

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED FATHERS

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of mass incarceration in the United States means that a historically unprecedented number of children are exposed to paternal incarceration. Despite a growing literature investigating the intergenerational consequences of incarceration, little research collects information from the children who experience paternal incarceration. In this chapter, we describe an ongoing data collection effort, the Jail & Family Life Study, a longitudinal in-depth interview study designed to understand the consequences of paternal incarceration for families and children. Part of this study involves conducting in-depth interviews with 8- to 17-year-old children of incarcerated fathers during and after the father's incarceration. First, we document the challenges and strategies to gaining access

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to children of incarcerated fathers, paying particular attention to the role of children's mothers and caregivers in facilitating this access. Second, we document the challenges and strategies to developing rapport with this group of vulnerable children. Third, we describe the opportunities that children can provide for researchers. Taken together, these findings suggest that it is both challenging and imperative to incorporate children into research on the collateral consequences of incarceration.

Keywords: Childhood; interviewing methods; parental incarceration

INTRODUCTION

Incarceration rates in the United States have increased rapidly over the past four decades, translating to a historically unprecedented number of children who experience parental incarceration (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). More than 2.7 million children currently have one or both parents incarcerated in local jails, state prisons, and federal prisons, and more than 10 million children will be exposed to at least one episode of parental incarceration during childhood (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009). Exposure to parental incarceration is concentrated among racial/ethnic minority and poor children. For example, 2% of White children, 4% of Latino children, and 11% of Black children are currently exposed to parental incarceration (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Therefore, for some groups of children, parental incarceration – especially paternal incarceration – has become a normative life course event (Western & Pettit, 2010).

Given the increasing number of children exposed to paternal incarceration, a growing research literature describes the deleterious consequences of this exposure for children's well-being. By and large, children exposed to paternal incarceration, compared to their counterparts not exposed to paternal incarceration, have academic difficulties, behavioral impairments, and health problems (e.g., Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010, various chapters; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014; Wildeman & Western, 2010). There is also evidence that these consequences of paternal incarceration persist into adulthood (Foster & Hagan, 2013). The negative consequences of paternal incarceration, in conjunction with the concentration of paternal incarceration among racial/ethnic minority and

poor children, means that paternal incarceration contributes to childhood inequalities (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013).

Despite the growing interest in understanding the intergenerational consequences of incarceration, as well as factors that promote risk and resiliency among children exposed to paternal incarceration, there remain a number of opportunities for research. Importantly, the vast majority of existing research is based on quantitative data, with outcomes usually reported by children's caregivers (Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, & Mincy, 2012) and less commonly reported by children themselves (Haskins, 2015). Other existing research is based on interview studies of caregivers (see Siegel, 2011; Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). Little research investigates the intergenerational consequences of incarceration by conducting in-depth interviews with children, a methodological approach that may shed necessary light on the mechanisms linking paternal incarceration to children's well-being (Travis et al., 2014). This is an important oversight, both in research on paternal incarceration and in research more generally (Avison, 2010; Eder & Corsaro, 1999), as children may have different perspectives than parents (Thorne, 1987) and may provide the most direct accounts of family, school, and peer experiences (Calarco, 2011).

In this chapter, we draw on our experiences interviewing children of incarcerated fathers as part of a new data collection effort, the Jail & Family Life Study, to document both challenges and opportunities in conducting interviews with this vulnerable group of children. The Jail & Family Life Study, described later in detail, is an ongoing study designed to understand the collateral consequences of paternal incarceration for families and children. It involves conducting in-depth interviews with jailed fathers and their family members, including children aged 8–17, during fathers' incarcerations and after release. We address three aspects of conducting research on children of incarcerated fathers in this chapter. First, we describe the challenges and strategies for gaining access to children of incarcerated fathers, paying particular attention to the role of children's parental and non-parental caregivers in facilitating this access. Second, we describe challenges in interviewing this vulnerable group, focusing on both strategies for developing rapport and enabling dialogue with children. Third, we describe how children provide unique and critical opportunities to learn about themselves and their families. As data collection is ongoing, the goal of this chapter is not to elucidate themes gleaned from the in-depth interviews, but instead to discuss the methodological challenges and opportunities related to collecting qualitative data on this vulnerable group of children.

