

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: INCARCERATION AND PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF  
SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Incarceration impacts families in a number of different ways ranging from emotional distress, economic challenges, and social stigma. The purpose of this analysis was to explore how men's perceptions of support from their partners during incarceration and community reentry shape intimate partnerships. Using secondary data content analysis, a sample of 20 fathers from the Fathers and Families Resource and Research Center study dataset has been examined (Roy, 2002-2004). Using family stress theory and symbolic interactionism, qualitative methods were used to examine life history interviews.

Interviews were coded for themes related to past incarceration, intimate partnerships, and social support. Overall, men reported feeling supported in their roles as partners across their relationship trajectories and support shifted occurred from their roles as romantic partners to their roles as co-parents. Community reentry was an especially significant time that support mattered due to the recommitments that many made to fatherhood during this process.

INCARCERATION AND PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS: A QUALITATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science  
2007

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## Acknowledgements

First, to Dr. Kevin Roy, I would like to say a huge thank you for putting forth your time and energy to help me complete this study. Your expertise with qualitative work is remarkable and I am very fortunate to have received your guidance throughout the process. Thank you!

To my committee members, Dr. Norman Epstein and Dr. Carol Werlinich, I thank you also for your time and commitment throughout the course of my study in ensuring that I came out with something that I could be proud of. Having such a supportive committee helped me tremendously, and I cannot imagine having completed this project with you both behind me. Thank you!

To my partner Kevin, I love you very much and appreciate the support you gave me as I went through this process. It was not always easy, but you stuck by me and helped when no one else was there and I simply cannot thank you enough for that. I am positive that I would not have completed this without you. Thank you so very much!

To dad, mom, and sister, I thank you all for showing support and pride for all of my achievements. It has been so hard to not be with you all throughout this process, but your patience and understanding has been incredibly helpful. I would not be where I am today without each of you and it really helps to have such a strong and stable family behind me, so I thank you for that. I love you all!

To my handsome cat Tails, even though you literally chewed through my work at times, you always did have a way of showing your support the best way you knew how. I appreciate your feline wisdom too; you knew that playing fetch with you would give me needed laughs, and you knew that blocking my view of my laptop screen would give me well overdue breaks. Thanks for helping me through this process. What can I say – you're the best!

And last, but certainly not least, a huge thank you to the Class of 2005! The eight of you have been my family away from home for nearly two years now and I thank God to have been fortunate enough to have you in my lives throughout this process. You gave hugs when they were needed, absorbed tears when they were shed, and created laughter when spirits were down. There are simply no words to express my gratitude for your support. You are such beautiful, talented, and special people and I love and thank you all!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An estimated 1.5 million children in the United States had a parent in prison in 1999 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Almost 3.6 million parents were under some form of correctional supervision, including those in prisons, jails, or on probation or parole (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Add to that continuing trends of mass imprisonment in the United States since the 1970s (Mauer, 2004; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001), and one can begin to imagine the large and increasing numbers of families affected by incarceration today. One can also imagine that with so many children affected by incarceration and so many parents behind bars or under some form of correctional supervision, there may be a similar number of parents of the same children who are not incarcerated. “When asked who is currently caring for their minor children, over 80% of inmate parents said that their child was now living with the child’s other parent” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000, p. 4). Thus, there are likely millions of co-parenting and intimate partner relationships affected by incarceration in this country.

Not only are these relationships of particular concern, but so are the populations of low-income and minority families who are most heavily affected by incarceration in the United States as well (Braman & Wood, 2003; Mendez, 2000; Nurse, 2002; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2000), Black children were almost 9 times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than White children, with 7% of all Black children having a parent in prison in 1999. Moreover, nearly half (44%) of all incarcerated parents in 1999 were African American (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).



A review of the literature makes it clear that incarceration can have detrimental effects on families. Taken at a broad level, the most commonly reported effects of incarceration on families include physical and structural constraints, stigma and loss of social support, and economic challenges (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Hairston, 2003; Rosen, 2001; Travis & Waul, 2003). Incarceration affects those who have been imprisoned, children of incarcerated parents, and partners in co-parenting and intimate relationships in negative ways. For those who have been incarcerated, specifically men, imprisonment can have a number of effects. The literature shows that changes often take place in their roles as intimate partners and parents (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Nurse, 2002; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Furthermore, they may be at particular risk of stigmatization, recidivism, economic hardship, mental illness, and even physical health declines (Bahr, Armstrong, Gibbs, Harris, & Fisher, 2005; Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2006; Travis & Waul, 2003). For children of incarcerated parents, the most commonly cited effects of parental incarceration include problems associated with the physical removal of the parent, emotional challenges such as depression and low self-esteem, and economic challenges (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005; Nurse, 2002; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). For incarcerated men and their partners, including co-parenting and intimate relationship partners, incarceration has been associated with decreased contact, lowered relationship trust, decreased opportunities for relationship maintenance, and problems related to personal autonomy and power differences (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Comfort et

al., 2005; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Rosen, 2001; Segrin & Flora, 2001; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

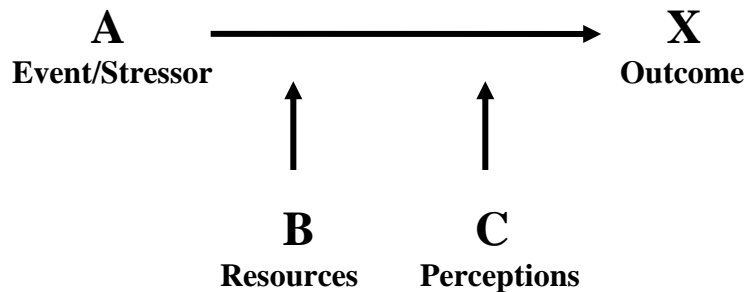
This study is important because there is an apparent gap in the literature regarding incarceration and families. Specifically, there is little explicit focus on men's perceptions of the processes that occur in partner relationships during incarceration and community reentry (Nurse, 2002; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Many partner relationships do not survive incarceration (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003). A critical factor in this may be the role of incarcerated men's perceptions of social support from their partners. What role does social support between partners play during male incarceration and reentry? It may not be enough for women to say that they support their incarcerated or formerly incarcerated partners; the key may be how men interpret the efforts (or lack thereof) of their partners to show support for their roles as intimate partners and as fathers.

The purpose of this study, then, has been to explore how men's perceptions of support from their partners during incarceration and reentry shape co-parenting and intimate partner relationships. Qualitative analysis methods were used to explore themes and describe the processes that shape these relationships during incarceration and reentry. A greater understanding of these processes is important because it may help generate hypotheses for further studies and provide useful information for the development of interventions for similar populations.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Family Stress Theory*

Family stress theory is one of major theories which has been used to explain the patterns and behaviors of families. In the current study, it is used as one way in which the role of men's perceptions of social support during incarceration and reentry may be understood. The major contribution to this model was offered in the 1950s by sociologist Reuben Hill. Hill developed an ABC-X model of family stress that is still very applicable to contemporary families (Shehan, 2002). In his model, "A" represents an event or stressor to which a family is exposed, "B" represents a family's resources which are available to cope with the event, "C" represents how a family defines or perceives the event, and "X" represents the outcome of the event and whether or not it becomes a family crisis (McDonald, 2001). Thus, although all families will face stressful events at some point during their lifespan; whether such events turn into crises depends upon a particular family's coping mechanisms and perceptions of the events.



**Figure 1** – Hill's ABC-X model of family stress shows how a family's resources and perceptions of stressors influence potential family crises.

It is important to note that within Hill's conceptualization of family stress theory stressful events can be chronic or acute, internal or external, and at times predictable (McDonald, 2001). Similarly, with male incarceration periods of imprisonment may be

recurring or one-time events, and in some cases predictable to an extent. Though one interpretation of this model may consider incarceration an internal stressor, here incarceration is considered an external family stressor. The former interpretation is such because internal stressors are thought to occur within the family such as illnesses, and military deployment, while external stressors are deemed to be larger macro-level events such as economic recessions, natural disasters, and social disorder (McDonald, 2001).

A simple, yet very useful advancement to Hill's model of family stress was offered by Hamilton McCubbin and Joan Patterson with their concept of “pile up” (Shehan, 2002). Using Hill's ABC-X model, “B” and “C” will become drained if a family is continually exposed to stressful events, as these events and their effects may “pile up” over time. In other words, the coping resources and optimistic perceptions that a family has to deal with stressors may be depleted over time with a large number of stressful events. Indeed, one can imagine the strain that is likely exerted upon the resources and perceptions within partner relationships when one partner's incarceration is one of a myriad of stressors such as job loss, unsafe surroundings, racial and class-based discrimination, family illnesses and deaths, and poverty, especially if incarceration occurs as a chronic stressor, yet these factors are present in high amounts in the lives of the current study's participants. Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) interviewed families affected by partner incarceration and found that they had come across what they termed a “hidden pocket” of families who were particularly vulnerable due to accumulations of risks from adverse conditions. For many families affected by incarceration the removal of a family member represents only one of a number of serious stressors that often exist prior to incarceration (Braman & Wood, 2003), rendering

incarceration an event that may pile upon other events and diminish families' recovery abilities.

For the purposes of this study then, male incarceration is considered the "A," or stressor through which a partner relationship may be affected. Women's social support for men in their roles as co-parenting and intimate relationship partners will be the "B" or resources within this model. Men's perceptions of social support from women will represent the "C" in this model. And finally, the processes that men describe as occurring during incarceration and reentry will be the outcome or "X."

### *Symbolic Interactionism*

The symbolic-interactionist framework represents another way to examine families. The basic premise of symbolic-interactionism is that individuals create and affect the structure of their larger society (Neuman, 2003). Influence is thought to flow from the individual to the larger society. While structure is addressed in this framework, the importance of social processes are emphasized more so than structure. There is particular emphasis on the role of perceptions in this framework, as they are considered the guiding forces for people's actions.

A principal concept of symbolic-interactionism is known as the "definition of the situation" (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). According to the creator of this concept, William Thomas, people define their own realities based on their individual beliefs about situations. Thus, different people experience the same situations differently, arrive at varying conclusions, and act based on these individually-based conclusions. Furthermore, if someone defines a situation as real, then it is real, at least to them. For example, Nurse (2002) studied parenting strategies from within the California juvenile

justice system and found that many paroled fathers had adopted a “siege mentality” against women in which they perceived the actions of women in their lives as purposeful attempts to cause them stress. Yet another example of how the “definition of the situation” concept can appear in families affected by incarceration is found in Roy and Dyson’s (2005) analysis of incarcerated fathers. The occurrence of maternal gatekeeping, or efforts of the mothers to prevent the fathers from having contact with their children, led many of the fathers to define their situations as ones in which they were powerless fathers.

Another important symbolic interactionist concept that guided the current analysis was Charles Cooley’s “looking glass self” in which a person's self-concept is largely dependent on interactions with others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). This concept includes three parts: (1) how we imagine and think we look to others, (2) how we think others judge us, and (3) how we feel about the judgment of others. Furthermore, Cooley argued that the family is the primary group for the formation of one's self-concept, making the family a powerful force for individuals and ultimately the larger society. Following these principles then, one may assume that incarcerated men who imagine that others’ appraisals of them are negative would be more likely to have negative self-concepts, particularly if these “others” are family members. However, Rose and Clear (2003) found that in some cases incarceration could lead to positive changes in the self-perceptions of former inmates, as many inmates reportedly developed new personal narratives about their lives which others around them attribute directly to their incarceration. Rose and Clear (2003) report that incarceration did in fact lead to feelings of empowerment for some inmates. Following Cooley’s principles of the “looking glass

self,” one may also assume that interactions with family members are paramount to men’s self-concepts. Indeed, Dyer (2005) found that incarcerated fathers had interruptions in their processes of identity confirmation as fathers because they could not perform tasks such as providing financial support for their children. Thus, for purposes of the current study men’s perceptions will be a focus of analysis, and careful attention will be placed on the potential effects of these perceptions on men’s self-concepts.

## Literature Review

### *Incarceration and Men*

The consequences of incarceration in the United States are particularly far-reaching for men, as they have traditionally comprised the largest proportions of imprisoned persons in this country (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). For the purposes of the current study, it is important to know who these men are both as intimate partners and as fathers. It is also important to take a look at life conditions prior to incarceration, what changes occur for these men during periods of incarceration, and what changes occur during the process of reentry into their communities. The following presents our knowledge to date within each of these areas.

### *Demographic Information*

Current statistics reflect that between men and women, men continue to make up the larger proportion of individuals incarcerated in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). There were almost 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States at the end of the year 2005 and men made up approximately 93% of this population, incarcerated at rates 14 times higher than women (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). For the aims of the current study, it is important to note the particularly large impact of

incarceration on African American men. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2006), at the end of 2005 “Black inmates represented an estimated 40% of all inmates with a sentence of more than 1 year” and “Black males (547,200) outnumbered white males (459,700) and Hispanic males (279,000) among inmates with a sentence of more than 1 year” (p. 8). Furthermore, statistics show that young Black males are at particular risk of being affected by incarceration, as 8% of young Black males between the ages of 25 and 29 were imprisoned at the end of 2005 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). Finally, “government figures now show that a Black male born today has a one in three chance of spending at least a year in prison at some point in his life” (Mauer, 2004, p. 7).

#### *Pre-incarceration Life Conditions*

Parental and partner status are two important pre-incarceration life conditions to consider when reviewing the literature concerning incarcerated men. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2000), “In 1999 an estimated 721,500 State and Federal prisoners were parents to 1,498,800 children under age 18” (p. 1). In fact, over half of both state and federal prisoners reported having minor children in 1999. The figures show that the overwhelming majority (approximately 93% at both the state and federal levels) of these incarcerated parents were fathers. Furthermore, the majority of these incarcerated parents were African American, with 49% at the state and 44% at the federal level of incarcerated parents being African Americans. In terms of parent-child living arrangements, 44% of incarcerated parents at the state level and 55% of incarcerated fathers at the federal level reported living with their minor children prior to their imprisonment.



According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2000), incarcerated parents at the state level reported the following marital statuses in 1997: 23% reported being married, 28% reported being divorced or separated, and 48% reported that they had never been married. Incarcerated parents at the federal level reported the following marital statuses: 36% reported being married, 25% reported being divorced or separated, and 38% reported that they had never been married. It is important to note that these figures reflect the total population of incarcerated parents in 1997, including both mothers and fathers.

However, Day et al. (2005) studied a sample of 51 incarcerated fathers and found different marital status figures. The men in this sample reported their partner relationship statuses prior to their incarceration, and only about 10% reported being married. Furthermore, 20% reported cohabitation or dating relationships with partners prior to incarceration, 40% reported that they were divorced or legally separated, and the remaining 30% of men refused to comment on the status of their relationships or reported being friends with the mother of their children. Additionally, 56% of the men in this sample reported having just one child with the partners in question for the study, and almost 50% of the men reported having at least one other child with another partner in a different household. Day et. al. (2005) argue that these findings display the great complexity of relationships and “disparate loyalties” for incarcerated men in their sample.

When comparing the reports of these 51 fathers to the marital status statistics for incarcerated parents reported by the U.S. Department of Justice, it very likely that incarcerated fathers are far less likely to be married than incarcerated mothers, and it is clear that the chances of incarcerated fathers being divorced, separated, or never married

are far greater than their chances of being married upon entering prison. Furthermore, the findings of Day et al. (2005) point to the fact that simply considering marital status as does the U.S. Department of Justice does not tell the entire story of incarcerated fathers' intimate partner relationships prior to incarceration. It is likely that many of the 48% and 38% of partners at the state and federal levels (respectively) who reported being in the "never married" category were in cohabitating or dating relationships with intimate partners. In fact, in the sample of Day et al. (2005), 40% of the men reported living with partners before incarceration and 15% reported having lived with their partners at least five years before imprisonment.

In addition to parental and partner status, economic and educational status are other important pre-incarceration life conditions to consider within this body of literature. In 1997, unemployment rates for fathers prior to incarceration were reportedly high (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Both fathers in state and federal prisons reported unemployment rates around 26% before they were imprisoned. However, the reverse side of these figures indicates that the majority of fathers imprisoned in 1997 were in fact employed upon entry. Of those who were employed, 61% of fathers in state prisons and 64% of fathers in federal prisons reported full-time employment before their incarceration. The U.S. Department of Justice also collected data on the sources of income that imprisoned fathers reported in 1997 and in the month before their most recent arrests; large percentages of men reported that at least some of their income came from illegal sources (27% and 31% at the state and federal levels, respectively). Other sources of income reported were wages/salaries (68% at both the state and federal levels), transfer payments such as Social Security, Supplemental Social Security income, and

welfare (13% state, 7% federal), and income from family and friends (18% state, 13% federal). Over half (53%) of fathers in state facilities and just under half (45%) of fathers in federal facilities reported having personal incomes of less than \$1,000 before their imprisonment. Overall, these figures show that the economic picture for many incarcerated fathers is not particularly positive at the time of their imprisonment, and reliance on alternative forms of income, especially illegal forms, is quite high.

In terms of education, most parents in both state and federal correctional facilities did not have a high school diploma in 1997 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Of incarcerated parents who reported not having high school diplomas, approximately 12% at both the state and federal levels reported educational attainment of 8<sup>th</sup> grade or lower. Of the remaining parents, 27% and 16% at the state and federal levels (respectively) reported some high school-level education, and 31% and 27% at the state and federal levels (respectively) reported having attained a GED. Combining the two categories of high school graduates and those with some college or more, approximately 20% of incarcerated parents at the state and 45% at the federal level fall into this category. An interesting point to note with these figures is that “college attendance was nearly twice as high among parents in Federal prison” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000, p. 3).

### *Health Status*

Many scholars have noted the presence of risk factors in the lives of incarcerated men prior to their periods of imprisonment. The most commonly noted health-related risk factors were mental illnesses, developmental disabilities, substance abuse problems, and infectious diseases (Day et al., 2005; Gaes & Kendig, 2003; Haney, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003; U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). According to Haney (2003), “mental

illness and developmental disability represent the largest categories of disabilities among prisoners” (p. 50). There is no clear consensus on the prevalence of mental illnesses (such as depression and bipolar disorder) and developmental delays among inmates in correctional facilities. However, Haney says that “based on the various studies and estimates, it is probably safe to assume that up to 20 percent of the current prisoner population nationally suffer from either some sort of significant mental or psychological disorder or a developmental disability” (2003, p. 52).

Among incarcerated men who are fathers, 13.4% at the state level and 5.6% at the federal level reported mental illness (classified as a mental or emotional condition or past admittance to a mental hospital or treatment program) in 1997 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Prior substance abuse problems are highly prevalent for incarcerated men as well, with nearly 70% of state male inmates and 58% of federal male inmates reporting regular substance use prior to incarceration in 1997 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). Estimates of the rates of people in prisons with infectious diseases vary. However, Travis and Waul (2003) report, “In 1997, nearly one-quarter of all people living with HIV or AIDS, nearly one-third of people with hepatitis C, and more than one-third of those with tuberculosis were released from prison or jail that year” (p. 9). This means that the rates of infectious diseases amongst inmate populations are likely very high in U.S. jails and prisons.

#### *Changes during Incarceration*

Half of the offenses that landed men in prison in 2005 were violent offenses such as murder, robbery, assault, and rape (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). However, an equally large proportion of men incarcerated in 2005 were arrested for non-violent

offenses. Property and drug-related charges composed 40% of the offenses for which men were imprisoned and “prisoners sentenced for drug offenses constitute the largest group of Federal inmates (55%) in 2003” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006, p. 10). Due to mandatory sentencing policies in the United States as a result of “get tough” policies, sentences for offenders, particularly drug offenders, are lengthier than ever (Mauer, 2004). During imprisonment, aside from the obvious change of the physical removal of the inmate from his family, many psychological changes can occur for men in their roles as partners and in their roles as fathers.

