



A Qualitative Analysis of the Complex Relationship Between Fatherhood, Incarceration, and Desistance

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Abstract

Understanding desistance from crime and substance abuse is a critical criminological concern, particularly in the era of mass incarceration when so many formerly incarcerated individuals exit prison and return to their communities. Scholars have theorized that fatherhood should provide a 'hook for change' and motivate desistance, but research on this topic has provided equivocal results. The study draws on the narratives of returning prisoners from the Therapeutic Community Prison Inmate Networks Study (TC-PINS) to understand the role that fatherhood may have in promoting desistance. It is possible that men who prioritize their children use them as a stronger motivating force to remain drug and crime free once released. These factors, among others, are considered to understand how fatherhood intersects with reentry and aftercare planning. The current study uses a sample of 25 incarcerated fathers to analyze this complex relationship. Findings suggest that fatherhood is a primary motivation for desistance post-incarceration. However, it appears that this relationship is complicated by prior relationships with the children and the mothers of the children as well as financial responsibilities.

Introduction

The United States now has the world's largest incarcerated population and highest incarceration rate. Since the late 1970's, when the U.S first began to see a dramatic rise in prison populations, the number of people incarcerated has continually increased until a peak in 2008, with just over 2 million people in jail or prison (Carson and Anderson, 2016). The current United States incarceration rate is about 750 inmates per 100,000 residents, compared to other developed Western nations who incarcerate less than 200 inmates per 100,000 residents annually (Clear and Frost 2014). This era of mass incarceration has led to a large stream of people into the United States prison system. Conversely, it also has resulted in a large stream of people leaving prisons and jails every year. Thousands of incarcerated men and women will reenter their communities in the coming year. Since 2000, between 600,000 and 700,000 male and female prisoners have been released annually (Carson and Golinelli, 2014).

While these previously-incarcerated people are expected to reenter their communities as reformed and now-productive members of society, this is rarely the case. Formerly incarcerated people face many challenges once released, including societal stigmatization, housing and income instability, and fractured family and social ties. These challenges cause many to reoffend and be reincarcerated at alarming levels. A United States Sentencing Commission study found that, of 25,400 inmates released in 2005, nearly half (49.3%) were rearrested within the next 8 years. A third of those were reconvicted and about 25% were reincarcerated (Hunt and Dumville, 2016). High levels of recidivism by those who have been previously incarcerated has generated a great deal of research to understand the causes of recidivism and how to prevent it.

Given that many of those who are incarcerated will at some point be released (except for those serving life sentences), it is important for those in the criminology and criminal justice fields to understand the reentry process and the factors that may inhibit successful reentry. One such factor that has been strongly correlated to recidivism and crime is substance abuse. Whether the individual commits a crime to obtain money for drugs or they commit a crime while under the influence of a drug, crime and substance abuse appear to be strongly entwined. In the Liverpool Desistance Study, 90% of all participants in both groups (desisting and persisting) stated that they had regularly used drugs at some point and two thirds stated that they have been addicted to drugs or alcohol at some point in their lives (Maruna, 2000). Given that many of those who are incarcerated struggled with substance abuse prior to incarceration, simply being incarcerated is not enough to prevent them from going back to drugs after release. Therefore, substance abuse treatment during incarceration has become a necessity for many inmates. A 1991 report by the U.S General Accounting Office found that nearly 74% of inmates needed drug treatment, but only 15% were receiving it (U.S General Accounting Office, 1991).

A promising drug treatment program offered during incarceration is the Therapeutic Community (TC), which first emerged in the 1950s. While therapeutic communities aim to treat individual disorders of substance abuse, they also work to transform lifestyles and personal identities using a community approach (De Leon, 2000). In comparison to other substance abuse programs, TC's appear to be better suited for the prevention of recidivism after release. A 1990 study comparing the Stay'n Out TC to two other forms of treatment (Milieu and counseling) and inmates receiving no treatment found evidence that the prison-based TC program significantly reduced recidivism in both males and females (Wexler, Falkin & Lipton, 1990). Three of the most essential parts of the TC program are 1) the focus in a change of identity for the participants, 2) continual treatment post-release called aftercare, and 3) a focus on interpersonal relationships.

A commonality found in the participants of TC's are that they have "negative social identities and unformed personal identities." They perceive themselves in ways that often stem from their drug abuse. Thus, they internalize negative stigmatizations that have been placed on them by society such as "addict" or "criminal" (De Leon, 2000). TC's help the inmates form new, positive identities based around their feelings, thoughts, and goals. These new identities can provide a catalyst for change. Using this new identity, the inmate can foresee a future that is not riddled with crime and substance abuse but rather an achievable goal of who they hope to become.

Aftercare for inmates can take the form of Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), dual diagnosis groups, transition or halfway houses, and many others. For some inmates, these programs are a stipulation of their parole while for others these programs are voluntary. Aftercare is an essential part of the process for those with substance abuse because it allows the progress made in TC to continue upon their reentry. Once back into society, there are an abundance of stressors that may drive the individual back to substance abuse. Aftercare is a way to help the individual confront and deal with these stressors without turning to substance use. It also provides a support system of peers and counselors who understand the individuals' circumstances and want to see them succeed. For many, being left in the community without this support will often lead back to substance use, even if not right away, and inevitably recidivism (De Leon, 2000).