*Existing Knowledge about the Intergenerational Consequences of
Paternal Incarceration*

By and large, existing research documents deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration for academic, behavioral, and health outcomes of offspring. For example, children with incarcerated parents, compared to their counterparts, are more likely to experience grade repetition (Turney & Haskins, 2014), lower educational attainment (Foster & Hagan, 2007, 2009; Hagan & Foster, 2012), worse academic performance (Foster & Hagan, 2009; Hagan & Foster, 2012; Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012), and more school absences (Murray & Farrington, 2008; Nichols & Loper, 2012). Paternal incarceration is also deleteriously associated with children's behavioral problems (e.g., Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2015; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013), physical and mental health issues in youth (Foster & Hagan, 2013; Turney, 2014), and juvenile delinquency (Roettger & Swisher, 2011).

The vast majority of research on the intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration uses existing survey data to understand these relationships, yielding a tremendous body of knowledge over a relatively short period of time. These existing surveys include the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Geller et al., 2012), the National Survey of Children's Health (Turney, 2014), the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Swisher & Roettger, 2012), the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011), and the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (Murray & Farrington, 2005). When answering research questions about the intergenerational consequences of paternal incarceration, survey data sets are advantageous for a number of reasons. Indeed, survey data is often representative of a population, easily available, and facilitates analyses that document change over time.

Survey data can also be advantageous when it includes multiple reporters of children's well-being. For example, Haskins (2015) uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to estimate the relationship between first-time paternal incarceration and the well-being of 9-year-old children, as measured by children and by their caregivers. She finds that paternal incarceration is associated with greater child-reported internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and delinquent behaviors, but that these associations are smaller in magnitude than associations between paternal incarceration and caregiver-reported outcomes. Although these data were not designed to understand the processes through which paternal incarceration is differentially associated with child-reported outcomes and

caregiver-reported outcomes, results suggest that incorporating children's perspectives may yield new and important information.

Despite the importance of incorporating children into research, especially into research on stressful life events (Avison, 2010), little research uses qualitative methods to understand the intergenerational consequences of incarceration from the perspectives of children.¹ There are some noteworthy exceptions. For example, drawing on 34 interviews with children aged 8–17, Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) document the risk and resiliency experienced by children of incarcerated parents (also see Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013). Additionally, Johnson and Easterling (2015), drawing on 10 interviews with children aged 10–16, find that children cope with parental incarceration by distancing themselves from their incarcerated parents, minimizing the challenges associated with having incarcerated parents, and exercising control in their relationships with incarcerated parents and others.

The Jail & Family Life Study conceptually builds upon the growing literature on the intergenerational consequences of incarceration by investigating the heterogeneous processes through which paternal incarceration is linked to children's well-being. In this chapter, we contribute to existing research on the collateral consequences of paternal incarceration, as well as existing research on childhood inequality, by documenting (1) challenges and strategies for gaining access to children, (2) challenges and strategies for developing rapport with children, and (3) the opportunities that children provide for researchers. Though we necessarily draw on our experiences interviewing children of incarcerated fathers, we expect this discussion to be useful to researchers who collect data on all vulnerable children.

JAIL & FAMILY LIFE STUDY

Study Design

In this chapter, we draw on our experiences collecting data for the Jail & Family Life Study, a longitudinal in-depth interview study designed to provide a complex account of the collateral consequences of paternal incarceration for families and children. Recruiting families for the Jail & Family Life Study proceeds in three steps. First, the research team begins by recruiting fathers incarcerated in three Oceanside County jails in Southern California.² The research team recruits fathers by making announcements in programs held at the jails (e.g., parenting classes, substance abuse classes) and, shortly thereafter, conduct interviews with recruited fathers while

they are in jail (with some fathers serving sentences in jail and others awaiting trial or sentencing). To be eligible for study participation, fathers did not need to have resided with their child prior to incarceration, but had to have some contact with him/her in the month prior to incarceration; therefore, heterogeneity in fathers' pre-incarceration involvement with their children is built into the study design. Second, during interviews with fathers, the research team solicits contact information for family members. The research team interviews these family members, which include children, children's mothers or caregivers, father's mothers, and any other important adults in the fathers' or children's lives (e.g., partners, sisters, child's maternal grandmothers). Third, the research team re-interviews fathers and family members after fathers are released (and, in the event they are not released during the study time, about one year after the first interview).

