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Associations Between Individual and Family Level Characteristics and Parenting Practices in Incarcerated African American Fathers

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Abstract

We investigated the reported parenting practices of fifty incarcerated African American fathers. Fathers were interviewed using hypothetical vignettes adapted from the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI) and received scores on two parenting practices: responsive and restrictive. Father's individual level (education and length of time spent incarcerated) and family level (number of relationships that have borne children) characteristics were significantly associated with their parenting practices. Based on canonical correlation analysis, on function one, responsive parenting was positively associated with education level and negatively associated with both cumulative incarceration time and more numerous partner fertility. Restrictive parenting was negatively associated with education level and positively associated with both cumulative incarceration time and more numerous partner fertility. Function 2 capitalized on variance in the restrictive parenting predictor that was not utilized in function 1, and likely captured lack of opportunity to parent. On function 2, restrictive parenting was negatively associated with cumulative time spent incarcerated and more numerous partner fertility. In all, results suggest that prison-based education programs should be part of an overall response to incarcerated fathers. These results add to the growing body of research on incarcerated fathers and fragile families.

Keywords

Incarceration; Fathering; Parenting practices; Education; Fragile families

Introduction

Generations of African American fathers have been rendered absent by incarceration. Today, 12.8% of African American males aged 25–29 are serving time in jail or prison (Harrison and Karberg 2004). Based on current incarceration rates, research suggests that of those African American males born in 2003, one in three will serve time in prison (Bonczar 2003). Yet only recently have studies begun to converge on parental incarceration as a risk factor for, as opposed to a marker of, parental and family problems (e.g. Phillips et al. 2006). At the same time, recent research estimates that in 1999 nearly 1.5 million children in the US had a parent in prison (Mumola 2000). Further, additional children may have had parents who were, but no longer are, incarcerated.

Research on incarcerated parents is highly germane to rehabilitative efforts. Although the extent to which incarcerated fathers actually engage in parenting their children, even prior to recent incarceration, is ambiguous, studies suggest that close association with the family may decrease a father's recidivism (Bahr et al. 2005). Further, studies show that family ties during and after incarceration improves integration into the community (Visser and Travis 2003). Whereas contact with incarcerated fathers is often limited and tends to be conditional upon the father's legal relationship with the mother (Roy and Dyson 2005), reports of contact between incarcerated parents and their children suggest that a sizeable number of families attempt to maintain family ties during imprisonment (Mumola 2000).

Families impacted by incarceration are already high in cumulative risk factors including poverty, family violence and substance abuse (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003). Thus, the act of incarceration itself may render economic strain and instability to an already vulnerable system (Phillips et al. 2006). Although selected parenting programs for prisoners are beginning to focus on aiding the family system that is affected by incarceration (Johnston 2006), it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses presented by this population as they exist pre-intervention. In light of the paucity of research on incarcerated African American fathers as well as tenable rehabilitative interest in fathering (Hairston 1987), the present study focuses on past parenting practices of incarcerated African American fathers; fathers reported on their most recent parenting practices prior to their current incarceration.

With an acknowledgment that numerous factors may influence the parenting practices of incarcerated African American fathers, the present study is an exploratory investigation of several factors posited to affect father's involvement with their children within Parke's (1996) theoretical framework. Parke has proposed a multi-level, multi-factor framework for conceptualizing determinants of father involvement, including individual influences, family (dyadic and triadic) influences, and extra-family influences, consisting of informal and formal supports and cultural effects. The systems model it is a fitting paradigm from which to explore potential correlates of incarcerated father's past (pre-incarceration) parenting practices for several reasons. First, the framework underscores the idea that changes in any level of influence may affect other model processes. Similarly, incarceration is associated with interconnected risks, and it may be that the stasis between risks and resources determines parental behavior (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003). Further, the systems model suggests that paternal involvement is multiply established. Likewise, no single variable accounts for differential outcomes in paternal parenting practices (Wade and Kendler 2001). Thus, the current study focuses on the influences of level education level and time spent incarcerated as the individual-level systems, and the influence of number of relationships that have borne children as family-level systems, in relation to African American fathers' reported responsive and restrictive parenting practices.

