Interpersonal Partner Relationships, Bonds to Children, and Informal Social Control among Persistent Male Offenders

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study applied a life course framework to characterize the nature of interpersonal partner relationships of Mexican American young adult men affiliated with street gangs during their adolescence. Data come from a 15-year longitudinal mixed-method cohort study conducted in San Antonio, Texas. We analyzed semi-structured interviews conducted with a subsample ($n = 40$) during the course of three face-to-face sessions to explore the men's motivations, aspirations, and goals to lead conventional lives, despite their criminal justice involvement. Specifically, we focus on the complex nature of maintaining ties to children, the navigation of complicated family structures, the processes of seeking partners with economic resources, and on partnerships with criminal and delinquent partners. We document the complex interpersonal nature of these relationships as men contend with serial incarceration and their desires and motivations to desist from criminal behavior.

KEYWORDS: crime, partners, informal social control, Mexican Americans, offenders.

The experiences of female partner relationships among young adult men with histories of criminal behavior is not fully understood. Earlier studies have established that stable prosocial marital partners contribute to the desistance of crime among male offenders (Craig and Foster 2013; McCarthy and Casey 2008; Simons and Barr 2014; Van Schellen, Apel, and Nieuwebeerta 2012; Wyse, Harding, and Morenoff 2014). These studies used a life course approach to frame how interpersonal relationships with female partners contributes to the desistance of crime among delinquent and young adult men (Sampson and Laub 2009). More recently, studies have focused on how non-marital relationships among men with histories of persistent criminal involvement influence their criminal behavior (Leverentz 2006; Wyse, Harding, and Morenoff 2014). More recent desistance research considers the significance of more fleeting and fluid non-marital relationships, and the diverse processes through which romantic relationships of all sorts are linked with criminal behaviors among highly disenfranchised minority and other marginalized urban men (Wyse, Harding, and Morenoff 2014).

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Involvement in street gangs by disadvantaged youth place them at high risk for early behavioral problems and delinquency, including street crimes and other offenses that extend into early adulthood (Brotherton and Barrios 2011; Moore 1978; Rios 2011; Thornberry et al. 2003; Vigil 1988). This study will provide further insights on the complexity of partner relationships among young men with backgrounds of early gang involvement, hypermasculinity, serial incarceration, and interpersonal violence and aggression. In addition, this study provides new knowledge on how the female partners of men with these street-oriented characteristics and gang histories influence their criminal behaviors. A qualitative examination of these partnerships provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex social nature of partner relationships for disadvantaged minority men contending with extensive criminal trajectories.

AGE-GRADED THEORY OF INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

The age-graded theory of informal social control (Sampson and Laub 1990) has long suggested that positive social relationships are necessary throughout the lifespan to prevent engagement in maladaptive behavior. Specifically, this theory posits that for criminally disposed men, marriage will change routine activities and reduce time spent with negative social peers (Sampson and Laub 1990). More importantly, its proponents argue that the added structure of marriage promotes prosocial behavior through informal social control mechanisms (Laub and Sampson 2003; Simons et al. 2002; Warr 1998). According to Laub and Sampson, social ties in marriage are important because they create “interdependent systems of obligation and restraint that impose significant costs for translating criminal propensities into action” (2003:42), including dissolution of the marriage. Sampson, Laub, and Wimer (2006) found in their longitudinal study that being married is associated with a 35 percent average reduction of engagement in crime compared to equivalent non-married participants.

A large body of literature driven by this framework has found that positive marital bonds characterized by high levels of attachment are likely to contribute to a reduction or desistance of criminal activity (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006; Warr 1998). Similar protective effects of marriage have been demonstrated to reduce alcohol abuse (Duncan, Wilkerson, and England 2006) and improve recidivism rates (Bales and Mears 2008; Blokland and Nieuwebeerta 2005; King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007; Savolainen 2009). Other research has documented genetic influences in criminal desistance (Barnes and Beaver 2012). Overall, although multiple forms of relationships exist, much of this early research focused primarily on marital bonds, suggesting that individuals cease to offend at about the same time they start to form significant life partnerships (Farrall and Bowling 1999; Hughes 1998; King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007).

PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

In line with the continued interest in the marriage as a crime-suppressing relationship, a growing body of research has begun to document the importance of variations of non-marital partner relationships (Edin and Nelson 2013). This is particularly important given that marital relationships are not common among individuals with criminal and disadvantaged backgrounds (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Western 2007). Research has documented the increase in non-marital relationships among the urban poor in part because criminal offending negatively influences the marriageability of adult offenders (King and South 2011). Others have documented the low rates of marriage among urban poor African-American women as being associated with the lack of availability and desirability of potential partners in minority disadvantaged communities (Chambers and Kravitz 2011; Lichter, Sassler, and Turner 2014; Wilson 2012).

