Over the past thirty years, three interrelated trends have profoundly affected the lives of low-income men. First, wages for low-skilled men employed full-time and year-round have declined sharply, as has the proportion of men who do work full-time and year-round. The drop has been substantial for African Americans and Latinos, but especially dramatic for unskilled whites (Bound and Johnson 1992; Katz and Murphy 1992; Lerman 1993), a trend that continued even through the economic expansion of the late 1990s (Holzer and Offner 2001). Second, rates of marriage for low-income and minority men have declined dramatically, driving up the proportion of these men with nonresident children (Tucker and Mitchell-Kerman 1995). Third, incarceration rates have also increased, especially for low-income and minority men (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1990, 1992).

What does the confluence of these trends mean in the lives of unskilled and semiskilled men? There is substantial evidence that criminal involvement increases when men are unemployed (Parrington et al. 1986), when their wages are low (Doyin, Ahmed, and Horn 1999; Groger 1998), and when entry-level jobs are scarce (Shahadeh and Usery 1998). Conversely, offenders tend to desist when they find stable employment and show commitment to their jobs (Schoen 1996), especially if this transition occurs when they are older (Bachman and Schulenberg 1993; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Uppen 2000). Attachment to the military has a similar effect, and timing also matters (after the age of twenty-two, military service tends to disrupt adult bonds to family and work) (Sampson and Laub 1996). Young men also tend to turn from crime when they marry and maintain a stable marital relationship over time (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 1990, 1993), though the relationship may also be sensitive to age in that a very young marriage can worsen offending behavior (Bachman and Schulenberg 1993). Robert Sampson, John Laub, and others explain these variations in criminal involvement (which persist after controlling for prior delinquent activity) by utilizing aspects of social control theory (Hirschi 1969) and the life-course perspective (Elder 1985; Hagan and Palloni 1988).

Social control theory, which draws from Émile Durkheim’s work on anomie (1951), posits that individuals engage in deviant behavior when their bonds to society are weak or disrupted. The life-course perspective examines “pathways through the age differentiated life span,” in which age manifests itself through “expectations and options that impinge on decision processes and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points” (Elder 1985, 17). “Turning points” are key events that occur at a particular stage in an individual’s life course (see also Hogan 1980) that may alter his or her trajectory—in this case, a criminal one—by either increasing or decreasing “social bonds to adult institutions of informal social control” (Sampson and Laub 1990, 625) and thus act as either a brake on or a spur to criminal involvement. The life-course perspective recognizes that individuals differ in their adaptations to similar life events and that these responses can lead to different pathways (Elder 1985, 35). The change can lead an offender to desist completely; offend at a lower level, or trade one kind of offense for another (Laub and Sampson 1990).

Turning points may steer a young man away from a criminal path and toward a more normative trajectory (Elder 1985; Warr 1998). However, these need not be unidirectional. In a qualitative reanalysis of data collected on a sample of delinquent and nondelinquent white teenage males born between 1924 and 1935 (Glueck and Glueck 1950, 1968); Laub and Sampson (1993, 17), analyzing declines in job and marital stability, have found that when these social bonds were disrupted, criminal and deviant behavior increased. In a similar vein, Julie Horney, Wayne Os- good, and Inkeke Haan Marshall (1995, 655) consider whether an individual’s offending behavior is influenced by “local life circumstances that strengthen or weaken social bonds” over time. They find that men committed more crime during the time periods when they were using drugs and committed less crime during the time periods when they lived with a wife.

GOAL OF THE CHAPTER

Our goal in this chapter is twofold. First, we examine all men in our sample who reported any criminal activity in their past (including those with no imprisonment or incarceration history) and look for any evi-
dence that becoming a father has functioned as a turning point in their criminal trajectories. We do not limit our analysis to the time of the birth of a first child, since we find that it is often a higher-order birth that fathers report as most salient (perhaps because they are older and at a more receptive stage in their lives). In particular, we want to explore whether the event of fatherhood, when combined with fear of being locked up, acts as a deterrent to future criminal activity.

The offending and desistance literature routinely considers men’s ties to the institutions of the workplace, school, and marriage as well as their residential mobility or immobility and even exogenous or “chance” events such as being drafted in wartime or being part of a cohort with unique access to a social good like the GI bill. Given this theoretical perspective, we were startled that we could not find a single study that considered the experience of paternity as a potential turning point, despite Sampson and Laub’s (1990, 611) observation that “in later adulthood, the dominant institutions are work, marriage, parenthood, and investment in community.” This was particularly surprising because many of these studies emphasize the origins or onset of criminal behavior but of desistance from it (see also Uggen and Pillarien 1998). Our approach in this chapter is entirely consistent with the social control–life-course perspective advanced by Sampson and Laub; it is distinct in its emphasis on fatherhood as a potential source of adult bonding. Complementary to our investigation here of the effects of fatherhood on somewhat older fathers is Anne Nurse’s contribution on juvenile fathers (chapter 4 in this volume). Nurse finds, as do we, a generally strong desire on the part of young fathers to maintain relationships with their children. Yet as she documents, that desire is heavily mediated by the relationship with the child’s mother, a factor that is clearly salient in our research as well.

New data drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan et al. 2001b) show that unmarried fathers often continue to have romantic relationships with the women who bear their children and their children’s children, and some say they plan to marry their child’s mother. However, an even greater proportion say they intend to stay involved in their children’s lives no matter what happens between themselves and their children’s mothers. The fact that more than eight in ten unmarried fathers surveyed actually attended the birth of their child or visited the child and mother while they were still in the hospital attests to the importance these men place on their bonds with their children (McLanahan et al. 2001a; also see chapter 2 in this volume for more discussion of the Fragile Families study). For such men, who seldom marry or find stable employment until they are well into their thirties (if at all), paternity is sometimes the only event that has the potential to act as a turning point.