African American fatherhood is conceptualized as diverse, culturally based, and non-static (Marsiglio et al. 2000). Research suggests that the African American male is challenged with proving himself as an economical contributor to the family (Jarrett et al. 2002), as African American husband-fathers in lower socioeconomic realms may undergo provider role-strain due to a paucity of employment opportunities (Taylor et al. 1988). The economic instability experienced by many low-income African American fathers contributes to lack of opportunities for marriage and may also result in non-residence with children and their mothers (Jarrett et al. 2002).

Although current paternal research continues to underscore a strength-based approach to African American fathers, a preeminent issue for the African American family is the father's increasing dissociation from the family. For example, in 2004, 50% of African American children were living in mother-lead households, with only 35% of African American children

living in households sustained by two married parents (Child Trends 2006). In particular, high rates of incarceration amongst African American males has rendered a large percentage of African American fathers absent from their families, with 1 in 3 African American men incarcerated at some point in their life (Harrison and Beck 2005).

Incarcerated fathers represent a high-risk population (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003), as incarcerated individuals tend to differ from the general population along several dimensions, including increased history of abuse (Johnson and Waldfogel 2004), violence perpetration (Carlson and McLanahan 2002), and illegal drug use (Arditti et al. 2003) and decreased levels of education, socio-economic status (Johnson and Waldfogel 2004) and relationship skills (Arditti et al. 2005). Thus, this study's focus on a vulnerable population who are in a unique position to receive social services is a value-added contribution of this research (Nurse 2002).

The current study focuses on two types of parenting practices among incarcerated African American fathers: responsive and restrictive. *Responsive practices* represent parental expression of warmth and affection and firm control (Baumrind 1972). Researchers have argued that middle and upper class African American families tend to utilize more authoritative parenting styles (Smetana 2000), characterized by the use of inductive reasoning and responsive behavior management techniques (Dornbusch et al. 1987). Responsive parenting typology has been linked with positive child outcomes, including higher school grades (Dornbusch et al. 1987), fewer behavioral problems (Querido et al. 2002), and increased psychosocial competence (Steinberg and Lamborn 1994) and pro-social behavior (Gunnoe et al. 1999) across diverse ethnicities. Thus, responsive parenting practices, emphasizing behavior management, may be a constructive approach towards child regulation in African American families, as well.

Restrictive practices include those parenting behaviors that involve the parental expression of high demand and control and low warmth and responsiveness (Baumrind 1972). Past research shows that African American families are more likely to endorse authoritarian parenting styles, including the use of restrictive discipline (Deater-Deckard et al. 1996). Authoritarian parenting has been described as high in parental demands and control, yet low in parental receptiveness (Dornbusch et al. 1987) and has been linked with negative outcomes for children including lower cognitive competence (Baumrind 1972), poor self-reliance and self-conception (Steinberg et al. 1992), negative argumentativeness (Bayer and Cegala 1992), and co-dependency (Fisher and Crawford 1992). However, studies suggest that associations between ethnicity and authoritarian parenting may be confounded with socioeconomic status (Hill and Bush 2001). Indeed, over 33 percent of African American children are currently living below poverty level (Fass and Cauthen 2005). Thus numerous African American care-givers experience the negative consequences of low socioeconomic status (Harrison et al. 1990).

In addition, researchers have argued that authoritarian parenting is adaptive for low-income African Americans (e.g. Harrison et al. 1990). For instance, authoritarian parenting may prepare children for the racist environments that they will be required to negotiate in the future (Deater-Deckard and Dodge 1997). Moreover, studies show that the relation between authoritarian discipline and negative child outcomes is moderated by the normativeness of such discipline techniques (Deater-Deckard and Dodge 1997; Lansford et al. 2005). Similarly, research suggests that authoritarian parenting differs in Black and White families, with restrictive techniques in Black families being characterized as less harsh, being associated with greater warmth, and leading to more positive outcomes for children (Deater-Deckard and Dodge 1997). Indeed, Brody and his colleagues (Brody and Flor 1998) have argued that African American parents often couple restrictive practices with warmth suggesting that such a combination reflects a no-nonsense parenting strategy. These findings show the potentially adaptive nature of restrictive parenting practices within the African American community.