As a result, what has emerged is a focus on cohabitation rather than on the traditional marital bond, especially among adult minority men with low levels of educational attainment (Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston 2011). On one end, this body of research finds that a quality relationship may contribute to a positive influence in subsequent offending. For instance, in a longitudinal study of

criminally involved young adult men, findings indicate that as romantic non-marital relationship quality increased, self-reported offending decreased (Zedaker and Bouffard 2017). At the other extreme, scientists have suggested that cohabitation, in comparison to marriage, evokes less positive results regarding maladaptive behavior (Duncan, Wilkerson, and England 2006), and, to an extent, promotes criminal activity among those with criminal backgrounds (Haynie et al. 2005; Horney et al. 1995). Among a sample of criminally involved men, investigators found that their female partners' antisocial behavior predicted both onset and persistence of the men's arrest records (Capaldi, Kim, and Owen 2008).

More recently, attempts to disentangle the effects of marriage and cohabitation revealed that cohabitation was associated with a reduction in certain types of crime, but not the termination or abandonment of these behaviors as did marriage (Forrest 2014). These prior studies have recognized the importance of non-marital relationships and a more expanded modification of the age-grade theory of informal social control that has important implications for a more current-day understanding of desistance in an age of mass incarceration. However, contrasting findings and methodological limitations (quantitative large national data) have precluded the close examination of the nature of these non-marital relationships among serious and persistent offenders.

Few studies have gone beyond these limitations by providing in-depth first-hand accounts of the mechanisms by which relationships have an effect on male criminal trajectories (Edin and Nelson 2013; Wyse et al. 2014). Based on interviews with black and white fathers in the Camden/Philadelphia area, Edin and Nelson (2013) find that fatherhood for these men is characterized by the emotional rather than economic support. They further document the father's tie to the mother as a supplement to the bond with the child. Despite the men's daily struggles with poverty, relationships with non-marital partners, and drug and criminal involvement, Edin and Nelson document how these men do not reflect the stereotypical absent father portrayed by society. Contributing to this line of research, Wyse and colleagues (2014) document the social processes and pathways at the interactional level (needs, identities, and relationship roles), by which romantic relationships either facilitate or impede men's desistance from crime. Their research finds evidence for some of the processes for social control, but it also reveals the promotion of criminal offending through material circumstances, social bonds, and patterns of interaction and emotional supports and stressors.

The present study on the long-term consequences of gang membership provides a unique opportunity to add to the small but growing body of literature exploring and characterizing the nature of interpersonal partner relationships among Mexican American, young adult, persistent male offenders with histories of adolescent gang involvement. Specifically, we focus on the complex nature of maintaining ties to children, navigating complicated family structures, the processes of seeking partners with material resources, and partnering with criminal and delinquent partners. We explore a qualitative examination of the men's motivations, aspirations, and goals to lead conventional lives and desist from criminal behaviors. This analysis provides insight into the challenges and barriers disadvantaged minority men and their respective partners face that contribute to shaping criminal trajectories across the life course. We build upon the theory of informal social control and previous work (Edin and Nelson 2013; Leverentz 2006; Turney 2015; Wyse et al. 2014) to further understand the role and impact that persistent crime and serial incarceration have on relationships.

METHODS

Community Context

The present analysis used data from a longitudinal study of a cohort of Mexican American young men who were gang affiliated as adolescents in the West Side area of San Antonio, Texas (United States). The San Antonio population in 2010 was estimated at 1.3 million, with more than 50 percent of Mexican descent (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2010), primarily comprised of second- and third-generation Mexican Americans. This metropolitan San Antonio area ranks the highest in

residential income segregation among the 30 largest metropolitan areas (Fry and Taylor 2012). The sample for this study was recruited from neighborhoods in San Antonio characterized by a high concentration of poverty, adult criminality, drug trafficking, delinquent behavior, and Mexican American street gangs. For example, the [Economic Innovation Group \(2016\)](#) developed the distressed communities index, an inequality indicator at the level of zip code. Not only does San Antonio rank in the top 10 cities with the largest number of people living in distressed zip codes (percentage of vacant housing, adults not working, poverty, adults without high school degrees, and median income ratio), but the city also has the highest level of spatial inequality between zip codes. For example, the least distressed zip codes in San Antonio have a distress score of 0.5, contrasted with a score of 97.8 for the most distressed zip codes. The latter zip codes encompass the setting for the present study.