*Partner role changes.* One of the most profound psychological changes that occur for incarcerated men is a process referred to as “institutionalization” (Haney, 2003). It may also be referred to as “prisonization” when it takes place in correctional settings, but in general “it is the shorthand expression for the broad, negative psychological effects of imprisonment” and “involves the incorporation of the norms of prison life into one’s habits of thinking, feeling, and acting” (Haney, 2003, p. 38). Seven of the “psychological adaptations” of institutionalization were outlined by Haney (2003):

...dependence on institutional structure and contingencies; hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust, and suspicion; emotional overcontrol, alienation, and psychological distancing; social withdrawal and isolation; incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture; diminished sense of self-worth and personal value; posttraumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment. (pp. 40-45)

Haney (2003) points out that the process of institutionalization is not inherently pathological, as it allows prisoners to adapt to and function in the conditions of life while incarcerated. However, dysfunctionality can occur with cases in which the inmate cannot

readjust or properly function to life after incarceration. Long before release, however, this process can likely disrupt relations between inmates and their partners during periods of incarceration. For example, the learned behaviors of hiding one's intimate feelings and emotional reactions (Haney, 2003) may cause communication problems between inmates and their partners. Segrin and Flora (2001) found that the longer married inmates were incarcerated and the longer the process of prisonization occurred, the more loneliness inmates reported feeling. They speculate that more time away from one's spouse and within the institution, the more likely there will be "a greater discrepancy between desired and achieved intimacy with that spouse" (p. 166). Thus, prisonization can change incarcerated men's roles as partners in co-parenting or intimate relationships by decreasing the amounts of intimacy and emotional connections they are capable of sharing.

Another way in which incarceration may potentially change men's roles as partners is through the process of "hard timing." Nurse (2002) identified this process among imprisoned young men in California and described it as a process whereby they intentionally cut themselves off from their family and friends as a psychological coping strategy to manage personal feelings of guilt and absence. Nurse (2002) found that hard timing can block interactions with inmates' children. However, interactions with men's partners are probably just as likely to be blocked by hard timing when it occurs.

Other changes can potentially occur in partner relationships during incarceration due to the prevalence of "misogynistic talk" among male inmates. This term refers to the practice of inmates speaking of women in negative, exploitive ways in order to assert their masculinity and power among fellow inmates and bond with other men in prison

(Nurse, 2002). This talk can influence the perceptions of some inmates, particularly if they are highly impressionable, and these changed perceptions may in turn influence the ways that men interact and relate to their partners, leading to decreased relationship functioning.

*Father role changes.* Several scholars have reported that men's perceptions of themselves as fathers often change during incarceration (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Dyer, 2005; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002). Dyer (2005) noted that for fathers who are incarcerated, the process of identity confirmation as a father may be severely interrupted, leading to negative outcomes for children and men alike. For example, if a man cannot provide financial support for his children, a central responsibility of fatherhood for many men, he may be unable to psychologically reconcile the difference between his expectations of what a father "should" be and his appraisal of what kind of father he actually is, leaving him unable to confirm his identity as a father. The interruption of the father identity confirmation process may even lead some incarcerated fathers to completely abandon their roles as fathers (Dyer, 2005).

Hairston (2003) also reported that the literature documented a similar process occurring for incarcerated fathers within the literature and noted that many fathers reject seeing or contacting their children on the basis of reasons such as that visits will be too emotionally painful for themselves or their children, and that there is little they can provide for their children while imprisoned and they will make up for their absence post-incarceration. Indeed, Arditti, Smock, and Parkman (2005) and Nurse (2002) found many cases in their samples in which incarcerated fathers reported feelings of powerlessness in their father roles and imagined their releases as opportunities to start

over and be better fathers. Interestingly, while incarceration removes fathers from their families and often challenges men's perceptions of themselves as fathers, Nurse (2002) found that many men receive support and positive messages from other incarcerated men for being fathers. However, these messages are often in complete contrast to the messages they receive about being relationship partners, as will be discussed later.

### *Changes during Reentry*

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2004), "at least 95% of all State prisoners will be released from prison at some point" (p. 7). In 2001, nearly 600,000 State prisoners were released after serving sentences. Many studies have shown that the process of reentry into communities can be a difficult and very challenging transition for men to face, especially for men who are fathers (Nurse, 2002; Rose & Clear, 2003; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2003). The following is a review of reentry changes that have been found to occur for incarcerated men including changes in their roles as partners, as fathers, and changes in other areas as well.

*Partner role changes.* Nurse (2002) found that upon reentry men often felt tremendous pressure to live up to the high expectations that they set for themselves to be better partners. During their imprisonment and separation from their partners, there may have been promises made to their girlfriends, wives, or the mothers of their children which they find hard to keep during reentry. This can lead to breakups or divorces for couples, or interruptions in contact with co-parents. Nurse argues that "the association between prison and family dissolution is particularly disturbing given evidence showing that strong family relations may be the key to helping men make a successful transition



out of prison” (2002, p. 5). Thus, men’s appraisals of themselves during reentry are especially important to the maintenance of partner relationships.

*Father role changes.* Men’s roles as fathers may change during the transition from incarceration to family life. As stated earlier, fathers often have great optimism and high expectations of themselves as fathers upon release from prison, some even viewing their release as a “rebirth” of sorts in their roles as fathers (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Nurse, 2002). However, during the process of reentry, feelings of disappointment are common as fathers may feel that they have let themselves and others down by not living up to their own standards of fathers (Dyer, 2005; Nurse, 2002).

However, social support from a father’s network of family and friends, particularly from the mother of his children can increase the chances that fathers can actually fulfill their expectations of themselves as parents post-release. For example, Roy and Dyson (2005) interviewed fathers in a work-release program, and nearly three-quarters of the men reported that their children’s mothers encouraged their involvement as fathers. Their findings showed that “support for paternal involvement offered incarcerated fathers hope for a meaningful family role after release from the facility” (p. 301). Furthermore, Roy and Dyson point out that the meanings attached to this support of their father roles were key for these men: “emotional support from current or former partners...encouraged men’s parenting, if only in that it suggested that children’s mothers understood their stress, confusion, loneliness, and anger” (p. 304).

Overall, it is unclear exactly how many fathers make successful transitions out of prison and into active parenting roles during reentry. However, based on the literature it seems reasonable to assume that the major determining factors in whether successful

return to the parenting role takes place after release from prison include the state of the mother-father relationship, fathers' pre-incarceration involvement with their children, and perceived social support of the father for his parenting role (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Nurse, 2002; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

*Other changes.* There are several other important areas to consider when examining men's reentry into communities following incarceration. One is the high prevalence of stigma for formerly incarcerated men. Rose and Clear (2003) examined stigmatization of released inmates and found that:

...those individuals who feel stigmatized may deal with it in one of four ways: They may (1) actively try to change the others' opinions, (2) go on about their business, disregarding these opinions, (3) isolate themselves from others who judge them, or (4) move to a new community and start over. (p. 326)

Stigma holds serious consequences for men reentering their communities, as studies have shown that securing employment and housing for former inmates can be very difficult and at times impossible due to stigmatization (Bahr et al., 2005; Rose & Clear, 2003). However, more information is needed that examines the impact of stigmatization on former inmates, as most of the current literature concerning its impact focuses most heavily on inmates' partners and children (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Travis & Waul, 2003).

Recidivism is another important reentry consideration. National recidivism rates are high, as the U.S. Department of Justice report that "In a 15 State study, over two-thirds of released prisoners were rearrested within three years" (2004, p. 20). There is a clear association between successful reintegration back into communities and lower

recidivism rates, yet there seem to be few programs to promote such success for prison inmates (Day et. al. 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003). In their sample, Day et. al. (2005) conducted an 18 month follow-up on the formerly incarcerated men and found that 20 of the 51 men in the sample were back in the prison system. Similarly, Bahr et. al. (2005) reported approximately 20% of the men in their sample were reincarcerated three months after their initial release from prison. They report that variables associated with avoiding recidivism include close family relationships, high quality parent-child relationships, employment, and stable housing, while variables linked to recidivism include socializing with friends at least four times per week, conflicted family relationships, having family members on probation or incarcerated, and the perceived difficulty in remaining drug-free.

The economic situation of inmates returning to their communities is another important consideration, as financial stability is often absent during the reentry process (Bahr et al., 2005; Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2006; Rose & Clear, 2003). Geller, Garfinkel, and Western (2006) found that employment rates of formerly incarcerated men are about six percentage points lower than for similar men who have not been incarcerated. Furthermore, incarceration has been found to be associated with a 14-26 % decline in hourly wages (Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2006). The economic situation for inmates during community reentry may create feelings of disappointment towards themselves (Nurse, 2002). The situation is further complicated by the stigma that prevents employment for many former inmates upon reentry (Bahr et al., 2005; Rose & Clear, 2003).

Physical health problems can make reentry more challenging as well for incarcerated men, as some return to their communities with infectious diseases contracted during imprisonment or substance addiction problems which were present upon beginning their sentences, but left untreated during incarceration (Day et al., 2005; Haney, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). Moreover, little access to medical care may exacerbate physical health problems. In fact, access to medical care in their communities may be so limited that incarceration may actually improve the medical attention that inmates receive overall, as many receive more medical exams and visits with health care professionals while in prison than in their own communities (Travis & Waul, 2003).

### *Incarceration and Families*

Many studies have examined the impact of incarceration on families (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Day et al., 2005; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Rosen, 2001; Travis & Waul, 2003). A review of this body of literature reveals three major impacts of the incarceration of a family member on families. These include physical and structural constraints, loss of social support and stigma, and economic challenges.

#### *Physical and Structural Constraints*

One of the most apparent consequences of incarceration of a family member for surviving family members is the physical absence of the incarcerated member. This represents what Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest (2003) call a “primary loss” meaning the imprisoned member is physically no longer present within the family system. One side of the physical loss of an incarcerated family member often manifests itself when family members attempt to see the incarcerated member. Many have reported that correctional institutions severely limit or deny the families’ opportunity to see inmates in various

ways, such as strict visiting rules and hours and having unplanned security lockdowns (Day et al., 2005; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Rosen, 2001). Indeed, as Rosen (2001) points out, “prison officials are the absolute gatekeepers to visitation and are entitled to exclude any visitor on the grounds of security” (p. 71). Another side of the physical loss of incarcerated family members is the ambiguous nature of the loss (Boss, 1999). As Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) point out, this loss may be considered ambiguous because it “remains unclear, indeterminate, and unvalidated by the community” (p. 196). The problem of uncertainty is particularly pervasive for families with incarcerated members because quite often there is vagueness about how long a family member will be imprisoned due to the lack of understanding of the criminal justice system and misinformation regarding sentencing terms and conditions (Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002).

#### *Stigma and Loss of Social Support*

Another major impact of incarceration for families is the loss of social support and the stigma associated with having an incarcerated member (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Travis & Waul, 2003). Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest (2003) claim that the loss of a family member due to imprisonment is different from loss due to illness or death in that the family often does not receive sympathy or support for this loss, and they are shamed. The stigma of having an incarcerated member can be so strong that families may not disclose that one of their members is incarcerated, make attempts to hide the incarceration, or avoid relations with others all together (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Hairston, 2003).

Loss of social support and stigma for children and partners specifically will be discussed in more detail later.

### *Economic Challenges*

A third major impact of incarceration on families is economic hardship. Incarceration removes the economic support of the adult who has been incarcerated, creates single-parent households, and removes the flow of child-support for many families (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Nurse, 2002). Aside from these obvious consequences, Hairston (2003) noted that, “financial problems are greatest for those families that try to maintain the convicted individual as a family member and for families where the imprisoned family member has functioned in responsible parenting roles prior to imprisonment” (p. 264). For example, relatives who provide care for the children of inmates while they are imprisoned often face the financial conflict of finding it too hard to maintain parent-child relationships when a parent is imprisoned because phone calls and visits can be very expensive. Additionally, relatives may end up covering mandatory state and federal in-prison costs of family members including health care, institutional fines, and child support “when corrections departments collect money for those services and items by placing a levy on all monies that are deposited into prisoners’ financial accounts” (Hairston, 2003, p. 266).

### *Incarceration and Children*

The greatest wealth of information related to incarceration and families pertains to the effects of parental incarceration on children. At the end of 1999, nearly 1.5 million children in the United States had an incarcerated father (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). “Black children (7.0%) were nearly 9 times more likely to have a parent in prison

than white children (0.8%)” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000, p. 2). Within the literature regarding the effects of parental incarceration on children, the most common finding is that parental incarceration has negative outcomes for children (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Eddy & Reid, 2003; Hairston, 2003; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). Both short-term and long-term consequences have been found.

### *Short-Term Consequences*

There is little information regarding the short-term consequences of incarceration of a parent for children such as what children experience during the initial stage of arrest or during the time that they first become aware of the incarceration. However, Jose-Kampfner (1995) reported stress reactions including flashbacks and nightmares among a sample of 30 children who had witnessed their mother’s arrest. There are likely differences though in the numbers of child witnesses and levels of stress-related symptoms between children who have witnessed their mother being arrested and those who have witnessed their father being arrested depending on children’s individual relationships with their mothers and fathers; information is needed in this area to shed light on these differences. Likewise, more information is needed concerning the reactions and consequences that children experience when they first become aware that a parent has been incarcerated. Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2003) report that many experts disagree over the appropriate way to disclose a parent’s incarceration to a child and if it should be disclosed at all to some children. Furthermore, they report that when children are in fact made aware of a parent’s imprisonment (typically by their mother regarding their father’s imprisonment) there is often vagueness or deception within the explanations

which may be harmful to the children's psychological abilities to cope with parental incarceration.

### *Long-Term Consequences*

*Emotional challenges.* The greatest body of information concerns the long-term consequences of parental incarceration for children. The most commonly cited consequences are emotional and economic challenges. Nearly every study concerning the effects of parental incarceration on children cites the emotional difficulties faced by these children. These difficulties include depression, low self-esteem, emotional withdrawal, disruptive behavior in school, juvenile delinquency and other anti-social behaviors, and that these symptoms occur more frequently among populations of children with incarcerated parents than those without incarcerated parents (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Eddy & Reid, 2003; Hairston, 2003; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). These difficulties vary somewhat depending on the age, gender, and environmental conditions in which children exist (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). There are a variety of explanations for the higher occurrence of these emotional difficulties in children with incarcerated parents. One reason may be the "state of extended uncertainty" that children are often in when waiting for an incarcerated parent's unpredictable return (Braman & Wood, 2003, p. 182). Another may be the fact that children of incarcerated parents experience social stigma associated with their parent's incarceration (Braman & Wood, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). Yet another justification for the higher rate of emotional difficulties in children of incarcerated parents versus those without incarcerated parents may be the negative state of relationships that often exist between the parents in families affected by incarceration. The state of these



relationships will be described in further detail in the section “Incarceration and Partners.”

However, it is important to note here that children’s difficulties may be related to the “package deal:” many incarcerated men consider their children and the mothers of their children an inseparable unit (Furstenberg, 1995). As a part of this “package deal,” the children of incarcerated fathers may experience limited contact with their fathers when the relations between their parents are negative or weakened. In this way the parent-child relationship is inextricably tied to the mother-father relationship.

Aside from parents’ relationships with one another, there may be other parent-related explanations for the emotional difficulties that children of incarcerated parents experience. One is the identity disruptions of men as fathers which cause many men to be emotionally unavailable for their children even when opportunities are present (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Dyer, 2005; Hairston, 2003). Another is the stress associated with not only losing one parent to imprisonment, but also losses in the other parent on an emotional level. According to Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003), children of incarcerated parents have “...to contend both with the primary loss of a parent and changes in their relationship with the survivor parent...because most survivor parents [are] poor and overwhelmed with responsibilities” (p. 201). Add these difficulties to the fact that visitation in correctional facilities is hardly ever child-friendly to begin with (Nurse, 2002; Rosen, 2001), and one can see how easy it may be for children of incarcerated parents to experience emotional difficulties.

Though it is clear that children of incarcerated parents experience emotional difficulties at higher rates than children without incarcerated parents, scholars point out

that it is hard to attribute children's problems directly to parental incarceration since there may be preexisting or co-occurring environmental stressors along with the incarceration that are partially responsible for emotional difficulties (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). According to Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999), no research to date has been able to definitively link the emotional difficulties that children of incarcerated parents experience directly to incarceration.

*Economic challenges.* Parental incarceration has been associated with economic hardships for families with particularly daunting consequences for children (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Nurse, 2002). It removes a parent's ability to provide economic support that otherwise could have been provided, often creates single-parent households, and removes the receipt of child-support in some cases (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Nurse, 2002). For example, Nurse (2002) found that gender mistrust often existed within co-parenting relationships in which the father was incarcerated because of messages that men received from other inmates while incarcerated, and this mistrust had financial implications for children, one of which was the decrease or termination of child support. This pattern reflects the idea of Furstenberg's (1995) "package deal" as described earlier in which negative relations between parents result in negative consequences for children due to the idea that mothers and children together are units instead of separate entities. Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) discovered that following the incarceration of their male partners, many mothers actually left the work force due to lack of child care, creating even deeper financial hardship for their children and reliance on public assistance in some cases.

### *Incarceration and Partners*

Incarceration and partner relationships are the major foci of the current study. Here, the term “partner relationships” refers to both co-parenting and romantic partner relationships, because many incarcerated men and their partners do not easily fit into either category at any given time. Indeed, some of these relationships begin as co-parenting relationships and move towards serious romantic relationships and vice versa, and at times the same two people may remain in the co-parenting category, but move in and out of romantic relationships with one another. Thus, in the current study “co-parenting partners” are defined as those who shared children together and “intimate partners” are defined as those who share a romantic relationship with one another, with neither category being exclusive of the other. The following provides a review of the literature regarding relationship changes during incarceration and the state of relationships following periods of incarceration during community reentry. Refer to the previous section titled “Pre-incarceration Life Conditions” under “Incarceration and Men” for a review of the state of relationships prior to incarceration.

#### *Relationship Changes during Periods of Incarceration*

There are many relationship changes that may occur during periods of incarceration for partners. The majority of men in one sample of incarcerated men (82%) reported that their incarceration led to serious problems for their families (Day et al., 2005). Indeed, incarceration has been shown to increase the likelihood that marriages will end in divorce (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003) and decrease the chances of marriage for unmarried incarcerated men (Lopoo & Western, 2005). Many of the psychological changes that can occur for men in their roles as partners and in their

roles as fathers were described previously in “Incarceration and Men.” However, some of the most common changes in partner relationships during periods of incarceration will be addressed here. These include decreased contact, lack of social support and stigma, lowered relationship trust, and decreased opportunities for relationship maintenance.

*Decreased contact.* As described earlier, one of the most apparent consequences of having an incarcerated family member is the physical loss of that member, and the same holds true for partner relationships in which the male partner is incarcerated. Policies of correctional facilities often limit the amount of visitation that partners can have (Day et al., 2005; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Rosen, 2001). However, some partners may choose not to visit their incarcerated partners for reasons unrelated to correctional facility policies. In Day et al.’s (2005) sample of 51 imprisoned men, 65% of them reported receiving no visits from their partners during their prison sentences. This was one of many indicators in this sample that represented an apparent dichotomy in spousal support of prisoners; either spouses visited these inmates regularly or not at all (Day et. al., 2005). Moreover, 41% of the men in this sample reported little or no phone or mail contact with their relationship partners. Decreased contact can also occur when inmates are transferred to correctional facilities long distances away from the localities in which their partners reside (Nurse, 2002; Rose & Clear, 2003).

*Lack of social support and stigma.* Another change in the relationship of couples with an incarcerated partner is the stigma and decreased social support that often accompany the incarceration of a family member. As discussed previously, stigma is quite common for the family members of incarcerated individuals (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Braman & Wood, 2003; Hairston, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Travis &

Waul, 2003). However, social disapproval can manifest itself in the form of lowered support and failure to recognize relationships as legitimate for couples (Comfort et al., 2005; Nurse, 2002). Within Nurse's (2002) sample of incarcerated young men, one finding was that maternal family support (support from the female partner's family) for the couple relationship significantly decreased after the male partner's incarceration. The women of incarcerated male partners in Comfort et al.'s (2005) sample reported that their relationships were often considered illegitimate by correctional facility staff, particularly if they were not married, and this often negatively affected visitations with their partners.

