Bobby that... His dad was really never in his life. So to see the bond that he has with his daughter,

the responsibility he feels as a father... It makes me feel good. I showed him that. That came from me.”

While family support often accompanied housing stability, some reentry study respondents had been engulfed in crime and drug use that could not be fully compensated by help from relatives. Drug addiction posed a strong threat to positive relationships with children. Carla, a black women in her early 40s, had used drugs since she was a teenager. Periods of intense drug use, street life, and incarceration had frequently removed her from her family for months and sometimes years at a time. Carla had her first son, Reshawn, when she was 19 years old. She told us that she and Reshawn’s father were “just messing” at the time of his birth, and not involved in a serious relationship. Two years later, Carla had her daughter Jada. Carla describes Jada’s father as her “soul mate” and continued to be involved with him for the next 20 years, though he himself was serving a long prison sentence at the time of our interviews. Three years after Jada was born, Carla had her third child, Tyrone, with a boyfriend she was living with at the time. We received conflicting accounts of Carla’s involvement with her children. She told us that she always took Jada with her everywhere, but her sister reported that all three children lived primarily with Carla’s mother, Candice, and were each legally adopted by her. Jada offered a similar account. When we asked her, at age 21, how her mother’s drug addiction had affected her, Jada said she “didn’t really deal with it” because she lived with her grandmother, Candice.

After getting out of prison the last time, Carla moved back in with Candice. Carla described living at her mother’s house as “hard” because “my kids are doing their own thing.” Twenty-three year old Reshawn had just moved into his own place with his girlfriend and their infant daughter.

Jada, herself just released from prison, spent time at Candice's place and her girlfriend's. Seventeen-year old Tyrone lived with his grandmother but expected to move in with his girlfriend when their child was born in the following months. While Carla identified strongly as her children's mother, she acknowledged the parental role Candice played in her children's lives. Upon returning to her mother's household, Carla remarked that Candice might be "jealous of me and my kids' relationship, because she raised them, basically."

Family support in the context of a complex web of kin relations can draw formerly-incarcerated parents into the lives of a variety of related and unrelated children. At the time of his baseline interview, Ray, a black man in his mid-thirties, identified as the biological father of two children—Tyler and Tanya—and as a father figure to his two nieces. During his most recent imprisonment, Ray called and wrote to Tyler and Tanya, but he had no contact with his nieces. Upon his release, Ray lived with his godmother, her brother and his son, and her niece and her two young children—Darryl and Alyssa. Although Ray was initially hesitant to identify as a father figure to Darryl and Alyssa, he did tell us that "I treat everybody's kids like my kids. It's a community." By his six-month interview, Ray was helping to provide daily care for all the children in the home and felt he had become a father figure to all of them. In addition to providing care for Darryl and Alyssa, Ray was in weekly contact with his nieces. While Ray's biological children each lived with their respective mothers, they were in daily contact with their father and stayed with him three nights each week.

In Ray's case, parenthood meant having biological children, helping a brother care for his daughters, and assisting in the daily care of a roommate's children. Although the relationship and kinds of contact with children may

vary greatly, identifying as a parent (biological or social) allowed many formerly-incarcerated people to claim a positive social role. In this way, social parenthood can be considered a resilient response to circumstances of uncertainty and a source of support to non-biological children.

Unlike most people we interviewed, Ray was able to secure steady employment within his first week out of prison. With some financial security, he could pay monthly child support to both of his biological children's mothers, provide in-kind assistance to his nieces, and even give Tanya a party for her birthday. Speaking animatedly about the party, Ray exclaimed, "It was the princess's birthday... She got sneakers, overnight clothes, sneakers, slippers... We went and did pottery, the movies, out to eat." Although Ray sometimes argued with Tanya and Tyler's mothers about the mothers' drug and alcohol use, his relationships with both women were generally congenial throughout the year of the study.

A year after prison release, Ray had moved into his own one-bedroom apartment and reported that Tanya and Tyler stayed over at least three times per week. He also remained in regular contact with his nieces. While Ray no longer lived with his god-sister's children, he frequently visited or called. Ray had maintained contact with his children prior to obtaining his own apartment but the family could only manage a visiting relationship.

The cases of Bobby, Carla, and Ray show the importance of housing and other family members in sustaining contact between parents and children. The cases also show the supportive role of older female relatives. Bobby's mother played a bridging role to Bobby's partner and provided stable, private housing where his daughter could visit and stay overnight. Carla's mother provided a place to stay for both Carla and her children. Although she was a resident parent, Carla's history of drug addiction and significant health

problems limited her parental role, and her mother had legal custody of her children. Finally, Ray's story indicates how stable housing can provide a safe and consistent foundation upon which parents and children can build a relationship. Ray's case also indicates the complexity and variety of kin and social relationships. Despite large differences in the support Ray provided to each child, these relationships reinforced Ray's identity as a father and his self-worth as a provider.

DISCUSSION

Parental incarceration has been widely found to be negatively associated with child well-being, yet few studies directly observe parent-child relationships and parental involvement immediately following incarceration. Despite significant evidence for the negative effects of parental incarceration on children, the economic insecurity of formerly-incarcerated parents and the complexity of family life was largely bracketed from prior research. We explore the contact between parents and children after incarceration using data from the Boston Reentry Study. Following a cohort of 95 formerly-incarcerated parents and their 270 children shows great variety in the involvement of parents with their children.