Study Design and Sampling

The data were collected in two waves and designed to cover three time periods of the life course. First, the original study, conducted from 1996 to 1998, involved recruiting and interviewing 160 adolescents from a sampling frame of 415 members associated with 26 street gangs in the aforementioned *barrios* (neighborhoods). During 1996, extensive ethnographic fieldwork was carried out to develop rosters of all 26 adolescent street gangs in the West Side. These rosters were used to employ a stratified random sampling approach. Individuals not sampled for inclusion were still tapped by field workers to help recruit eligible participants. A detailed description of the sampling design has been presented in earlier articles ([Petersen and Valdez 2005](#); [Yin et al. 2000](#)). The original study focused primarily on how peer, school, and family attachment influence violence, drug use, and criminal behavior among these youth through the administration of in-depth qualitative interviews and structured survey questionnaires.

The follow-up study, conducted from 2009–2012, located 95 percent of men from the original sample of 160. Of those located, 83 percent were successfully enrolled, for a final follow-up rate of 79 percent ($n = 119$). Sixteen men declined to participate in the follow-up study, six men were deceased, and two men were in federal prison. Subjects in Bexar County Jail or the Texas Department of Criminal Justice were successfully enrolled in the study. An additional 156 men were recruited from the original sampling frame for a final sample size of 275. The follow-up interview consisted of the administration of a standardized cross-sectional questionnaire and a retrospective Natural History Interview (NHI) to gather detailed histories of romantic relationships, incarceration, drug use, and employment over the period between the time of the original interview (1996–1998) and the present interview (2009–2012). The follow-up study also contained a nested qualitative component with a subset of the study sample.

The present analysis uses the nested qualitative data consisting of in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews that were conducted with a subsample of 40 participants selected from the follow-up sample ($n=275$). Participants were selected for recruitment for the qualitative interviews based on preliminary analysis of the quantitative data in order to ensure variability across risk factors and risk outcomes. Typically, these interviews were conducted over a one-month period for each participant and were 1 to 1.5 hours in length for a total of 3 to 4.5 hours per participant. All qualitative interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Detailed field observation notes collected during the ethnographic process of locating participants provide supplemental qualitative data. Written informed consent was obtained, and participants received compensation for their time. The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Southern California and the Executive Services at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice approved the study protocols.

The semi-structured qualitative life history interviews were conducted using an interview guide that focused on the life course trajectories of these men by exploring cultural (e.g., familism, gender roles) and contextual (e.g., drug markets, criminal networks, law enforcement practices) factors. Specifically, the interview guide asked about: 1) family social processes such as quality of relationship

with parents, communication, and conflict resolution; 2) changes or stability of patterns of peer networks and characteristics (conventional vs. non-conventional); 3) incarceration experiences including family support, re-entry social services, barriers to employment and prison gang associations; 4) significant partner relationships; 5) variations in drug use patterns, consequences, and treatment experiences; 6) participation in risk networks and mixing patterns; 7) high-risk sexual behaviors; 8) labor force experiences; 9) influence of gangs on antisocial behavior; and 10) how culture, ethnicity, and social inequality intersect to affect these processes. The qualitative interviews also served as an opportunity to ask participants about their experiences during the NHI, including how they explain their present circumstances and how they link these explanations to change processes and behavioral intentions.

Analysis

The transcripts were input into NVivo software for coding of emergent themes using the comparative method approach (Ragin 1987). The ethnographic data analysis involved four inductive strategies that proceeded sequentially (LeCompte and Schensul 1999; Ragin 1999; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The first strategy, item-level analysis, implemented a form of unrestricted initial coding consisting of line-by-line reading to identify item codes. A constant-comparison analytic process was conducted whereby codes were compared within and across interviews. Next, a pattern-level analysis was conducted to establish linkages among the item codes and develop potential categories. Third, a structural-level analysis involved organizing relationships among patterns of the data into themes associated with types of partner relationships. Lastly, interpretation consisted of defining the types and specific variations that distinguished the relationship processes that shaped patterns of relationships during the life course of the male participants. Analyses of the observational data consisted of a line-by-line reading of field notes during the course of the study, enhancing interpretability and contextualization of the study setting.

FINDINGS

Maintaining Ties to Children

A recurrent issue for men was maintaining relationships with their children. The majority of these men had fathered at least one child, the first often as teenagers. With some exceptions, it was common that these children were raised and living in a single-parent household with their biological mothers. In some cases, the couple had agreed to maintain an amicable relationship in the interest of the child or children. For example, 37-year-old Juan, while not living with his former partner, financially supported their two children. Reflective of most men in the study, Juan dressed in a white T-shirt, baggy blue jean pants, and sported a shaved head with numerous tattoos over most of his body. At the time of the interview, he was living with his present girlfriend in her apartment and working part-time as a laborer. He discussed the nature of maintaining a relationship with his children and their mother despite long periods of separation as a result of his serial incarceration history:

There's not a day that goes by that I don't call them. When I was in prison, I had a phone and I would call them every day. That first week I got out I saw my son and my daughter. I see them practically every weekend. Their mother and I have no bitterness between us, there never has been. When we separated we sat down and had a talk. No matter what our problem is, we gotta be there for our kids regardless.