*Lowered relationship trust.* Another common finding among partners affected by incarceration is a decrease in relationship trust during imprisonment. Because the incarceration of a male partner often inverts the power differentials between men and women, imprisonment may foster distrust in the relationship, especially of the female partner. For instance, men in Nurse's (2002) sample reported the occurrence of the "summer shake" in which women would break up with their incarcerated male partners and men would attribute it to the women getting dressed up in the summertime, going out for social time with their girlfriends, and potentially meeting new partners. This same sample of men (Nurse, 2002) reported deep feelings of powerlessness over the activities of their partners while they were incarcerated. These feelings of powerlessness and mistrust were fueled by messages that they heard from other inmates regarding women's behavior such as "all women are the same and they all cheat once you're behind bars" or "don't trust your baby's mama." Furthermore, men reported often hearing rumors from their family members and friends while they were imprisoned regarding allegations of unfaithful activities of their partners, and this affected trust levels as well (Nurse, 2002).

Some men even broke off their romantic relationships with partners as a way to protect themselves from the anticipated hurt of having their fears confirmed after hearing messages from other inmates or hearing rumors from family members and friends even if they had no evidence that their partners were cheating on them (Nurse, 2002). This may have also been a way for men to gain back some power in their relationships which they felt they had lost as a result of their imprisonment. Nurse (2002) observed intergender hostility and a “siege mentality” adopted by many imprisoned men in which they believed that women intentionally caused emotional distress for them and took pleasure in doing so. Thus, imprisonment of a male partner often holds dire consequences for trust in partner relationships.

*Decreased opportunities for relationship maintenance.* Though many couple relationships dissolve under the stress of the incarceration of a partner, for those couples that wish to maintain their relationships, doing so can prove quite challenging. According to Hairston (2003), “couples are usually denied sexual intimacy and are unable to engage in the day-to-day interactions, experiences, and sharing that sustain marital and other intimate, adult relationships” (p. 270). In fact, most states reject the very idea of granting prisoners and their partners conjugal visits (Rosen, 2001). Comfort and colleagues (2005) interviewed women with incarcerated male partners, and many reported that any physical contact during visitations was severely limited and scrutinized and that women’s clothing and behaviors were often interpreted as inappropriate and sexual by correctional officers. Even simple body contact such as resting a hand on the partner’s knee or rubbing their back were sometimes interpreted by correctional officers as inappropriate and were promptly stopped. In an extreme example, one woman

reported being asked by her male partner to eat her popsicle differently per the instructions of the correctional officer present, because she was allegedly conveying sexual messages through her eating behaviors (Comfort et al., 2005). Intimacy was so restricted that many of the women in this sample reported that they and their partners relied on their imaginations as the only “place” in which they could safely share intimacy with one another.

With little opportunity for relationship maintenance, feelings of loneliness and hopelessness emerge in partner relationships in which the male is incarcerated (Hairston, 2003; Segrin & Flora, 2001). In their sample of 96 married prison inmates, Segrin and Flora (2001) found that married inmates had higher levels of loneliness than married partners who were not incarcerated. The picture is not completely bleak, however, as having more positive marital histories and quality helped lessen the effects of limited opportunities for communication and relationship maintenance for this sample of incarcerated spouses.

#### *Status of Relationships during Reentry*

The state of partner relationships during community reentry is often directly related to many of the changes that take place in couple relationships during periods of incarceration. Due to these relationship changes during terms of imprisonment, incarcerated individuals and their partners often must cope with power differences, violated expectations, and issues related to new intimate relationships of one or both of the partners during reentry.

*Power differences.* As reported earlier, male partner incarceration often reverses the power differential between men and women. Whereas men may have more power

and control than their female partners before their imprisonment, women often end up with more power post-imprisonment (Nurse, 2002). In many cases women become more independent and self-reliant by necessity during the time of their male partner's incarceration, and the changes in their amounts of personal autonomy and power may be unexpected for the men who return home to them (Nurse, 2002; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Furthermore, a male partner's status as a parolee gives many women more control over their male partners, because they can and sometimes do report parole violations to law enforcement officials (Nurse, 2002). These power differences can even affect a male partner's relationships with his children. Roy and Dyson (2005) conducted life history interviews with 40 incarcerated men, and many reported the occurrence of maternal gatekeeping in which their children's mothers discouraged their involvement with their kids following periods of incarceration.

*Violated expectations.* Expectations about life during reentry are often different from what relationship partners expect and at times make it difficult for partners to relate in positive ways to one another. For example, Nurse (2002) found that levels of trust often decreased for the female partners of incarcerated men during reentry when promises that men made during their incarceration were not met. Men often promised to be better partners, to no longer engage in illegal activities, and to provide better lives for their families. The trust of female partners decreased especially in cases in which the male partners were rearrested or reimprisoned (Nurse, 2002). The challenges of simply adjusting to daily life together may present another area of conflict for relationship partners who worked hard to maintain their ties to one another during the male's incarceration. For example, some partners had no choice but to maintain their intimacy



with one another in “alternative spaces” such as their imaginations and “when relationships are created and maintained in fictional, imaginative places, release from prison into the hardships of reality [can be] particularly problematic.” (Comfort et al., 2005, p. 9). Another way in which expectations for post-prison life can violate expectations and affect partner relationships is the adjustment to psychological changes (outlined previously in “Incarceration and Men”) that many men experience during periods of incarceration. It is clear that for some women these changes violate post-incarceration relationship expectations, as many have reported that they felt they were meeting new people when their partners returned home from prison (Nurse, 2002).

*New intimate relationships.* Since some relationship partners develop new partnerships with new partners during periods of incarceration, moving from the category of “romantic partners” to “co-parents” can cause significant problems for many. Nurse (2002) found that three serious issues arose when incarcerated men returned to their communities and found that their previous partners were in new couple relationships. The first was that men often did not get along with the new partners of their former romantic partners. The second was that men were often jealous of the new partners. And finally, many men expressed feeling threatened by the new partners of their former partners, especially if the new partners had a lot of contact with their children. Similar tensions appeared with cases in which the formally incarcerated men found new partners. The implications of these negative patterns were often poor for children, with some men withdrawing from their roles as fathers due to these tensions.

### *Gaps in the Literature*

An apparent gap within this body of literature appears to be in the area of co-parenting and intimate partner relationships. A few scholars have examined the impact of incarceration on co-parenting and romantic relationships (Nurse, 2002; Roy & Dyson, 2005). However, the vast majority of the literature focuses on impacts of male incarceration on children and parent-child relationships (Hairston, 2003; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003).

Furthermore, there also appears to be a lack of information about the effects of male incarceration on extended family relationships. Many have cited the importance of social support for the successful reintegration of inmates back into their communities (Bahr et al., 2005; Rose & Clear, 2003; Solomon, Gouvis, & Waul, 2001; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001; Travis & Waul, 2003; Vischer, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004), pointing to extended family networks as one of the main sources of social support; however, the research overwhelmingly focuses on immediate family relationships. It seems that more work on the inner processes of relationships between incarcerated men and extended family members would greatly contribute to our understanding of how incarceration affects families and how successful release and community reintegration can take place.

Finally, studies are severely limited in presenting the strengths of families affected by incarceration (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Comfort et al., 2005). Most are quick to point out the deficits (Hairston, 2003; Rose & Clear, 2003), but surely these families have more strengths and resources than have been highlighted which help them through the difficulties associated with having an incarcerated member. Revealing these

resources may help families through the stresses of incarceration and perhaps even prevent incarceration from happening in the first place.

### Purpose of Study

From the literature we know that incarceration has a large impact on families and partner relationships (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Nurse, 2002; Travis & Waul, 2003). We also know that the role of social support is critical in helping men through periods of incarceration and reentry into their communities (Bahr et al., 2005; Haney, 2003; Roy & Dyson, 2005). The purpose of this analysis was to explore how men's perceptions of support from their partners during incarceration and community reentry shape co-parenting and intimate partner relationships. Qualitative methods were used in the current study to explore themes related to partner relationships and incarceration and to describe the processes that shape these relationships during incarceration and reentry. Findings were used to generate hypotheses for further studies with similar populations and provide information that may be used to inform the development of interventions for similar populations.

### Research Questions

Using family stress theory and symbolic interactionism as guiding frameworks, the specific questions addressed in this study were:

1. How do men change the meanings of their intimate partnerships throughout the course of their partnerships in ways that are satisfying and fulfilling for them? In particular, how do men change the meanings of their relationships throughout the experience of life stressors such as incarceration?

2. How does context shape the meanings men place on their partnerships? In particular, how do the contexts in which men exist prior to, during, and after incarceration shape the meanings that men place on their partnerships?

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

### Qualitative Research Methods Overview

Qualitative research methods were used to collect the data used in this study. In general, qualitative methods rely on words, contexts, and meanings to examine the details and conditions of the daily lives of study participants (Neuman, 2003). Furthermore, research methods involved in this approach are fundamentally different than quantitative research methods. For the qualitative researcher, these methods include following non-linear, cyclical patterns, using inductive reasoning, creating procedures specific to individual studies, extracting themes which emerge from the data, and organizing evidence to create clear pictures of one's findings (Neuman, 2003). Moreover, a central task and responsibility of a qualitative researcher is to present interpretations of his or her data in a manner that most closely represents the intended meanings and experiences of study participants (Neuman, 2003).

### Sample

The sample for the current study was chosen from the Fathers and Families Resource and Research Center (FFRRC) study dataset (Roy, 2002-2004). This dataset included 35 fathers in a metropolitan area in the Midwest. Each of them took part in an 11-week long community-based fathering program and completed life history interviews at the conclusion of the program. The literature makes a clear distinction between those on probation and those on parole. Probationers are defined as "criminal offenders who have been sentenced to a period of correctional supervision in the community in lieu of incarceration" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006, p. 2). On the other hand, those on parole have been previously incarcerated and are serving "a period of conditional

supervised release following [their] prison term.” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006, p. 2). Since participants in the Fathers and Families Resource and Research Center study fell into both categories, the current study used a purposive sampling strategy to include only men who were incarcerated at some point during the years captured by their life history interviews, regardless of their parole statuses at the time of the interviews.

The current study also relied on the use of life history grids to aid in sample selection. Using the grids allowed for easy recognition of men who had been incarcerated at some point during their lifespan. These grids were created by Dr. Roy’s research team as a way to give a graphical summary of the family structures and major life events reported by the men in the study in their life history interviews. Refer to Appendix B for a sample life history grid. A total of 20 men have been selected for the current study. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic information for the current sample.

Table 1: Sample Demographic Information

	<b>Sample (N=20)</b>	
	Number	Percent
<b>Race</b>		
African American	19	95%
Caucasian	1	5%
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	7	35%
25-29	9	45%
30-35	4	20%
<b>Number of Relationship Partners (to date, over time)</b>		
1	7	35%
2	10	50%
3	2	10%
4	1	5%
<b>Number of Children (including step-children if in same household)</b>		
1	7	35%
2	5	25%
3	4	20%
4	3	15%
6	1	5%
<b>Substance Use (any across lifespan)</b>		
Yes	14	70%
No	6	30%
<b>Incarceration (years)</b>		
1-2	7	35%
3-4	8	40%
5-6	3	15%
Over 6	2	10%
<b>Criminal Charges Reported by Participants (frequencies by participant)</b>		
drug charges	12	
assault	4	
driving with suspended license	4	
theft	4	
weapons charges	4	
robbery	3	
attempted murder	2	
DUI	1	
failure to pay child support	1	
forgery	1	
sex offense	1	

## Data Collection

The current sample was drawn from an existing data set from a previous fathering study. All men from this dataset took part in 11-week community-based fathering program in a metropolitan area of the Midwest. This program included parenting education, peer support groups, GED training and job placement, and counseling services and men were either voluntary participants in these programs or court-mandated to participate. All men in the current sample were low-income and this occurred partly due to the eligibility requirements of the fathering program in which they took part. One requirement was that men had to have children receiving public assistance to take part in the programs.

Upon completion of the fathering programs, curriculum facilitators approached participants regarding the original research study, the Fathers and Families Resource and Research Center (FFRRC) study (Roy, 2002-2004) and asked for their participation. Men who agreed to participate were individually interviewed for two hours on average by the facilitators and reimbursed \$20 in cash for their time. These life history interviews centered on themes related to intimate relationships and significant turning points in the life course. The interviews were semi-structured and interviewers had the flexibility to use probing throughout to gain more information about particular parts of men's narratives. Refer to Appendix A for a complete set of interview questions.

All life history interviews were transcribed and coded by a team of researchers at the University of Maryland headed by Dr. Roy. This research team consisted of both undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of Family Studies who all received training by Dr. Roy in procedures for qualitatively coding the interviews. Using



QSR NUD\*IST, a qualitative data analysis software package for the social sciences, the research team coded each interview for major relational themes that appeared throughout all interviews and created individual life history grids based on the details found in each interview. In all cases, two members of the research team read the same interviews, compared their coding, and discussed any discrepancies before creating life history grids based on the interviews. Refer to Appendix B for a sample life history grid.

### Data Analyses

For this study, secondary data content analysis was used to address the current research questions. Specifically, a grounded theory approach (LaRossa, 2005) was used to analyze and code these interviews for major themes related to periods of incarceration and reentry for the men, potential changes in their partner relationships, and their perceptions of social support from their relationship partners during incarceration and the process of reentry. It is important to note that while special emphasis was placed on the sections of interviews in which men explicitly discussed incarceration and intimate partnerships, interviews were reviewed in their entirety by the researcher to gain a fuller understanding of the contexts surrounding and subtleties within each man's story. Thus, the findings, presented later, include information from various parts of the interviews.

The analysis of interviews took place in three major phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Overall, "these have become the most widely accepted phases in GTM [grounded theory methods]" (LaRossa, 2005, p.840). Open coding was the first phase of data analysis and consisted of the initial review of the life history interviews. The primary purpose of the initial review was to identify any emergent themes that existed within and across the interviews (LaRossa, 2005; Neuman, 2003).

Concepts from prior studies guided this initial coding, and these concepts have been referred to as “sensitizing concepts” (van den Hoonaard, 1997). A sensitizing concept is defined as “a starting point in thinking about the class of data of which the social researcher has no definite idea and provides an initial guide to her [or his] research” (van den Hoonaard, 1997, p. 2). Examples of sensitizing concepts are “support for father role” and “lowered trust.” Other emergent codes were developed from this researcher’s own insights during the initial readings of texts. With the current sample, life history interviews were reviewed and there was close attention to the parts of each interview that related specifically to incarceration, partner relationships, and social support. Memos were used to record these concepts, and from these concepts came the creation of broad categories or codes that guided further analysis. For example, social support was a broad category that emerged during the open coding phase with the current sample.

The second phase of data analysis was axial coding. The primary purpose of this phase was to review the data again and to identify subcategories within the initially identified categories through a process of constant comparison (LaRossa, 2005). “Subcategories also are categories, but they are categories that answer the questions of ‘when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences’ around a focal category” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125). More specific details were sought such as when, where, and how in order to refine sensitizing concepts. These concepts were also compared and contrasted across cases. For example, the concept of “support for father role” emerged in the open coding phase, and the task during the axial coding phase was to answer questions like “when did men feel support for their father roles?” and “how did the men describe this support?” Then, the task was to look across cases to find how

many men described this concept and what the similarities among men who described this concept were. Similarly, if the theme of “lowered trust” emerged during the open coding phase answers to questions such as “when did the men describe this lowered trust as taking place?” and “what did men describe as the consequences for this lowered trust?” were explored. Then, the cases were compared and contrasted to find the commonalities among men who reported lowered trust and the differences between them and those who did not report lowered trust. Nurse’s (2002) discovery of the “summer shake” in her sample of young incarcerated men served as an example of a subcategory that was linked to the sensitizing concept of “lowered trust” in this sample. Men in Nurse’s (2002) sample reported the occurrence of this phenomenon and described it as a process in which women would get dressed up in the summertime, spend a lot of time with girlfriends in social settings, meet potential new partners, and eventually break up with their incarcerated male partners. Nurse (2002) found that the influence of fellow inmates and the feelings of powerlessness that stemmed from being incarcerated often led to men having lowered trust in their relationship partners, and in some cases this lowered trust was confirmed by the occurrence of a “summer shake.” In my sample, as stated before, social support was a broad category that emerged during the open coding phase and through a process of contrasting and comparing I answered more specific questions regarding the dimensions of social support. For example, the question of “when?” in relation to social support was a critical question and I found that social support played a large role throughout men’s lives but particularly during the process of community reentry. The question of “where?” was also key, as I discovered that men perceived receiving support from sources such as their partners, families, and mentors.

The final phase of analysis was selective coding. LaRossa (2005) described this phase as one in which a researcher makes a decision about the main story that he or she wants to tell through their analysis. Once this story is decided upon, the task is to selectively draw out sub-categories that can provide support for a specific core category and to organize the data in a way that makes the story “lucid, understandable, and hopefully compelling” (LaRossa, 2005, p. 850). For example, in this analysis the concept of social support was developed throughout the coding process and subthemes such as “from where is my strength” and “the role of trust” helped to illustrate specific dimensions for men’s social support, specifically where they perceived receiving useful social support and the importance role that trust played in who they turned to for support.

#### Researcher Role

With any qualitative analysis it is important to discuss the role of the researcher in creating narratives from participants’ stories due to the heavy reliance on assigning and interpreting meanings from the stories of others. My interest in families affected by incarceration partly stemmed from my previous research work with Dr. Roy, but also stemmed from my personal experiences with the incarceration of members of my extended family. This study has allowed me to understand the stories of many families affected by incarceration in the United States including my own, as throughout the research process I have compared and contrasted men’s narratives surrounding their relationships to the narratives within my own family. While this personal connection has driven my motivation to understand the stories of others, it is also a factor that has inevitably affected the lenses through which I have viewed these families and the interpretations of the stories presented here. At times the men’s narratives were difficult

to review without making comparisons to my own family, yet at other times the meanings within men's narratives were very clear for me due to my personal experiences.

Another factor that has affected my role as a researcher in the current study is my clinical training as a Marriage and Family Therapist. Since my training is based on a systemic approach to examining relational patterns, it has been an asset throughout the process of research in that my attention was strongly pulled towards viewing partnership dynamics within their contexts, the correctional system being just one of those contexts. My training has also drawn a great deal of attention to the circular fashion in which partnerships operate, making more visible how men's perceptions affect their own actions, thoughts, and feelings, in turn affecting their partners' actions, thoughts, and feelings, which again affected the same factors for men.

Lastly, it is important to make clear that I approached this study as a middle-class African American female researcher. My experiences, then, as a member of these three groups have also inevitably affected my interpretations of men's stories. Being a part of the middle-class may have made interpretations more difficult at times and being an African American female may have given me the advantage of having more cultural similarities with the participants, but the disadvantage of not having a shared gender perspective. Given all of the factors that have affected my role as a researcher for this study, throughout the process I have worked very closely with Dr. Roy to recognize my personal assumptions and biases and to challenge them by developing critical perspectives as much as possible in regards to participants' stories.

## CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

An important part of the life history interviews for the men in the current study was to retrospectively describe the beginnings of their intimate relationships. Two major themes characterized the initial stages of their partnerships including adolescent partnership and unexpected pregnancy. It is important to understand men's accounts of the beginnings of these relationships, as this helps one get a clearer picture of the partnership transformations that occurred during periods of incarceration and community reentry.

### Where It All Began

#### *Adolescent Relationships*

Several men recounted their experiences during the beginnings of their partnerships and described how their unions first developed. It appeared that many men met their partners within the contexts of their communities, usually at school or in their neighborhoods, and in general it appeared that partnerships began before men began their involvement in criminal activities that led to incarceration. Men described the origins of their partnerships as young teenage romances that were more about lust, sex, and familiarity than factors that often bring adult partners together such as shared life goals and similar philosophical views. Even after children were born within these unions, typical aspects of adolescent relationships came into play as Earl, a 27-year-old father described:

At first I think I was in tenth grade. I wouldn't necessarily say we were high school sweethearts but we went together and we were real close. We would always be around each other. I started working early even before I had kids. I had

an after school job in the ninth grade. After I went to school I went home, we would talk on the phone all the time and after school we would be around each other all the time. I wouldn't necessarily say after she got pregnant but there were some things going on in high school. They were different cliques and we just hung in different cliques. That always caused problems but this is after she's pregnant and had the baby.