An identity change that may also facilitate effective aftercare can come in the form of parenthood. Parenthood can be a turning point, or "hook for change," that causes inmates to desist from substance abuse and crime for the sake of their children (Giordano, Seffrin, Manning & Longmore, 2011). Interpersonal relationships are at the core of the "community approach" of therapeutic communities. The therapeutic community emphasizes that post-release, positive interpersonal relationships, such as family, should facilitate recovery (De Leon, 2000). However, most literature that focuses on parenthood and re-entry focuses on motherhood, with much less focus being placed on fathers (Barnes and Stringer, 2012; Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, Smith & O'Connell, 2016; Michalsen, 2011). Those studies that do analyze the impacts of fatherhood on criminal desistance tend to find null or weak effects (Wolfgang, Thornberry & Figlio, 1987; Farrington and West, 1995; Massogoli and Uggen, 2007). This lack of research and equivocal findings open a need to understand the variable role that fatherhood may play in the re-entry process, specifically for those with substance abuse issues, participating in prison-based programming, and preparing to re-enter their communities.

The current study focuses on a sample of currently incarcerated men with various substance abuse disorders and looks to understand how parenthood intersects with their re-entry and aftercare planning. At the time of their first interview, the men were incarcerated within a Pennsylvania medium security prison and set to be released soon. To understand how fatherhood fits into the men's re-entry planning, respondents who were fathers were first separated from the non-fathers, with 25 fathers forming the primary sample. The goal is to analyze 1) What type of man is more likely to look to their children as motivation to desist and 2) Why do some fathers prioritize their children and use them as motivation for desistance, while others do not? I hypothesize that factors such as socioeconomic status, relationship with the child, and relationship with the child's mother, among others, will help to explain the answers to these questions. To test these hypotheses, I will qualitatively code and present narratives drawn directly from the incarcerated men.

Methodology

Data

This study is based on data collected during a larger project titled the Therapeutic Community Prison Inmate Networks Study (TC-PINS) that focuses on peer processes in a men's prison substance abuse treatment program. The TC-PINS project utilizes a longitudinal network study that occurred in a TC program and continued during respondents' reentry experience. The data was collected monthly from August 2016 to May 2017. At the time of data collection, the men in the study were housed at a medium-security State Correctional Institution (SCI) in Pennsylvania that held five TC units. This SCI has a focus on substance abuse treatment and houses many short-sentence inmates, thus creating a unique prison environment that focuses on treatment and reentry unlike many other SCIs. This focus on substance abuse and reentry is the underlying theme of the TC-PINS project.

Residents of the TC were recruited to the study by Kim Davidson, a graduate student at The Pennsylvania State University working on the project. Computer assisted personal interviews (CAPI) were conducted monthly with participants in one of the TC units during the period of data collection. The CAPI consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions about their familial relationships, future expectations, treatment engagement, peer network measures, and their evaluation and experiences in the TC program. 84% of eligible respondents completed at least one CAPI during their time in the TC unit. Overall, 470 CAPI surveys were administered to 177 male prisoner respondents.

TC participation is required for inmates who score at a six or higher on a drug screen administered upon entry into the state system as a parole stipulation. If an inmate chooses not to participate or leaves the TC program early they are required to serve their maximum sentence instead of being eligible for parole at an earlier date. TC programs in Pennsylvania last for four months and consist of 3 phases. The first phase, called the "induction" phase, lasts for one month. The second phase, called "primary treatment", lasts for two months. The final phase, called "reentry", lasts for the fourth month. Residents enter the unit on a rolling admission system and "phase up" based on their entry to the program. TC program residents remain isolated from other inmates in the prison during their time in the program. The TC unit studied during this project houses 62 residents at a time who are continuously engaged in peer interaction. This includes treatment groups, going to and having meals together, daily yard time together, and downtime spent together. Residents attend meetings and treatment groups Monday through Friday from 9 AM to 4 PM, with breaks for meals and inmate counts.

Sample

Of the 210 residents in the TC program, 177 inmates completed at least one CAPI during their treatment months, with participation declining with each successive month of treatment. The average age of respondents was 36.85. 58% of TC program residents were White, 35% were Black, and 7% were Hispanic. The average for the highest grade completed was about twelfth grade for the entire unit and the sample. The average IQ fell between 90 and 109 and the average offense gravity score fell between 6 and 7 for the entire unit and the sample.

Inmate TCU scores are measured using the TCU Drug Screen II during the prison intake process. Possible scores range from zero to nine, with an increasing score indicating the severity of substance use disorder. As stated above, a score of six or higher results in a requirement for TC program participation. Inmates who score below a six can still be required to participate in the

program as a stipulation of parole or may voluntarily enter the program. The TCU Drug Screen II also measures drug of choice by asking inmates to indicate the substance that is the primary source of their disorder. The largest drug use group in the entire unit and the sample is opiates followed by alcohol and then crack/cocaine.

TC-PINS participants who would be eligible for parole in the year following data collection were asked to participate in three qualitative interviews detailing their reentry process. The criteria to determine participation in the qualitative interviews included inmates incarcerated at a specific state prison in Pennsylvania, completion of the TC program while incarcerated, a history of substance use, and release from prison within a year of the start of data collection. Eighty-eight men were interviewed prior to community reentry, with the promise of \$25 monetary incentives should they continue to community interviews upon release.

Qualitative Interviews

The TC-PINS study also utilizes longitudinal semi-structured interviews with eighty-eight residents of the TC unit who were eligible for parole and community release. Up to three interviews took place per respondent: one while still in prison and two in-community interviews. The current project focuses only on the in-prison, pre-release interviews, all of which were conducted by Kim Davidson, a PSU graduate student who also built rapport with the men during prior survey data collections. At the time of this project, thirty-two of the eighty-eight total interviews were transcribed and eligible for inclusion in this study.