Based on Parke's (1996) theoretical framework, the current study posits that several individual and family level characteristics are related to African American fathers' reported parenting responsive and restrictive practices, including education level (individual influence), length of time spent incarcerated (individual influence), and number of relationships that have borne children (family influence). *Education* is an important demographic factor that may predict the parenting practices of incarcerated fathers. Caregivers who have less schooling tend to be more authoritarian (Scott-Little and Holloway 1994), and children who are raised by authoritarian parents show poorer school outcomes (Taylor et al. 1995). For example, low-income African American mothers with less education display increased levels of anxiety (Thompson and Ensminger 1989); whereas more educated African American teenage mothers exhibit greater rates of professional help-seeking in relation to child-rearing (Stevens 1988). In addition, single African American low-income mothers with lower levels of education have been found to place a greater emphasis on obedience and to use disciplinary approaches that are parent-oriented, as opposed to child-oriented (Kelley et al. 1992). Thus, higher education levels should be associated with the increased endorsement of responsive and decreased endorsement of restrictive parenting practices. However, such findings would be of particular importance to incarcerated fathers, as they are in a strong position to receive educational services within the correctional system.

Scant research exists, to our knowledge, on parenting practices that are associated with *length of time spent incarcerated*. Instead, past work on the effects of incarceration on the family system have mainly focused on children's reactions to parental incarceration, and have found that children with incarcerated parents show increased levels of depression, emotional withdrawal, and disruptive behavior (Gabel and Johnston 1997). In addition, research suggests that the effects of parental incarceration on children are mediated by parental discipline style (Larzelere and Patterson 1990).

However, researchers have not yet investigated the effects of length of incarceration on parenting. One study of African American parent-absent families that did include incarcerated fathers found that none of the fathers reported using restrictive techniques on their children (Savage et al. 1978). The finding of Savage and his colleagues is of particular interest, as more recent work shows that incarcerated individuals report relatively high rates of having experienced authoritarian parenting, themselves (Chipman et al. 2000). The current study explores the hypothesis that increased periods of incarceration may be associated with *both* decreased responsive and restrictive parenting, based on diminished opportunity to fulfill the paternal role.

Finally, the current study focused on *number of relationships bearing children* as an important indicator within fragile families. Fathering children in multiple relationships is fairly common amongst incarcerated fathers, with one study of fragile families suggesting that over 60% of their sample who reported multiple-partner fertility had served time in jail (Logan et al. 2006). Research suggests that nonresident fathers who form new families tend to extricate themselves by having less contact with their children from earlier relationships (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Manning and Smock 1999). Further, both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that from a mother's perspective, a father's responsibility to children from other households undercuts his paternal investment to children from both current and past relationships (Carlson and Furstenburg 2006, 2007; Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Multi-partner fertility has important consequences for children, affecting family associations and the kinship system (Carlson and Furstenburg 2006, 2007). Researchers have only recently begun to investigate parenting in fathers with children from multiple relationships (Carlson and Furstenburg 2006). Nevertheless, a recent study shows that mothers perceive fathers as less supportive, less effective co-parents, and as taking less responsibility for the child when

they have fathered children in other relationships (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007). Clearly further research is required to understand how multi-partner fertility may impact paternal parenting practices. At the same time, based on past work citing less effective discipline in these fathers, it is hypothesized that higher numbers of relationships that have borne children will be associated with increased use of restrictive and decreased use of responsive parenting practices.

Our questions are focused on two constructs that we refer to as responsive and restrictive parenting practices. Arguably, responsive and restrictive parenting practices are likely associated with authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, respectively. However, the current data was not designed to measure the broader authoritative and authoritarian parenting categories. Thus the variables examined in the current study are education level, time spent incarcerated, number of relationships that have borne children, as associated with reports of expected responsive and restrictive parenting practices in response to hypothetical scenarios. This study utilizes canonical correlation to investigate the overall correlation between the two variable sets: individual and family level characteristics and parenting practices, to determine the amount of variance in one set of variables that is accounted for by the other set. The canonical correlation technique was chosen for the present study as it is a descriptive, exploratory technique rather than a hypothesis-testing procedure (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007).

Method

Participants

Fifty incarcerated African American fathers were interviewed for the present study. Thirty-nine men were in the custody in Central Virginia and eleven men were in the custody in Northern Virginia.

Recruitment procedures differed for each location. The Central Virginia facility utilized case manager referrals to identify inmates with children. A second wave of recruitment was employed by distributing fliers with study information to all jail residents. At the Northern Virginia facility, the sole means of recruitment was through flier advertisements.

Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 49 years, with ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.96$, $SD = 7.40$) years. As seen in Table 1, 20% of the sample had graduated from high school or obtained an equivalency degree. Fathers had an average of 2.7 children, and had been incarcerated an average of 4.13 times. A majority of men in the sample (87.3%) had been found guilty for their offenses, while 10.6% were awaiting trial and 2.1% had missing data. While both jails include juveniles in their populations, males under the age of 18 were excluded from the present study. Recruitment efforts were aimed towards African American males who were fathers. However, one male who identified himself post-entry as half Hispanic, half African American was also included in the study.

Variables

The study utilized a canonical correlation design to test the model based on Parke's (1996) theoretical framework, investigating education level, time spent incarcerated, and number of relationships that have borne children in relation to two parenting practices: responsive and restrictive.

Education—The education variable was created in response to the question: “What level of education have you completed?” Responses are listed in Table 1.

Time Spent Incarcerated—The cumulative time spent incarcerated in jail or prison including the current jail stay was tabulated to create a continuous variable of time spent incarcerated. The average time participants had spent incarcerated was 1,188 days.

Arguably, portions of participant's time spent in jail or prison may have been prior to the birth of children or after participant's utilization of reported parenting. However, we opted to include the variable for several reasons. First, because the samples were obtained from jail populations, it is likely that participants' current incarceration had lasted for a short period of time. Second, time spent in jail could be considered not only a measure of one's previous experience but also of one's general antisocial behavior. Third, as the main focus of the study was incarcerated fathers, the time spent in jail or prison was an important characteristic of the population.

Number of Relationships Bearing Children—Participants listed their different relationships which had borne children, and responses were tabulated to create a continuous variable. Descriptive groupings are listed in Table 1.

Parenting Practices—Parenting was derived from the discipline-focused section of the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI) (Creighton 1996). The PDI was developed by Slater and Power (1987) to measure and quantify perceived parenting styles. The measure is patterned on available parenting assessment devices, which have been found reliable. Further, past research has utilized the PDI to measure parenting in low income (Kelley et al. 1992) and working-to middle-income African American mothers (Kelley et al. 1993).

Participants in this study responded to vignettes adapted from the final section of the PDI, which measures reported behaviors with regard to childrearing. The complete vignette section of the PDI, composed of six hypothetical parenting situations, was planned for the study. However, institutionally enforced time constraints precluded completion of the full battery. Thus, the present study utilized four vignettes. Participants were told to envision their youngest child that they had had the opportunity to parent prior to their current incarceration, in order to rule out infants and to incorporate a target child with whom the father likely had most recent contact. The same procedure was repeated for the four situations.

The vignettes section of the PDI is comprised of parenting scenarios, such as “After arguing over toys, your child strikes a playmate,” and asks participants to estimate on a 1–5 “Likert” type scale (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*) the likelihood that they would parent with 8 different practices. Other vignettes included in the study were “Your child has gone outside without picking up his or her toys as you requested,” “Your child becomes sassy while you discipline him or her,” and “You see your child playing at a busy street which you have forbidden him or her to go near for safety reasons.” The two omitted vignettes were excluded based on participant feedback that they were less likely to experience the scenarios: “You receive a note from your child's teacher that your child has been disruptive at school,” and “You catch your child lying about something he or she has done that you would not approve of.”

The parenting practices were grouped into two categories. The responsive ($\alpha = .85$, $M_{\text{responsive}} = 3.42$, $SD = .86$, Range = 1–5, with a high score indicating highly responsive parenting) category was comprised of items consistent with responsive parenting (Bates et al. 1998): “Take away a privilege,” “Take away something material,” “Ground the child,” “Assign an additional chore,” “Send to room,” and “Reason with child.” The restrictive ($\alpha = .73$, $M_{\text{restrictive}} = 2.25$, $SD = .88$, Range = 1–4.25, with a high score indicating highly restrictive behavior) category was similarly comprised of items consistent with restrictive parenting (Robinson et al. 1995) “Yell at child” and “Physical punishment (e.g., hit or spank).” Mean scores were calculated for each category across the four situations. Apriori, a third parenting

variable was considered, that of an ignore strategy. However, due to the fathers' relatively infrequent endorsement of ignore, such that over 60% of fathers stated that they were unlikely to ever utilize the ignore strategy, the variable was dropped from analyses. This result is consistent with previous findings that African American fathers are reluctant to utilize "ignore" parenting practices (McAdoo 1988).