Second, we look at the effect of imprisonment and incarceration on low-income noncustodial fathers’ ability to form and maintain social bonds with their children. In this second part of the analysis, we limit our focus to those men in our sample who have been imprisoned or incarcerated since becoming fathers and analyze their life-history narratives to identify the role that incarceration may play in either weakening or strengthening these bonds. If social bonds are important predictors of within-person variations in criminal activity over time—and if the salience of the father-child bond for fathers in this group can be demonstrated—policymakers will have to ask whether incarceration policies inadvertently increase criminal behavior by affecting fathers’ ties to their children. On the other hand, we must give equal consideration to the possibility that for some fathers, especially those with particularly high offending rates, incarceration may play a restorative role, allowing bonds that were largely latent to begin to form or re-form.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Existing data can and have been used to analyze relationships between some of the factors outlined here. However, these data have some serious limitations, and our data some distinctive advantages. Most important, noncustodial fathers are seriously underrepresented in large data sets, and this is especially true of low-income, never-married, and minority fathers (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998). According to estimates made by Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, and Thomas Hanson, it is fair to say that, with the exception of the Fragile Families Study (which surveys only new fathers), for low-income and minority noncustodial fathers, the underrepresentation problem in most large surveys is so severe that it constitutes something of a crisis. Although we do have indirect data on these men, drawn from the reports of the women that bear their children and the heads of the households they reside in, little is known about these fathers’ own perspectives. We have been able to interview a large number of such men and have enjoyed a high degree of rapport with them in the interviewing process.

In addition, qualitative data such as these can make several unique contributions to the body of research on low-skilled men. First, though the hallmark of quantitative analysis is measuring relationships between variables, the limitations of the data often mean that the processes or mechanisms leading to the outcome of interest remain opaque. Qualitative analysis can help shed light on the processes and mechanisms by which one set of factors leads to another, such as how the event of fatherhood might act as a turning point in some cases but not in others. Second, qualitative data can help reveal actors’ motivations for a given course of action. Although we do not always take these accounts at face
value, when properly analyzed the data can help to inform theories that make assumptions about such motivations. Third, qualitative methods allow subjects to respond to questions in open-ended narrative form rather than in a fixed-choice manner. The resulting accounts can help to identify important correlates to outcomes of interest that might not otherwise have been considered. Fourth, qualitative interviewers often develop a high degree of rapport with their research subjects and are thus sometimes better able to get accurate measures of sensitive issues (such as criminal activity or family violence).

Hence even in quantitative research using especially thorough survey data, our method makes a significant contribution. For example, in chapter 2 of this volume, Bruce Western, Leonard Lopoo, and Sara McLanahan, using the Fragile Families data, find a statistically significant negative relationship between incarceration and marriage among unwed new fathers and mothers. This chapter (and Anne Nurse’s chapter 4) extends those findings to interrogate the tenor, substance, and context of relationships between parents—from the fathers’ perspective—that could variably contribute to or deter future criminal behavior.

A chief liability of our approach, though, is that our data are cross-sectional and not longitudinal. Therefore, we rely on retrospective accounts of fathers’ experiences and on interpretations of those accounts that may, in some cases, be no more than post hoc rationalizations of behavior. Given the limitations of our data, we cannot correct for this problem. Thus the results we report here must be interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless, because so little is known about the life experiences and worldviews of low-income noncustodial fathers or how they experience and interpret the world, we believe the following approach is justified and, at the very least, can generate new hypotheses for future scholarship.

RESEARCH METHOD

The data are drawn from verbatim transcripts of repeated in-depth interviews of roughly three hundred unskilled and semiskilled low-income noncustodial fathers living in two U.S. cities (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Charleston, South Carolina) conducted from September 1995 to May 2001. The cities were chosen to reflect variation in economic conditions and policy contexts. Philadelphia and its inner suburb, Camden, New Jersey, both had slack labor markets during the study period, but the Charleston area’s was one of the tightest in the nation. Both sites have strict child-support enforcement systems, but Charleston’s is especially punitive. The law enforcement regimes of these locales vary as well, though we have not explored these variations in depth. Generally, the primary limitation of qualitative data is that the sample size is small or equivalent data are not collected across all cases. This data set is unique in that we conducted a large number of interviews in a highly systematic manner. Our sample is evenly divided by race-ethnicity (black, white, and Latino in Philadelphia and black and white in Charleston) and by age category (fathers aged thirty and under and fathers over thirty). As a result, we have thirty fathers in each race-age cell in each city and a total sample of three hundred. For this chapter we have analyzed forty-five cases with incarceration histories and an additional forty-five cases with episodes of criminal involvement but no incarceration history. More than one-third of respondents report imprisonment or incarceration (jail, prison, or time served in an alternative institution such as a rehabilitation program or halfway house). Roughly two-thirds reported at least one episode of criminal involvement over their lifetime.

We did not recruit our respondents randomly; rather, we used a targeted neighborhood approach. In each city, we used census data to identify census tract clusters with relatively high levels of poverty, because these were the neighborhoods that also contained the largest number of poor single-parent households. We had to assume that the fathers attached to such families could also be found there. Our initial list of target clusters, or “neighborhoods,” contained all those neighborhoods with a poverty rate of at least 20 percent. This relatively low poverty threshold ensured that a sufficient number of white neighborhoods could be identified for the study (typically, the white poor are far more likely than their African American or Puerto Rican counterparts to live in mixed-income neighborhoods). From this list, we selected several target neighborhoods in each city that had demographic characteristics that typified the range of neighborhoods we had identified for each ethnic group. To offer one example, the Philadelphia metropolitan area contains a large number of predominately African American neighborhoods that met our criteria. But because they are concentrated in the cities of Philadelphia and Camden, we chose three Camden neighborhoods and six Philadelphia neighborhoods that roughly represented the range of social conditions (unemployment rates, poverty rates, preponderance of single-parent families) seen in the broader list of predominately African American neighborhoods on our list. Fewer white and Puerto Rican than black neighborhoods ended up fitting our criteria, so we interviewed in all of these communities rather than selecting among them.