The in-prison interviews provide baseline information and perceptions of the future from respondents prior to release. This baseline information includes information about the respondent, their family life, how their substance use and criminal behavior began, their drug of choice and other drugs they have used, previous incarceration experiences, and previous treatment program experiences. These in-prison interviews detail life history narratives, including a focus on criminal behavior and substance use, the respondents' experiences in the TC program, and their plans, expectations, and concerns for their reentry experience. Interviews took on average between 90 and 120 minutes. Although not the focus of this study, in-prison interviews are followed by community interviews focused on the respondents' lives since their prison release. This will include expected and unexpected challenges faced during reentry, substance use relapse, treatment program participation, family reunification, and employment, among others. It is expected that some respondents will recidivate and return to prison. These respondents will still be interviewed and will be asked about their experiences during the time that they were out of prison. To encourage participation for community interviews, a monetary incentive of \$25 will be offered to respondents for each post-release interview.

All interviews (in-prison, community, and reincarceration) are audiotaped and sent to Datagain, a transcription service. The transcripts are then redacted to remove all identifying information. Once the transcripts have been transcribed and redacted, they are uploaded into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program (CAQDAS) for coding. The CAQDAS program used for this study is NVivo, which facilitates the movement between data collection and analysis, writing memos, coding, and creating models (Bringer, Johnston & Brackenridge, 2006). The interviews are coded for recurring themes by undergraduate and

graduate students using NVivo coding. NVivo coding assigns a word or short phrase to similar narrative content within the interviews (Saldaña, 2009). Current codes include family life, entrance into substance use, opinions on the TC program, daily prison life, and goals for reentry.

Current Study

The current study is a smaller project within the TC-PINS study. The author was given access to thirty-two transcripts and conducted a preliminary reading of ten transcripts. This preliminary reading was conducted to inductively identify an overarching topic and hypothesis that could then be tested with the remaining transcripts. Based upon a reading of ten interviews, I chose to focus on fatherhood and its effect on men’s desistance narratives prior to prison release. The transcripts were first coded into two categories: fathers and nonfathers. This was done using an item from the TC-PINS survey that asked, “*How many biological children do you have?*” Anyone with a non-zero response to this item were coded as “fathers.” A total of 25 men were identified as fathers and thus used as the final sample of this study. The author read the transcripts in-depth, identifying themes that were present amongst the narratives to understand who prioritized fatherhood and why.

Results

	Prevalence of Theme	Explanation
<p>Guilt*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Missed Time ● Financial Responsibilities 	<p>72%</p> <p>60%</p> <p>44%</p>	<p>Guilt due to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) missing important events such as holidays, birthdays, academic events, and life achievements due to incarceration and/or 2) the inability to provide financially for their children. This extended beyond necessities to things the children wanted as well (such as new clothes or a car)
Positive Role Model	40%	The desire to be a positive role model in an attempt to keep their children from following in their footsteps.
Fear	27%	Fear that they would lose their children due to their inability to change. Further, they didn’t want their children to end up ashamed or hating them nor did they want their past actions to negatively affect their children's lives.

Encouragement from Children	20%	Children who understood their father's current situation were encouraging them to receive help while incarcerated so that they could come home.
Relationship with Mother of Child**	64%	Some of the fathers maintained civil co-parenting relationships with the mothers of the children despite no longer being in a romantic relationship with them. On the other hand, some of the fathers experienced negative relationships with the mothers which complicated the reunification process post- incarceration.
● Positive	20%	
● Negative	44%	

*For the theme of guilt, respondents spoke of guilt due to missed time, the inability to provide financially, or both. Thus, the individual breakdown of the two sub themes (missed time and financial responsibilities) do not add up to 72% for the overall theme.

**For the theme of relationship with the mother of the child, those who still in a romantic relationship with the mother of the child were not coded as positive. Further, the narratives that did not have a clear indication of a positive or negative relationship with the mother of their child were not coded.

Many of the fathers interviewed recognized that their substance abuse and incarcerations had significant impacts on their families, especially their children. A large majority of the respondents expressed extreme guilt, not only because of their actions, but because of the effects that they had on their loved ones. The desistance narratives pointed to self-reflections during their incarcerations that led them to these realizations. Further, it provided a sense of motivation to remain sober and crime-free once released in an effort for many of the fathers to reestablish relationships with their children. 72% of the fathers expressed guilt over missing important events in their children's lives, their inability to provide financially for their children due to their incarceration, or both. Whatever the reason, each of the fathers used their guilt as motivation for their upcoming release to ensure that they did not return to a life of drugs and crime for the sake of the relationship that they had, or hoped to have, with their children.

Missed time in their children's lives

Many of the desistance narratives had a similar topic of the fathers missing important events that were occurring in their children's lives. 60% of the fathers felt not only guilt, but also regret, that they would never be able to get back many of these memories. For some fathers, the events they were missing were holidays and birthdays due to incarceration:

I mean like, like I missed his birthday and Christmas three years in a row. (28-year-old white male with 1 child)

While for other fathers it was academic and social events that were important to their children that they were unable to be present at:

I missed the whole senior year of high school. You know what I mean?
I ain't get to walk him across the court on his senior night for
basketball. (36-year-old black male with 3 children)

Most of the fathers spoke about missing important events in a child's development such as the ones above. However, three of the fathers interviewed had even missed a child's birth. These fathers seemed to express not only guilt and regret at not being there to see their child born, but even pain.