When complete, the Jail & Family Life Study will include interviews with more than 120 families across three jails. Children are eligible for participation in the study if (1) they have a father who participates, (2) they are between the ages of 8 and 17, and (3) their caregivers consent to the interviews and they assent to the interviews.³ Given many fathers have children younger than age 8 and/or older than age 17, not all families in the study include an eligible child. Other families include multiple eligible children whom we interview.⁴ The majority of children are race/ethnic minorities (predominantly Latino) and are growing up in economically disadvantaged families. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of California, Irvine, in June 2015.

Interviews with Children

We conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with children aged 8–17. Given the developmental heterogeneity among children in this age range, we have different interview protocols for children aged 8–12 and children aged 13–17. Interviews with younger children, those aged 8–12, are designed to last between 20 and 30 minutes. The interview guide is comprised of the following five modules: (1) warm-up, (2) family life, (3) peers, (4) school, and (5) future. For example, in the “family life” module, we ask children questions such as “Tell me about your family” and “What are your favorite things to do with your mom [or caregiver or other mother-like figure]?” Interviews with older children, those aged 13–17, are designed to last between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews with older children have the same five modules and many of the same questions, but are expanded to

include some additional questions and probes. For example, though we do not ask younger children about witnessing domestic violence between their parents and contact with the police, we do ask older children about these experiences. All children are paid \$10 for their time. Interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim.

GAINING ACCESS TO CHILDREN

Though accessing children with incarcerated fathers is feasible, it is also quite challenging.⁵ In the Jail & Family Life Study, access to children was contingent on two people: children's fathers and children's parental and non-parental caregivers.⁶ Indeed, as interviewing children nearly always require the consent of a parent or caregiver, parents and caregivers play an important role in the research process of interviewing children. Below we describe the process of making contact with parental and non-parental caregivers and facilitating children's participation.

Making Contact with Caregivers

In the Jail & Family Life Study, the first step in conducting an interview with a child respondent involves contacting the child's parental or non-parental primary caregiver. We receive the primary caregiver's information – usually name, address, and phone number – during the father's interview. Then, as soon as possible after the father's interview, we contact the caregiver to introduce ourselves and the research study, setting up an interview with her and the child(ren).⁷ Reaching caregivers can be quite time-consuming and often takes multiple contact attempts via mediums such as the telephone, text message, and Facebook. Reaching caregivers can also be complicated by the fact that fathers sometimes give us incomplete contact information, either because they were unprepared to provide such information (as they rarely know when we will come to the jail to interview them) or because they do not know all of the contact information. In these instances, we can often obtain contact information of caregivers by revisiting the father in jail, encouraging them to mail the information, or asking other family members to provide contact information (as fathers nearly always provide contact information for at least one family member and permission to contact this family member). Therefore, although it is feasible to contact caregivers of fathers' children, it is not

always straightforward; instead, it is often a circuitous process that requires persistence.

Facilitating Participation of Children

Consenting Caregivers

After we reach parental and non-parental caregivers, we must request their consent to interview children. Initially, caregivers have a range of comfort levels regarding children's participation in the study. Some caregivers are immediately eager to allow children to participate, others take more time before deciding to allow children to participate, and a minority do not grant children permission to participate. We found the following three strategies useful in facilitating caregivers' consent for children's participation: (1) building initial rapport with caregivers, (2) directly addressing concerns voiced by caregivers, and (3) working around the individual constraints of caregivers.

First, though it is ideal to interview the caregiver and child at the same time, it can be helpful to build rapport with the caregiver before asking her to consent to the child's interview. In some instances, especially when the caregiver seems hesitant of her own participation in the study, we first conduct the caregiver's interview and then ask her to consent to the child's interview. This gives the caregiver the opportunity to get comfortable with the interviewer and the types of questions asked before the interviewer requests a future interview with the child.

Second, for caregivers who appear uncertain about allowing the child to participate, we find it helpful to ask the caregiver to tell us about any concerns she has about the child's participation. We then work to troubleshoot these concerns. For example, caregivers have told us the child does not know certain details about the father's incarceration (e.g., when he will be released, the crime he has been charged with) or, less frequently, that the child does not know the father is incarcerated. In these instances, we assure the caregiver that, if permitted to interview the child, we will not tell the child any details about the father's incarceration.⁸ Caregivers have also occasionally told us that talking about the father is difficult for the child and that they do not want the child to experience negative emotions. We have also offered to let caregivers see the interview guide prior to the child interview, though to date no caregivers have taken us up on this.