Once we had selected our more than two dozen target neighborhoods, we then canvassed each neighborhood on foot, informally interviewing owners of local stores, representatives of local grass-roots community groups, clergy, representatives of nonprofit social service agencies, neighborhood employers, and representatives of other social institutions (teachers, social workers, and other government agency rep-
representation). These neighborhood canvasses, along with data on male characteristics from the census, gave us some sense of the range of low-income noncustodial fathers we might find in each neighborhood and how and where we might find them.

We then used referrals from each of these sources and from direct contacts made between fieldworkers and research subjects at bus or train stops, informal day-labor cemeteries, formal-sector places of employment, and other locales where we learned neighborhood males tended to congregate (bars, grocery stores, convenience stores), taking care to try to sample across the range of men we were expecting to find in each neighborhood based on our canvas. Men who were successfully recruited into the study were also asked for referrals to neighborhood men they thought we would be unable to identify through these means. The resulting sample is far from random, but our intent was to maximize heterogeneity to reflect as closely as possible the composition of the population of interest.

According to our sampling strategy, all of our respondents earn less than $8,000 an hour or $16,000 a year from formal-sector employment, and none has a college degree. All have at least one child for whom they are the noncustodial father, most are not married and have never been married, nearly two-thirds are African American or Latino, roughly half report that they use drugs or consume alcohol at levels considered excessive, and most also live in poor urban neighborhoods. Considering the fact that these interviews took place in a period of unprecedented economic growth, our wage restriction alone means that the men in our sample are highly disadvantaged indeed. The fathers in our sample come into contact with the criminal justice system primarily through the drug trade (other common crimes include theft, auto theft, burglary, robbery, and assault, and these are often drug related). Drugs play a large role in the story we tell in this chapter; though not all of the incarceration or imprisonment we observe results from drug involvement, most is at least peripherally related to the sale or use of controlled substances.

This is a new area of interest to us. Our father interviews contain detailed histories of their relationships, both with their children’s mothers and with their children, their employment histories (including formal, informal, and criminal employment), a recounting of their experiences with the criminal justice system, and detailed information on their income (from all sources, including informal work and crime) and expenditures. Thus these data are potentially useful for understanding the pathways through which involvement with the criminal justice system may affect a father’s bond with his children and whether familial relationships between fathers and children may affect criminal trajectories.

In this research we have used a focused life-history approach that is common to ethnographic studies. Such an approach does have a serious limitation in that it necessarily relies upon retrospective accounts of events that may have happened months or even years before the interview. However, quantitative longitudinal studies of criminal trajectories are rare, and qualitative longitudinal studies even rarer (for exceptions, see MacLeod 1995 and Sullivan 1989). The special advantage of the focused life-history approach to ethnographic interviewing is that it offers the chance for the respondent to give a detailed narrative about important turning points in his life, including his history of criminal offending, his interaction with the criminal justice system, and his formation and maintenance of social bonds.

FINDINGS

The event of fatherhood can sharply alter how men perceive the risks and rewards of criminal activity, particularly because they believe strongly that street crime leads to either victimization (death or debilitation) or eventual incarceration. For those men who choose to activate the fathering role (whether with a first or subsequent birth), this belief is likely to make the risks of crime far less tolerable. Additionally, the men we interviewed tend to value the ties to their children above all other social bonds that could potentially link them to institutions of informal social control. As a result, fatherhood in and of itself can prove a powerful turning point that leads men away from crime and toward a more mainstream trajectory.

For offenders who maintained contact with their children (or their children’s mother) before their arrest, the event of incarceration has a pronounced negative effect on the bonds with their child and the child’s mother. Social control theorists would expect these men to continue their criminal careers after release because of these diminished attachments. For offenders whose lifestyle has created a wedge between them and their families before arrest (usually because of severe drug or alcohol addiction), incarceration itself can be a turning point: an opportunity to take a time-out and reorient one’s life. In some cases, fathers in this group use the experience of incarceration to rebuild severed ties with children (though often the romantic tie to the child’s mother is not salvageable, a cooperative friendship may sometimes emerge). From the social control perspective, incarceration may have a rehabilitative effect for those men in this group who take advantage of the opportunity to reattach themselves to family.

FATHERHOOD AS A TURNING POINT

One common theme that emerged from our interviews was the dramatic impact that becoming a father often had on men’s lifestyles. The stories
fathers told us sometimes had the flavor of religious testimonies and were structured into before-and-after accounts. Typically, these fathers had been involved in selling or using drugs, hanging out on the corner, and “messing with” several different women—a lifestyle several respondents referred to as “rippin’ and runnin’ the streets.” However, after their first child was born, many reported a dramatic change in their behavior. Ahmed, a nineteen-year-old African American high school graduate from Camden who works in the formal sector, regularly spends time with his daughter (though he provides only intermittent financial help). Here he describes the impact the birth of his daughter had on his life:

She changed my life a lot. I was headed down the wrong path. I grew up on the streets, everything from drugs to this and that. I mean, I’ve been in jail before. But ever since she’s been born, I slowed down a lot. You know. . . . Cause it’s like, before her, I didn’t really care too much about anything. I really just lived every day for that day. But as of now, I’m living every day for today and tomorrow.