Well I was incarcerated when she was born, so most of her life, most of her [Age 2] years, I've been incarcerated. (34-year-old black male with 1 child)

And my second daughter, I didn't even meet her yet. She's a year old. I didn't meet her yet, so I would really—I would love to get out there and work out things with —with my kid's mom, get back together, and raise my daughter. So, I'm having a change of heart now. (45-year-old white male with 1 child)

Interestingly, some fathers expressed that the missed time in their children's lives led them to feel a phenomenon one such respondent labeled as a "part-time dad."

It's like I missed out so much with my family's life. It's bits and pieces of it. Being a part-time dad, I'm only here part-time. Then when I go home, I feel as though I can't really come out and start acting like your father because I ain't really been here. Now, what your dad, you wanna come home and play dad now? No, it doesn't work that way. (56-year-old black male with 3 children)

The belief that they had been "part-time dads" led those fathers to worry about the reunification process with their children. Since they were only present sometimes in their children's lives, these fathers worried about how to interact with their children, how to discipline their children, and even who their children had grown to be (personality-wise). They recognized that being a parent was a full-time job and due to their previous actions, they had only been partially present. This realization led these fathers to be excited about the possibility of being present all the time once released, but also created some fear about the process.

Missing time in their children's lives acted as a catalyst for change for these fathers. They recognized that while they could not change the past they could change the future. The inability to "make up for lost time" was a sentiment shared across many desistance narratives but as was their determination to "get back out there" and be a better father to their children in the future. Many of the respondents recognized that these events and achievements in their children's lives were a large part of parenthood and many included the desire to be present at all future events as a part of the future they imagined for themselves post-release as crime and drug free, as well as overall better fathers.

Providing financially

When speaking of challenges that they had faced, many of the respondents spoke of financial challenges. The fact that they had kids to provide for only made it that much harder for them. Many of the fathers that spoke of financial challenges recognized that they wanted to be able to provide for their children financially but were hindered because of their record or their incarceration. For many of these men, prior to their incarceration, they used drugs or crime as a source of income. Now that they were on a perceived path to desistance, finding a stable income represented a problem for their post-release lives.

So, it's, that's going to be the toughest struggle I think is the financial part. But I'm willing to sit at home for the next year with my kids, do nothing and save my money. And if that's what I got to do that's what I go to do. (29-year-old white male with 2 children)

I'm not prepared at all. I'm afraid. I have to face outside life...I have to get a job. I don't have a GED, so it's gonna be harder. And I'm a - I'm a convicted felon. I have to get myself enrolled in programs to better my life and stay steady out there, and I have to worry about getting my own place... (24-year-old Hispanic male with 2 children)

Other men recognized that although they would probably have to work minimum wage jobs once released it would still be better than the prison labor that they had worked and would ultimately be worth it for their children.

Challenges? Probably financial would be the biggest. I've got two beautiful boys out there and a wife, yeah, financial. And the big thing for me is I don't want to get overwhelmed and fall back on like old habits, old thinking, go down that road. So, I've just got to stay humble, I've got to stay focused. The big thing I learned last time, unfortunately this is the second time, the thing I learned last time, is when I got out of prison last time, I started working at Wendy's, working at a fast food joint, flipping burgers and I thought I would be embarrassed and all, but I wasn't. Because you work in here for 24 cent an hour, well you can work there for \$8 an hour, so I did that for a

while and things were fine and I was very humble about it. (34-year-old white male with 1 child)

For many fathers interviewed, it was not simply about providing financially for the things their children needed but also the desire to provide the things that they wanted. Two of the men had children who had entered the driving phase of their lives and expressed the desire to be able to buy their child a car.

My son, I just wanna- he's got his permit, so now, he can drive with it with a driver, with a licensed driver, and I'm looking forward to buying him his first car. Six months, and well, now, it's like four months he'll be able to get his license. I'm looking forward to buying him his first car. He wants all these cars, he's out of his mind, but he's getting a little shitty hooptie, you know what I mean? I can't wait to get it for him. (37-year-old white male with 2 children)

For those who have been incarcerated, finding a stable income that is also large enough to support a family can be extremely difficult. It is one of the challenges that often leads many to recidivate post-release (Morenoff and Harding, 2014). The stories in the desistance narratives often showed that these men recognized the difficulties they would face financially post-release, but it was less so about themselves and more about their children. 44% of these men wanted to provide financially for their children and feared not being able to. Being able to buy their children new school clothes, a car, or even help with college funds shaped their post-release thinking.

Financial challenges play a large role in the reentry process for most inmates (Morenoff and Harding, 2014). Most inmates don't have a stable job or a family able- or willing- to provide for them once released leaving the temptation to return to crime daunting. For these men, the desire to provide financially for their children adds a layer of complexity to the financial challenges they will undoubtedly face post-release.

While guilt was the largest theme present across the desistance narratives, in terms of reasons to change, it was not the only one. Fear also played a large part in the desistance narratives that I describe further in the next section. 28% of the fathers were afraid that they would lose their kids or that their kids would end up hating or being ashamed of them if they were unable to change. More positively, some fathers spoke of the desire to be better role models for their kids once released. And others said that the encouragement that they got from their kids played a large role in their hopes to change.

Fear

Fear was another theme that was in 28% of the desistance narratives. Many of the fathers recognized that they could possibly lose their kids if they did not change. The fear of losing their children forever worked as a driving force to make this time different from their past incarcerations and bouts with substance use.

Cause I know deep down that I'm going to lose my kids if this doesn't change. (31-year-old white male with 2 children)

More specifically it was the possibility their children would end up being ashamed or even hating them due to their inability to change their ways.