Third, we strive to maintain awareness of the caregivers' individual circumstances to facilitate the child's participation. For example, caregivers

sometimes appear unsure about having the child participate because of perceived logistical issues such as busy schedules, lack of childcare for other children, and transportation limitations. We remain attuned to these limitations and work with caregivers to overcome them. As noted above, when possible, we try to complete the caregiver's and child's interview at the same time to avoid multiple disruptions to the family's schedule. We also offer to bring another member of the research team to provide childcare for younger children and offer to meet the family wherever is most convenient for them. Relatedly, in some cases caregivers appear uncertain about the child's participation (and their own participation) because they do not want strangers in their homes. In these instances, researchers interview caregivers and children in public spaces familiar to them (e.g., a local coffee shop or a park) so they feel at ease in their surroundings.

Assenting Children

Once caregivers consent to the child's interview, it is necessary for the child to assent. We find that asking a child to assent to the interview is easier than asking caregivers to consent to the child's interview, as caregivers often facilitate assent by telling the child about the study. For example, the mother of 13-year-old Mimi, whose biological father was in jail, put her on speakerphone during an initial conversation with the interviewer and asked her daughter directly if she wanted to participate. Children are often quite excited about the study. For example, after one respondent, Bianca, told her 9-year-old son about the interview, he told her he wanted to participate because he is interested in writing and wants to be part of a book that will result from the study.

In the rare case when the child is initially reluctant to participate, personal contact with the interviewer helps the child feel comfortable. For example, the mother of 10-year-old Stacey had initially – and strategically – scheduled her own interview when Stacey would not be home, as she said Stacey gets upset when talking about topics such as her biological father's incarceration and her mother's poor health. However, Stacey called her mother over FaceTime during the mother's interview and her mother asked her if she wanted to participate. Stacey agreed to participate after the interviewer explained more about the interview process and questions – at which point her mother gave her consent as well.

Importantly, a tension often exists when planning to interview children because their voice is ignored if the caregiver or parent does not consent to the interview (Lansdown, 2005; Leonard, 2007). Before we can ask a child if he/she wants to participate in the interview, we have to first build trust

with the caregiver, who serves as a gatekeeper toward the child. Indeed, a hierarchy of consent is created when the caregiver, the person with power and legitimacy, has to provide consent before a child can assent. The child's assent may be assumed after caregivers provide consent, which undermines the child's agency. In our interviews, we work to preserve children's agency in three ways. First, we provide the opportunity for them to skip any questions they do not want to answer and enable them to end the interview at any time. Second, we work to pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that might signal active dissent. Third, we check in with children periodically during the interview, asking children how they are feeling and asking permission to continue on after a difficult question/answer period. Children are, after all, gatekeepers to what they are willing to share, regardless of parental access (Ball, 1985; Mandell, 1988). These strategies give agency back to the children and also help reduce the power dynamic between interviewers and children.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERVIEWING CHILDREN ABOUT A SENSITIVE TOPIC

Next, we discuss challenges to interviewing children about the incarceration of their father, a sensitive topic for many children. In this section, we document three challenges we face when interviewing children of incarcerated fathers: (1) our positionality as adults, (2) the need to sometimes adapt sensitive questions, and (3) maintaining confidentiality within families. We also document strategies for overcoming these three challenges.

Interviewer Positionality

Interviews with children can be challenging because of the power dynamics inherent in interactions between adults and children, a challenge faced by many childhood researchers. In the Jail & Family Life Study, these power dynamics are often exacerbated by other differences between the interviewer and the child (e.g., race/ethnicity, social class). The interviewers to date, all graduate students, include three White women, two Latinas, and a Latino. The interviewers also come from an array of social class backgrounds, sexual orientations, and family structures, and many of these characteristics of the interviewers are discordant with characteristics of

the children we interview. In conducting interviews with children, we use a number of strategies to help children feel comfortable during the interview, including controlling our physical appearance, our language, and our posture and placement during the interview.

One way we attempt to facilitate children's comfort is through our physical appearance during the interview. We dress casually and avoid clothing or accessories that appear too professional. A typical interview outfit might include dark cotton pants or jeans, a simple t-shirt, and plain-looking tennis shoes or sandals.