These sentiments were echoed by “Bucket,” a forty-six-year-old African American father of one adult daughter and one twelve-year-old daughter. Bucket has a certificate of general educational development (GED) and does odd jobs (mostly window washing). Though he sees his youngest daughter twice a month, he offers no financial support. “I always wanted to be a father. I always wanted a child. I waited until I was twenty-five years old before I had my first child, but I always wanted to be a father. Before I had her [I was] in trouble. I was doing wrong things. I was wild, crazy. It always seems as though I was getting in some kind of trouble.”

Fathers often enthusiastically embraced the lifestyle changes brought about by their new role and did not merely accept them with reluctance. Robert, a twenty-three-year-old African American college dropout (he dropped out to help support his son) sees his six-month-old son frequently and intermittently contributes a portion of his earnings from his full-time formal-sector job. When we asked him how the pregnancy of his girlfriend and birth of his son had affected him, he told us:

Yeah, it has definitely changed my day-to-day life because I know that for the whole nine months my girl was pregnant and to this date, I have been like totally with her, if not physically at least like on the phone, [asking] “How is everything?” I don’t talk to anybody like my friends and how I used to go to parties and things like that. And it is not because I feel like “Oh dam, I can’t go out.” I want to be there. I want to be with my son, you know. I would rather know what is going on with him than be somewhere, because even when I am out, I am like thinking about him. [I have] reordered [my life].

According to many of these fathers, their child’s birth literally “saved” them from the streets. The salvation theme was fairly strong in virtually all of the interviews with fathers who maintained some level of involvement with their children. Even among those fathers whose involvement had lapsed, many still used this salvation motif to describe how their lives had been transformed by a child’s birth. For some fathers, the first child was a sufficient impetus to leave the streets. For others, the transformation did not occur until a second or third child was born, when the father was older.

In addition to these retrospective accounts of lifestyle changes, the impact of fatherhood was also apparent from the answers fathers gave when we asked them to imagine what their lives would be like if they had never had children. Some men did tell us that things would be easier for them, that they could have finished school or taken advantage of better employment opportunities. But the overwhelming majority of fathers we interviewed believed strongly (even passionately) that their present situations would be much worse without the presence of children in their lives. The most involved fathers spoke most poignantly to this point, but many less involved fathers (and even some completely uninvolved fathers) said their lives would mean very little if it were not for the fact that they had fathered a child. The following quotes are representative of many others that we could have selected. Kevin, a twenty-one-year-old African American father with a GED, does not work regularly but “babysits” his toddler each day while the child’s mother works. Kevin contributes financially when he picks up odd jobs on weekends. “I think [my life] would be a lot different to tell you the truth. Yeah, [I would] be getting into trouble. No, I wouldn’t be settled. I’d probably be doing something bad, something like that, you know. [Having a kid] calms you down.”

Lee, a forty-two-year-old high school graduate, lives with the mother of his youngest child and contributes to the household expenses as well as to the support of his older two children. “Without the kids,” he said, “I’d probably be a drug user. I hope not with AIDS. . . . I’m more settled now. Being a father has stopped me from doing something real stupid.”

Bucket, whom we described above, told us:

I’d probably still be doing the things I was doing. ‘Cause when I did my first child, it changed me. It stopped me from doing all the stuff I was doing before. So maybe I’d still be doing the things I was doing before if I didn’t have her. . . . I was on the weed [and] drinking [a lot]. If I didn’t have [my children], I’d still be doing that. . . .
In particular, some men claimed that their status as fathers was incompatible with selling drugs, an activity that many had engaged in before the birth of their children. Robert, a twenty-three-year-old African American father, asked whether he would consider selling drugs again to clear up his financial problems, replied:

[No]. I want to keep it clean, and that is the hardest thing. I could do that and probably make three times over [what I'm making now], and probably get out of all of this [financial mess]. But I don't think that it would make me a better person because it would make me paranoid, and plus I would be bringing an environment around my child that I just do not want. Being at twelve o'clock at night and things of that nature—because I used to do that type of thing when I was younger, I experienced it.

SEVERING FRAGILE TIES

The standard perception among scholars is that incarceration has negative effects on the father-child bond. This makes sense, in that jail time necessarily removes the father from his children's lives, in terms of both physical proximity and economic contributions. Fathers in our sample who fell into the severed-ties group had several characteristics in common.

First, the vast majority offended either infrequently or moderately. Second, most had combined their criminal activity with some sort of episodic employment that, though not always formal-sector work, was not illegal in and of itself (that is, "under-the-table" employment). Third, these men generally reported no heavy drug or alcohol use before any particular episode of incarceration. Perhaps for these reasons all the men in this group had established some sort of bond with at least one of their children that involved a pattern of regular visitation or financial support or both. In some cases the bond extended to the child's mother, in others it did not.

For these fathers, the event of incarceration proved devastating to their ties with their children and their children's mothers. Virtually none of the fathers reported that their child's mother had "stayed" with them through the period of incarceration; in virtually every case, the mother broke off the relationship or became involved with another man. Because mothers are generally the conduit through which fathers' communications with children must flow, the severing of the romantic relationship with the child's mother nearly always posed problems for fathers who wanted to maintain a connection to their children.

Second, fathers in this group sometimes claimed that their children's mothers used the fact of incarceration as a justification for prohibiting the father from any subsequent contact with his child or to "talk trash" about the father to the child, thus lessening the father's motivation to remain strongly bonded to the father. Several fathers in this group, for example, found upon release that their children and their children's mothers had moved away or had simply disappeared.