Juan expressed his goal to find steady employment and steer away from his former friends, many of whom are still involved in crimes and heavy drug use, in order to have a better relationship with his children. Similarly, Sammy was a chronic heroin user until his wife, with whom he lived along

with their four children, demanded that he stop. She was the primary wage earner, whereas Sammy had only intermittent employment as a day laborer. He explained:

My wife she's not into none of that [heroin]. I had to hide everything from her. But she always found out. And when she got sick of it, she was like, "You're either going to go over there with them [your friends] or you're going to be with us [your family]." So she gave me an ultimatum. Don't get me wrong, I miss banging with my boys, but I'd rather be here with her and my kids than being strung out and locked up.

Data demonstrated that maintaining a positive relationship with the mother of the participant's children, especially during periods of incarceration and even upon release, is critical to maintaining ties to their children and partners. Many female partners get wary of the time, energy, and money—such as expenses associated with visitations—required to maintain a relationship. For instance, Paco, a former member of one of the largest adolescent gangs at the time, had been incarcerated intermittently for 11 years for burglary and various drug charges. His daughter lived with his former partner, Rose, and he currently lives with his girlfriend and her four children. He works part-time in a tattoo parlor, using a skill he learned in prison. He described the difficulty of maintaining his relationship with Rose and his daughter while in prison:

Yeah man, she [Rose] made my time in prison hard. You can't do no time with a girl. You can't do your time and then have your mind out in the free world at the same time. You'll break your head. County time, prison time, and the free world are different fucking places. You can't control the outside from the inside.

Upon release, he reestablished ties with Rose by keeping a steady job and providing economic support for their daughter. This served as an opportunity for Paco to maintain a relationship with his daughter.

Given these men's crime-involved lifestyle, characterized by intermittent serial incarcerations in county jail and/or long-term sentences in state prison and precarious legal status, many reported being unable to fulfill their roles as fathers. As one respondent stated, "I don't want my kid to grow up like I did. I want him to know their paps. I want to be part of my son's life." However, this desire often was unrealistic, given the difficulties associated with limited economic resources, social capital, and overwhelming structural and legal barriers. For example, Saul, 30, was living by himself in a cheap efficiency apartment while attempting to financially support his child, who lived with his ex-girlfriend. Saul stated, "I've been working sometimes in construction, but my money comes from shoplifting, stealing, and pawning items to make enough." Saul discussed in the interview that regardless of his financial contributions to his former partner, she refused to let him live with them because of his continued drug and criminal involvement and history of partner violence.

Some of the young men reported that not having a relationship with their children increased feelings of being unfit and unworthy fathers. This resulted in low self-esteem for some, whereas for others it heightened feelings of low self-worth and motivation to improve their circumstances. Bobby's ex-partner, Claudia, whom he was with for more than 12 years, forbade him from seeing his six children. Bobby's relationship with Claudia was made more difficult by his chronic joblessness, which he attributed to employers not hiring him because of his extensive criminal record. He said, "They won't even hire me as a dishwasher. That's why I am still involved in crime, mostly small stuff just to make a buck to get high." He continued:

It's hard not to see my kids. But I don't got shit going on. I have nothing to show. So I just don't try no more. I just gave up. I just keep away. . . . It's better that I stay away from them.

Men like Bobby felt as if there were no incentives to change their lifestyle participation in crime and other antisocial behaviors if they remain unable to have a relationship with their children.

Some men reported having access to their children, but given their circumstances, they deemed themselves unfit to be a positive role model and chose not to be in their children's lives. These men also expressed concern with magnifying problems in an already tenuous relationship with the mother of their children. For example, Raul stated that he had not seen his four children in more than a month because of his unstable housing situation and financial instability:

I don't have a place to live. I haven't seen my kids in a long time. I have a good relationship with them, but I don't want them to see me like this. Ever since me and their mom split, I feel like I let them down and can't face them. I'm trying to find a job and start working. I don't want to sell drugs all my life.

The men consistently expressed motivation to desist from engaging in crime and other criminal behaviors and the desire to reestablish bonds with children. Nevertheless, the process of maintaining ties to children was further confounded by the nature of existing family structures in these disadvantaged communities.