Second, we attempt to facilitate children's comfort by using language they understand; this language varies depending on both children's chronological and developmental ages. This involves, prior to the interview, summarizing the project in accessible language and giving the child the opportunity to ask us questions before signing the assent form. This also involves asking the child to choose a "fake name" (instead of "pseudonym," a terminology not all children would understand). Relatedly, we find it important to avoid using official terms or formal phrases when speaking to the child. For example, when referring to the Principal Investigator when talking with young children, we use the language of "teacher" instead of "professor." We are also mindful to use vocabulary that resonates with the child, considering what kind of words and phrases they will understand, and also use words and phrases the child has used with us (e.g., identifying their father by whatever name they use for him). Some of this language is built into the interview guide, such as asking about when they feel "happy" or "sad" instead of asking about more complex emotions such as "stress" (which we ask about in interviews with adults).

Third, we attempt to facilitate children's comfort by being aware of our own posture and placement at the interview location. For example, we make every effort to take a relaxed posture and sit on the same physical level as the child, mirroring the child respondents to increase their feelings of ease and avoid portraying an authoritative stance. This might include a shift to our own body posture, such as having our shoulders more rounded and hunched than upright, or sitting cross-legged or on our knees as a child might.

Incorporating Emotional Sensitivity

In our study, interviews with children are challenging because they usually include questions about sensitive topics such as the father's incarceration,

visiting the father in jail, and complicated relationships between the child's parents. We are careful to ensure the child feels good about himself/herself during the interview (and, when it appears this may not be true, work to redirect the interview in a way that makes him/her feel good). Specifically, this can involve checking in with the child about how he/she is feeling during the interview, delivering praise throughout the interview ("it sounds like you're a really great brother"), validating positive relationships or other aspects of their lives ("it sounds like your mom cares a lot about you"), using normalizing statements ("sometimes when dads go to jail, there are big changes for the rest of the family"), and thanking them for discussing sensitive topics ("thanks for talking with me about these hard things"). Some of these statements are built into the interview guide, but the interviewer also has discretionary permission to utilize these phrases throughout the interview where appropriate (or to skip questions the interviewer senses may cause the child discomfort). We also ensure we end all interviews on a positive note (e.g., "it sounds like you have a really bright future"), with the context of this statement varying for each child based on the content of the interview.

For example, during one interview, 9-year-old Phillip had a drink in front of him during the interview and would take a sip directly after answering questions about his biological father that were difficult for him. In contrast, he seemed to brighten when talking about his cousins, grandmother, and other friends. The interviewer quickly became attuned to topics that made him happy and topics that made him sad and, throughout the interview, worked to maximize his happiness and minimize his sadness. During another interview, 9-year-old Irvin quieted and looked around when asked questions about his biological father, so the interviewer did not probe Irvin too much about his father.

Importantly, children in the study come from an array of racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds and they live in a variety of neighborhoods across Southern California. Because there is variation among our respondents, we do not suggest all children be treated the same. Instead, we worked to be open-minded and sensitive to cultural diversity, sometimes noting similarities between the interviewer and the child to build rapport with the child, and sometimes noting differences between the interviewer and the child to ensure sensitivity. In the latter situations, allowing the child to teach the interviewer about apparent cultural differences permits the child agency in the interaction that can help balance the power dynamic between the adult and child. These agentic strategies often lead to more detailed and open interviews.

Maintaining Confidentiality

Finally, the Jail & Family Life Study is unique because we interview individuals who are connected to each other through the father. This means that the research team has to work hard to maintain confidentiality within families (as well as across families, of course). To begin with, the research team cannot disclose to family members that the father is in jail without his permission. At the end of each father interview, we ask the father if the child's caregiver (and other family members he provided contact information for) knows he is in jail (even though we nearly always know this information from the content of the interview). In the rare case the caregiver does not know the father is in jail, we ask the father for permission to communicate this information to the caregiver. However, as mentioned prior, caregivers may report that the child does not know the father is in jail or that the child does not know all of the details of the father's jail stay (though both of these scenarios are more common among children under the age of 8, who we do not interview). Some caregivers tell the child that the father is "away," others say he is "working" or "at school," and still others do not specify the reason for the father's absence. If caregivers report the child is unaware his/her father is in jail, under no circumstances do we reveal this information to the child. However, we still interview the child, asking him/her questions about school, peers, and neighborhoods, as one of our primary research goals is to understand children's well-being and children can provide that information without talking about their fathers.

Furthermore, throughout our interactions with children (and, more generally, with all family members), we take care to maintain confidentiality by not inadvertently revealing information about any of the other family members. When interviews with children occur after caregiver interviews, children sometimes give different accounts than caregivers of the same events. In these instances, the interviewer must not reveal there were differences in accounts. For example, when 16-year-old Eduardo asked the interviewer if his mother mentioned an instance of domestic abuse between his mother and social father, the interviewer reminded Eduardo that she could not share anything his mother told her (and, similarly, that she would not disclose anything he said to his mother). Eduardo then discussed the domestic dispute between his parents and his feelings about the dispute.