A majority of these relationships began during the high school years of the participants and their partners. Even among the younger study participants, they held a perception that they were young and naïve at the onset of their partnerships. In the following, 21-year-old Wesley described the beginning stages of his relationship with his current partner of four years:

Sometimes you think you are grown even when you haven't made it near man hood. 16, you know, I don't know – I think that when I first started having sex I thought that I was grown. And that was a long time ago. You mistake things for love, for lust. You know you see this girl and she is so fine, and then you get her and it is what you wanted and it was perfect. So now you think you are in love. So you want to do for her, and it isn't love, it is lust and the only reason you are doing for her is because you want more, and it is lust, it is like a drug. You got to hustle to get the drugs, everything. I mean I have been with this girl for four years, I been with her since she started high school.

#### *Expecting the Unexpected*

The fact that many of the partnerships began in adolescence increased the potential for problems as the men and their partners grew older and matured into their

adult selves. All of the men in the current study were fathers sampled from a previous fatherhood study, and the occurrence of unexpected pregnancies within the majority of these partnerships meant that relationships which may have otherwise dissolved under fragile conditions were transformed into long-term partnerships, be they romantic partnerships, co-parenting partnerships, or somewhere in between. As if out of nowhere many of the men described the sudden movement of their relationships from short-term, unstable unions to various forms of long-term co-parenting unions. Men reported that pregnancies often occurred in the midst of “playing games.” For example, 19-year-old Kevin discussed the pregnancies of both of his partners: “Yeah, I was with both of them but I guess they was playing too. Everybody was playing games for the most part so I don’t think nobody was serious, just got caught up in the moment.”

Nearly all of the men described experiencing some degree of shock or fear at the moment of discovering their partner’s pregnancy. Again, 19-year-old Kevin shared his experience with his partners:

At first I was kind of stunned, but I was anxious too. We were real young at the time. The main thing I was kind of scared. But I faced it though, I can’t live in my heart without seeing what’s up, but you know when I came to them it’s like they never brought it to my attention. They always say it’s somebody else’s, but other people have doubts about it.

In Kevin’s case shock was accompanied by anxiety and fear as well. Furthermore, even though there were paternity doubts in his case, he approached his partners about their pregnancies because he knew it would be unbearable for him to continue with his life without acknowledging that he was the children’s father if in fact he was.



For some men shock was accompanied by disbelief. Feelings of disbelief at times stemmed from the fact that some men did not trust that their partners were only having sexual relationships with them. For instance, 26-year-old Theo simply did not believe his partner until proof came:

I didn't believe her. I was staying at my cousin's house and she had gotten into a fight and she was locked up and she needed a place to go, and I asked my cousin if she could stay with me until she got off of her house arrest. When she stayed with me a couple days she showed me some papers saying she was pregnant. I didn't believe her. I told her to go get another blood test. We went and got another pregnancy thing. So, I knew it was mine, and she looks like me.

After the shock wore off and partners gave birth, Theo like many other men ceased questioning the paternity of their children once they were able to see their children and recognized physical resemblance to themselves.

After the initial shock of finding out that they had unintentionally impregnated their partners, even more of the men described feeling an immediate need to find stable work and provide for their expected children, a surprising finding considering the young age of many of the men:

I laughed. Yes, that is what I do right before I am going to hit somebody. I was like girl you better quit playing with me. I didn't believe her for about two or three days, and then her sister and her momma told me, but I was kind of happy.

And then I started thinking that I had to get a damn job (Oscar, 25 years old).

Miles, age 30, reported experiencing shock over the pregnancy, then acceptance. His acceptance did not come as immediately as did Oscar's, but after his partner's mother and

his parents shared how upset they were over the situation, Miles' focus shifted to finding work:

I felt she was lying to tell you the truth. I did because it was shocking at first. I was like, I was being myself right, and I wasn't seeing her a lot, and I thought she was out there doing something, and then she told me she was pregnant. I accepted it and everything. And then her mother came over there and balled me out, and my father balled me out, and my mother said what did you go and do that for. We made the best out of it. I started looking more for jobs.

The anxiety of expecting an unplanned pregnancy can be even more stressful for men who were incarcerated during the time of their partner's pregnancy or their child's birth, partly due to the loss of control that men experienced while in prison. Since many described a sudden focus on fulfilling the provider role for their children upon pregnancy, one can imagine the potential disappointment experienced by men who were incarcerated at the time of discovering their partner's pregnancy. In the following, 18-year-old Rob described his reaction when his partner informed him of her pregnancy during a period of incarceration:

I was like, "Yeah, right! No way, you're lying." Cause she was four months pregnant before she ever called me. And I was like, "So, you're like half-way through the pregnancy and you are just now calling me? Get a life." But then I found out that she really is pregnant. I was locked up when she was like six months pregnant or something like that, somewhere in there. She had the birth and everything without me. I came home and made it a week before her first birthday. So, she chilled with me on her first birthday.

Thus, for some men the realization that their providing abilities were virtually nonexistent while behind bars was painful and manifested itself in anger toward their partners. Even behind bars, 27-year-old Alonzo was one of the only fathers who described being enthusiastic about the news of their partner's pregnancy:

[Okay, tell me how – what was it like for you when you found out that Carrie was pregnant?] Actually, I was locked up. I was locked up. I was at the county. So, it was like cool, but I'm not there. It was very exciting though.

Overall, though a few of the study participants reported being incarcerated when they found out about their partner's pregnancy, most of the men were not imprisoned at this pivotal moment in their relationships. However, several of the men described leading life styles which could have easily led to their arrests and incarceration at any time. Termed "living the fast life" by many (see section below), their lives were characterized by illegal activities including hustling and drug dealing to make fast money. It is important to point out that several of the men responded to their partner's pregnancy by contemplating their current life choices and if they wanted to continue down such unstable paths to fulfill their roles as fathers and as providers.

For example, 21-year-old Wesley described his reaction to hearing of his partner's pregnancy:

I mean, I knew it was going to come sooner or later. I figured that. It wasn't a shock. It was just – alright she's pregnant, and I have got to do what I have got to do. I try to stay away from my old friends. They are not up to anything I want to be at the moment. If they just got out of jail or they are selling. And I am trying to get away from the negative years. I have a kid to raise.

Clearly, for Wesley the realization that he was going to be a father meant ridding himself of the negative influences around him and creating more stability in his life for the sake of his child. Though several men shared Wesley's viewpoint, for 23-year-old Ben, the thought of moving away from his life on the streets and into fatherhood brought out feelings of fear:

[So TaShay, she was your first born, so what was that experience like when you found out?] I was scared. [What was so scary about it?] Because, it wasn't about me no more. Basically, I had no choice but to step up and be a man. [And what does being a man mean?] Being there for your family. Doing whatever it takes to make sure they don't need anything. That's a big sacrifice. Yeah. A very big sacrifice that's why I was scared. So you have to set away those games and say it's time to focus, set away everything. I'm going to tell you the truth, the life I was living, everybody told me, my teacher's in Chicago, they told me I wasn't going to live to see 18. It's because I was living the fast life.

Here, Ben recognized that being a present and active father and partner would mean a great deal of personal sacrifice on his part and attributes his feelings of fear to this realization. This fear was not uncommon among the sample, but for the most part men were willing to at least try to make sacrifices and fulfill their family roles. Only one man, however, reported that the dilemma of living the fast life and while entering fatherhood was too difficult to reconcile:

“It ain't mine.” Well, I knew with Haley because she's not a promiscuous woman. It was really sudden that I was flared about. I didn't want it to happen. I presented her with options, you know. I just wasn't ready. I still was in and out

of jails, you know. I had just got out of boys school when I met her. Two months later I'm back in jail. I was living too fast to be involved with somebody (Mo, age 25).

So although Mo was aware that he was the father of his partner's child says he was simply not ready to leave his street life behind to fulfill not only his father role, but also his partner role.

While many men reported that their partners' pregnancies were not deliberate, feelings of joy and excitement came for some of the men regardless. Take 29-year-old Kennedy for instance:

She didn't want her mom to know that she was pregnant. But I sat out in the car the whole time and when she came outside and I seen her crying I just started smiling, you know what I mean. I started smiling and I called my mom and I told her, "I'm about to have a baby." I remember that like it was yesterday. I mean I was happy to hear it cause we didn't have the baby on purpose. I can actually say it wasn't meant to be but I don't regret it at all, you know what I mean. I remember that day. I was happy.

Kennedy reported being happy despite his partner's feelings of disappointment, an unusual and isolated finding among the sample. For 32-year-old Jalen, excitement prompted a big decision:

To tell you the truth, when I met her she was with another guy, she was living with somebody else. So, I felt overjoyed. That is why I moved to Las Vegas with her. For one, I just had some strange reason I was going to have a son. Something I always wanted and two, I really loved her.

Thus, although his romantic relationship with his partner was in flux at the time, Jalen's excitement over the unexpected pregnancy of his partner with his son meant moving across the country to be there for the two of them.

Finally, 27-year-old Earl reflected on his revelation about becoming a father at the young age of 16:

[Tell me how you felt when you found that the mother of your child was pregnant.] I guess to sum it up best, me and my best friend Ray was just sitting there, walking and talking, it was maybe 10 or 11 at night – he lives across the street from me. He was like, “man you know you ain't the only one now.” That's when being a father hit me. You can't just think of yourself no more. And being 16, that's a lot to swallow when it's always been just you. I had to learn to be not so selfish. That was like the turning point. It hit me – “I'm going to be a father!”

For Earl, then, feelings of excitement were mixed with feelings of ambivalence about his ability to make the appropriate sacrifices to fulfill his father role. It appeared that his ambivalence mostly had to do with the fact that he was a teenager and had to learn how to put someone else's needs before his own. Given the young ages of many of the men during their transitions into fatherhood, feelings of ambivalence about their ability to sacrifice for their children came out of the narratives of many other men as well.

In summary, while reactions ranged from shock to excitement and were often complicated by the challenges of incarceration and living the fast life, the discovery of pregnancies marked an important turning point for nearly all of the men and their decisions as new fathers held significant implications for the future of their intimate partnerships. These implications will gradually be revealed throughout the remainder of

the current study's findings. Of most importance here is that while there were a variety of ways in which these relationships began, most began as relatively young partnerships and faced the difficult challenges of unexpected shifts from partners to parents.

### From Behind Bars

Participants in the current study were interviewed and asked to report their prior experiences during periods of incarceration. Thus, all reports regarding those periods are retrospective in nature. However, many of the men were able to talk about their experiences while behind bars at great length and in great detail. One surprising finding that emerged out of these accounts is how little men spoke about what happened within their partnerships during incarceration, or how their absences during periods of incarceration shaped changes in their partnerships. Even though participants were directly asked how their incarceration impacted their relationships with their families, including their intimate partners and the mothers of their children (refer to appendix A for exact interview questions), most of the men spoke in far more detail about connections to their children and their families of origin during incarceration than connections to their partners. Thus, in the following, men's accounts of changes in their partner relationships, father-child relationships, and relationships with their families of origin are presented.

### *Partnership Changes*

When men did speak directly about their incarceration and its impact on their partner relationships, it typically had a negative impact on the trajectories of their partnerships. Trust played a major role for men within their partnerships, and infidelity was clearly a great concern for at least one man and probably others as well. For

example, 20-year-old Bird told the story of the infidelity that occurred between his partner and his best friend while he was behind bars in Minnesota:

I'm up in Minnesota, and this hoe fucked my best friend. Well, was my best friend; now he's an associate. My man, he was my guy, but she fucked him, so I cut both of them off. It's not like I tell him everything like I used to; we used to be so super tight.

Later in the interview Bird discussed how his partner cheating on him with his best friend affected his trust in her regarding their child and how he felt she ruined his dream of having a happy life together:

That's why I want to establish paternity, so that bitch just can't be, you can't see yours, I'm up, I'm fixin' to go somewhere with yours. That would hurt me so much that I think I will go through the thing, get it all straight. Because there isn't shit between us, and she still wants something between us. If I want her, I can have her, but I don't want her. Ain't no love, it's just basically hatred, because of what she did. I hate what she did, because what we could have been on is a whole new different story – white picket fence and all this shit – what could have been. You can't turn a whore into a housewife.

It is clear from Bird's story that the pain associated with the occurrence of what Nurse (2002) termed the "summer shake" was so intense that it shattered his trust in his partner not only in her role as a romantic partner, but also in her role as a co-parenting partner.

Another man, 34-year-old Muhammed, described how his multiple periods of incarceration led to negative outcomes for his partnership:



We are basically friends. I mean she got tired of me going to jail, and my temper gets me in trouble and she says I don't listen. She said I react too fast to situations. And I think that if you disrespecting me then I will settle my business.

As one can see from this quote, it is not always just the absence of men during incarceration that adversely affect these partnerships, but perhaps rather the behaviors learned through incarceration experiences – in this case a quick temper – that lead to negative impacts on the paths of their relationships. Of course it is not clear in Muhammed's case if this quick temper existed before incarceration.

As highlighted by Nurse's (2002) account of the experiences of California youth in the correctional system, trust can play a major role in men's perceptions of what happens in their partnerships while they are locked up. Here, 25-year-old Oscar described how his trust for his partner was reassuring both during and after his incarceration:

I want my kids by one person. We are going to be together and we are going to raise our kids. I have been through a lot with other girls and I can honestly say that she loves me and I love her. And I knew what she was doing while I was incarcerated and I know what is going on when I am and am not there. Not like it was with a lot of other people. But her, I know what she is doing all of the time.

Without this trust, his absence during incarceration may have led to serious difficulties or even the termination of their romantic partnership.

Finally, while trust had a major impact on partnership trajectories within the context of incarceration, another factor appeared to shape partnership trajectories. It was very difficult to identify what this other factor was exactly, but a strong focus on children

and family of origin was clear. For example, here 25-year-old Mo illustrated what happened when many of the men were directly asked about their partnerships:

[Now, were you and Haley together at the time of your incarceration?] No, me and Helen was. [So, how did that influence that relationship?] My kids thought I was at work camp and they would still make it up every week to see me. Both of them.

Immediately Mo's focus shifted to his relationship with his kids when asked about his partner relationship. Although this focal shift did not happen as immediately for other men, it happened in many cases and played out as men either speaking very briefly about their partnership dynamics during periods of incarceration or not at all. One potential explanation for this finding may be that because men are removed from their home environments during incarceration, they lost a lot of control over the activities of their partners, and trust became a concern. As Nurse (2002) pointed out, incarceration of the male partner in heterosexual relationships often flips the power differentials between men and women, and many men experience feelings of powerlessness while behind bars. Perhaps, then, shifting one's focus to children and family members served as a way to stay connected to individuals who could be trusted most during times of removal from the community. Although one could speculate that these relationships may have been considered casual, thus explaining the sparse mention of partners during periods of incarceration, it was clear that these relationships were anything but casual. Men's descriptions of their partnership trajectories and the significance of these partnerships will be detailed later.

The focus here has been to describe men's perceptions of changes in their partner relationships during periods of incarceration. Due to the sparse information that men gave regarding the impact of their absences on their partnerships, it is difficult to detail how partner relationships are shaped by the absence of men during periods of incarceration or how men perceived women's support of them as partners. However, the fact that men chose to focus on relationships other than their partner relationships when describing their experiences during incarceration was telling in and of itself, because it became clear that one of the apparent effects of incarceration on partnership relationships is a downward shift in the value placed on their partnerships. Later, outcomes of these relationships post-incarceration will be presented in detail.

#### *Maintaining Father-Child Connections*

Nearly every participant in the study spoke about the relationship dynamics between themselves and their children while behind bars more often than they discussed their intimate partnerships or relationships with their families of origin. As expected, when asked about barriers that may have kept them from having contact with their children, several men cited their periods of incarceration. Furthermore, a couple of the men reported missing some of the first few months of their children's lives due to incarceration.

Men also described their feelings of pain and worry that surrounded being separated from their children while incarcerated. Take 23-year-old Ben for example:

I got locked up one time after I had my daughter. I had to do 30 days and that hurt. How old were you? I was twenty-two. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. One

of them. But that hurted. Just being away from my daughter for 30 days, you know what I'm saying? That wasn't it. That was the hardest 30 days I ever did. Along the same lines, 25 year-old Oscar described feeling fortunate for being sentenced to boot camp instead of prison because of his baby daughter:

They weren't going any lower than 8 [years], but I lucked out on the boot camp. I don't want to go through those things that I did with Tamika with this baby. My daughter kept me going. If it weren't for her I would still be in the joint. I think about Tisha and my baby. Four years from now, my girls will be 11 and 5, and a lot of shit would have changed and how are you going to do anything after you have not been around.

Clearly men were concerned about their father-child relationships while behind bars and a large number even made promises to be better fathers when they returned to their communities which will be described later.

Along with these concerns appeared to be concerns about how their partners were supporting their roles as fathers while the study participants were incarcerated. Some expressed difficulties with their partners when they made attempts to keep their father-child connections going. In the following passage, 35-year-old Asante discussed his challenges with his daughter's mother:

It was beautiful, man [when we got in touch with each other two years ago]. Cause she wrote me a couple times in the joint, but her mama didn't really want her to do it, because she was mad at me, so every time her mother was mad, she was like, don't even tell [my daughter] my messages.

According to him, Asante tried to keep in touch with his daughter but his partner would avoid letting their daughter know the messages that he wanted to give her when they were not getting along as partners. Later, Asante described that his partner gave his daughter negative messages about him while he was away and when he was coming out of prison he found that she had taken their daughter and moved out of state:

[Any times when the mother really stepped in and prevented you from seeing her?] Yep, quite a few times. Like I said, she was born in '80. The first time I went to joint was in '83, during '81 and '82, her mother was playing me, saying like "forget him, he ain't nothing," but she [my daughter] was a baby, so she ain't know. And the mama ran away to Mississippi, and I actually didn't try to find them, I mean, "you all know where I'm at, and you've got my momma and father," that's her grandmother and grandfather, "you're going to alienate the whole lot of us, everybody, just because you're mad at me?" All we could do was like, "well, she'll be back."

This scenario demonstrated the inextricable nature of partner and co-parenting roles within these partnerships. Thus, when there were personal problems between the men and their partners, the potential for father-child connections to be damaged or lost increased. On the other hand, 18-year-old Rob reported that he and his partner were able to set aside the problems in their romantic relationship and that she helped him sustain his connection with their child:

[What was that like for you being...cause that was sixth months of pregnancy and you were locked up. What was it in like the relationship with Katy and having to find out about the birth of your child and you are in this place here. How was that

like for you?] She kept it pretty simple. We would write, enough saying what's going on. Nothing really, no personal stuff just basically Brooke. Sent me pictures and stuff. Yeah, it sucks, but really it ain't nothing you can really do about it so I don't really sit and think about it much. Try not to cause why dwell on something that you can't have control over really? I just make the best of it.

Since incarceration meant that men were removed from their families and communities, it is not hard to imagine how extremely difficult it may have been to maintain father-child connections with children without the support of one's partner. When this support for their father roles was not present, it was especially painful for men because it amplified their loss of control over their fathering activities.

Nevertheless, several men reported being able to maintain their father-child relationships while incarcerated with the help of family members. Men reported that their mothers were particularly instrumental in helping them maintain communication with their children via phone calls, letters, and visits. Eighteen-year-old Rob discussed his low control over maintaining his father-child connection and how his own mother helped:

[Any barriers that kept you from being a father?] Locked up, I guess that's a big one. There's not really much that you can do. I got to see her for a couple of hours, every two or three weeks because my mom would bring her up there to visit me... Yeah, she's the one that put the effort to bring Brooke to come out and see me. Otherwise, I wouldn't have seen her at all. She went and out to go to Katy's house and pick her up.

Similarly, 20-year-old Bird discussed the role his own mother played during his incarceration:

I got this shorty, and even when I was in Minnesota [incarcerated], I'd call my mama and she'd have my shorty, and I'd say "how's she doing," and mama would say "she's right here," so she put her on the phone, [my daughter was] trying to say dada and shit.

In two cases men reported that their family members stepped in and assumed care for their children during their incarceration. Twenty-five year-old Oscar, who had custody of his older daughter for the first two years of her life, reported that his mother began raising his daughter when he was incarcerated:

She [my older daughter] is living with my mother. She used to live with me before I went to boot camp. Then I went to the center and started coming here. And that is when I got locked back up, and then I got back out, and now I want to get my money straight before I have her come back down. My mom is in Atlanta. She is coming back to live with me. She is going to come.