Third, even when mothers attempted to preserve the father-child tie during the period of incarceration, the mere fact of incarceration often means that fathers miss out on those key events that serve to build parental bonds and to signal to the community that they intend to support their children both emotionally and financially. These key events include attending the child's birth or observing developmental milestones such as walking and talking 'The father's absence at these crucial moments, we argue, can weaken his commitment to the child and, years later, the child's own sense of commitment to his or her father.

The harmful effects of incarceration can be seen in the case of Mark, a thirty-two-year-old African American in Philadelphia who works under the table as a sandwich maker at a convenience store—delicatessen.

Mark has an eleven-year-old daughter whom he sees several times a month and to whose support he contributes intermittently. Mark, one of five children, grew up with his mother and grandmother. His father left the family when he was quite young, and Mark has not seen him since he was seventeen years old. After graduating from high school, Mark went to work as a janitor, and at this time met his daughter's mother, who was still a high school senior. They had been together two years when his daughter was born. When she was five years old, he was arrested for selling drugs.

It was a situation because why I started selling was because of my daughter. That is an excuse, true, but my daughter didn't have nothing for that Christmas... and it sent something inside of me and it just totally blew my mind. And I knew friends and family that was [selling drugs] and I always could have got into it but I didn't want to. And... This was Christmas, and... I couldn't get nothing for her... And to a dad, I don't care if he is doing drugs or anything, if a dad is out there and he love his child and he love his kids and if he can't get them stuff for that special occasion, it sends something through them.

Mark's plan was to sell drugs for just a short period of time, make a lot of money (he claimed that he made about $700 a day when he sold drugs full-time), and then move back into the legitimate workforce. He thought
that his risk of imprisonment was minimal because he had never been convicted of any crime before. "You know what? I thought I could outrun the system. I said, "This is my first time. I never did anything before. If I get caught, I am only going to get probation and I could walk off that.' [But] it didn't happen that way." Instead, he was arrested only three weeks after he began dealing and was sentenced to one year in prison. "I was sent to a prison where it is murderers and rapists and people not coming home for three hundred years, and it totally sent me ballistic. I thought I was going to go crazy and I didn't think I was going to make it."

While he was locked up, Mark's girlfriend started seeing another man, and he found out about it through the prison grapevine. Although they got back together when he returned from prison, she was still "creeping" on him, and he decided to move back in with his mother. The girlfriend then married the man she was seeing, and they have recently had a son together. Mark feels that his time in prison is to blame for driving a wedge between him and his daughter's mother.

If I wouldn't have got locked up, I would have still been with her, in the sense that it would have never happened—she would have never met no one else. [But] I can't say that the blame was hers; I can't say that the blame was my daughter's. The blame was [on] me and myself. I put myself in that situation and [now] it is up to me to think with a clear head and take it on another level.

Martinis is a forty-year-old African American father currently serving a sentence for parole violation in a halfway house in Philadelphia. He has a two-year-old son by his current girlfriend and two teenaged children from a previous relationship. Although his eighteen-year-old son is more forgiving of his father's lapses, his seventeen-year-old daughter had become bitter over his going back and forth to prison when she was growing up. Just before we interviewed him, Martinis had made some effort to restore his relationship with his daughter, but he realized that he had a lot of history to overcome.

In the beginning we were [close]—all the way up until the age of eight or nine we were close. But after me keep getting myself in trouble [going back and forth to prison], I guess she kind of gave up on me. I was never around, and I guess it hurt her. We just recently had a conversation on the phone, and I had to explain to her where I was. Not just where I was literally, but my mindset and why I made the decisions I made, and why I was incarcerated and why I did certain things. It wasn't like I wanted to be away from her. I told her that I loved her dearly, and we had a little rapport. . . . Actually we [hadn't been] speaking to each other. My kids' mother said, "You are the adult."

Go down there and talk to her and get y'all thing together so that y'all can have some kind of rapport... . I had to go ahead and do that, and we talked, and she cried and she explained why she feel the way she feel. She feel that she didn't have no dad and it hurt her to hear that, but it was the truth. I don't blame her in a way because I wasn't there. So now I been trying to incorporate myself into her life again, and in her daughter's life. She is coming around now; she is coming to accept me more. But I don't think she is putting her all in it, because she maybe feels as though she don't know if I am going to disappear again. I used to promise her this and promise her that, and sometimes I didn't come through. I am not a bad dad—they tell me that they love me and everything, but it is just that I am not always there for them when they really need me around.

His latest incarceration is already affecting his relationship with his youngest son, something that disturbs him:

I am not there all the time... though I want to be, and it hurts me and it upsets me... I can remember that my dad was never around and I was wondering what it was like to always have your dad around. So I always tell myself that I would want to be around for them and sometimes I found myself doing it [them what happened to me], by me being incarcerated and not there in the years when they were growing up and their little personality starting to develop... I know that it upsets the mother... . She wants me to be part of his life [She] calls me now and she says, "Man, Rahmere doesn't even know you... " I missed all that time with Rahmere when he was an infant. He was born May of last year and he didn't know who I was. And she was like, "That is your dad." She came twice [to visit me].... But she didn't bring him. I was very disappointed... . I seen him through pictures but I didn't really get a chance to see him personally until I came home in May [of this year].

Martinis's daughter was eight and his son was nine when he was first incarcerated for burglary. He thus had some time to establish a close relationship with them before he went to prison. He worries he has lost that opportunity with his younger son.