Although not ideal, it is sometimes necessary to conduct an interview in the presence of the child's caregiver, perhaps because the caregiver was initially reluctant to allow their child's participation or because caregivers will loiter during the interview. Interviewing children in the presence of

caregivers can make it either easier or more difficult to develop rapport with children. On the one hand, children may be more comfortable with their caregiver present, which can facilitate the development of rapport between interviewers and children. For example, 16-year-old Sean and his mother together experienced many years of abuse from his incarcerated biological father. Those experiences created a close bond between Sean and his mother; accordingly, the two have an open relationship and rely on each other for social support. The presence of Sean's mother during the interview created a safe space for Sean to share things that he might not have otherwise shared. On the other hand, children may be less comfortable sharing information, especially sensitive information, in the presence of their caregiver. For example, 10-year-old Louie, whose mother was not present during most of the interview, very carefully chose his words when his mother approached the picnic table where his interview was being conducted. In sum, developing rapport in the presence of caregivers is a heterogeneous experience.

OPPORTUNITIES THAT CHILDREN CAN PROVIDE

Though a number of challenges exist when interviewing children, especially vulnerable children of incarcerated fathers, children provide a number of valuable insights into family dynamics. Throughout ongoing data collection for the Jail & Family Life Study, we learn a number of lessons from children through their verbal and non-verbal communication styles. We consider our interviews with children equally as important as our interviews with adults, since children can provide important information about their own well-being and their family's well-being that we may not otherwise learn from their adult family members.

Learning from Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

First, children – especially teenagers – use words to communicate their feelings and experiences. For example, 16-year-old twin sisters, Renee and Alexis, told us how difficult it was for them to be disconnected from their biological father when he was in jail. They each discussed this during their individual interviews, using language to convey the strain this imposed on their lives. Additionally, Sean talked about a time in his life when his biological father physically and emotionally abused him and his mother. He

mentioned he was comfortable talking about this, but after answering several questions, he communicated directly to the interviewer that he had reached the limit of his comfort level on the matter, indicating that the relationship with his father was, at times, difficult for him to talk about.

Sometimes children verbally offer information not provided by the adults interviewed. For example, half-sisters Kayla and Mimi told interviewers about their biological father's deportation in their individual interviews, each offering this information even though we did not directly ask about this topic (as the children's parents did not offer this information in their interviews). Therefore, though an interviewer may not garner the same level of precise detail from children, in comparison to adult interviews, these examples demonstrate that youth can verbally communicate about their experiences and feelings and can offer relevant information not provided by caregivers.

In addition to learning from children's verbal communication, we also glean information from children's non-verbal communication. Children often provide non-verbal cues, telling us how they feel with their bodies, facial expressions, and mannerisms. As described above, we must navigate children's non-verbal communication to be sensitive to their needs, often opting to omit questions or probes if the child appears uncomfortable. Omitting questions can produce non-verbal information. Nine-year-old Luke, who did not provide too many verbal answers to our questions (and, in fact, his mother was present during the interview and answered many of the questions for him), rocked back and forth vigorously when asked about his social father or when asked to elaborate about the bullying he experienced at school. Sean lowered his head to indicate he no longer wanted to talk about the extent to which he and his family were abused by his father years back and his own suicidal thoughts as a result of this trauma, which prompted the interviewer to move on to different questions and thanked him for opening up about a very personal and sensitive issue. Louie fidgeted and got up from his seat when asked more serious questions, letting the interviewer know that a certain topic was particularly difficult for him to talk about. Through non-verbal cues during the interviews, children indirectly communicated to us how their family situations affect them.

Gaining Perspective Outside the Caregiver's View

Additionally, talking with children provides us with a valuable perspective that we may not otherwise learn from children's caregivers (even though we

ask caregivers a number of questions about their children). For one, teenagers reveal to us how they spend their time away from caregivers, frequently providing illuminating information about how their father's incarceration affects them. For example, Renee and Alexis told us during their follow-up interviews about time spent with their father after his release, information that did not come up in their mother's interview or in such detail during the father's interview. They also told us about a time their father was arrested in front of them and how that experience affected them, information not gleaned from the parent interviews. Relatedly, children can provide important information to researchers even if their caregiver is present at – or in the vicinity of – the interview (see [Castro, 2017](#)). For example, 16-year-old Nicole responded openly and thoughtfully to interview questions about her biological father, even though her mom was in the room for part of the interview. Though Nicole's mom sometimes added her own responses before her daughter had a chance to speak, she also provided details that Nicole had forgotten.