In this case it was unclear why Oscar's partner did not receive custody of their daughter when he went to boot camp; however, substance abuse may have played a role. In another case, 34-year-old Muhammed talked about how his sister helped when he was on the way to prison and the local social services agency stepped in to take his kids:

If my family wasn't like that, then my boys would have been in foster care when DCFS came out. But my sister even though she is the one who put me in the predicament, that is also why we are all staying at the same address. She has custody of them.

Later in the interview, Oscar pointed out that substance abuse played a role in his partner's situation with anger-filled statements directed toward his partner:

“If you are doing drugs then you can't handle my kids. I mean you lie.” Just now I am getting to the point where they feel that they don't have a mother. Aaron feels like he has a mother, but DeShawn is too little to be concerned. To me it is nothing. “If you want to do drugs and you don't want to be with the kids. I can't help you.”

Overall, the challenges of preserving father-child relationships while incarcerated were quite difficult for nearly all of the men. Yet, cases that proved to be most challenging were those in which men reported not receiving support from their partners in their roles as fathers. On the other hand, cases that proved to be less challenging were those in which fathers felt the support of others (e.g. mothers, sisters) for their roles as fathers.

### *Shifting Loyalties*

Another major finding in the study was that as participants described periods of incarceration, relationships with their families of origin appeared to shift into the forefront while partner relationships gradually moved into the background of their focus. This may have occurred perhaps in part due to the efforts of family members to help men maintain their father-child connections as described above. Yet perhaps another explanation for this may have been the family losses that some men experienced throughout periods of incarceration. Two men described the deep impact that family deaths had on them while they were caught up in the correctional system. Nineteen year-old Kevin shared his experience with the death of his grandfather:



I was locked up and never got to attend his funeral. It was like 2001. [So what was that like hearing that your grandfather passed away when you were incarcerated?] It was kind of dreadful. I was young and full of hatred. I had a problem that had to be dealt with. But I guess I matured a whole lot from that. Makes me little bit stronger.

Even more striking was the story that 20-year-old Bird shared about the personal impact of his great-grandmother's death:

That shit hurt; it's our first funeral. My grandmother was ninety something. She was the last stone, rock hard stone of the family. After my grandma died, then my great-grandma was the stone. Now she died, and my mama will be the stone. It passes on. My mama isn't even the oldest, but of all the sisters she's the responsible one. All her sisters look up to her; she got two brothers. It was just back to back with my grandma. One year my auntie died, then my grandfather, then the next year my grandma died, then there wasn't no deaths for a minute in our family, now my great-grandma died. This shit is hurting.

Later in the interview, Bird continued to talk about the pain of losing those close to him. The profound impact of family deaths becomes clear as Bird describes his religious beliefs:

It hurts. I don't want to say goodbye; don't even know if I'll go to the funeral. I ain't got no religion; I don't believe dude; I don't want to believe in God. Every time you believe in him, no matter how good you is, he still will take you away. As far as church, if he don't come to my house, I don't go to his. My grandma was the sanest person around, didn't curse, and he took her away. The people

who do wrong, he don't take, but the people who are righteous, he takes. I can't understand that for shit. We're born to die.

Though there seemed to be a shift of attention away from partner relationships and towards family relationships in many cases, there was one case in which a participant described a shifting his focus away from family all together as a coping mechanism and survival strategy while incarcerated (Kevin , age 19):

[Now during that time in the boy's school did you have contact with your family?] Yeah, from time to time. They probably come down to see me. They had blocks on the phone so I never could really just call. But they come down to see me...it's wasn't about your family, it's about you. You're going to be homesick, there's a whole lot of stuff you're going to be feeling that you got to suck it up. Don't let nobody see that you're down this, this, and that. They press doors and they like to get your spots but for the most part you feel kind of bad.

In this way it seemed that Kevin was protecting himself not only from dealing with the pain of having little control over contacting his family, but also from the possibility of appearing vulnerable to the other inmates and losing control over his power among them. Despite this one case, however, the overall finding was that periods of incarceration marked the beginnings of general shifts in men's priorities regarding their family lives. For partnerships, this meant that the type of support that men needed may not have been available from their partners but was in fact available from family members. These shifts became even more apparent as men described their experiences during community reentry.

## Reentry and New Directions

Though some participants may return to incarceration at some point in their future, with their time confined in the correctional system behind them, at least temporarily, many men described the various difficulties that they faced upon reentry and the meanings and functions of support from others. Men also described how they perceived the dynamics and changes within their family relationships including those with their partners, children, and families of origin.

### *From Where Is My Strength?*

Evaluation of participant interviews revealed that the meanings attached to emotional support were remarkably varied yet overall served as a key piece of their personal narratives. Men came out of prison with new goals and aspirations and reported needing support, inspiration, mentorship, and acknowledgement for their efforts to become not only individuals, but also better boyfriends, husbands, fathers, sons, grandsons, brothers, cousins, uncles, and friends. Going into the analysis, there was an expectation that most men would turn towards their partners for emotional support. However, there was a finding that a lot of the men found support from people in their lives other than from their intimate partners.

### *Families of Origin*

When describing periods of reentry, in most cases men did not mention their partners as the key people from whom they received the emotional support they needed. Instead, family members, especially mothers, but also mentors in their lives were most often mentioned as sources for support. Take 19-year-old Kevin for instance:

So if you're going to go to the family, you know your cousins, who you can depend on, who you can run to, talk to, you got that support, and you feel more comfortable to when you're around nothing but family. Everybody is out for you to take care of you.

Kevin was an example of receiving support from extended family, and many men reported the same. However, most often men reported receiving and appreciating emotional support from their mothers:

She [my mother] got me started going back to church. I think now she's – we starting to come back around a little bit. She's been supporting me. She's supporting me about going through the [fatherhood] program here. Uh, so now, I mean, she support me, just support while I was going to school. Words of encouragement, stuff like that. That's helpful right there (Dion, age 25).

For several men the support of their mothers existed in the context of not having known their fathers throughout their lives.

She [my mother] helps me out a lot. Really, I'm talking about immensely. She's my mentor...She had a big impact in my life. If it wasn't for her, I'd probably be dead somewhere or in a penitentiary. My dad, we just really start communicating like 3 years ago. He left when I was young (Eric, age 27).

It appeared that Eric attached even greater meaning to his mom's support, because his father was not present most of his life. Overall, men greatly appreciated emotional support and that they received from their families to help them through the difficult process of reentering their communities and working towards goals set forth for

themselves. What was unclear, however, was if this reliance on kin support during the process of reentry resulted in strains in intimate partnerships.

### *Partners*

Though men's families were most often cited as sources of emotional support, several men reported reliance on their partners for support as well during reentry. For example, as reported above, it is clear that 27-year-old Eric received support from his mother, but he also reported receiving support from his girlfriend:

Lord knows I've been trying and trying. It's just, I mean I feel like I'm just a little boy out here, but I got bills to pay. My girlfriend is helping me tremendously, and my parents. That's another reason I've been staying sane. I've got a good family. Good positive people I hang around what making me keep my head up.

Eric's comparison of himself to a little boy highlighted the vulnerability and limited autonomy that many men felt during the process of reentry; yet, there still appeared to be a strong appreciation for how this support could help them during these times. An interesting finding was that two men reported turning to their partners for support during reentry even though they were no longer in romantic relationships with their partners. Most amazing is that when both men began reporting that they would turn to their partners for support, they both began with the phrase "to tell you the truth" as if they were surprised by their responses. The following is part of 32-year-old Jalen's account of relying on his partner for support:

[If you got sick to the point where you needed to be taken care of who would you turn to?] To tell you the truth, my son's mother...I mean we are good friends like

that... We got this relationship where if she needs something and I give it to her; if I need something she'd give it to me, no questions asked, no reasons, you just do it. You know how you have a best friend, she's like my best friend – because I can talk to her about anything because we know each other.

What was most surprising in Jalen's case was the fact that the partner he refers to lived several states away from him and had a current boyfriend as well. Yet he still considered her a source of support and someone who he could talk to about anything.

### *Mentors*

Another major source of emotional support for men during community reentry was mentors. Mentors played such a pivotal role that participants reported receiving meaningful support from mentors in their lives almost as often as they received support from partners. Wesley, age 21, described the huge impact of his mentor, not only during reentry, but also throughout his life:

I mean he [my mentor] just wanted to help me all through my life. I owe a lot to him. He was the one who taught me not to be hot headed. He listened to everything I had to say. My father doesn't say that he loves me; we don't have no communication. I could tell Mr. Minoki about everything. And that is what I needed when I was growing up, that I didn't get. I get it more now, but I needed it when I was young... I needed somebody to tell me to fight, don't stop until you win! Sometimes, if I fail, I don't want anybody to pity me. I want to stand back up. I want them to encourage me, but don't pity me.

Again in this example as with the case of Eric described above, the presence of social support in the absence of a relationship with his own father heightened the meaning of

the support that Wesley received from his mentor. Many men expressed desires for wanting their fathers in their lives even though they appreciated the support of others around them. As Eric described here, having a male support figure has a different meaning:

There's something about a male figure versus a female figure to tell you something. You know, you going to listen to you mom, but you gonna blow her off really – or a woman. But a man, that will have a nice impact on you, to me.

For some men it was support specifically for their roles as fathers that they appreciated during the process of reentry. Surprisingly though, this type of support did not necessarily need to come from their partners to have had significant impacts on their lives. Take for instance 26-year-old Theo's account of his experience of the fatherhood program that he entered during reentry:

You're [the fatherhood program staff] giving us all the support you can give us, supporting us for what we're going through. In ways that other people wouldn't want to stand by you. Help giving advice, teaching us things we didn't know. And giving us the agencies that we need to be a father.

Since the sample for the current study was selected from a dataset of men who all took part in a community fathering program, there was no surprise that several men discussed receiving emotional and even material support, for their roles as fathers during the reentry process. However, as one of the major foci of the current study was to examine what support men received from their partners in their fathering roles during community reentry, the findings in this area will be presented in the next section of this chapter.

### *Spirituality*

A final source of support that men reported reliance on during the process of reentry was spirituality. While not reported nearly as often as were families, partners, and mentors, men still reported finding significant strength from spirituality both during and after periods of incarceration. One example of this finding is 30-year-old Miles:

It uplifts me a lot to think about all of the blessings that I received, and I literally walk down the street singing a song. I am not crazy or anything, I mean I say [Miles sings] “I know I can change, the angels up in heaven want to sign Miles’ name.” I sing, right, and one time this lady caught me – I was singing that song. She said that is a church song, but I put my name in it; it comes back I remembered it. Every time I sing that song, I know I have changed, and it just makes me smile. And, if I smile right then, my lady friend is happy.

For Miles, then, a spiritual song not only kept his motivation and spirits high, but also helped keep his relationship with his partner in good spirits.

### *The Role of Trust*

An unexpected finding was that some men reported turning to no one when in need of emotional support. The reason behind this finding appeared to be the fact that many participants found it hard to trust others in their lives. When asked who he would turn to for emotional support, 25-year-old Mo simply replied, “I don’t deal with others in that category.” In another example, 25-year-old Oscar discussed his intentionally small network of emotional support:

I have one friend outside the family, Kevin, and that is probably it. There is nobody else. I mean, I talk to you, but I can't trust you. And I don't want to waste



my time trying to find out if I could trust you. Basically I know what you are about. I have been through a lot and I have done a lot of things. I have pulled off many fronts and at one point I could catch them slipping or falling asleep and then I get them. They say what you really saw. I think about that, and I do not want anybody to do this with me.

Oscar's small network was the result of his inability to trust people in his life, because he learned from experience the potential dangers in trusting just anyone. Such careful focus on trust may have come as the result of dealing with others while living the fast life and this will be discussed more thoroughly later.

This difficulty with trusting may in part have been related to absentee fathers who many men reported sparsely having in their lives. On the other hand, it may also have been related to gender role expectations as 32-year-old Jalen described:

I think I might go see a counselor to talk, to sort my problems out. It is hard when you walk around and keep so much inside. You just want to explode. It is hard to get men to open up and talk about things, because they seem scared.

Indeed, given the psychological effects of prisonization (Haney, 2003) and the potential effects of existing in contexts in which misogynistic attitudes are highly present (Nurse, 2002), one can imagine how difficult emotional expression may have been for these men. However, Jalen went on to describe what could happen if men could get past gender role expectations and talk to someone they trust. For him, this trust was placed in the interviewer:

Maybe bad things could happen, but it feels good to talk about this. You feel more at ease, relaxed, not so tense. When you put a name on something that you

know has been there for a long time, that is a relief in itself. A lot of things that I talk to you about I never told anybody. It's here, it is not going anywhere, so don't worry about that – I mean, I am alright now. Because you know, when I started talking, I just let it go.

Thus, there is a clear finding that it is not simply the availability of emotional support that mattered for these men, but also from where that support came and the degree of trust they placed in those offering support that mattered.

### *Fatherhood Reborn*

#### *Initial Momentum*

For nearly every man in the sample the return back into their communities following periods of incarceration signified a rebirth of sorts for their roles as fathers. Incarceration gave many men the chance to slow down and recognize how they could improve themselves as fathers and rebuild connections that were often lost during their time away. For 30-year-old Miles, a father of two sons, excitement about fathering characterized his reentry:

As with my sons I was only gone two and a half years. They know who I am, but I have to build a relationship back up with them. And when they see me they are so excited, and I mean, I am so excited too. I mean Randy is a big guy. It is real nice to be back home with them...For the past 5 years, I have been in and out and then it is very uncomfortable for them and Leslie had this other guy in her life, but me and my sons still know. I was fortunate enough to have that time with them when they were babies. They grew up, so now they still call me daddy. They make me feel more excited to spend a lot more time with them. They don't see

me as being gone all this time and now we have a new daddy. I can just try to get that relationship we had back.

Later during the interview, Miles expressed his feelings of regret and sense of indebtedness to his sons for his absence:

For me to tell my kids right and wrong, I have to be at least trying to do things that are right. And if I don't keep myself focused, how can I ask somebody else to be focused. I can't lie to my kids; I can't lie no more. I owe this to my sons. I owe them more than 5 years of their life when I was gone.

### *Regret*

For many, their sense of regret for being away from their children during incarceration translated into positive changes in not only their fathering behaviors, but also in behaviors in all contexts of their lives. For example, 25-year-old Mo expressed regret over the choices he made that led to his incarceration and absence from his son:

Well, it really sucked but these are choices that I made before he was born. So, I just had to shove the consequences after, for a while. Since the kids popped out, I've been pretty much on the straight and narrow. But I knew it affected him by me surfacing and resurfacing. I knew it affected him.

Although Mo reported having followed a more positive path since the birth of his children, he recognized that his incarceration did hurt his children on some level. In the next example, 20-year-old Bird described his renewed determination to be there for his daughter post-incarceration:

And when she goes to sleep, and she wakes up, I'm holding her hand. That's how she knows I'll be there, beside her. I feel like I'm married to my daughter.

Through thick and thin, I'll be there. Rain sleet and snow, whatever you need, I will be there.

In this sense his regret for his absence translated into changes in his fathering behaviors; specifically being physically present for his daughter as much as possible. Changes then had to take place in men's roles as partners as well so that they could create levels of cooperation between themselves and partners that allowed them to make and maintain changes in their fathering behaviors.

### *Changing Family Patterns*

One reason behind this strong determination to come out of prison and be more present and reliable fathers had to do with men's thoughts about their own childhoods while incarcerated. The majority of the men in this sample reported having absentee fathers during their formative years, and a few men reported that by contemplating what their own lives were like without their fathers while in prison, they were able to focus more on becoming better fathers during the process of reentry. Take 23-year-old Ben for example:

I mean, it was just the simple fact that I had a father [my step-father], but my biological father, he didn't do anything with me; I never knew him. I just came to the conclusion that that isn't me. No matter what happens with me and my fiancée – if we separate or whatever and never get back together – there will be no way possible that there will be a lot of “take me away from my kids” because I want them to know me, everything about me.

Ben made it clear that because he did not know his own father, he would not let even a separation between him and his partner stand in the way of staying connected to his children so that they would know him.

Another example of a man relating his own experiences of not having his father in his life to his children's experience was that of 27-year-old Alonzo. In the following, he shared that he taught himself to be a father because of the absence of his own father:

[Who taught you to be a father?] Myself, in prison. [In prison, did you read, or did you just?] No, I really didn't read, but I also knew how the things, I mean, growing up I really didn't think of my father as far as like [age] 1 to 13. But, when I first got locked up, I did remember the things that I did miss, because I didn't have a father there. I mean basically the opposite.

Just as Ben expressed above, Alonzo made it clear that he wanted his children to have him in their lives because he wanted to give them what he did not have in his life with an absent father.

Finally, 19-year-old Kevin discussed not having his father around and what that meant for his own role as a father after incarceration:

[Ok, so you don't stay in contact with the child?] No. [Would you like to if you had the chance?] Both of them if they were mine. I ain't trying to be with the baby's mothers, but if they're my kids...you know my father did me wrong. You know that's one of my greatest fears is to not be like that towards my kids.

In this case Kevin expressed his desire to be there for his children in terms of fear; if he was not a present father for his children, then he would have to face his greatest fear of being becoming the same absent father that his father was. The stories that men shared

while relating their experiences to their children's experiences surrounding fatherhood held an important implication for how they viewed the trajectories of their partner relationships. Basically, men were very strong-willed in their determination not to let problems and separations within their partnerships diminish their abilities to be active and present fathers for their children.

### *Numerous Challenges*

While most participants reported coming out of prison with a renewed sense of fatherhood and more energy than ever before to be better parents, it appears they faced numerous challenges in fulfilling their roles as fathers and rebuilding connections to be proved no easy task. One interesting finding regarding changes in partnerships after incarceration was that many men shifted their focus almost entirely away from the romantic aspects of their partnerships and towards the co-parenting aspects just as in the previous example with Kevin who expressed no desire to "be with" the mothers of his children. Another example was 24-year-old Walt:

[How has the experience of incarceration impacted your life? With your child? With Kiesha?] I just know that I have to take care of Kavon. It's very high – a priority. He's number one to me. I know that I got to take care of him. I don't think about Kiesha at all.

In Walt's case it appeared that although he did not completely stop thinking about his partner as he reported, he did stop thinking about his partnership as a romantic relationship and instead shifted it to a co-parenting relationship in his head.

Along the same lines, two of the men's narratives emphasized the importance of setting aside personal differences with partners for the sake of being good fathers. Take 32-year-old father Jalen for example:

Being a responsible father, adjusting to your kids needs. They do need material things along with, and you have to be able to not just be with the kids, but with the mother too. Like I was saying, I hear a lot of fathers talking about the mother won't let him see the kids. But see I just did it right off top. [Laughing.] As soon as we broke up, I was calling the next day. Sucking up to the mothers and get in good graces with her and you can always see your son or daughter. No matter what it takes sometimes; and a man will snap and you just got to know how to suck it up. You know, "Okay I apologize, you were right, I am wrong." Then eventually she'll get tired of that, and she can't help but to give in.

For Jalen, then, being a father meant going above and beyond providing to the more difficult task of thoughtfully engaging in interaction with one's partners in order to create dynamics in which access to one's children was not prevented.

Likewise, 19-year-old Kevin referred to men as failures if they said they could not see their kids because of bad relations with their mother:

I've just been through too much, just to go out like a sucker. That's just a simple excuse. You are a failure if you can't take care of what you put down, regardless of the baby mama and what you feel about her. So let's get serious, truthfully.

It was apparent that Kevin simply rejected the idea that a man could not see his children because of strained interactions with partners.

The potential consequences of not setting aside differences with partners became apparent as 35-year-old Asante shared his story regarding access to his children:

They [my children] with their mother, both of them. I get visitation rights if I'm good. [Laughter] If I'm good. If I get mad at [their mothers], I can't see my kids. But if I'm good with them, then it's alright. Even though I don't care about them anymore, I care about my kids, but they feel I'm just saying that.

For many men, then, this careful attention to the orchestration of interactions with partners appeared to signify signs of maturity and responsibility for them. They took pride in being mature enough not to be so reactive towards their partners that they blocked their access to children, and they applauded themselves for being responsible enough fathers to recognize the significance of their interactions with their partners on their fathering abilities. In a sense, men seemed to perform a reality check with themselves by facing the truths of the dynamics within their partnerships.