Procedure

The interview session consisted of questions from the demographic questionnaire and the amended version of the PDI. The interviewer read the questions aloud to the participants and participants responded verbally. The interviewer was a senior honors student trained in several upper level courses focusing on African American family systems. The interviewer was a Caucasian female, potentially creating a social desirability bias in participants; however, participants were found to be forthcoming with information through out the interviews. Participants were allowed to ask questions and were permitted to explain their answers. The interview session lasted from 45–60 min.

Preliminary procedures included inmate confirmation of their paternal status. Participants read and signed an informed consent agreement, which was also read aloud and confidentiality and anonymity were assured. All participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the interview. University IRB approval was secured prior to the start of the study.

Results

We conducted a canonical correlation analysis (Sherry and Henson 2005) to test the model based on Parke's (1996) theoretical framework. The model included three variables as predictors of the two parenting variables to evaluate the multivariate shared relation between the two sets of variables (i.e.; individual and family characteristics and parenting strategy); this is in-line with Tabachnick and Fidell's (2007) recommendation of utilizing 10 cases per independent variable. Canonical correlation yields the relation between two sets of variables as well as multivariate regression and residuals, and even small sample sizes will detect relatively strong canonical correlations. Thus, the procedure addresses the extent to which direct sets of variables are related to each other, as well as the extent to which each variable contributes to the other variables within the tested model.

Collectively, the full model across all functions was statistically significant ($F(6, 86) = 2.40$, Wilk's $\lambda = .73$, $p < .05$). Because Wilk's λ represents the variance unexplained by the model, $1 - \lambda$ yields the full model effect size in r^2 ; thus the r^2 type effect was .27, indicating the full model explained approximately 27% of the variance between the two variable sets.

The dimension reduction analysis allows for the hierarchical arrangement of functions to be tested for statistical significance. The full model (Functions 1–2) was the only statistically significant model.

Table 2 presents the standardized canonical function coefficients (analogous to the beta values in regression) and structure coefficients for Functions 1 and 2. The squared structure coefficients are also included. Total percent of variance and total redundancy indicate that the first and second pair of canonical variates were moderately related.

In terms of Function 1 coefficients, the relevant dependent variables was responsive ($r_s = .96$) with restrictive ($r_s = -.50$) making a secondary contribution to the synthetic criterion variable. This conclusion was supported by the squared structure coefficients. In addition, the structure coefficients of responsive and restrictive had opposite signs, indicating that they inversely related.

In terms of the predictor variables for Function 1, education level ($r_s = 1.0$), was the primary contributor to the predictor synthetic variable, with time spent incarcerated ($r_s = -.33$) and number of relationships ($r_s = -.44$) making secondary contributions. Whereas neither time spent incarcerated nor number of relationships had a large canonical function coefficient, this was due to their multi-collinearity with other criterion variables. Because the structure coefficient for education level was positive, it was positively related to responsive and negatively related to restrictive parenting practices. Further, the structure coefficients for amount of time spent incarcerated and number of relationships were negative, indicating a negative association with responsive and a positive association with restrictive parenting practices. These results were partially supportive of the theoretically expected relations between education level, time spent incarcerated, number of relationships, and responsive and restrictive parenting practices.

In terms of Function 2 coefficients, the relevant dependent variable was restrictive parenting practice. In terms of the predictor variables for Function 2, amount of time spent incarcerated ($r_s = -.94$) was the primary contributor to the predictor synthetic variable, with number of relationships bearing children ($r_s = -.34$) making a secondary contribution. Because the structure coefficients for amount of time spent incarcerated and number of relationships were negative, the variables were negatively related to restrictive parenting. These results were partially in-line with the theoretically expected relations between time spent incarcerated, number of relationships, and restrictive parenting practice.

Canonical correlation analysis revealed several significant findings. On the first function, responsive parenting was a positive indicator for incarcerated fathers, such that responsive parenting was positively associated with education level and negatively associated with time spent incarcerated and number of relationships bearing children. Whereas restrictive parenting was a negative indicator, and was negatively associated with education level and positively associated with both amount of time spent incarcerated and number of relationships bearing children. Conversely, on the second function, restrictive parenting may have quantified incarcerated fathers' often diminished prospects for parenting their children, and was negatively associated with time spent incarcerated and number of relationships bearing children.