Younger children also talk about their time away from caregivers, revealing insights into their interactions with other adults and friends. Nine-year-old Phillip shared that he told one friend about his biological father's incarceration, a friend who disclosed that his own father was in prison, though his mother told us her son is embarrassed by the father's incarceration and does not tell anyone about it. Stacey confirmed her mother's narrative that she talks to her friend whose own father is in prison, and added that talking to her friend makes her feel like she is not alone. Luke's mother told the interviewer that her children were having a difficult time adjusting after moving, but Luke elaborated on this by saying he was being bullied and had no friends. When we talk to children, we gain first-hand information about their lives, adding complexity to our understanding of their experiences surrounding their father's incarceration that caregivers alone cannot provide.

Interviewing children also teaches us about the relationships children have with their parents. For example, Mimi spoke about how hard her single mother worked (she spends a lot of time with friends when her mother is at work) and also knew exactly how much her mother paid in bills and rent. Sixteen-year-old Alejandro and 13-year-old Alejandra told the interviewer they call their social father by his first name and view him more like a friend than a father. These siblings provided an account of their reality that differed in comparison to that provided by their social father.⁹ Although parents and caregivers may know a great deal about their children, when children are given the opportunity to speak for themselves they

often reveal more about their opinions and experiences – which may even be contradictory to caregivers' accounts.

CONCLUSION

The Jail & Family Life Study, a qualitative data collection effort designed to understand the collateral consequences of paternal incarceration for children and families, involves interviewing children (aged 8–17) of incarcerated fathers. Though data collection is still ongoing, it is clear that interviews with children of incarcerated fathers provide valuable information about the consequences of paternal incarceration for these children – and will extend our understanding of the unintended consequences of incarceration. Indeed, though research on the collateral consequences of incarceration has increased rapidly in recent years, the Jail & Family Life Study is one of the first examinations of the effects of paternal incarceration from the perspective of children, despite the fact that scholars suggest that incorporating children into the research process can be quite valuable (Avison, 2010; Eder & Corsaro, 1999; Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2008; Shanahan, 2007).

The interviews with children also contribute to research on the sociology of childhood. This literature suggests that children have the ability to actively and meaningfully participate in research and that researchers should give children the opportunity for this participation (Moore et al., 2008). Indeed, in the Jail & Family Life Study, we capture the diversity of children's experiences by speaking with them directly and learning about their families, peers, and school experiences (James, 2007). We find that taking a child-centered approach and interviewing children directly provides important information with regard to their own experiences. Children provide critical information about their own lives and the lives of their family members and, often, the information provided by children extends the information provided by their parents and/or caregivers. This sometimes occurs because children have different information than their caregivers (in the case of Renee and Alexis described above) or sometimes occurs because children have a different perspective than their caregivers (in the case of Alejandro and Alejandra described above).

Taking this child-centered approach in the Jail & Family Life Study, as highlighted in the sociology of childhood literature, required thoughtful planning and execution. On the planning side, this involved working with the IRB at our institution to secure approval to interview children, working

with developmental psychologists to ensure our interview questions were developmentally appropriate (and designing different interview guides for younger and older children), and consulting with experts on vulnerable populations who provided strategies about developing rapport with children. On the execution side, this involves promoting the child's agency during the interview. First and foremost, we make sure children know they do not have to participate in the interview, even if their caregiver has already consented to the interview (Lansdown, 2005). As described above, we let children know they can skip any questions, we pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that might signal discomfort, and we check in with children throughout the interview to ensure their continued assent. These strategies ensure that children have an opportunity to have their voices heard on their terms.

Importantly, research in the sociology of childhood suggests that children, just like adults, are a diverse population. Though all children share in common the fact that they are navigating the space of childhood (Qvortrup, 2005), children occupy different spaces in the social structure and the perspectives of one child should not be taken as the perspectives of all children (James, 2007). In the Jail & Family Life Study, children experienced a great deal of heterogeneity in their family lives before, during, and after their father's incarceration. For example, some children were living with their fathers prior to his incarceration and other children were not. Some children had fathers who were greatly emotionally and economically involved in their lives, while other children had fathers who were less involved. These differences in family lives, which were explicitly built into the study design, may have implications for how children talk about the experience of having an incarcerated father. Understanding diversity in the consequences of paternal incarceration is one direction we will explore after data collection concludes.