Yet another fatherhood challenge that men were faced with during the process of reentry involved their partners' new romantic relationships. Though many participants made it clear that they had no desires to have romantic relationships with their partners upon reentry, they reported that new partners still interfered with their abilities to reconnect with their children such as in the case of 35-year-old Asante:

I went over to her mama's house to pick her up, and there was this guy there; I don't even care about this guy, "you're gonna be you," I just left a female, and the guy tried to get upset. "Sit your punk ass down fool, I come to get the baby, you can have the woman." Then I had to hit him in his mouth. Then we [he and his partner] fell out – "get outta my house!" "Can I take the baby?" I didn't feel like



I did no wrong; I was defending myself. So she's trying to pressure me by not letting me see the baby.

Later during his interview, Asante described this interference of the new partner and his perception of his imprisonment being held against him:

Her mother's husband – is a bitch! She [my daughter] don't even like him; she can't wait until she's 18, she wants to go away and come with me. But her mama, like, you gonna stay with me until you're eighteen, I don't give a damn. Her mama is kinda ignorant, to me. I can understand what she's saying, because I ain't been taking care of her because I been locked up so many times. But still, that ain't got nothing to do with nothing. She's my daughter; I don't give a damn what happened, when it's all over and done "who her father is?" They got to say my name: "Oh, Curt's the father."

Though Asante's case involved a physical altercation with the new partner and displayed an extreme example of what could go wrong in these partnerships when new romantic partners came into play, other men expressed concerns about their fatherhood roles in the presence of new partners as well. For instance, 30-year-old Miles described his situation:

Last time I saw them [my children] was like two weeks ago. It was kind of an awkward situation because my kids' mother, she stays with her boyfriend and they have a good relationship going and I don't want to intervene on that so I try to be more away from the house. I don't want to be calling there. He has seen me before but I have never really talked to the gentleman, so I talked to the kids'

mother today, but he did say something about it. I apologized. She said anytime you want to see the kids just call my mother's house.

Thus, in Miles' case, he recognized the potential for problems with his partner having a new boyfriend and made thoughtful efforts to make things run smoothly in maintaining contact with his children. Dion, a 25-year-old father reported a similar situation. However, in his case there appeared to be less patience and more frustration towards the fact that his partner's new boyfriend could complicate things for him with visitation:

I just think back, I mean, to the woman I had my daughter with. You know what I'm saying, I mean, if she's still the woman that I met, I know my daughter is in good hands...She'll be the best mother she can be, but, it just hurt me to where I can't be there with my daughter. Know what I mean? I mean, I don't care what her dude got going on. I wanna see mine, though, know what I saying. I want some type of visitation.

In another example, Eric, age 27, shared his concerns about the husband of one of his kids' mothers:

They're encouraging. Yeah, that's one thing I can say about all three [of my partners]. They encourage me. Only thing about Elizabeth in Kentucky. She got married when she left here and had 2 more kids, 2 or 3. And her husband was trying to claim my daughter.

While it was not entirely clear from Eric's story what he meant by saying that his partner's husband was trying to claim one of his daughters, this may have been a case in which the husband attempted to formally or informally adopt his daughter as his own

child to solidify the new family that he and Eric's partner were trying to create together. Eric's report of his partner's husband trying to claim his daughter as his own was a unique one among the sample as a whole.

Very few cases existed in which men shared stories of things running smoothly with their partners' new boyfriends or husbands. However, Joseph, age 29, reported the most amicable situation among the sample with his partner's new husband:

I can come whenever I want to. I am there for my son. I am a father to him. She is married now, but I am still here for him. We are all good together. The guy she is married to, I know him and all of his family.

Joseph's case was the only in which a man actually reported knowing the partner of their children's mother so well that they also knew his family. Though it was a rare occurrence, it appeared that Joseph's relationship dynamic with his partner's new husband actually helped his access to his son, since Joseph reported being able to see him whenever he wanted.

In addition to the challenges of having to be careful not to let personal problems with partners block access to children and dealing with the new boyfriends and husbands of partners, two men reported that they were faced with the challenge of having to prove themselves as fit fathers during reentry to local child protection agencies. The first case involved 34-year-old Muhammed who had one partner with a substance abuse problem. Though his sister stepped in and cared for his two younger children during his incarceration, he reported great difficulty with the local social services agency when he tried to live with his sister and assume care for his children upon his release:

DCFS was trying to say that I couldn't go back while the kids were there. I fought that in court. You can't tell me I can't go back there because my kids are there.

They don't want an ex-con around the kids. Just like they don't want guns in the house...When I got out, I had to prove that I was a good father.

Muhammed reported eventually winning custody of his children and getting a protective order issued against his partner for his children, because he had such concerns about her drug use and the kids' safety.

Similarly, 26-year-old Theo shared his challenges with the local social services agency upon reentry. At the time of his interview Theo reported that his child was in state foster care for reasons that were not entirely clear. The following was Theo's response when asked how he felt about having to deal with the agency that had custody of his child:

It makes me feel like dirt. I be like going to school. Then going through these programs, and I didn't have to do any of this. I could have been doing my own things. And they still aren't doing anything. They took the kid from her, but they give her more privileges than they give me. I feel that, I see that. At first they gave her unsupervised visits. They gave me nothing. When they gave her these, I hadn't even seen my baby for a month.

Yet another challenge to fulfilling their roles as fathers during community reentry was providing financially for their children. Fathers who had been absent in their kids' lives due to periods of incarceration especially felt the pressure to provide in order to live up to the expectations that they had set out for themselves as renewed fathers. One example was 25-year-old Mo:

[Now, with Terry were they any turning points?] Yeah, there really is. I was in prison for the first two years of his life. So, I felt like a complete failure, because you are failing when you are in prison. I got out and I got two jobs.

The challenge came in when men did not have the same ability as Mo had to gain employment after time in prison. As will be discussed in greater detail later, having a criminal background can make gaining legal employment hard and nearly impossible at times. This made providing for one's children very difficult and negatively affected how men perceived themselves as fathers, as was the case for 35-year-old Asante:

I want to work. I want to work so bad. I been trying to find work...It's time for money now, something with benefits that is stable. So I can look at my daughter with a smile, instead of a fake smile. I got you, now I got to go out there to see what I can do to get you. That stuff upsets the fuck out of me. I ain't fixin to borrow; I have to do this for my daughter – take care of my baby.

The meanings that men attached to work and providing even held implications for the time men spent with their children in some cases:

[Have there been barriers that kept you from being a father?] Yeah. Mostly barriers that I put up myself, like mentally. Say there is something they wanted and I couldn't get it – that would keep me away from them for awhile, until it was possible I could afford it (Earl, 27-years old).

A final finding regarding the challenges that men faced in their roles as fathers during community reentry was that of not receiving support from their partners as fathers. Only a couple of men reported perceiving that their partners did not want them to have contact with their children. As described earlier, 26-year-old Theo reported that his child

was in foster care upon his release. In the following he shared how he felt about his partner's support, or lack thereof, of his role as a father: "She didn't want me to have my baby, she would rather my baby grow up in a foster home. She is just like that."

Similarly, 35-year-old Asante talked in great detail about the resistance he perceived from his partner while trying to fulfill his father role. Asante reported making attempts to maintain his connection with his daughter both during and post-incarceration:

Just before I got out of the joint in 94, we was writing once or twice a week, so me and her we was getting communication going, and mama stepped back then, she knew I was behind bars and their madness, "I mean damn, I'm already mad, you can't get mad at me too. They got me locked up, I don't give a damn what you're saying." So she let us have our way. When I got out, she was like, "well, you're out." And I'm staying out, and she couldn't do anything about it, because the letters had brung us together, by the words we were saying to each other, they brung us together, we was all good.

Later, Asante describes in more detail his perception of the dynamic between his daughter and his partner that made it more difficult for him to fulfill his father role:

We're like brother and sister. We just, we all good. She'll call me but her mother likes to poison her mind, if [her mother] gets mad, she'll figure the same as her mother thinks: "Aww, he aint no good! Mama, come get me!" You know what I'm saying? But before then, we were like brother and sister. Now, anything I say to get her upset, she'll call her mother: "Mama come get me. Yah, you right he's no damn good."

On the other hand, however, several fathers reported feeling very supported in their roles as fathers during community reentry. Miles, age 30, was just one example:

We have a beautiful understanding for us as far as the kids go. She knows that I will be there for them whenever they need me, and she will be there for me. She is trying to be a woman – a woman about the situation. She could just be like, you have been gone this long, forget it, but she isn't like that. I give her credit for that. She knows that I am a good father (Miles, age 30).

It was clear that Miles appreciated his partner not holding his time away during his incarceration against him during reentry for his role as a father. Other men reported similar feelings of support during their returns as well, and it appeared that having this support helped men realize their hopes of becoming better fathers upon reentry.

#### *Partnership Trajectories*

The partner relationships examined in this study have experienced many life events that shaped and influenced where they ended up during community reentry, and incarceration represented just a piece of their existence. Though in many cases it was unclear exactly how the relationship dynamics changed throughout periods of incarceration, it was evident that trajectories took on a variety of different forms for these relationships during reentry and at the time of data collection for the current study.

#### *Separate Ways*

The trajectories of many partnerships left partners going their separate ways and maintaining little to no contact with one another despite having children in common. Unfortunately, the explanations for this finding were not clear-cut, but trust have had

some influence over partner relationship paths. An example of this was the partnership between 25-year-old Dion and his daughter's mother:

[Ok, alright. And then what happened during that period? How did the relationship change over time?] Uh... it was a lot of financial issues. Lot of – I would think it was a maturity problem. I mean, now that I sit back and I think on it. [Maturity problem on who's part?] Both parts... I mean, we just went through regular relationship problems. I mean, I can't really pinpoint exact problems. You know, I try not to focus on what was to blame.

Even though Dion reported that his partner stuck by him during his incarceration and reentry and even served as one of his greatest supports during the reentry process, at the time of his interview he reported that they were no longer together but that even he could not precisely name the factors that led to the dissolution of their romantic partnership.

For several other men, it seems that either during their incarceration or during the process of reentry their partners entered new relationships with other men. Just one example was the case of 19-year-old Kevin:

Me and Ashley, the first girl, we was cool, [she] is one of my first loves, we was all cool. So I got locked up for intimidation with a knife. So when I got out we was on and off. It wasn't so much I want to be with you. We was on and off but I guess she had another boyfriend and got knocked up so she's pregnant. But the thing about it is she's not with him anymore. But now she wants to get back with me... We messed around for a second then I heard her heart. You know, I played her to the left than that's the last time I seen her. We talked on the phone a bit but that's it. I think that's what it was. It's this and that – I kind of messed her up.



So I'm finished with this grudge. It's just young childish play that's all it was.

She was my first love.

Here, it seemed that during Kevin's period of incarceration, his girlfriend found another partner with whom she became pregnant. During his reentry then, he and his partner's relationship was very unstable even though they still had romantic interest in one another. Even though most men are not reporting it, perhaps similar to Kevin it is the case for many that their partners found new partners during their incarceration leading to instability and eventual dissolution for relationships during men's reentry into their communities.

In a small number of cases relationship outcomes were directly tied to problems with the custody and care of children and indirectly tied to incarceration. For example, in the case of 24-year-old Ray, even though his period of incarceration occurred before he met his partner, he reported having significant difficulties finding a job, which contributed to the problems with his partner by diminishing his ability to provide for her and their child. While Ray acknowledged his difficulty with providing, he also expressed anger towards his partner for relying on her mother for help:

I mean I'm having problems with my baby mama now. That's the one girl that I wanna be with. So, men don't wanna settle down like I do, you know what I'm saying. [What kinda problems are you sensing?] She think she really taking care of my son, man. She really ain't, she really ain't. Her mom is – her mom is taking care of her and my son...“I really don't wanna be with you now because I don't have nothing. You don't know how to struggle, you don't know how to, you know what I'm saying.”

Later during his interview Ray reported that he planned to find someone else to have a romantic relationship with and that he wanted it to be someone who could accept him, settle down with him, and eventually marry him.

In another case, 26-year-old Theo described how shaky his romantic partnership was and how it completely dissolved around their daughter's first birthday when she was taken and placed in foster care by the local social services agency. As described earlier, Theo was upset that after his incarceration he was put in the position of having to prove that he was a fit father to even gain visitation rights to his child while she was in foster care. Overall, their relationship was not on good terms at the time of his interview though Theo said he would still turn to his partner for emotional support if he needed it. Theo even reported that his partner attempted to have him arrested for domestic violence in what he perceived as an attempt to keep him away from their daughter.

In the final example of relationship outcomes in which partners went their separate ways due to problems with the custody and care of children, 27-year-old Alonzo reported that his daughter was born while he was in prison and he and his partner were a couple and living with their daughter upon his release. However, from his report their relationship dissolved when he tried to stop his partner from using physical discipline with their child. In the end, Alonzo reported that his partner took their daughter and moved away without disclosing their location to him.

### *Partnering Redefined*

Despite the challenges associated with men's removal from their communities due to incarceration, 40% of participants reported successful trajectories in their partnerships. While the number of men who reported success fit with pre-analysis expectations, the

most striking and unanticipated finding was men's perceptions regarding definitions of successful partnerships. More often than not when men reported that their partnerships had positive trajectories post-incarceration they were referring to stable co-parenting relationships instead of romantic relationships. For instance, 30-year-old Miles described the state of his relationship with his partner as one that was successful because of their children's needs:

We don't have to be girlfriend and male friend to each other but we need to be parents for these two. [How does it feel?] What it feels like is a special type of friend. It is a special bond that you have to have. Leslie and I were together ten years. And we built up a bond that she knows me and I know her. You have got to have a real strong relationship to be in the situation that me and Leslie are in right now. She has a guy she is staying with and I have a female friend... but it is no problem – we know that our main objective is Randy and Little Michael... I get along better with Leslie right now than when we were ever together. It is very true. If we are together we can't get along. As it is now we don't have to do all of that talking and working it out. The relationship is built up and it is pretty good, but I love the relationship we have right now because it is better for the kids.

Clearly, although Miles considered the maintenance of their romantic relationship as something that would have been detrimental to their kids and for him; the outcome of their relationship symbolized something very special and a great success between him and Leslie.

In another example, 25-year-old Mo found similar success not only with one of his partners, but with both:

I've never had a bitter break-up. Me and both of my sons' moms left on good terms. I could call up one right now and ask to go to lunch and she would be happy. Cause it's not about me and her – it's about the product of us.

In this example, Mo made it very clear that his children are a higher priority for him than either himself or his partners. Positioning children's needs in front of one's personal needs seemed to give partners a way to unite for a joint purpose whereas otherwise they would have gone their separate ways at the conclusion of their romantic partnership.

This strong focus on children and on co-parenting in relationship outcomes not only symbolizes success, but also reflects the recommitment that many men made to their father roles during incarceration and reentry, and the changed meaning that men created for the purposes of their partnerships. Meanings given to success in partnerships were transformed away from traditional couple ideals towards new and more fitting standards, leaving room for a broader definition of success. Furthermore, many men were proud to say that they and their partners were best friends and did not focus on the fact that the romantic side of the relationships had ended. This process of creating healthier partnerships seemed to occur due to a variety of other factors. The major factors at play appeared to be men becoming older and maturing, the role of men's families of origin, and the time that men spent removed via incarceration that was spent contemplating their roles. Overall, then, it seems that most of the successful unions between partners existed outside of the scope of romantic relationships, and men seemed to have shifted their expectations for what partnership meant. Effectively coming together as a co-parenting unit seemed to be just as satisfying and workable than their previous romantic relationships with the same partners.

## The Fast Life

Throughout each of the stages of partner relationships presented in these findings including their youthful beginnings, periods of incarceration, and community reentry lay a significant life struggle for nearly every man included in the current study. The struggle was that of dealing with “the fast life.” Participants who reported experiencing this struggle described the fast life in similar fashion, and while some variation exists in descriptions, the central components appear to include hustling and/or the illegal selling of drugs, gang involvement, and weapons possession, particularly gun possession, mainly for the purposes of defending oneself but also for the purpose of attacking others. Men often referred to this lifestyle as “the fast life” or “living fast” because one of the major purposes of it is to make fast money, and also because one must often think, act, and react quickly when living this lifestyle to increase chances of survival and decrease chances of being caught by law enforcement. In the following, 35-year-old Asante described the fast life as he experienced it:

We’d run around with guns, doing this and that. It was like nothing. It was something you had to do... “Duck, here come the bullets!”...It’s just like doing the daily thing, I wasn’t scared of the hood, I didn’t think man, I got to do this, it’s just something to do, it was just a day in America.

As one can tell, Asante became so accustomed to the events of the fast life that he was able to normalize everyday as just another “day in America.” Indeed, it appeared that many men became so adjusted to the fast life that they lost sight of what it meant to live outside of it until they were removed from it via incarceration. Men’s perspectives of the

fast life during periods of confinement will be presented. First, however, the factors that led to the fast life and the role of partnerships will be explored.

### *Getting There*

Throughout the life history interviews, several men offered to share the circumstances surrounding their decisions to begin living the fast life. Most striking was the amount of variation that existed among the sample in their reasons for involvement, as no one reason stood as the predominant explanation for how or why men arrived at the fast life.

### *Financial Need*

Some men described the financial need of their family and wanting to improve things as their major reason for beginning to “live fast”:

I see my mom crying and shit, but I couldn't see that, I was trying to get that money. I used to come into the house with \$300-400 dollars in my pocket, I'd try to give some of it to her, “here's \$70-80,” my mom didn't want none of that shit. “I don't want none of that funk ass drug money!” – that's how my mama said it. That made me mad, but me and her we had a joint account, so I'd sneak behind her back and put some in the account. I just didn't want to be like my mama, struggling, I hated it when she'd cry. When I see my mama, I'd hurt (Asante, 35).

On the other hand, some men mentioned financial need and not wanting to work for minimum wages when there were opportunities to make a lot more money at a much faster rate. Take 34-year-old Muhammed for example:

My daughter asks me all the time “daddy, why don't you get a steady job?”

Because, see, the skills that I know don't allow anybody to pay me what I can

make out there hustling. I could do it myself and make \$500, don't owe nobody nothing. If I go out there and paint that house for a salary of \$5 per hour...

Muhammed left an unfinished thought here, but it is implied that for him working legally with his skill set was far less appealing and lucrative than was making fast money through hustling activities. It was also implied that he felt a greater sense of autonomy and independence by making fast money. Twenty-seven year-old Earl echoed Muhammed's thoughts of wanting money and a greater sense of independence. When asked what led up to his incarceration his simple, yet powerful four-word response spoke volumes: "The wanting for more."

#### *Alternative to Legal Employment*

Yet another reason that men offered to explain their move towards the fast life was difficulty in securing legal employment. For example, Asante reported his job trouble:

[Have you ever felt left out of the work world?] Yeah, longtime I couldn't get a job. It was for over a year, that I couldn't get a job. [What year?] I don't know. I would have to say 2001 and 2002. So I went to hustling.

It was not uncommon for men to report having difficulty securing employment for a variety of reasons including little previous work experience, low education, limited access to transportation, unavailability of jobs in their locales, and prior criminal offenses. Thus, in this case a major component of the fast life, hustling, offered Asante what he viewed as a viable alternative to having trouble finding legal employment.

### *Family Deaths*

An unexpected and surprising finding was another reason that men offered for getting involved in the fast life. Several men reported having emotional difficulties handling the deaths of family members and friends in their lives and described these deaths as having such profound impacts on them that they began not caring about their own lives or their futures. For 27-year-old Eric, it was the single death of his aunt that had this great impact: “My great auntie...died in 94. She was like a mentor to me. After that, you know, I didn’t care no more. She was really like a grandmother to me.” In another case, 30-year-old Miles described multiple deaths within his family that contributed to his move towards the fast life:

My father, my real father, I never saw him or talked to him until I was 25 years old. When my brother died, my mom, my brother, and my favorite auntie died the same year. That is when I started getting locked up.