Navigating Complicated Family Structures

Given that most children were raised by their biological mothers or maternal parents/grandparents, data above describe men's motivations for maintaining positive relationships with their children's mothers. This commitment, however, often became more complicated with the changing nature of these young men's families and personal relationships. For instance, given the relatively young age of the study population, it was highly common for the young men and their respective partners to develop other romantic relationships, often resulting in additional children. For instance, David is a 30-year-old with four children from two different women. He has an extensive criminal and serial incarceration history that includes three felony convictions, and he has served intermittently a total of eight years in both jail and state prison. He states:

I have three kids with Lucy. She is married to someone else right now, but I have a good relationship with her and I try to give my kids whatever they need or want. I also have a little girl with Nancy. She is always threatening me to not allow me to see my daughter if I don't give her money. This is hard so I don't see her very often because she doesn't know me as her father.

Similarly, Jack is a 31-year-old whose navigation of a complicated family structure is associated with serial partner relationships, most of which resulted in children. This was further complicated by his extensive criminal record. Jack's first felony conviction was at the age of 17 for aggravated robbery. What followed over the course of ten years was a serial pattern of brief jail and prison stints, many associated with his heroin addiction. During this time, Jack had three partners with whom he had children. He described these as not being meaningful emotional relationships, and he also described how many of these women also had other children with other men. Nevertheless, he does have a relationship with his 15-year-old son from his relationship with Elvira:

Elvira, she has kids and is living with this other guy. But I see my son. I try to get him things that he needs and wants. I tell him all the time not to get involved in gangs, because I know how that is. My 13-year-old son was adopted and his mom Sally who I see around has 4 other kids.

Jack expressed his frustration with the complicated nature of his network of numerous children and their mothers and current boyfriends.

Although a smaller proportion of the sample, there were young men that found themselves raising a partner's children from previous relationships. Often times, the men expressed strong emotional ties to these children and voiced their motivations for parenting children they knew were not their own. Frankie, 29 years old at the time of the interview, described his tumultuous relationship with his on-and-off partner of eleven years, Adriana. He describes how although Adriana was not there for him during his two years of incarceration for heroin possession, he would always be there for her daughter.

I helped raise her. I continue to go back to see her, but I don't want anything serious with Adriana. She wants to be with me but she was not there for me when I was locked up. I will always be there for that little girl.

Frankie is currently in another relationship with a woman, with whom he recently had a baby.

Overall, these findings point to the men's aspirations and motivations for attempting to navigate the complicated family situations and structures common in this community. These family relationships are further problematic, given the men's persistent criminal and offending histories and precarious legal status.

Processes of Seeking Partners with Economic Resources

Instrumental support (in the form of tangible resources) can be crucial for former offenders who experience reentry with limited material resources and access to social services common to many formerly incarcerated men. Female partners can also be an important alternative resource. As a result, some men reported consciously seeking out female partners who had access to resources from stable employment, public or private social services, family assets, or other sources of capital. In contrast to their male counterparts, many young women in these neighborhoods are employed in unskilled jobs in the tourist and medical industries that dominate the city's economy (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). These jobs offer a stable source of income, but are often supplemented by social and health welfare programs for low-income, female-headed households. These programs are beyond the reach of a large proportion of the men in this study, especially those with felony convictions.

Some men perceived that women with economic resources have the ability to exert direct influence over their behavior. Oftentimes the men spoke more about what tangible items they could get out of their partners, rather than their emotional connections to these young women. For instance, Roy had a history of serial incarceration, reflective of many men in this study. He had been in jail or prison nine times, and at the time of the interview was serving a 12-month sentence in county jail. He was estranged from Linda, his former partner of many years, and their four children. Roy recounted a time when she convinced him to stay sober for a year:

It's crazy because Linda actually made a deal with me. She made a bet that I couldn't stop selling and doing coke for one year. I took her up on that bet. I did it, man. I did it for a whole year. I stopped selling drugs and doing cocaine. I did it for her. The deal was that she would buy me a truck. Actually, I didn't know that a year was up. I focused more on not doing it than really keeping track of time. So, when the year went by I didn't realize until she was like, "Hey, look in the driveway."

Although Roy had a long history and large family with Linda, he spoke only minimally about his relationship with them. His serial incarceration and criminal behavior were an overarching theme in his life.

Alternatively, some female partners provided more day-to-day instrumental support. These resources were often available as a result of government and nonprofit program benefits (e.g., housing assistance programs, food stamps, and community-based medical clinics). Some men reported indirectly benefiting from these resources, such as Tony, who stated, "I've been unemployed for a long-time. Priscila works and has insurance for me and the kids. I want to stop selling drugs, but it's all I know." In other cases, women had additional capital through their personal family networks (e.g., parents, adult siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles). These resources included emergency monetary assistance, childcare, job leads, and connections to other resources outside the male partner's immediate social network. For instance, Joe has a long incarceration history that spans over eleven years. He was recently diagnosed with Hepatitis C and describes how his partner supports him: "She has been supporting me with her job and child support checks from her daughter's father."