We suggest the strategies undertaken by our research team may be applicable to a number of populations, including children placed in foster care, children in the juvenile justice system, and homeless children. For example, our strategies with regard to developing rapport could be used in research with youth placed in foster care. Children in foster care are vulnerable, like children of incarcerated fathers, and it is important to allow these children to speak openly and freely about their lives (Whiting, 2000; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Indeed, the few researchers that utilize a qualitative interview approach to the struggles faced by children in foster care understand the uniqueness of the trauma in each transition they experience (Whiting & Lee, 2003) and recognize the therapeutic

nature of children telling their story in interviews (Whiting, 2000). Approaching interviews with openness and sensitivity to the individual experiences of youths is imperative to our research as this technique allows interviewers to potentially glean depth into the emotions, challenges, and outcomes for the youth we interview.

Taking a child-centered approach to understanding research questions, though challenging, is valuable across an array of disciplines and populations. Based on our experience conducting qualitative interviews with children whose fathers have experienced incarceration for the Jail & Family Life Study, we share strategies that are applicable to researchers studying children more generally (and not just researchers studying children from more vulnerable populations). For example, we found that gaining access to children, accomplished through their caregivers, was sometimes facilitated by building rapport with caregivers during the caregivers' own interviews. Therefore, researchers wanting to interview children may consider also interviewing parents or caregivers as an avenue to facilitate access to children. Additionally, we found that it was imperative to pay close attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues to develop rapport and navigate any discomfort from our respondents during interviews. We also utilized normalizing statements throughout the interview when discussing sensitive topics and gave sincere praise throughout the interview to aid in continued rapport and to encourage openness from our respondents.

Through the Jail & Family Life Study, we have developed and implemented strategies to enable children to directly share their own experiences with interviewers. Children in our study share valuable information with interviewers about their own heterogeneous experiences, expanding our knowledge from what we would have learned from their caregivers alone, and these strategies are likely useful to researchers interviewing children across various disciplines and levels of population vulnerability.

NOTES

1. Other research uses qualitative data – usually from interview studies – that more generally assesses caregiver well-being (see, e.g., Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman, 2004; Turanovic et al., 2012; for research on maternal incarceration, see Siegel, 2011; for reflections on qualitative research on justice-involved families, see Easterling & Johnson, 2015).

2. Oceanside County is a pseudonym. We also use pseudonyms for all respondents.

3. Children can have either biological or non-biological fathers who are incarcerated. It is possible that family members' willingness to participate depends on the types of charges for which the fathers are in jail or the child's relationship with the father. However, analysis of family member participation is outside the scope of this chapter.

4. We also interview adult children of incarcerated fathers, which we do not discuss in this chapter.

5. Approval by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) is another important part of gaining access. The IRB stressed that if the child did not know about the father's incarceration, the researchers should not disclose this information to the children (and this was part of a broader concern that we did not break confidentiality across respondents). Additionally, given the sensitive nature of the questions and the fact that the questions may elicit emotional reactions, the IRB also requested that the Principal Investigator consult with an expert on interviewing children (a pediatrics faculty member at our institution) prior to beginning data collection. This expert provided guidance on making children comfortable and recognizing when to end an interview.

6. The majority of children's caregivers are their biological mothers. For ease of presentation throughout the rest of the manuscript, we use the more inclusive term "caregiver" when referring to all parental and non-parental caregivers. In examples about specific caregivers, we use "mother" when referring to the child's biological mother and "caregiver" in all other instances.

7. Primary caregivers for the children in this study are nearly always women.

8. Indeed, a key part of the IRB protocol is that we will not break confidentiality between respondents. We chose to interview the few children who did not know about their father's incarceration because these children could still provide us important information about their well-being (and could potentially provide different information than provided by their caregiver). Further, we wanted to include these families in the larger study, as it is useful to know how caregivers and fathers choose to disclose or not disclose information about the incarceration.

9. The children's social father told interviewers that four of his six stepchildren call him "dad" (while his two older stepchildren do not because they are too close in age to him) and talked extensively about his involvement in their schooling. The social father also joked, though, that they probably call him "dad" for their own benefit (suggesting they do so in order to gain his favor or sway his opinion).

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