My biggest fear is continuing to fall and to wind up being like my father in the end and just spending the rest of my life in and out of jail. That's my biggest fear and for my kids to hate me. That's my two biggest fears cause if my kids were to decide to hate me, to be honest with you, I wouldn't want to live any more, if I don't have my kids. (32-year-old white male with 2 children)

She might with her little friends and stuff like that. Then she, they said, "Oh, well. My father's this, my father's this." Then she, "I can't really talk about my father, cause my father is in prison." I had to think about how that makes her feel. When she was little, it was easy to get around it but now that they're mature, they have their little people, they have their people. They have their own minds.

(56-year-old black male with 3 children)

One father spoke of his fears that his past actions would make his daughter a victim of his circumstances.

Oh, bring your Dad to school day — "I can't. My Dad's in jail." That's a huge fear for me, man. That's deep to me. I don't want her to be a victim of my circumstances because she doesn't deserve it. She didn't do anything wrong. She hasn't done a thing wrong. (28-year-old white male with 1 child)

This thought goes back to the self-reflections that occurred in many of the men that their actions didn't just affect them but their families too. For this father, the realization that, despite her innocence, his daughter's life could be impacted because of decisions he made was a large force to make him want change.

Fear is often an undiscussed emotion when dealing with incarcerated populations. The thought of the re-entry process can bring about large levels of fear and anxiety at what the future holds. Many inmates fear the inability to find a job or a home, being unable to remain drug and crime free, or even simply returning to society.

But across these desistance narratives many of the fathers spoke of fear in relation to their children. The idea that their drug use could end up affecting their relationship with their children was a fear that many men held. It was a strong enough fear that many men were using to remain sober and crime free once released to ensure that they could ultimately make their children proud.

Desire to be a better role model

40% of the fathers interviewed expressed the idea of wanting to better themselves to be a better role model for their children. They recognized that they currently represented something that they did not want to see in their own children and that the best way to help their children was to help themselves. Many of the respondents simply said that they didn't want their children to end up like they did.

This is the time where I gotta help him figure out what he's gonna do with the rest of his life. I don't want him to end up like I did.

(37-year-old white male with 2 children)

While others recognized that they were the only adult figure that their children, particularly their sons, would listen to and aim to be like.

I don't want my kids following in my footsteps, I don't want to have to go visit my kids in jail and stuff like that, writing letters so I know, especially my son, the only person he's going to listen to as a person is me, their mother can have as many guys in her life as she wants but deep down inside they're going to realize "that's not dad, only my dad can really speak to me and show me how to be a man," so that's what I'm going to do. (31-year-old white male with 2 children)

One respondent even said that he was afraid that his own son was only a short time away from the period in his life where he began using drugs. It was this fear that led him to want to be a positive role model for his son as well as other children in the community.

One that that I would like to do and I'll run this by parole when I get hime, is I would like to see if there is somebody I can like talk to, like teenage kids and share my experience like how I went down this awful path and ended up in these places. Because my son is going to be [Age] in April, a month after I get home and it scares the heck out of me to think that he's four years away from where I started using. So, I would like to share with like kids his age, like his friends and stuff like that, like the bad decisions that I have made and how they affected me, my family, you know I'm a convicted felon now, that limits me to the things I can do. So, I would like to share that experience with them and it's something that I would like to talk to drug and alcohol when I get out there and see if there is some sort of

meeting place where I could speak, I would like to do that, so if I could help somebody. (34-year-old white male with 1 child)

These men recognized that, despite their pasts, they had the potential to be positive role models in their children's lives. Many had children who they felt were at an impressionable time in their lives and needed someone to steer them in the right direction. While many understood that they could not do that while incarcerated, they looked forward to their time post-release to correct past actions and be the role model their kids needed. Their determination to remain on the path to desistance was a large step in ensuring that their kids could look to them as a person they should aspire to be. By remaining drug and crime free, finding stable and legal employment, and being a role model to their communities, these men hoped to show their kids their full potential even in their young lives.

Encouragement from children

Interestingly, some fathers spoke about the encouragement that they were receiving from their children to change was playing a large part in their desistance journey. One father could build a better relationship with his daughter in between prison stints and was using her encouragement to keep a positive path.

I didn't get arrested since 2006 so this is the time I was out there a while a built a good relationship with my daughter where this little incarceration that I had to do, like before, she did not want to talk to me, not want to write me, all my letter down and everything. It was like an issue like that, but this time, she stood by my side and wrote "Dear old dad, I know you couldn't do the right think. You were doing the right thing out there. You had a little bit of cocaine on you. It wasn't that I was..." She understood more this time. She said, "Just go get yourself right and come out and we'll move on from that. She stood by my side and encouraged everything all the while where before, she didn't.
(51-year-old white male with 2 children)

Similarly, another father had a young son who also was encouraging him to get the help that he needed so that he could return home.

My close family, my brother, sister, mom and my [Age]-year old son, you know he said, "dad I love you I just want you to get the help you need, come home so I can whip you in basketball," he's a good basketball player.
(34-year-old white male with 1 child)

Further, this father recognized that he was lucky to have a family that was encouraging him to do well because he saw many other incarcerated men who did not have that same support system.