Donald, a thirty-year-old African American in Charleston, has two children, a teenaged daughter and a younger son, aged six. Donald says that his son does not like him very much because he was born when Donald was locked up—they did not meet until the boy was three years old. Donald's daughter is more forgiving because she had formed an attachment to him before he was incarcerated. She currently spends summers with Donald, and he is negotiating an arrangement with her mother that would allow the daughter to live with him full-time. Because low-income men tend to become first-time fathers in their late teens and early twenties, at the very same time that they are most
likely to be engaged in criminal activity and are at highest risk of incarceration, many of our respondents with incarceration histories report having been incarcerated for the first several years of at least one of their children's lives. As we showed earlier, The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study finds that more than 80 percent of the fathers responsible for these births attended the birth or visited the mother and child in the hospital immediately thereafter. Our data reveal that a father's presence at his child's birth is a key event that signals to the larger community (the father's kin, the mother's kin, and peers) his intention to take some financial responsibility and, more importantly, to forge a solid emotional bond with that child. Noncustodial fathers who have been present for their children's birth often describe it as one of the most significant events of their lives. On a practical level, many states allow voluntary admissions of paternity in-hospital, and missing this opportunity to form a legal bond to the child means that the father's name is often not on the child's birth certificate and that the mother, the state, or the father can formalize that tie only through more difficult and costly means later on.

Fathers who are incarcerated when their children are born miss this crucial opportunity, and we speculate this may have consequences for their financial and emotional investments in their children.

Sometimes the contemporaneous occurrence of childbirth and incarceration plants seeds of doubt as to the child's true paternity. Julio is a thirty-six-year-old African American father living in Charleston, South Carolina. His daughter was born exactly nine months after he was incarcerated, which led him to doubt whether she was really his child. Julio says this doubt "haunts" him, yet he is hesitant to have a blood test because, in his view, the child is already bonded to him, and he is afraid of hurting her.

Donald recounts a similar situation with his son:

I found out [my son's mother] was pregnant when I was incarcerated...and a guy came in that I knew from school, and he said he'd seen Yvette and that she was pregnant. And I was like, "Whatever," you know, I was like, "By who?" So I ended up getting in touch with her and called her mom's house and talked to her. She was like, "Yeah, I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant from you." And I was like, "Whatever, not me. Come on, we dated off and on from seventh grade up until high school and you know we messed around and...you never got pregnant all that time from me." And she was like, "Yeah, it's from you, and what do you want to do?" And I was like, "I'm not doing nothing. I'm going to be sitting in here for while. I'm locked up." And one night, I was sitting in the cell after a few months and I was like (praying), "God, if it's my child, show me it's my child, and just let me know something."

The next day Donald's mother visited him in prison, something she had never done before, and reported that the child had been born. As both events happened only a day after he had prayed, he took them as a "sign" yet told us he had nagging doubts.

Both Donald and Julio were incarcerated for a period of several years. Yet our data show that even quite short periods of incarceration can mean that fathers of very young children regret having missed out on milestones in their child's development. Rick, a young African American father living in Camden, was spending just three months in jail when his son turned a year old. He was quite upset that the time away from his family caused him to miss out on the transition from infant to toddler: "That was last August, and my son had just...started walking and talking. And when I went to jail they barely let me see him. And when I got out, he was walking and talking...That crushed me. "Cause, you know, I wanted to see all that, you know. My first son."

Although incarcerated fathers must be separated from their children, one may wonder about the role of visitation in keeping fathers and children connected. In 1999, according to figures from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1.5 million children had a mother or father in prison (Mumola 2000). Although about 40 percent of imprisoned fathers reported weekly contact with their children by phone, letter, or a visit, nearly 60 percent of incarcerated fathers reported never having seen their children since their admission to prison (Haislton 1998). Although our interviews did not address this question directly, our fathers who had served time seldom reported having received visits from their children, or even their children's mothers, while they were in jail or in prison. For a few, this was largely because they were sent to prison at an institution that was too far away for someone with no access to a car to visit. However, several others told us that serving time was harder if one remained in contact with one's friends and family on the outside. For this reason, they voluntarily cut themselves off from outside relations.

Donald, who had been to prison several times, told us, "Normally when I'm locked up I don't accept visits. I don't write if I'm locked up and I don't do any of that, because it makes your time hard, you know, worrying about what's going on out there and thinking about what's going on out there; it makes it hard. You focus on getting this time done and getting this over with."

Mark was one of the few fathers whose child visited him regularly. His daughter was five when he was sent away for one year. Initially, it was her visits that kept him going. Yet toward the end of his sentence, he could not take the strain of constant reminders of home:

And the only thing that kept me going [when I was in prison] was my daughter...[She] came to see me every weekend, every weekend my daughter's mom brought her to see me—every weekend, when I was in the hole, when I was still here. And the last three months of my sentence, they sent me all the way up there by the Pocomas...[It was too hard for her to] make it, and I didn't want her to make it. She tried...
a couple of times, and I kept denying it, because the closer you get to [being released] the harder it got when you see people from home. And what you want to do is try to tune them out. [But] I wrote everyday, and she wrote me everyday. Boy, you should see how many letters.

When fathers are incarcerated, they must rely on their children’s mothers to be the conduit to their children, though sometimes a kin member (for example, the father’s mother) can also play that role. The children’s mothers do this either actively by bringing children to visit in prison, or more passively by simply accepting collect phone calls or, more rarely, their letters. Yet as noted earlier, incarceration can sever not only a father’s relationship with his children but also his relationship with his children’s mother.

Often, a father and his children’s mother are still romantically attached when he is initially incarcerated. However, this is a vulnerable time for their relationship, and virtually all of the men in our sample reported that their girlfriends had formed new attachments while they were in prison. Tom, a thirty-year-old white father from Philadelphia, had just been imprisoned for selling drugs when his oldest child (now eleven years old) was born. While in prison and unable to continue a relatively lucrative career selling drugs, he lost his house (bought with drug proceeds) and his girlfriend, who took up with someone else. Although Tom did not return to selling drugs after his release, his child’s mother would not let Tom see his son unless he was paying regular child support—something he found hard to do because his prison record locked him out of most conventional employment (see chapter 8 in this volume). At the time of the interview, Tom had not seen his son in five years.