While several men were able to make the connection between the deaths of their loved ones and their moves towards the fast life, one man, 27-year-old Alonzo, reported that while his mother and a judge hypothesized about the impact of his favorite uncle’s death, he disagreed:

Well, my first uncle I really didn’t know, so it somewhat took effect on me because my family was mourning over him and I didn’t really know him so it was difficult. I mean, but it was still somewhat difficult, he was kin to me. Then, my grandfather passed. [On you mom’s side?] No my father’s side. And then, my uncle passed. After that, that’s when my mother, and even the judge said that I just basically evidently went haywire and that’s what led me to catch my case.



[Did you agree?] No. [Why was that?] Because it wasn't they deaths or nothing, I just I went through something for me basically.

Previously during his interview Alonzo reported that his second uncle who died was the person in his life who had the greatest impact on him because he was a positive father figure in his life. Yet Alonzo refuted that his death led him to the fast life and instead reported that it was more about his personal struggles with finding a job that caused him to “catch” his legal case. Overall, however, experiencing deaths in their lives clearly influenced some men's decisions to lead lifestyles of dangerous and illegal activities.

#### *Living “Down” to Expectations*

Finally, men mentioned the negative expectations of others as yet another factor that led them to the fast life. Specifically, several participants reported that they were thought of as the “black sheep” in their families of origin. For instance, 25-year-old Oscar described his experience within his family:

Only trouble I used to get into was school. Then I got older and your family – I was the black sheep, everyone told me I was stupid and going to go to jail, so I started to show them I was crazy and stupid.

For Oscar, this label served as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in which he internalized the negative expectations of others and began to act out not only in school, but in his neighborhood eventually leading to his incarceration. For two men, these negative expectations took the form of comparisons to their siblings. Rob, age 18, described how this happened in his family:

I was the only one that would get in trouble, though. My brother made it to the army. He's doing pretty good. My sister, she has a decent dude, and they have a

kid and they are settling down somewhere. I was just the only problem child. My mom be like, “Why you my problem child? My baby boy is my problem child.”

That’s what she always used to say.

Thus, negative expectations were yet another factor that men reported contributing to their move towards the fast life.

### *Separating Worlds*

An interesting and unexpected finding was that in describing how they arrived at the fast life, only two men mentioned their partner relationships in any capacity. One explanation for this finding may be the fact that many of the participants who became involved with hustling, drug dealing, and gangs were very young when they first did, even younger than the ages at which many of them met their first partners. Another potential explanation for the absence of discussion of partnerships in coming into the fast life could be that once men realized the dangerousness of leading such lives they made deliberate efforts to keep their fast living separate from their partnerships. Ben, a 23-year-old man described doing just that:

When I was out in the street I was out in the street. Ain’t no me and you, I got to focus on what got to do, what I got going on in the street. Now, when I come home then it’s me and you, you know what I’m saying? I couldn’t have you on the street ‘cause she used to [say] “why can’t I go with you?” “No!” ‘Cause then that’s one extra body that I have to worry about you know, ‘cause in the drug game you never know what’ll happen. A person will try to rob you, anything, you know? Shoot at you, whatever. So, that’s one thing – I kept her separated.

Although Ben was the only man to actually discuss this effort to keep his partner separate from his fast life on the streets, there is an assumption that the absence of dialogue around partners in describing transitions into the fast life may have been due to similar efforts of other men to separate their partnering roles from their roles within the fast life. In this way men may be better equipped to handle the psychological stress of living in this context. In the other case in which a man mentioned his partnership relationship and coming into the fast life, 25-year-old Mo reported that he was not ready to become a father when his partner became pregnant because, as he put it, “I was living too fast to be involved with somebody.” Thus, his effort to keep his partnership separate from his street life meant choosing one over the other which may have been the case for other men during their entries into hustling, drug dealing, and gang activities.

*Removed From It*

There is a clear finding that removal from the fast life due to periods of incarceration for most men was characterized by contemplation over whether or not they wanted to continue their involvement with it. Indeed, it appears that by and large, men used their time within the correctional system to correct themselves in a sense by using the time removed from their communities and from the fast life to reflect on what their priorities were in life and how continued involvement in the fast life would affect themselves and their families, particularly their children. A couple of men even said that their incarceration was a good thing. In the following, one man even expressed gratitude for his time spent incarcerated:

I finally got sent to the joint. I am glad I got caught now. I am glad I am not doing a lot a lot of time, but I am glad I got caught. It brought me back to reality.

I know better (Miles, age 30).

In this situation, Miles had experienced the deaths of his mother and brother, isolated himself from his family and friends for half a year while abusing substances, and then went to jail for dealing drugs.

Most men made some changes, but did not describe making drastic changes in their lives during incarceration. However, the case of 26-year-old Theo describes the most radical changes made behind bars as a result of contemplating life choices found among the sample:

I became a vegetarian in jail. I was raised on religion and when you be locked up you have a chance to sit back and focus on things that you haven't been able to focus on. I started reading the Bible and reading newspapers and articles and going through things and like “man, I was tired of this.” And I said I wanted to change. And I hoped that they would say that I had changed and not just my looks. I was like man, they said God say eat all the food of the land and I took it in and just stopped eating meat. People used to be like “man this is the wrong place for you to be doing that.” And I thought it was the best because once I got out of here I would have it all easier...After I got up in there, I thought about the gang bangin’ and all that – I left it up in there. When I got out here, I am a whole new me.

Most men did not describe their periods of incarceration like that of Theo’s in which he decided to change many aspects of his life, however, many men did describe

making the decision to remove themselves from the fast life upon reentry. The main reason behind this decision among participants was children. Take 27-year-old Eric for example:

Lately, I've been living for myself and that ain't right. I feel like I've been living for myself, like I don't have kids, but I know damn well that I got kids. And it's been killing me, it's been eating me up alive.

The passion that Eric displayed in wanting to turn his life around for his kids was found in nearly every other man who reported wanting to get away from the fast life for the sake of their children. However, there was scarce discussion of coming to this decision solely for the sake of their intimate partnerships unless it was as a means to improve their roles as fathers.

Although incarceration was not necessarily the inevitable result of the fast life, it was a major part of it for many men. As described earlier, men focused far more on relationships with their children and their families of origin during incarceration than on their partnerships. Although not stated, this may have been due to assumptions that partners would move on to other partnerships while they were incarcerated. Indeed, many men did mention the new boyfriends and husbands of their partners who at times interfered with their parenting abilities once out of prison. Perhaps another reason that partnerships were not mentioned when men described their contemplation behind bars is because much of their foci were on prioritizing the relationships with people in their lives. In general, those who were incarcerated while in romantic partnerships reported that their partners were high priorities and contributed to their decisions to move out of the fast life. On the other hand, those who were incarcerated while in co-parenting

partnerships, which typifies the majority of men, considered their partners low priorities relative to children and family members when it came to deciding to move out of the fast life.

### *Over and Done?*

So what happened after men had been incarcerated and made the important life decision of moving away from quick money and gang involvement? And what role did their partner relationships play during community reentry and attempts to move away from the fast life? Overall, it appeared that men came out of prison with very strong motivation to stay away from the fast life and, at least in the short term, actually made life changes that reflected their decision. However, two major obstacles stood in the way of many and made it more difficult than they had anticipated to stay away from the previous lifestyles they had known.

### *The "X" Factor*

By far the most frequently reported obstacle during reentry in heading towards paths other than the fast life was that of the "X" factor, or the stigma that several men reported experiencing while trying to secure legal employment. In addition to the challenges of having low education, brief work histories, a narrow range of job skills, and limited access to transportation, men said that having to report their criminal backgrounds during the application process made it hard and at times impossible to get jobs. In general, men reported the same phenomenon:

Hard to get jobs with a record. I am 25 [years old] and I have the X on my back and I am trying to do something with the odds against me and many times I get frustrated (Oscar, age 25).

This frustration described by Oscar stemmed from the fact that so many men put so much mental energy into their desire to turn their lives around and leave the fast life only to have their motivation dampened when they step back into their communities. Due to the reliance on others that results from this struggle during community reentry, some men expressed feelings of disappointment in themselves over their employment problems:

My grandfather, he has always been like when you get to a certain age you are supposed to be on your own, and I am past that certain age. So it is really unstable. And I feel like I am a burden on him. I don't like feeling like I am a burden on nobody. So I am in this state of confusion. It is hard to find employment – something that will pay the bills (Jalen, age 32).

As described earlier, men expressed strong desires to be better fathers upon reentry.

This, combined with the hardship of finding legal employment drove one man to rethink his decision to stay away from the fast life:

Providing things for your shorty is very important. Because needs and wants, like she wants something - a need is more important than a want, like if she wants a doll but needs some shoes. I'm going to get her what she needed. If I can't get it, then I'm hurt because I can't get something for her. If I ain't got no way else, I'm going back to the bricks to take care of mine. Got to do what I got to do for mine. Anything, by any means necessary, to do for mine (Bird, 20).

Here, Bird describes his passion in wanting to provide for his 2-year-old daughter and the pain that he experiences when he cannot get her the things she needs. He also makes it very clear that if he cannot provide for her the legal way he is willing to turn back to the fast life if it means getting her the things that she needs. It was expected that the younger

men within the sample would report thinking about going back to the fast life or having gone back to it more often than would the older men within the sample because on average the older men have accumulated more years of incarceration than have the younger men. Surprisingly, however, this was not the case. In another example, 21-year-old Wesley shares a different perspective on returning to the fast life than that of Bird:

It is everything for me to be working. Because if I don't have money in my pocket I feel like shit. If I am broke, I feel like, I mean I have been broke mostly all of my life. I know what it feels like to be broke, and so why would I want to go back to it. If I didn't have a job right now, I bet I could get another job. I have a big mouth and I would talk to those people so good, I don't care if it is McDonald's, I am going to get me another job. I am not going to be unemployed. I am not going to sell more drugs, I am through with that. I have been through with that since 4 years. I am through with that and everybody knows.

With Wesley it was apparent that similar to Bird, his feelings of self-worth were strongly related to his employment status. For him, however, returning to drug dealing was simply not an option.

Partner relationships, particularly co-parenting relationships, made it especially hard for men to deal with an inability to find a job during reentry because even when men reported that they and their partners were not on good terms, there existed an expectation that men would financially provide for their children during reentry. One man even reported that a judge expected him to pay child support regardless of being unemployed and issued an order for ten dollars per month to be given to his partner. Thus, partner relationships can be strained, and in some cases men's access to their children may be



limited during reentry, making their vows to stay away from the fast life extremely difficult to uphold. Furthermore, with cases in which men promised their partners that they were done with the fast life, expectations were severely violated when men reoffended and were sent back to jail or prison.

### *Familiar Faces and Places*

Another major obstacle to staying away from the fast life reported by several men was the challenge of returning to their communities in which they were surrounded by elements of the fast life and having to keep themselves from falling back into it. Again and again men talked about how difficult it was to return to the same environment and keep themselves on the straight and narrow. For one man this challenge lowered his spirits during reentry and resulted in going back to the fast life:

I ain't got shit, I'm tired of this! I just need a new environment. When I came back from Minnesota [prison], I told Al, I know me and these projects, if I'm around too long, I'll get attracted to the same old shit. He said, stay away. But I fell right back into it...It's a whole downer, the whole neighborhood. It's like eating the same food with no variety. Just getting fatter. I have more fun asleep than woke (Bird, 20).

Another man described feelings of nervousness and doubt when recounting his reentry experience into the same environment:

I was really nervous, know what I mean. Nervous just to step back out into this jungle man. Especially having to go back to the same neighborhood where I just left from or got in trouble at – then got to go right back on probation or parole or whatever. How I'm going to dodge all these cats our here, know what I mean, try

and stay away from them. But I got to go back to where they at. Know what I'm saying? It was a lot to deal with. I had a lot on my plate, man (Dion, age 25).

Here, Dion asks how he can return to his neighborhood and avoid old friends who he knows are still involved in the fast life without getting roped back in himself. This recognition that one must stay away from old friends was very common among men who expressed concerns about returning to their same communities during reentry. For many, old friends represented peer pressure and temptation to go back to a life of fast money and drug dealing. Thus, they often struggled with the decision over whether or not they could spend time with these friends at all:

[What were your plans when were you released?] Get out and get a job – stay out of trouble. It's like the devil be trying to mess with me, man. He just coming to me, man. Or, I just be hanging with somebody and then they just wanna go do something and I then just – it's right there. Then, at that point in time it's my decision: get locked up or look like an outcast or something. Right now I'd rather be an outcast to the society and to the world (Ray, 24).

In this example, Ray's decision to stay away from the fast life meant being an outsider in his own world. Considering the stigmatization that many men faced in the work world and the challenge of having to separate themselves from old friends in their social worlds, it is not surprising that some men experienced multiple periods of incarceration before staying out of the fast life for significant periods of time.

In some cases partner relationships that were on good terms served as motivation for men to resist the environmental pressure to fall back into the fast life. Some men even described desires to move away from their communities and relieve themselves of

the negative influences. In one case, 21-year-old Wesley tried to convince his girlfriend to move from Illinois to Mississippi with him so that they would be away from the violence and gangs within their own community, and so that he would actually have positive opportunities including legal employment and a university nearby to continue his education. However, his girlfriend rejected the idea when she became pregnant with their child, in order to stay in close proximity to family.

The power of the fast life is evident in men's stories as they describe going into it, being removed from it, and struggles with staying away from it. Many men, however, were successful in staying out of it after periods of incarceration whether their motivation and strength came from their children, partners, families, mentors, or themselves. The words of 25-year-old Oscar reflected the thoughts of many:

I have been through all of that. I have had my fun, and I have got my stars and stripes. If I need something I can go get it. But I am pushing all that to the side. I am through with it.

Thus, for Oscar as for many, the fast life represents a closed chapter in their lives.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this analysis was to explore how men's perceptions of support from their partners during incarceration and community reentry shape co-parenting and intimate partner relationships. In sum, it appears that there are no simple answers to the current research questions, as men's perceptions of support from their partners varied depending on levels of trust and the contexts in which their relationships existed; incarceration operated as just one piece of those contexts. Overall, however, many men did report that they felt supported in their roles as partners across the entire trajectory of these relationships, though this support more often took the form of support for their roles as fathers as opposed to support for their roles as partners. Furthermore, community reentry appeared to be a time when this support mattered most for men because of the recommitments that many made to fatherhood during the process of reentry.

The majority of the partnerships included in the current study began as adolescent relationships and continued throughout the men's lives as prolonged, yet often unstable unions. Furthermore, the vast majority of the partnerships transitioned from romantic relationships into co-parenting relationships, and most of the pregnancies were unplanned and occurred unexpectedly.

During periods of incarceration, for the men it appears that critical changes took place in their partnerships. Relationships appeared to transition from romantic partnerships to open-ended partnerships with somewhat clear expectations for co-parenting roles. The findings reveal that trust played a major role for men during incarceration as they dealt with the real possibility that their partner may have access to new partners during their time away. Another noteworthy finding was that men often

focused on maintaining connections with their children during incarceration and though they received some help in this area from their partners, they more often reported assistance from family members, their mothers especially. Finally, there was a finding that in general, men seemed to shift their commitments to relationships in their lives by making their father-child relationships and relationships with their families of origin higher priorities than their partnerships during incarceration, perhaps partly in response to perceived lack of support from partners during incarceration. Later, this shift served to guide their interactions with partners during the process of reentry, with significant implications for the trajectory of their partner relationships.

Upon community reentry, several findings emerged regarding men's perceptions of social support and the trajectories of their partnerships. For one, men reported relying on the emotional support of people within their families of origin just as often as they relied on similar support from partners. In some cases men reported that they would rely on the emotional support of their partners even when they reported low levels of regular contact or the absence of a current romantic relationship with the same partners. There was also a finding that men relied on the support of male mentors and spirituality during the process of reentry. Overall, men's perceptions regarding who they could trust played a large role in exactly which individuals they turned to for support. Familiarity also played a role in men's ability to seek out partners for emotional support, particularly with cases in which only co-parenting relationships existed in place of former romantic relationships. While in a few cases the outcomes of partner relationships were characterized by animosity and low levels or no contact between partners, the outcomes of many cases were deemed successful by men as many men described having healthy

co-parenting relationships with their partners, and they often referred to them as their best friends and people who they could trust.

Finally, an important piece of the findings which influenced partnership dynamics was men's struggle with the fast life. Men's narratives suggested that participation in the fast life was necessary due to financial need, difficulties securing legal employment, emotional difficulties, and negative expectations of their behavior from family members. Incarceration, then, served as a critical turning point in their lives during which removal from the fast life gave them time to contemplate their pasts and which directions they wanted to go in the futures. While many men give a great deal of thought to turning their lives around and staying away from the fast life, challenges such as the effect of criminal backgrounds on employment searches and returns to the same neighborhoods in which they entered the fast life made it difficult for men to stick to their commitments of reworking their life paths. Thus, at times men's decisions in this area damaged their intimate partnerships. For example, similar to Nurse's (2002) findings, trust decreased in partnerships in which men were rearrested and reimprisoned.

#### Partnership Trajectories

One of the most significant findings of the current study relates to men's perceptions of successful relationship trajectories during the process of community reentry. There was a general pattern of transformation that occurred across the lifespan of these relationships in which partnerships that began as fragile romantic relationships often evolved into mature and collaborative co-parenting relationships with the shared interests of children placed before personal feelings between partners. In this way then, partnering remained constant throughout the trajectories of these relationships, but the

purpose of partnering shifted from partnering for personal, romantic interests into partnering for the sake of raising healthy, well-adjusted children.

Given that men often identified their intimate unions as successful when friendly and effective co-parenting strategies were in place between them and their partners, there seems to be a lack of information in the current literature regarding how to define “success”. As noted previously, one of the major gaps in the relevant literature is the lack of attention to family strengths within such partnerships as researchers have been quick to point out the deficits (Hairston, 2003; Rose & Clear, 2003). Furthermore, when attention has been placed on the strengths of families affected by incarceration, virtually none present strengths from the male partner’s perspective (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005). The current study, then, serves to fill in missing pieces of information within the literature surrounding families affected by incarceration by not only bringing attention to the successful aspects of these partnerships, but also presenting these aspects from the perspective of male partners.

There is information within the literature concerning the role of men’s appraisals of themselves during reentry and the connection to the successful paths for partner relationships. Similar to Nurse’s (2002) findings, men in the current study did report making commitments while incarcerated to be better partners upon reentry. However, the men in the current study seemed to rework traditional meanings surrounding what it meant to be “good partners” and focused on being better co-parents more so than romantic partners. For instance, men discussed the importance of setting aside personal differences with partners for the sake of having partnerships that were healthy for their children. The fact that men focused so heavily on defining their success as partners via

their role as co-parents is indeed congruent with the findings contained in the literature review that many men view their release from the correctional system as rebirths in their roles as fathers. It was also very clear that men took great pride in their roles as fathers and in the improvements that they made after incarceration. In general, separating their roles as fathers from their roles as partners did not occur and the purpose of partnering simply shifted from romantic to parental priorities.

### Partnering in Context

A major piece of the findings in the current study is the significant influence of contextual factors in shaping the trajectories of men's partner relationships. Specifically, two aspects of the fast life seem to affect men's partnerships most: trust and stability. The issue of trust was central as men recounted their involvement within the fast life. By definition the fast life involves both making fast money via hustling and/or drug dealing activities and thinking fast so as to protect oneself from physical harm and from being caught by law enforcement officials. Protecting oneself from these factors relied heavily upon knowing who to trust and deciding exactly under what circumstances those individuals could be trusted. Not only did men use what they learned about trust on the streets to successfully navigate and gain from living the fast life, but it is reasonable to assume that they also used what they learned about trust in their partner relationships, making it more difficult to trust their partners after heavy involvement in the fast life.

Although not explicitly stated, existing within the context of the fast life brings up the factor of stability as well for men and influences their partnership trajectories. The environment of the fast life is one that is very unstable because from day to day men may not know whether or not they will be caught doing illegal activities and arrested, whether



the people whom they trust at the beginning of the day are still the people they can trust at the end of the day, or whether or not they will survive another day. This uncertainty of the fast life coupled with the uncertainty and instability in other areas of their lives such as with jobs, finances, or family relationships, particularly relationships with their fathers, then may give men strong reasons for seeking some sense of consistency/stability in their lives. Perhaps their partnerships offered this opportunity. Even though fragile romantic partnerships may not offer such stability for these men, more solid co-parenting partnerships may offer them the steadiness that they are missing by affording men the opportunity to do two things.