But it's also I mean I am very grateful and especially with the holiday season here I see other guys, I feel very sorry for them, that they don't have as much out there. So, I am very grateful that I have all these people that I care about, and they visit me and rooting my book and etcetera, etcetera. So, it's been very eye opening, it's humbling, and it's taught me a lot of patience, I mean it's the only way I can put it. That's what I told parole too, it's humbling it keeps your patience in check. (34-year-old white male with 1 child)

Many of the desistance narratives that included men whose children were encouraging them to do better came from those who had older kids. These children were able to understand their fathers' plights and circumstances. Regardless of their father's past actions, the fathers perceived that their children could build a bond strong enough to stand in support of them. From the fathers' perspectives, the children could understand that their fathers needed help and while incarceration took them away it may be the only chance they had at getting better. Overall, these children simply wanted their fathers to receive the help they needed so that they could return home and stay home permanently. More importantly, they believed that it was possible for their fathers to get better. In a way this encouragement helped to motivate the fathers because they did not want to let their children down. Their kids were encouraging them to do better because they believed that they could do better. To relapse or return to jail would not only jail themselves, but also fail the children that had stood by their sides during their current incarceration.

Throughout many of the desistance narratives, parenthood was not just about the relationship with their children, but also the relationship with the children's mother. While 20% of the fathers still maintained positive relationships with the mother of their children, 44% had negative and even sometimes hostile relationships with them. I turn to the complicated issue of relationships between incarcerated fathers and their children's mothers in the next session.

Negative relationships with mother of child

Those who spoke of negative relationships with the mother of the child also spoke of how this complicated the process of building relationships with their children. For some of the respondents, the relationship with the mother had disintegrated so badly that the mothers would no longer allow the fathers to contact the children.

No. I have partial custody at home, I get them every other weekend, I don't — their mother moved, I don't know their address, we argue, she won't give me her address, stuff like that and apparently, I talked to my brother and she's told him "I'm moving back to [Country]." Or something, I don't know... I don't really know what's going on, so that's stressful... I mean I got Christmas — my son's birthday just passed, his [age], and I wanted to write him, like send a birthday card up to him, can't even see them to him. So that sucks. (31-year-old white male with 2 children)

So, I don't blame... my baby mom for finding somebody else, but, yeah, since

she found someone else, she hasn't had time to pick up the phone let me talk to my kids. (24-year-old Hispanic male with 2 children)

The respondents with negative relationships with the mothers of their children also spoke of domestic violence that occurred between them and the children's mothers.

I mean for my situation, I'm not gonna lie, the mother of my children kept punching me and punching and I kept wanting to leave, I gripped her up and told her listen go and she kept punching me so I'm not gonna lie, I smacked her. Do I know it was wrong, yes. (31-year-old white male with 2 children)

She used to abuse me physically, like she sliced me all that... We used to fight a lot. (28-year-old black male with 2 children)

While for other respondents, it was simply their inability to change their ways that led to a negative relationship with the mother of their children.

We were fighting a little bit, cause like I said, I wasn't there. She just had — our daughter died. Our first daughter died like six hours after she was born, and then I knocked her up again, so she was like upset that I wasn't there. She needed me. You know what I mean. I wasn't there, and then I'm — I'm lying or she could tell— she couldn't catch me, but she could tell I was doing something, and I wasn't supposed to be, and then, like I said when her brother told her I was getting high, we had a huge fight and then I— I was on the phone like every day. And I was talking to her one day, and she was in the hospital and the doctor make her have the baby prematurely, induced labor, like six months pregnant. So, she was going through that. Then the day the baby was born, I'm trying to get her to fucking get her sister to put money on somebody's book, so I can get high. And she — she hung up on me, and then we talked a little bit for like two weeks. The baby was in an incubator, so she was driving back and forth from [town] to [town], and I asked again. I was bitching about money, and she was like, "You know what? Fuck you." Hang up. I haven't talked to her since (45-year-old white male with 1 child)

Regardless of reasons why the relationship was no longer cordial, the desistance narratives that chronicled a negative relationship with the mother had a parallel theme of that negative relationship influencing the relationship with the child. Many of the fathers who had negative relationships with the mother of their children still hoped to build a relationship with their children but found the process complicated, and sometimes completely hindered, by the mother.

Positive relationships with child's mother

20% of the men had been able to maintain positive relationships with the mother. Many of the men maintained a positive relationship with the mother of their children because they were still in a romantic relationship with them. However, some men were no longer romantically involved with the mother and were still able to maintain a working relationship. This working relationship even came to be beneficial for their reentry process as the mothers were taking steps to help the men get back onto their feet.

I'm going to my daughter's mom's house until I can get a place of my own and get back to work. I'm lucky enough that she's gonna let me use the other bedroom there. (28-year-old white male with 2 children)

And my son's mom, we had a falling out right before I got locked up and we didn't talk for the first year I was locked up, but she contacted me six or seven months ago, and we've been getting along great. She's the person that's helping me, so that I don't have to go to a halfway house. She's paying for the first two weeks in a recovery house. I just put my home plan in yesterday and now, she's sending me money, and she's got money, she put money on the phone so I could talk to my son, so I could talk to her, and she's riding out. (37-year-old white male with 2 children)

Other respondents acknowledged that while their past actions had affected their relationships with the children's mothers, the moms were still willing to give the men a chance.

I've got a wonderful daughter. Her mom is— I dragged her through the mud for this long. We're not together, but she'll still always love me as a person. She didn't take that from me. (28-year-old white male with 1 child)

Me and her we have a relationship to whereas though I told her so much stuff she doesn't know whether to believe me or not. But I think she's willing to give me a chance because she want me to be in their lives and I wasn't to be in their lives. (47-year-old black male with 3 children)

For these men, having a working relationship with the mother of their children often allowed them another avenue for support. These mothers seemed to support the fathers in hopes that they could ultimately do better and be better for their children.