Mark was in prison for less than a year and was planning on getting back together with his daughter’s mother when he was released. Yet while he was away, she met a man who drove a bus for the local transit system. When Mark came home and started working for McDonald’s, she took him back but still maintained a clandestine relationship with the other man. When Mark found out about it, he broke off the relationship:

We was going to get back together; marriage and everything. But she wasn’t totally honest. I had much love for her and she didn’t know how much love I had for her ... [I didn’t really blame her, because] I probably would have [had another relationship] too [if she was serving time]. But she couldn’t be person enough to tell me—she kept trying to creep around ... I suspected it, and at that time I had people coming to me [and telling me about it]. ... So I did find out, and she still denied it, and from that point it was just like a thing. “I can’t never trust you now ... If I wouldn’t have got locked up, she would have never met no one else.

Mark’s statement—that his girlfriend “would never have met no one else if he had not been incarcerated”—raises an interesting point. In fact, despite his belief to the contrary, it is quite likely that Mark and his girlfriend would not have stayed together much longer, even if he had not been incarcerated. Relationships between unmarried parents are extremely fragile (70 percent of poor unmarried parents break up before the child’s third birthday), and fathers who engage in criminal activity are particularly likely to alienate their children’s mothers (see Edin and Kefalas forthcoming). Seen from this angle, incarceration may not directly cause a breakup but merely provide an additional impetus and opportunity for girlfriends to escape from a relationship a bit earlier than they otherwise might have.

This may partially explain our second finding that when fathers are imprisoned, their children’s mothers may use the fact that their child’s father has a prison record as a justification to completely cut him out of the child’s life, even if they knew full well of his criminal involvement before the incarceration. In low-income communities, particularly African American communities, mothers feel considerable pressure to keep their child’s father involved, especially because many of the mothers grew up without a father around and sorely felt the lack. For women who do not want to continue dealing with a father whom they view as a ne’er-do-well, incarceration provides a socially acceptable excuse to deny visitation or even to simply disappear. Rubén, a twenty-year-old Puerto Rican living in Philadelphia, had his only child at the age of sixteen. When he was nineteen, he went to prison on a drug charge and served a one-year sentence. Upon his return to the neighborhood in which he and his child’s mother had lived, he could find no trace of either of them. The mother did contact him to let him know that they were okay, but she refused to tell him where she was living or to let him see his son.

If the child’s mother is addicted to drugs or otherwise deemed unfit (abusive or neglectful), a criminal record can make a judge unwilling to let the child’s father have custody of the child. Thomas, a twenty-eight-year-old white Philadelphia father, has a nine-year-old daughter and a nine-year-old son by different mothers. Thomas was convicted of attempted murder when he was in his early twenties. Subsequently, his son’s mother, a drug addict, lost custody of the children to the state. He describes what happened next:

[The state] took [my son] and put him in a foster home. After that happened, I had a court date the next week to see if I could get him. But
something happened—I think it was because of my criminal record—they said no and they denied me. And my lawyer said only two things could happen. You have the choice of leaving that child in a foster home or you can sign the rights over to the [maternal] grandmother, just temporarily [until you get yourself together and can convince the judge you can care for the child] . . . I didn't want him in no foster home so I signed.

When relationships between fathers and their children's mothers break down and become acrimonious, as they often do, men with criminal records may find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Many fathers report that their former girlfriends use their records of criminal behavior, or simply the fact that they have been in prison or are on parole, as an excuse to “talk trash” about them to their children and to others. Bill, a thirty-one-year-old white father in Philadelphia, claimed that his “ex-wife” (his term for her, though they were never legally married) kept calling his parole officer and “told lies” about him (claiming he had violated his parole in various ways) whenever she wanted something from him and he was hesitant to provide it. He felt powerless in this situation, especially since submitting to her wishes would not guarantee him access to his child.

For those fathers with moderate or strong ties to their children or to their children's mothers, the threat of prison can act as a powerful deterrent to criminal behavior. Rick, a young African American father in Camden who was still together with the mother of his 18-month-old son, exclaimed,

I don't see how those guys want to keep going to jail. That's crazy to me. That's what I tell these guys, man. The most I did was three months in jail. . . . That's a place I don't want to be, I know that. . . . And—I don't see how these guys all just take little times of their life out. You missin' a lot, man. Then they get out, these things have changed. Most of the people I know be doin' two, three, four-year [sentences]. Three months, man [was too much for me]. . . . Yeah, it is a temptation to go back to selling drugs, but see, my son. That's really changed me, and any time that I did in jail . . . that three months.

Kevin's brother Craig has been to prison several times. He now worries day labor rather than selling drugs, because he has a child and does not want to be like his father. "[My father] passed away when I was about twenty-three or twenty-four. He was in and out of prison. That is basically why I try to do what I do [work day labor rather than sell drugs], because I do not want to be like that when my children [are] growing up."

Sometimes the threat of prison does not lead fathers who are att-
Lee managed to stay pretty clear of the drug trade since his first son was born seventeen years ago, but the birth of each subsequent child has reinvigorated his desire to stay away from the trade and its “fast money.” When we asked him what kind of father he wanted to be for his youngest child, he replied, “To be strong. To put a home over her head. And show her that education is the best thing to do, because fast money will get you nowhere.”

In his late twenties Lee was arrested twice for possession of marijuana and for shoplifting. Both times, he was released almost immediately, though he is not sure why. Lee considers himself lucky because he has never been arrested for selling drugs and, though he continues to deal on and off, these activities are nothing like those he pursued for about five years in his early twenties. He claims that he now sells drugs only occasionally and then only to “provide” for his family. In the two months preceding our interview, Lee had sold to only three customers, and the month we talked to him he had sold drugs only twice.