Discussion

The present study is a preliminary investigation of the past (pre-incarceration) parenting techniques reported by incarcerated African American fathers. Based on Parke's (1996) theoretical framework, education level, length of time spent incarcerated, and number of relationships that have borne children were investigated in relation to parenting practices. The results of this study are consistent with previous research that suggests a negative association between education level and restrictive parenting practices (Scott-Little and Holloway 1994). In particular, higher levels of education were associated with higher responsive and lower restrictive parenting scores. However, the current study's results offer additional insight into the education level—parenting practice association, as this is the first study to document such a relation in an incarcerated sample, to our knowledge.

There are several plausible explanations for the strong association between education level and parenting practices found in the current sample. First, individuals with education beyond high school may have been exposed to responsive parenting practices over the course of their education. Second, similar to Taylor and his colleagues (1995), education level was revealed to be negatively related to restrictive parenting. The negative association of education and restrictive parenting may reflect the experiences of the fathers' upbringing in a home with higher levels of restrictive practices and lower levels of educational attainment. In all, results

suggest that increased education may serve a beneficial function for fathers beyond increased employment prospects (Hairston 1987). These findings suggest that above and beyond parenting groups, prison-based education programs should be part of an overall response to inmate fathers.

In addition, the finding that length of time spent incarcerated and number of relationships bearing children were negatively associated with responsive parenting and positively associated with restrictive parenting is somewhat related to previous literature (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Logan et al. 2006; Manning and Smock 1999). This finding was only partially in-line with our hypothesis that increased periods of incarceration would be associated with *both* decreased responsive and restrictive parenting, based on decreased opportunity to parent. However, the finding that time spent incarcerated was negatively related to responsive and positively related to restrictive parenting underscores the notion that that cumulatively lengthier incarceration may correspond with higher risk for negative outcomes, including use of restrictive parenting (Chipman et al. 2000; Logan et al. 2006).

Further, similar to Carlson and Furstenberg (2006, 2007)'s outcome, we find that having children from multiple mothers is correlated with decreased responsive and increased restrictive parenting practices. This result suggests that having children within fewer relationships represent a positive tie to family that is also indicated by increased use of responsive parenting. In all, these relations suggest that three risk indicators that span both individual and family levels of influence may “travel together”: lengthier cumulative incarceration time, more numerous partner fertility, and restrictive parenting. Based on these results, traditional prison parenting programs that focus on alternatives to corporal punishment may find that men who have been incarcerated for longer periods of time and are multi-partner fathers may benefit most from parent training.

Results also showed a strong negative association between restrictive parenting and both time spent incarcerated and number of relationships bearing children. As past research has noted, variables that measure parenting practices coincide with actual occasions for parenting, including monitoring and supervision (e.g. Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber 1984). Thus, this finding likely captured opportunity to parent children vis a vis the restrictive parenting variable, as increased restrictive parenting was associated with fewer relationships bearing children and less time spent incarcerated. Moreover, in-line with the findings of Carlson and Furstenberg (2007) there was a trend towards a negative association between responsive parenting and number of relationship bearing children, as well as time spent incarcerated. These results highlight a root issue with incarcerated fathers, in that they may have little opportunity to actually parent (Hairston 1998). Thus, in addition to above findings that underscore lengthier cumulative incarceration and multi-partner fertility as risk factors for restrictive parenting, these background characteristics are likely risk factors for lack of engagement in parenting. However, the overall study results suggest that educating incarcerated fathers may prove most worthwhile in terms of creating protective factors for these men, and that increased education may be associated with improved quality of parenting that incarcerated fathers administer, regardless of its quantity.

The findings of the current study must be viewed in light of a number of methodological issues. First, although the present study is comprised of “hard won data” from incarcerated African American fathers, the small sample size is relatively small. Second, a major drawback of this study is its lack of data regarding age ranges of children and length of time as custodial parent. Individuals will likely parent differently based on both variables, and future research would benefit from such knowledge. In addition, the present study suggests that incarcerated fathers often belong to multiple, complex family systems; continued exploration of the paternal role in relation to such information would be useful for research. Further, data from the current

study was collected in a jail, as opposed to a prison setting. The choice to sample from a jail was made in order to maximize the chance that fathers had been afforded a recent opportunity to parent. Moreover, the majority of participants were either awaiting transfer (51.1%) or sentencing (36.2%), and of those that were sentenced, more than half were expecting to serve a year or more (58.8%). Thus, many of the study participants were likely to serve their sentences in prison. Nonetheless, participants may differ from fathers in prison in terms of legal history and length of separation from children. Because jails, as opposed to prisons, are unlikely to offer rehabilitative programs, future research should attempt to include data from incarcerated fathers within prisons. Finally, it is important to understand whether the child rearing inventory utilized in this study was an appropriate measure. While the PDI has been found to be an effective measure of parenting style for African American mothers and children (Creighton 1996), no research exists to validate the use of this measure on the present population of incarcerated fathers.