Stories of the men's social and economically dependent partner relationships were common. Nonetheless, they were complemented by expressions of these relationships threatening their masculinity and self-image in this community. Notably, Rico was one of the few men in the sample of former gang members who had graduated from high school. Nevertheless, throughout the course of his life he had been incarcerated six times, including a felony conviction that resulted in a state prison sentence. He currently lives with his long-term partner and their two children. He works intermittently as an assistant cook in a downtown restaurant earning \$1,000 a month. In contrast, his partner works as a nurse's aide and has a steady, relatively larger source of income. When speaking about their relationship, Rico expressed frustration about being financially dependent on his wife:

She's very successful, very economically stable. She makes good money and supports the family. I don't like it. Fuck that! A woman shouldn't have to take care of me. I wasn't raised like that. A man is supposed to take care of his family, not the other way around. You see it every fucking day where the woman is the man of the house. I can't do that.

Lack of emotional ties and threats to their masculinity were further confounded by men's perceptions of women. Saul, described before, commented on how being in a gang influenced his relationships with women.

I think that's why a lot of my relationships never worked out. Growing up in a gang it was always, "Fuck that bitch. Don't let her tell you what to do. Never really let your heart hold too much. Don't really care for a chick too much." Stuff like that. I guess it kind of messed me up with women.

Felipe expressed a similar sentiment. Despite living with his partner Nadine for nine years, he described an inability to establish a strong attachment to her, which he attributed to his peers discouraging him from building a meaningful emotional bond. He further stated that his inability to establish emotional relationships may have contributed to his return to prison.

As illustrated in these cases, men with extensive criminal histories developed instrumental ties that made them dependent on their female partners. In these communities, these relationships emerged as a result of a complexity of factors, including the men's limited capital, barriers upon reentry, and women's relative ease and access to resource-generating opportunities.

"She Parties and Smokes Too Much Weed"—Partnering with Criminal and Delinquent Partners

Interpersonal partner relationships existed between persistent male offenders and young women who permitted, encouraged, and conspired to engage in criminal and other socially disapproved behaviors. Participants in this study characterized these women as being disreputable, primarily because of their long-term affiliations with male adolescent gang members and adult criminals. Previous research with

this population has documented the community's perceptions of these women as sexually promiscuous polydrug and alcohol users with party girl reputations (Cepeda and Valdez 2003). Similar to the majority of the men in this study, these women did not mature out of the delinquent behaviors that characterized their adolescence.

A subgroup of men within this offender population were observed to have romantic relationships with female partners who encouraged and engaged in excessive drug and alcohol use. At the time of the interview, Bennie reported not being in a relationship with anyone, being unemployed, and living in a small one-bedroom apartment. He also spoke at length about his drug use with partners in the past. For instance, Bennie stated that he had been in a common-law marriage with Crystal for five years, a woman with whom he sold drugs and had been incarcerated with multiple times during their relationship. He explained:

We used to sell coke, me and my chick [Crystal]. We made a lot of money like that. I was with her for a while and that's when I was really selling. Then we really started doing it together. And then things just got bad.

He had recently been arrested for unpaid court fees and was facing conviction for what would be his fifth felony. He said that he expected to go to prison for a long time.

Other men described how their partners expected them to provide support by making *quick money*. When they were unable to do so, some men said they felt guilty. For example, John, who had multiple felonies, was living with his on-and-off-again girlfriend of two years and was unemployed. His girlfriend also did not work and had been recently arrested for robbery. He discussed their relationship and explained his continual involvement in selling drugs:

She smokes too much weed. Always trying to smoke everything that I have. Then I have to make money. She's very stubborn and has an attitude problem. Always trying to tell me that I'm not doing enough for her. So I go out into the streets to make some money just for her so that she can have nice things.

These cases illustrate how female partners who engage in excessive alcohol and drug use enabled men's continued detrimental substance use patterns.

For some persistent offenders in the study, their female partners were directly involved in criminal behavior. The most widely reported crime these women engaged in was selling drugs, which included making small-quantity drug deliveries, holding stashes, and collecting debts. Other offenses these partner relationships engaged in were lower-level street crimes, including shoplifting, breaking and entering, fraud, and scalping tickets at concerts and sporting events. Jess, 29 years old and in jail at the time of his interview, explained how his wife was an important partner in his drug dealing business while he was incarcerated. He discussed how his wife, from whom he was separated, helped him continue his business when he was incarcerated:

I got locked up one day and my connection called my wife: "Well, *mija* [diminutive word for a woman], I want to help him. Come pick up this half ounce of tar [black tar heroin] so you can send him money for commissary." So he shot me a half ounce of tar and my wife picked it up for me. She ended up selling it for like \$600 while I was locked up. My wife would handle everything while I was in prison. She actually liked doing this.