For some of the mothers, this meant helping to provide financially while for others it was simply giving the men another chance to prove themselves. Nonetheless, the fathers who maintained positive relationships with the mother of their children often spoke of not only their children but also the mothers in relation to their post-release lives.

The only reason to remain sober

For these men to be successful in remaining drug free and crime free post incarceration, they need to have a desire to remain sober for themselves. But a small number of men who were interviewed said quite honestly that their kids were the only lifeline they had to remain clean. Many insisted that if they didn't have their kids they would go back to substance use.

And that's like — for the first time, I always look out for myself. You know what I mean? I'm a selfish motherfucker, but now I don't want that. And if she don't let me see my daughter, then, I'm probably gonna say fuck it and start shooting heroin again. It's the reality of it. You know what I mean?
(45-year-old white male with 1 child)

That, if I don't have that, I know that I should say, fuck the maintenance and just shoot dope. I know I will because I have nothing new, no reason not to. If my kids don't want to be a part of my life, my family didn't want to be a part of my life, no matter what my decision is, no matter what I'm doing. I won't have a reason. I wouldn't if they rolled out on me and just said, Fuck off." I wouldn't even do right. I know I wouldn't. I wouldn't have the drive to do right. Not for myself, just fuck it. That's how it would be. (29-year-old white male with 2 children)

I don't know if I would have this same ambition to be clean and do the things — and go down the road if I didn't have them. (34-year-old white male with 1 child)

Across the desistance narratives, while the men spoke highly of their children as their primary motivating force to desist, they also spoke of other reasons to desist. The men wanted to become productive members of society, they had grown tired of the crime-incarceration cycle, or even the fact that they were aging. However, a small portion of the men lacked these motivations. Rather, they simply had their kids as their only motivating force. When faced with the reality that they might not be able to reunite with their children, these men were honest in that they would go back to substance use because they had no other motivations to keep them drug and crime free.

There were a variety of themes present across the desistance narratives that detailed the complex relationship between incarceration, desistance, and fatherhood. A large majority of the fathers interviewed wanted to (re)build relationships with their children post-release. Unfortunately, these desires were often complicated by other factors that strained their relationship with their children. Many men interviewed dealt with guilt due to their past actions that led them to miss important events in their children's lives, as well as their inability to provide financially for their children. These men also dealt with fear that they could ultimately lose their children entirely (either by custody or simply a disintegration of a relationship) or that their children would end up being negatively affected by their actions.

Both the guilt and fear that they consistently faced could drive the respondents to pursue desistance post- incarceration to build better relationships with their children. While these were negative motivators for the men, there were some positive motivators that were detailed throughout the desistance narratives. Many of the men had a desire to be better role models for their children. Although they represented something they didn't want their kids to be like at the beginning of their incarcerations, many of the men felt that they currently could provide a positive role model that would continue into their reentry journey. By staying drug and crime free once released, these men hoped to show their children that they could be positive and productive members of society. Some men had maintained good relationships with their children while incarcerated. These children, often older in age, realized that incarceration could allow their fathers to get the help that they needed. While these children noted that they wanted their fathers to return home, they first wanted their fathers to get help for their addictions. Nonetheless, they believed that their fathers had the potential to overcome their drug abuse and return to society. For these men, maintaining a drug and crime free lifestyle meant living up to their children's expectations and beliefs for them. To fail was to let their children down, and many men believed that their children didn't deserve to be let down once again.

Being a parent is not just having a relationship with the child, but also one with the other parent. Among these men, there were those with positive and negative relationships with the mother of their children. While some were still in romantic relationships with the mother of their child, many were not. For the men who had negative relationships with the children's mother, the relationship complicated reuniting with their children post-incarceration. Some of the mothers had simply cut off communication with the child or wouldn't allow the fathers to see their children. Others had simply gotten tired of the father's inability to change.

But for other men, the relationships with the mother were so bad that violence was involved, both physical and verbal. These men, despite their desire to reunite and create a bond with their children, found it difficult to do so because of the relationship they had with the mother of the children. On the other hand, some of the men maintained positive relationships with the mother of their children despite no longer being romantically involved. These men had found another support system that was encouraging them to get better for the sake of their children. Many of these mothers were supporting the men, not only mentally and emotionally, but also financially by helping them fund certain things in the reentry process. Though these mothers did not turn a blind eye to the fathers' past actions, they were willing to give them another chance to prove themselves because they wanted them to be involved in their children's lives. In sum, although it is clear from the fathers' narratives that children often act as an important "hook for change" toward a more conventional life, it is also apparent that staking one's desistance to fatherhood is often a precarious course. Relationships with mothers and the children themselves may be tenuous or uncertain, potentially derailing positive expectations the men developed in prison. Additionally, financial and caregiving responsibilities may be difficult or unrealized because of (1) the stigma attached to incarceration, (2) the limited opportunities associated with disadvantage, and (3) the personal deficits that initially brought the men into the criminal justice system. Even though the narratives reviewed in this study pointed overwhelmingly to children as a positive source of

change upon reentry, the challenges associated with fatherhood may explain why prior studies do not identify fatherhood as a strong correlate of criminal desistance.

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, the fatherhood role is a central component of the desistance narratives of the sampled inmates with children as they prepare to reenter their communities. 84% of the respondent fathers mentioned their children as the most important reason to desist post-incarceration. For these incarcerated men, they recognized the need to remain drug and crime free to (re)establish and maintain healthy relationships with their children. As for why fatherhood was important to these men, five themes emerged across the desistance narratives in varying prevalence: guilt, the desire to be a positive role model, fear, encouragement from their children, and the relationship with the children's mothers.