This study suggests several arenas for future research within Parke's theoretical framework. For instance, existent education programs within incarcerated settings should consider including parenting measures in evaluation of program effects. Further, future research should attempt to investigate the role of length of incarceration on African American family processes, including parenting practices. In particular, is there a "tipping point," wherein a cumulative amount of incarceration deters further family involvement (Swisher and Waller 2008)? In addition, this study focused on a single family-level variable (number of relationships bearing children) in relation to parenting practices in incarcerated fathers. Future research should attempt to measure important family-level factors including: relationship with child's mother and amount of contact with child; and extra-familial factors, such as neighborhood context, in order to better understand the varying import of ecological variables on paternal parenting practices.

At the same time, the current study extends past findings on paternal parenting practices. In all, results suggest that increased education may provide the strongest benefits to incarcerated fathers and that prison programs teaching alternatives to corporal punishment may most benefit those men who have been incarcerated for longer periods of time and are multi-partner fathers. Finally, findings underscore lengthier cumulative incarceration and multi-partner fertility as risk factors for lack of engagement in parenting. These results provide unique information about fathers in the penal system and add to a growing body of research on fragile families.

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Table 1
Respondent demographic characteristics and legal histories

Variable	%
Below age 30	64
Education level	
Grade school (grades 1–6)	2
Junior high (grades 7–8)	10
Some high school (grades 9–12)	68
High school graduation or GED	20
# Siblings, ≥ 4	48
Composition of home in which reared	
Dual-parent	50
Mother-only	34
Other	16
Birth order	
Oldest	20
Youngest	12
Middle	64
Only child	4
Ever married	38
Age 1st married	
Age 19	10.5
Ages 20–25	36.9
Ages 26–28	21.1
Ages 29–39	31.5
Total number of children	
1	26
2	24
3	36
≥ 4	14
Total number of relationships that have born children	
1	44
2	36
3	8
≥ 4	12
Prior to current incarceration, living with any biological children	50
Prior to current incarceration, living with all biological children	24
Prior to current incarceration, living with a biological mother of your child	44.9
With whom are your children currently living? (not mutually exclusive)	
Their biological mother	92
Other relatives	22
Foster parents	2
Current jail status	
Awaiting trial	10.6

Variable	%
Convicted, awaiting sentencing	36.2
Sentenced, awaiting transfer	51.1
Other	2.1
Length of current sentence	
Not yet sentenced	66
<6 months	6
6 months-1 year	8
1-3 years	10
3-5 years	4
>5 years	6
# of times previously incarcerated	
0	4.2
1	12.5
2	37.5
3	16.7
≥4	29.2
Current charge	
Probation violation	12
Failure to pay child support	4
Possession or distribution of an illegal substance	36
Breaking and entering	8
Violent crime (e.g. possession of a weapon, robbery, malicious wounding)	16
Other	24

Table 2
Canonical solution for demographic variables predicting parenting practices for functions 1 and 2

Variable	Function 1				Function 2			
	Coef ^a	<i>r_s</i> ^{b,c}	<i>r_s</i> ² (%) ^d		Coef ^a	<i>r_s</i> ^{b,c}	<i>r_s</i> ² (%) ^d	<i>h_s</i> ² (%)
Responsive	.89	<u>.96</u>	92.16		.51	.29	8.41	100.57
Restrictive	-.29	<u>-.50</u>	25.00		.99	<u>.87</u>	75.69	100.69
Percent of variance	58.35				41.65			
Redundancy	13.73				1.68			
<i>R_s</i> ²								
Education level	1.01	<u>1.0</u>			-.30	.01		
Time spent incarcerated	.00	<u>-.33</u>			-1.13	<u>-.94</u>		
Number of relationships	.02	<u>-.44</u>			.16	<u>-.34</u>		
Percent of variance	10.12				1.34			
Redundancy	43.02				33.21			
Canonical correlation	.60							

^aCoef = standardized canonical function coefficient
^bStructure coefficients (*r_s*) greater than or equal to [.30] are underlined
^c*r_s* = structure coefficient
^d*r_s*² = squared structure coefficient