Similarly, Cesar was employed at a warehouse earning a minimum wage of \$7.25. He described a time when he and his common-law wife, Marisol, whom he had been with for 11 years, got arrested together:

Me and my girl got arrested but we didn't go to jail or nothing. I was hustling at the Alamodome [sports arena]. All I did was sell tickets and I would bring the money to her. But she got popped with me.

These data reflect how criminal behavior reinforces these interpersonal relationships and commitments to generate money illegally, whether during incarceration or upon release.

Data indicated that some women came from families with histories of intergenerational drug use, criminality, incarceration, and street-based criminal networks. Instead of facilitating supportive norms and conventional values, these types of families encouraged and enabled the involvement of young men in crimes. This was particularly the case with young women who had family members that were affiliated with adult criminal gangs. Data revealed the influence these families had on the men in this study. It was common for the men to socialize with these individuals to gain respect and acceptance. Similar to the findings of previous research ([Anderson 1999](#)), associating with these "old heads" increased the men's street credibility in the community.

For instance, data revealed that in-laws encouraged criminal behavior by supplying young men with drugs and connecting them with traffickers or other criminal networks needed to distribute the drugs on a larger scale beyond street sales. For example, Israel, who was in his late twenties and had spent the majority of the past seven years in prison for drug-related charges and firearm possession, spoke about his ex-girlfriend Yvonne's father. As previously documented, this criminal record made it difficult for him to find stable employment like many of these men who were on parole or probation. He was trying to stop using heroin and reported no longer associating with his former gang network. Israel stated that his goal of staying clean was compromised by Yvonne's family:

Yvonne's dad would sell and inject heroin. He would always give me and her some to snort, but we never injected. One day I decided to inject heroin for the first time with Yvonne's dad, but I couldn't tell her about it. I tried to keep it a secret but I got really addicted to it and we broke up eventually over it.

The more Israel was in contact with Yvonne's father and other older members of his gang, the more embedded he became in the heroin subculture and other crimes to support his habit. The influence of these family networks on relationships provided opportunities for men to continue to engage in crime through well-established criminal networks.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A major finding of this research is the complex interpersonal relationships that persistent criminal offending young adult men have with female partners and their children. This analysis identified four social processes that characterize the nature of these relationships as men contend with criminal behavior, serial incarceration, and periods of absences from families. Specifically, findings point to men's strong desire and motivations to desist from criminal behavior as a means to maintain ties with their children. This often meant sustaining positive relationships with the mothers of their children, particularly if the relationship had dissolved. This finding complements previous qualitative research that has identified the fact that it is not enough to focus on the presence and/or quality of a relationship, but rather the dynamic bonds that are established with partners, the orientation towards children, and the implications they have for men's identity ([Craig and Foster 2013](#); [Edin and Nelson 2013](#); [McCarthy and Casey 2008](#); [Simons and Barr 2014](#); [Van Schellen et al. 2012](#); [Wyse et al. 2014](#)). Our findings point to female partners exerting some type of influence and promoting conventional lives, with some men adhering to their partner's expectations in order to maintain ties with their children. Others similarly expressed their aspirations to desist from crime as a means to stay involved in their

children's lives; however, this option was often not viable given their long-term serial incarceration experiences and limited economic resources.

Moreover, results point to the experiences men have in navigating a complicated situational family structure. Structures that are characterized by multiple children with different women, raising children that are not their own, and the presence of other men in the lives of their biological children and ex-partners. These unique family compositions contribute to men's attempts to attain functional family relationships with multiple women over time. Again, often the goal was to maintain bonds with children despite the men's multiple convictions and precarious legal status that typically spanned several intermittent and/or consecutive years. Similar to findings in existing research, men in this study demonstrate and/or express the importance they place on maintaining their family ties to partners and children (Toth and Xu 1999). This study adds to the existing literature by documenting the family complexity that characterizes poor minority men's likelihood of multiple-partner fertility (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Tach and Edin 2011). While this literature has shown the association between complexity and dissolution, our data provide a glimpse into an understudied aspect of this research - the nature and quality of subsequent relationships. That is, we find that for these young men, maintaining positive relationships with their previous partners, the mothers of their children, are extremely important in keeping ties to their children. This reflects the fluidity of relationships Wyse and colleagues find, where men rekindle relationships and draw upon social support subsequent to the relationships' dissolution (Wyse et al. 2014). Our data provide a characterization of the nature of these relationships despite the adverse criminal justice involvement these men face that often creates barriers to bonding and fulfilling parenting responsibilities (Lesser et al. 2001; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Parra-Cardona, Wampler, and Sharp 2006).