Guilt was by far the most prevalent theme, with 72% of the fathers discussing it in their narratives. The fathers discussed missing important events and milestones in their children's lives due to substance abuse and incarceration. This included birthdays and holidays, but also academic and life achievements such as graduation or passing the driving test. Three of the respondents had even missed the birth of a child due to incarceration. The fathers stated that, even when they weren't incarcerated, they weren't there for their children as much as they should've been due to their substance use. They expressed guilt that they weren't there for their children during these important moments, along with disappointment that they'd never be able to get these moments back.

The desire to be a positive role model was also an important theme as the incarcerated fathers recognized that they did not want their children to follow in their footsteps. They discussed how imperative it was to better themselves to keep their children on the right path. This included remaining drug and crime free post-incarceration, as well as getting a job or furthering their education. One respondent wanted to be a positive role model for his son and other kids around that age in the community.

He discussed wanting to talk to other kids in the community about his own experiences with substance use and incarceration and how these behaviors had affected both himself and his family.

Fear was discussed by the respondents in relation to them losing their kids, their kids hating or being ashamed of them, or their kids being affected by their actions. More positively, a few of the men (20%) were receiving encouragement from their children that they could use as motivation to desist. From the perspective of the incarcerated men, these children wanted their fathers to get the help needed while incarcerated so that the men could return home.

The respondents who could maintain a positive relationship with the mother of their children had a much clearer path to reunification with their children. While these fathers were no longer in a relationship with the mothers they managed to maintain a civil co-parenting relationship that ultimately allowed them access to their children. In addition, these fathers also found another route of help for the reentry process. These mothers helped by paying halfway house fees or even lending out the spare bedroom during the process.

Although nearly all the men expressed the desire to reunite with their children post-

incarceration, the process for many of these men would not be easy. 44% of the fathers had negative relationships with the mothers of their children, which complicated or completely prevented the reunification process. These respondents were dealing with domestic violence and custody issues with the mothers. Other respondents couldn't get into contact with the children because the mother's refused to allow it. One mother had moved and refused to give the father her new address, while another father attempted to call the children but found that the mother wouldn't answer the phone. Despite the genuine desire to reunite with their children once released, the path to reunification for these men remained unclear. Another factor that had the ability to complicate the reunification process was some fathers' inability to provide financially.

Throughout the narratives, the fathers spoke about how imperative it was to find a job post-release. They discussed many re-entry plans that would require funds, including paying for a place to live, medication, reliable transportation, and providing for their children. The men expressed guilt because they felt that they couldn't buy things that their children needed or wanted, such as clothes for the new school year or a car after they received their license. Finding a job post-release would help them provide for their children in ways they weren't previously able to while incarcerated. However, many of these men were going back into disadvantaged communities where there were already few opportunities. Their prior incarcerations, and the stigma associated with these experiences, would only further slim down the already few job opportunities, making it extremely hard for them to find adequate work. This inability to provide financially for their children could possibly hinder the reunification process with their children post-incarceration.

Currently, the TC program doesn't include parenthood and child reunification in its treatment curriculum. Based on the results of this study, it may be helpful to implement parenting sessions as a part of the program. This may help the participants who are fathers begin the reunification process with their children. Considering that the TC program occurs at the end of the men's sentences for most inmates, including more parenthood programming would be important to begin helping the fathers start the process of reuniting with their children. Utilizing parenting sessions in the TC program can help the men prepare for the role of being fathers in a controlled environment.

The narratives utilized in this study laid out the expectations of the respondent fathers for their reentry into their communities. The next step is to analyze how these expectations translated into reality and why. Two community interviews will be conducted with this study's respondents, one 3 months post-incarceration and the other 9 months post-incarceration. Using these interviews, we cannot understand the actual, rather than expected, reunification process. While some of the fathers will be able to draw on the relationship with their children to find success in remaining drug and crime free, other fathers will not and are greater risk of recidivism. These post-release interviews will help to further the understanding of the desistance and recidivism process. It will allow the analysis of how fatherhood plays a role in the men who recidivate as opposed to those who desist.

Future Research and Limitations

Despite the positive directions of the results presented in this study, there is still much to learn on the complex relationship between fatherhood, incarceration, and desistance. This study had a rather small sample size of 25 respondents. Further, the sample is limited to men with substance abuse issues participating in a TC. As such, the findings presented may not be generalizable to the general inmate population.

The narratives presented in this study were produced while the men were incarcerated. Thus, they represent the expectations of these men for their reentry process. Going forward, it will be necessary to analyze how these expectations translate into reality and why. While some of the fathers will be able to draw on their relationships with their children to find success in remaining drug and crime free, others will not. Using the two community interviews it will be possible to further analyze how fatherhood plays a role in the men who will desist as opposed to those who will not.

Conclusion

In sum, the fathers in this study hope to reunite with their children post- incarceration. The hope at having a healthy relationship with their children is a strong motivating force for these fathers to remain drug and crime free post-incarceration. However, prior relationships with mothers and children and financial responsibilities could complicate the reunification process. The fathers who are unable to reestablish this relationship may ultimately lose the motivation to desist once back into their communities. Without a motivation to desist, it is highly likely that these men will return to substance abuse which will almost inevitably lead back to crime.

Understanding recidivism has become a major criminological concern. This study is particularly unique because the in-prison interviews happen right before the release of the respondent fathers. So, the expectations of the men are captured at a major transitional period in their lives. If it is possible that fatherhood can act as motivation to desist then it is necessary for advocates in the criminal justice field to take advantage of this. However, if this proves too complicated of a variable then these advocates must find another motivation to help those in this situation desist.

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