For one, within their co-parenting relationships men can strive towards the high standards that they often set for themselves upon reentry, a finding that came out within the current and previous studies (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Nurse, 2002). Secondly, within their co-parenting relationships men often reported receiving support in their roles as fathers from their children's mothers during the process of reentry, similar to the findings of Roy and Dyson (2005). Thus, even in the absence of support for their roles as romantic partners men may be able to gain support from the same partners in their roles as co-parenting partners, increasing their sense of steadiness and higher purpose in their lives.

Given the great impact of the fast life on partnership trajectories found in the current study, there appears to be a large gap within the incarceration literature regarding men's involvement in such contexts that may lead to incarceration, and how involvement in these contexts may shape trajectories of intimate partnerships. Instead, scholars focused solely on how incarceration may affect men and their intimate relationships. The

closest tie, then, to these findings within the current literature review are the findings regarding psychological changes that may occur for men during incarceration. According to Haney (2003), incarceration can result in the process of “prisonization” in which men incorporate ways of thinking, acting, and feeling in prison into their lives outside of prison. Similarly, perhaps men’s thoughts, actions, and feelings within the fast life carry over into their partnerships, shaping the ways they think, act, and feel about trust with their partners. Trust could be lost very quickly in street life; for example, if someone who a man trusted gave law enforcement officials the information they needed to arrest him for a crime in order to get themselves a briefer prison sentence. Through this one incident a man may learn that very quickly his trust in someone he considered a friend can be completely lost. The consequences then for his partnership may play out with his partner doing one thing that he views as a similar betrayal. For instance, if his partner reported his name to social services to establish paternity for children in order to receive public assistance, trust could quickly be wiped away from his perspective.

Another finding within the literature review regarding psychological changes for men during incarceration was the occurrence of “hard timing.” This process, identified by Nurse (2002) occurred among prison inmates when they were removed from their families for long periods of time and distanced themselves as a psychological mechanism for dealing with the pain and guilt of their absence. The current findings suggest that a similar process may occur in a slightly different way for men in the context of the fast life. For example, one of the main findings regarding partnerships and the fast life was that there was deliberate effort placed on keeping partners physically and psychologically separate from life on the streets. Attempts for physical separation may simply be based

on safety concerns for their partners since the fast life involves a lot of violence. However, perhaps the psychological separation occurs as a way for men to better cope with the stresses of living in the fast life allowing them to devote more focus to survival and personal gains on the streets. So in similar fashion to hard timing, men may use at least psychological separating as a coping mechanism for managing their personal feelings of guilt regarding their absence and involvement in risky activities. Yet different from hard timing, men are not reporting that they completely block interactions with their partners and distance themselves to cope, but rather that they are selective in what times their partnerships can be in the forefront of their thoughts and actions.

A final finding within the literature review presented here regarding psychological changes for men during incarceration that may relate to the context of the fast life and influence partnership trajectories is the misogynistic talk that Nurse (2002) found occurring frequently among prison inmates. This “talk,” characterized by speaking of women in negative, exploitive ways for the purpose of asserting masculinity and bond with other men may very well occur in the fast life as well. Clearly, then, engaging in such talk may influence the trajectories of partnerships because men’s perceptions of their partners as women may shift to be more in accordance with the misogynistic talk that takes place on the street although this was not a direct findings in the current study.

#### Limitations

An important limitation of the current study relates to the issue of generalizability. Of the 20 men in the sample, 19 were African-American and 1 was Caucasian. In terms of socioeconomic status, all of the men were from low-income, working-class backgrounds, some had been recipients of public aid at some point during their lives, and

several had high school or lower levels of education. Furthermore, all of the men lived in a large metropolitan area of the United States in which many had lived all of their lives. Thus, the generalizability of this study's findings is very limited and one is cautioned against applying the themes found within these men's stories to dissimilar populations.

Yet another limitation of the current study is the fact that the findings relied upon secondary data analysis. The participants for the current sample were taken from an original study of fathers who all took part in an 11-week long community-based fathering program. At the conclusion of the program, participants completed life history interviews which centered on themes related to intimate relationships and significant turning points in the life course. Yet because the current researcher was not involved in this interview process, interpreting the meanings that participants gave to their lives and partnerships for the current study had to be done in careful collaboration with the original investigator to gain a better understanding of the nuances of each narrative.

Two other limitations of the current study are related to the designs of the original studies. For one, since the original interviews were not specifically designed to address themes related to men's partnerships during periods of incarceration and reentry the analysis of the current study was more difficult than would have been the case if questions were designed around the current research questions. Hence, while particular focus was given to men's partnerships during periods of incarceration and reentry some of the interpretive aspects of content analysis relied heavily upon filling in gaps and holes by reviewing and interpreting each interview in its complete form. Secondly, because all of the men took part in fathering programs and voluntarily consented to complete life history interviews, there may have been characteristics of men in the current sample that

differ from men in similar populations that have not taken part in such programs or interviews.

A final limitation of the current study is the reliance on retrospective accounts of participant's stories regarding their intimate partnerships. The life history interviews required each participant to rely on his own recollection of events and major turning points in his life including the dynamics that surrounded his intimate partnerships before, during, and after periods of incarceration. Clearly then there may have been some distortion of fact regarding events when men were asked to recall different periods of their lives simply due to the natural degeneration of memory that occurs as time passes. However, it is important to note here that while retrospective accounts are considered a limitation of the current study, the chief purpose was to explore men's perceptions of support from their partners during incarceration and community reentry. Thus, even with retrospective accounts it is not so much the fact of events that matter most, but rather how men experienced the events and the meanings they gave to them. Of course this reliance on men's accounts does ignore the female partners' accounts of their relationship trajectories and further studies would be most informative with both men and women's narratives taken into account.

#### Implications

The findings of the current study hold important implications for intervention development with similar populations. Not only do men's accounts of the changes and outcomes of their partnerships offer key information, but also do men's reports of their transitions out of the correctional system and into their communities. Thus, the following

are suggestions for program developers and practitioners to serve similar populations of men with reentry transitions and with their intimate partnerships.

### *Reentry Interventions*

Based on the findings, it is clear that upon community reentry men may greatly benefit from assistance programs. Specifically, job assistance, legal education, and building support networks are three major areas with which men could use assistance during reentry. Since many of the men reporting having difficulties securing employment after incarceration, in part due to stigmatization, job assistance in the form of providing referrals and connecting men with local agencies who are willing to collaborate with reentry programs is recommended. Secondly, providing men with basic legal education specific to their locales regarding paternity issues, child support, and visitation rights may be particularly helpful upon reentry, especially because participants in the current study expressed very strong commitments to their roles as fathers during reentry. Providing this type of assistance can be of great help for men facing legal challenges to maintaining regular contact with their children, especially for men whose kids are placed in foster care at some point during their incarceration. Lastly, comprehensive reentry programs for similar populations should include a strong focus on building support networks for men upon reentry. The vast majority of men in the current study expressed how important the role of partners, family members, and mentors were in their lives, particularly at turning points when men were attempting to make important life changes such as moving away from the fast live. If resources allow, providing male mentorship would serve as a key piece to helping men begin building their support networks in a way that they find useful.

### *Partnership Interventions*

Not only do the findings of the current work provide critical information for reentry programs, but also for partnership interventions with similar populations. First, and perhaps most important the findings make it clear that clinicians must recognize a wider range of success among intimate partnerships. Adopting the perspectives of the men themselves shows that workable and satisfying partnerships in some cases are defined more by desires to raise healthy children than to have romantic partnerships that were initially built upon fragile and casual relationships. Along with adopting this perspective lies the importance of adopting the language that men within similar populations use to describe and define their partnerships. Terms such as “couple” or “co-parents” do not seem to fit entirely with how men described these partnerships. For example, some men described themselves and their partners as “business partners,” some used “special friends,” and some used “best friends.” Yet there is no language within the existing literature that gives such partnerships a category in which to fit. However, recognizing and honoring the way in which men and their partners describe their unions may be an important step to helping through intervention.

Secondly, adopting a strengths-based approach is recommended for clinicians working with partners in similar populations. This can be done by highlighting aspects of these relationships that are actually working well for partners and building further progress using those aspects as the bases for success. For example, some men in the current study reported that they would turn towards their partners for emotional support even though they considered their romantic relationship dissolved with those partners, because they knew they could trust them. Thus, clinicians could use this underlying trust

as a focal point of intervention to help partners strengthen their co-parenting and romantic relationships where needed.

Third, partnership interventions designed for similar populations should pay close attention to the role of surrounding contexts throughout the course of treatment. For instance, based on the findings, men's involvement with the correctional system and struggles within the fast life made it more difficult for them to maintain their intimate partnerships because of direct factors like their physical absence from their partners during incarceration and indirect factors such as their diminished abilities to fulfill provider roles post-incarceration. Another crucial contextual factor is the role of extended family within these partnerships. Clinicians should make great efforts to understand the role that extended family members play within partnerships, particularly the mothers of partners, and where appropriate, incorporate extended family members into treatment.

Finally, for the development of partnership interventions at more broad levels there is a recommendation that less focus is placed on marriage promotion such as the federally-funded Healthy Marriage Initiative (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Instead, helping partners within similar populations by investing in the creation of workable unions for the benefit of the children involved is proposed. Within the current study it is clear that men changed the meanings of their partnerships by shifting the focus from romantic interests to co-parenting interests for the sake of giving their children what most lacked during their formative years: having steady relationships with their fathers. It is also clear from men's narrative that in many cases they considered their co-parenting partnerships very special relationships and ones that were



healthier for themselves and their children than the romantic relationships with the same partners could have been. Thus, investing in marriage promotion acts such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005) may discount the experiences and hopes of men in similar populations who simply wish to create the best possible outcomes for their children outside of marital unions.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Life History Interview Protocol

#### **Fathers and Social Support:**

#### **Fathers and Families Resource and Research Center Research Protocol**

I would like to spend some time today talking about your involvement with your family and community. I'm interested in looking back and talking about your "life history", such as where and how you grew up, and your work and school experiences. Most importantly, I would like to better understand how you are involved as a father and what being a father means to you.

#### **Current Situation**

- Let's start with where you're living now. Tell me about the neighborhood where you live currently.
  - How long have you lived there?
  - Neighbors
  - Safety
  - Businesses/jobs in community
  - Resources?
- Who do you live with?
  - How long have you lived there with them?
  - Are there any other places where you stay?
- How many children do you have?
  - Where do they live?
  - Are these your biological children?

### **Father Involvement: Interaction (ask for each “set” of children)**

- Tell me about your relationships with your children now.
  - How often do you see your children?
  - How much time do you spend with them in a typical week?
  - Can you give me some examples of what you do with them?
- Talk about how your involvement has changed over time.
  - Were there turning points in your involvement? Tell me about them.
  - Were you more involved or less involved at certain times in their lives?
- If you don't interact with some of your children, how do you stay in contact with them?
- How do you show your love to your children?
- The birth of your first child is a powerful moment in fathers' lives. Tell me how you felt when you found that the mother of your child was pregnant.

### **Father Involvement: Access**

- Looking back, describe how your relationship with the mother of your children has changed over time.
- Does the mother of your children discourage you from being involved with your children? If so, how?
- Does she encourage you to be involved with your children? If so, how?
- Did you work out an arrangement for your involvement? Tell me about that arrangement.
  - Did that arrangement change over time?

- Was there ever any tension or disagreement over this arrangement?
- Were you involved with children who are not yours by birth? Tell me about these relationships.
- Have there been barriers that kept you from being with your children?
- Have there been barriers that kept you from being a father?

### **Father Involvement: Responsibility**

- Think about all the things that you have done and that you do now as a father.
  - How important is providing in being a father?
  - What are some other important things you do as a father?
  - Is providing more important than these things?
- Have you established paternity for your children?
- Have you paid child support for them?
- Tell me about your experiences with paternity and child support.

### **Impressions of Father Involvement**

- We've talked about a number of important events or turning points in how you are involved with your children and their mother/s. Are there other turning points that you think have been important?
- What is the best age for a man to become a father?
- What makes someone a good father?
- Who taught you to be a father?

## **Family History**

- I'd like to talk a bit about your larger family now, like your parents, brothers and sisters. How would you describe your relationships with family members?
- Let's spend a bit of time talking about growing up.
  - Where did you live in grade school?
  - Tell me about these neighborhoods.
- Who was in your family then?
  - Who was the most important adult to you as a young boy?
  - What was your relationship with your father like when you were young?
  - What was your relationship with your mother like when you were young?
- Where did you live during high school?
  - Tell me about the neighborhoods where you grew up.
  - Who was in your family then?
  - Who was the most important adult to you as a teen?
- How old were you when you moved out of your parents' house for the first time?

## **Social Support**

I would like to spend some more time today talking about your involvement with your family and community. Many fathers are involved with many people – their own parents, partners and ex-partners, people who aren't "blood" family but who you consider to be family. I'd like to get an idea of how this whole collection of friends and family help you, and how you help them – especially how these friends and family help you to be involved with your children.

### **Network List**

- Write in parents and siblings onto family list.
- Other than these family members, who do you spend most of your time with?
- Tell me about this person:
  - Relationship to you
  - Where they live
  - Description: sex, age, race, marital status, education, job, etc...
- Do these family and friends know each other?
  - Who knows who?
  - What do they do together?

### **Social Support**

- Looking at this list, who are the people that rely on you for material or financial support, if they got sick, or needed help making ends meet?
  - Who do you rely on for this kind of support?
- Looking at the list, who relies on you for emotional support, or advice?
  - Who do you rely on for this kind of support?
- In general, what are the typical kinds of assistance that people ask you for? (Such as child care, money, food, transportation)
  - How frequently are you asked for assistance?
- Which types of assistance can you provide, and which are more challenging for you to provide?

### **Support for Finding A Job**

- Have you relied on anyone on this list to help you to find a job? Tell me about them and how they helped you.
  - Sex, age, race
  - Level of education
  - Income level and class
- Of these people with job contacts, who knows the most people with the authority to hire?
  - Who has provided you with the most job leads?
  - Who has the most diverse information about job leads?

### **Details on Supportive Family and Friends**

- Are there people for whom your assistance is “equal” – that they give you some help, and you give them the same amount of help as well?
- Are there people that are a “drain” on you or on the whole group of friends and family? Tell me how they are a drain. Emotional drain? Financial burden?
- Has anyone considered you to be a “drain” like this? Tell me about this.
- In a group of family and friends, there are always a few who are like the hub of wheel, the person who brings everyone together, like “Big Mama.” Of these people, who is the most “central” person?
  - Who knows the most people?
  - Who has the most resources?

## **Kin Work and Social Capital Ties for Children**

- Some families believe different things about caring for children. Some believe that both parents should care for each child, or that mothers should care for each child, or that many family members should care for all children in a big family. Think about all the people in your larger family, not just your household. What does your family believe about caring for children?
- We've talked a bit about how you're involved with caring for your children.
  - How did you first get involved in caring for your children?
  - Who got you involved?
  - Have family members helped to keep you involved with your kids?
- Some fathers think it is important to keep his children connected to his family. For example, a father may go to his own mother's house for Sunday dinner, and he may bring his children with different mothers together at that meal.
  - Do you keep your children connected to other family members? How?
  - How do you think these connections help your children?
  - Do you keep your children connected to friends (non-family)? How?
  - How do you think these connections help your children?
- What organizations or groups do you belong to?
  - Co-workers or group at workplace
  - Church
  - Neighborhood
  - School



- Has this group supported you in your involvement with your children?  
How?

### **Education History**

Where did you go to grade school?

What was your experience of grade school?

Where did you go to high school?

What was your experience of high school?

Did you graduate from high school?

What were your plans upon leaving/graduating?

How have those plans played out?

Do you have any long terms goals for education?

### **Work History**

- Where did your parents work when you were young?
  - Did they do things in addition to make ends meet?
  - How was work for your father when he was your age?
  - What do you think has changed in the world of work if you compared his experience to yours?
- Did you work during high school?
  - What was your first job?
- After high school, where did you work?
  - Did you receive any training or certification?

- Are you working now?
  - Where? For how long?
  - Full time/part time, hourly or salary, benefits
  - Is this job enough to make ends meet?
    - If not, what else do you do?
- Did you ever receive food stamps or public aid for your children?
- Have you ever felt left out of the work world?
  - What does having a job mean to you?
  - Do you have any long term goals for a career?

### **Incarceration History**

- Now, I'm also interested in the impact that incarceration has on this community and on young African American men. How has it impacted you?
- Have you been incarcerated?
  - If so, where and for how long?
  - (Type of incarceration: prison, jail, work release, house arrest)
- What led up to your incarceration?
- How do you think that incarceration affected your relationships with
  - your children?
  - your partner / mother of your children?
  - your extended family?
- Now let's talk a bit about coming back into the family and community. How were you prepared for release? Did you have any particular fears or concerns

about coming back? Did you have any particular hopes about coming back? If so, how did those play out?

- Tell me about reintegrating back into your family and community. What were some of your experiences? How did your family and/or community support you upon release? Did you have any support programs or support networks that you relied on?

### **Programmatic Questions**

Now that you've finished the program here, it's a good time to reflect on that experience. We're interested in hearing from you about your opinions about what works best about the program, what could be improved, and how you feel that it has addressed specific things that you needed when you came into the program.

- First, tell me about expectations that you had for the program.
- Tell me what you feel that you've gained from the program. (examples)
- OK, finally, tell me what you would have liked to have gained, but did not. (examples)
- Since you finished the program, tell me about any important changes in:
  - Your employment status
  - Your educational status
  - Your relationship with the mother of your child
  - Your involvement with your children
  - Payment of child support
  - Paternity establishment

- Housing situation
- Experiences with substance abuse

**Finish**

- Where do you see yourself five years from now?
- What is your greatest personal fear?
  - What is your greatest personal hope?
- What are some areas that you need to improve or change as a father?
  - What are some of your greatest accomplishments as a father?

Appendix B: Sample Life History Grid

**Pseudo Name: Joseph**

	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97
	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Child 1 family 1	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Child 1 family 2								5	5	5	5	2
Child 1 family 3											3	3
Partner in family 1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Partner in family 2						5	5	5	2	2	2	1
Partner in family 3										5	3	3
Work participation	0	0	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	0
Military	0	5	5	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hustling	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Relationship w/ father	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Relationship w/ mother	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	5
School participation	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Prison	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Substance use	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Physical health	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Death of family member	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Intimate rship onset	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
Intimate rship breakup	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Residential change for father	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
New father figure for child	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Child departure	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Extreme events	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

**Key Variables for Current Study:**

**Child (#) family (#):** represents a participant’s children and the family order; child and family number are based listing children in order of chronological age with oldest children always listed first; blank spaces mean child was not yet born; rated on a 0-5 continuous scale for level of father-child contact; (0=no contact during year, physical or non-physical; 1=contact once or twice during year; 2=monthly contact with limited care giving and providing; 3=moderate contact, weekly or twice weekly but still limited care

giving and providing; 4=more frequent contact, several times weekly; moderate to high levels of care giving and providing; 5=daily contact, in residence or out of residence with child; high levels of care giving and providing)

**Partner in family (#):** partner number corresponds to child number; blank spaces mean that man has not met this partner yet; e.g. “Partner in family 1” is the mother of Joseph’s oldest child

**Prison:** represents the amount of time in any given year spent within the correctional system; rated on a 0-5 continuous scale; (0=none; 1=correctional supervision such as probation or parole; 2=time in correctional facility for brief time period, usually less than one month; may include jail, prison, boot camp, or juvenile correctional facilities; 3=time in correctional facility for moderate time period, usually less than half a year including jail or prison; 4=time in correctional facility for significant period of time, usually most or all of the year; typically limited to prison; 5=time in correctional facility for entire year; typically maximum security level prisons)

**Substance use:** includes alcohol and other substances; usually marijuana use; (0=no use during year; 1=at least one reported occurrence during the year)

**Intimate relationship onset:** represents the onset of an intimate relationship, usually with the mothers of a participant’s child(ren); (0=no onsets; 1=at least one onset)

**Intimate relationship breakup:** represents the dissolution of an intimate relationship, usually with the mothers of a participant’s children; (0=no breakups; 1=one breakup)

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