This analysis also found that connections with partners who engaged in antisocial behaviors facilitated criminal involvement, drug abuse, and other anti-social behaviors. Similar to the findings of Moore (1991) among women who associated with gang members in Los Angeles, this study found criminal behaviors were exacerbated if the participant's female partner came from a "cholo" family, that is, Mexican American families with multiple generations of criminality, incarceration, heroin use, and street-oriented activities. Instead of promoting conventional societal norms, intergenerational families may actually facilitate participation in gangs and interaction with other negative peer networks (Cepeda et al. 2016; Covey, Menard, and Franzese 1992; Valdez et al. 2008). These same social processes were found in this population in San Antonio.

Previous research has illustrated how relationships of offenders are highly dynamic across types of partnerships, situations, and the life span (Leverentz 2006). Similar to the findings of Wyse et al. (2014), the lack of instrumental capital among our study participants often led them to seek relationships that provided financial and social resources that were more readily available to women. Women's control over these resources allowed them to impose certain social control mechanisms. Often, men in this situation experienced high levels of role strain given their inability to provide for their partners and children. This was particularly the case for men who perceived themselves as the primary breadwinner. In some cases, this stress led to such frustration that men chose to return to street-based criminal activities. These values are an extension of hyper-masculinity that framed much of these men's behavior, and are embedded in situated activities and an environment that is based on a male-dominated patriarchal hierarchy (Nowotny et al. 2016; Rios 2009). In other words, the gender ideology expressed by the men in this study, a product of their gang embeddedness, prohibited them from having positive romantic relationships. These interpersonal relationships are reflective of the role strain experienced by the men in Wyse's study, who turned to income-generating crime to meet their own gendered expectations.

These findings demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the informal social control mechanisms that play out in highly economically disadvantaged and socially isolated minority communities. In the absence of formal institutional systems and authorizing agents to regulate universal norms and behaviors, informal social control processes are particularly important (Thornberry and Henry 2013).

Among young men with extensive histories of delinquency, serial incarceration (in jails and prisons) and low levels of attachment and bonds to society, these mechanisms emerge from relationships across key social institutions, such as family and friendships. The age-graded theory of informal social control by Sampson and Laub (2009) posits that persistence in crime is explained by a lack of social controls, structured activities, and purposive human agency, and these characteristics are strengthened during the life course. That is, their research shows that even among men with high levels of criminal involvement, their commitment to a conventional life will increase and their criminality will diminish as they age. We support the notion that a modified version of the Informal Social Control Theory requires an in-depth examination of the nonmarital relationships that are prevalent with the changing demographics and delayed marriage patterns that exist today (Brady, Finnigan, and Hubgen 2018; Forrest 2014). This has particular implications for a population of relatively young men, similar to those in the present study, who are representative of the incarcerated populations being excluded from conventional society through the U.S. penal system. That is, the motivations, aspirations, and goals to lead conventional lives are clearly present, but the opportunities and mechanisms to diminish their criminality are often times unrealistic. Men find it difficult to acquire the social capital and instrumental resources to establish meaningful relationships with female partners, and, in some cases, bonds to children to successfully age out of criminal behavior. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing how forces such as poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, and early parenthood affect interpersonal relationships (Brady et al. 2018).

A major strength of this study is the nature of its longitudinal design, which followed a cohort of street-recruited adolescent gang members for approximately 15 years. As a result, data were examined on the trajectory of their partner relationships and the nature of these relationships during this period. Nonetheless, several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the generalizability and interpretability of these data are limited until comparable investigations are done with similar populations. Second, perceptions of these partner relationships were from the perspective of the men and may be different if the women's interpretation were considered. As a result, we recognize there may be a built-in gender bias that needs to be taken into consideration. Third, the study did not sufficiently emphasize that the women exercised self-determination, autonomy, and agency, and were not passive victims in an environment characterized by hegemonic masculinity.

We should note that the minimization or persistence of crime among these men cannot be solely attributed to their partner relationships, nor should it be. However, from an informal social control theoretical framework, these interpersonal relationships can represent a turning point in the lives of these men. We attempted to characterize and document the relationships of these men, and the individual- and situational-level approach need to be balanced with an acknowledgement of the structural factors that influence serial criminal patterns in this population. We conclude that partner relationships are exacerbated by the highly exclusive urban context in which they exist, intersecting with culture, ethnicity, gender, social inequality, and hyper policing policies that target minority youth and adults. This analysis provides a better understanding of how continual offending and mass incarceration are detrimental to social capital, family stability, and noncoercive mechanisms of social control that usually prevent crime in communities. It also provides insight regarding the collateral damage caused by incarceration on the family system, especially current and former partners, children, and other close family members. Future research should look beyond individual behaviors and focus on sociostructural factors such as deindustrialization, concentrated poverty, declining social services, and high rates of incarceration. Researchers need to consider how these factors have disrupted partner intimacy and family relationships in these disadvantaged communities.

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