Three findings stand out. First, patterns of housing were closely associated with parent-child relationships after incarceration. Co-residence was uncommon, but over half the sample was in weekly contact with their children. Rates of regular contact with children were significantly lower, however, for parents who were unstably housed in shelters, transitional housing, or homeless. Half of formerly-incarcerated parents were unstably housed at some point in the year after prison release. Little an-

alyzed in previous research, but common in the lives of those who go to prison, re-incarceration—even after controlling for arrest and substance use—effectively eliminated regular contact between parents and children. These findings suggest that housing imposes a hard material constraint on the levels of contact between children and parents after incarceration. Although the housing effects point to economic insecurity after incarceration as an important influence on parental contact, income was not closely related to either co-residence with children or weekly contact. In a context where children are not co-resident but may periodically stay with formerly-incarcerated parents, stable private housing appears to be a special type of resource for promoting parent-child connections. Stable housing provides not just the basic conditions for social integration after prison, it also offers a place that children might visit and stay overnight as children frequently did for the nonresident parents in the BRS sample.

Second, the complexity of family relationships is also closely associated with parent-child contact. Family structure and relationship quality matter in different ways. The rate of multiple partner fertility we observed in the BRS greatly exceeded estimates from earlier studies. Formerly-incarcerated parents with several partners were unlikely to live with their children but they did maintain regular contact. Relationship quality, on the other hand, is associated with both co-residence and regular contact. Where fathers and mothers who have been to prison had a history of supporting their children, where they remained in contact during incarceration, and retained a good relationship with their partners after incarceration, regular contact with children was much more likely. These patterns underline the gatekeeping role of partners of poor non-resident fathers observed in other research on low-income families (Edin and Nelson 2013; Tach et al. 2010; Tach et

al. 2014). In addition to the role of partners, qualitative data suggests that relationships between formerly-incarcerated parents and their children are sustained by other family members, especially older women, who played a bridging role. Grandmothers in particular, provided places for visits with children, and helped maintain contact between parents and children during parents' incarceration.

Third, drug use and crime were associated with reduced contact with children. The scope of risky behavior and its aftermath ranged from relapse to addiction for parents with long histories of substance abuse, to criminal justice contact through re-arrest and re-incarceration. Time-varying measures of drug use and justice system contact were more closely associated with parental contact than the time-invariant prior-restraining order. Addiction and violence may be less fixed propensities, than fluctuating circumstances that follow the ups and downs of life after incarceration. These fluctuating circumstance, it seems, may better reflect the capacities and inclinations of parents with histories of incarceration to be connected with their children.

Qualitative evidence showed that housing insecurity, family complexity, and drug use did not operate not in a linear and additive way, but were often closely related themselves. While regression can capture the outlines, the social process of parenthood for those who go to prison is embedded in conditions of material hardship knitted with intricate kin relations. Family complexity describes not just the structure of family relationships, but the shifting patterns of conflict and congeniality that emerge with poverty, housing insecurity, crime and drug use.

Most generally, the analysis suggests that the social integration of formerly-incarcerated parents and the support of their children depends on a rudi-

mentary level of well-being that includes supportive family relationships and stable housing under conditions of sobriety. Good relationships with partners are formed within a wider kin network in which older female relatives play a fundamental role. Grandmothers who provide stable housing, frequently help manage the relationships between their formerly-incarcerated children and their partners. These findings indicate the substantial material and demographic challenges facing formerly-incarcerated parents, even when they are strongly motivated to be closely involved in their children's lives. Living with housing insecurity, often in the grip of addiction, and managing time and relationships with several partners are objective barriers to positive parenting for even the most committed mothers and fathers newly-released from prison.

APPENDIX

Table A.1. Multinomial logistic regression analysis of contact with formerly-incarcerated fathers, all biological and social children, Boston Reentry Study. (Absolute z statistics in parentheses.)

	Occasional Contact (1)	Weekly Contact (2)	Co-Residence (3)
Constant	-.861 (.62)	-1.174 (.84)	-.048 (.03)
<i>Life Conditions After Prison Release</i>			
Unstable housing	.047 (.13)	-.408 (1.30)	-.657 (1.20)
Re-incarcerated	-1.866 (2.21)	-2.226 (3.07)	-15.882 (18.31)
Income	-.004 (.31)	.012 (.98)	.019 (1.22)
<i>Demographics of Incarcerated Parent</i>			
Biological child	1.009 (2.45)	1.838 (4.56)	.236 (.45)
Number of other partners	-.040 (.21)	.103 (.59)	-.034 (-.08)
<i>Quality of Family Relationships</i>			
Contact in prison	.912 (2.51)	2.574 (6.22)	4.311 (3.41)
Pre-arrest support	.108 (.98)	.343 (3.17)	.368 (1.89)
<i>Crime and Drug Use</i>			
Using drugs/alcohol	.520 (1.35)	.069 (.19)	-.949 (2.00)
Arrested	.965 (1.81)	.417 (.75)	-.009 (-.01)
Restraining order	.009 (.02)	.261 (.74)	-1.103 (2.19)
Pseudo- R^2		.265	
Children (N)		214	
Child-waves (N)		753	

Note: Regressions also control for parent's age, race and ethnicity, fixed effects for each survey wave. Standard errors are clustered by child.

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