REBUILDING SEVERED TIES

It is clear from these cases that incarceration can negatively affect fathers’ relationships with their children, either directly or indirectly, by severing ties to their children’s mothers or being maligned by the women in front of their children to such an extent that the children want no contact with their fathers. The threat of imprisonment can also deter some of these fathers from criminal behavior altogether, whereas others will reduce their risk of imprisonment by offending only occasionally. However, it is important to keep in mind that for some fathers it is not the time in prison that first drives the wedge between them and their children but rather the criminal behavior that lands them there in the first place.

For fathers hoping to rebuild severed ties, the bond with their children and their children’s mothers had generally been destroyed before incarceration. In every case we observed, this resulted from heavy use of either alcohol or illicit drugs. Substance abuse is extremely hard on family ties. First, fathers who engage in heavy substance use often remove themselves from contact with those they care about (even from their own kin) because they are ashamed to be seen “down and out.” Second, even fathers whose own shame does not cause them to remove themselves often find that the children’s mothers shut them out. It is not hard to imagine why mothers do this: Drug addicts tend to steal (even from their own families) to feed their habit. They engage in dangerous behavior that can follow them from the streets into the household. They generally offend at high rates to feed their habits. The debilitating nature of the addiction often makes it difficult for these fathers to combine their criminal activity with other more legitimate (and thus more socially acceptable) economic pursuits. Finally, they generally drink or smoke up all their “profits” from illicit work. None of these tendencies make them good father material in the eyes of their children’s mothers. In fact, the involvement of such fathers with their children can be downright dangerous. It is for these reasons that fathers in this group begin an episode of incarceration often feel they have nowhere to go but up in their relationships with their children. Of course, not all fathers who had severed their ties with their children before incarceration used the experience to reorient their lives. Our sample, like nationally representative samples, contains a few serious offenders for whom nothing—not fatherhood, incarceration, or any other event—deters them from a criminal trajectory.

We also find that older fathers are more likely than younger fathers to use the event of incarceration to try to repair severed bonds with family. Although it is true that older fathers tend to have older children, making the reconnection potentially more difficult, each child a man fathers, from his first to his last, offers the potential for reconciliation, and these older fathers tend to concentrate their efforts on the youngest child (this is possible because the children often have different mothers).

In addition, we find some evidence in our interviews that fathers are more motivated to reconnect when they are somewhat older because they have learned that crime does not pay and they plan on going straight anyway. That is, the accumulation of experiences with criminal offending tend to change fathers’ notions of how well crime—particularly the drug trade—pays in relation to more formal work. When such men transition to mainstream employment, they generally take jobs at the lowest end of local labor markets, as day laborers, factory workers, fast-food workers, and the like. This makes sense in light of the finding in chapter 8 of this volume that only 38 percent of employers in the four cities they studied would accept job applications from former offenders.

When the men we interviewed were younger, they were largely convinced by both street lore and their own early experiences that the drug trade paid better than these legitimate jobs. Over time, they saw that their profits fluctuated wildly, that their business constantly exposed them to long hours out of doors, and that drug dealing carried with it a substantial risk of death or imprisonment (this risk became palpable when they began to see more and more of their own street peers killed or disabled as a result of the trade). Even worse, they noted that because drug dealing often went hand in hand with drug addiction, over time their drug use escalated, and they drank or smoked up their profits, leaving them nothing to show for their efforts. Thus many had adopted the philosophy that “fast money don’t get you nowhere” but “slow
money is sure money." It is interesting that fathers who have made the
decision to pursue "saw money" in "mental jobs" thought they might
better be able to forge a reconnection with their children than if they had
continued to "live the life" of a street hustler to "get the paper" (the
money) to buy things for their children. Provided they could kick their
addiction, the very fact that they expressed willingness to engage in men-
ual yet steady employment, some said, was a powerful testimony to the
fact that "Daddy got himself together."

Jose, a forty-one-year-old Puerto Rican father from Philadelphia, has
a four-year-old son. In his son's infancy, Jose was a heavy drug user. He
was arrested for burglary (to feed his habit) when the child was a few
months old. After serving his sentence of three years, Jose could not find
his former girlfriend or his son. He told our interviewer, "I have not seen
[my son], and I don't [know where he is]—I know that I am his father,
that is all that I know. . . . He is mine, but I have not been able to be a
father to him, [first because of my drug addiction and then because of
prison]."

In fact, for fathers whose criminal lifestyle and the drug and alcohol
abuse that so often accompanies it has had them "rippin' and runnin'
the streets" to such an extent that they had virtually no relationship with
their children before incarceration, time spent in jail or prison might ac-
tually provide the necessary time-out they need to redirect their lives
away from drugs and try to forge a pathway back into their children's
lives. To illustrate how a spell of incarceration can serve as a turning
point for such fathers, we present the case of Jimmy in some detail.

Jimmy is a forty-year-old African American father residing in Camden,
New Jersey. Jimmy's mother died young, and his older sister, who
had six children of her own, raised him. He dropped out of high school
to work full-time because his sister did not earn enough to provide him
with the kind of clothing and shoes he wanted. To relieve some of the
pressure on her, and to satisfy his own tastes in clothing, he traded
school for a job between ninth and tenth grade. Jimmy works as a land-
scape and has held landscaping jobs on and off for nearly two decades,
between stints in jail and prison. Most of his employers pay him under
the table. Jimmy thinks he would own his own business right now were
it not for his ongoing drug addiction and his criminal record.

The mother of Jimmy's children is a woman named Shirley, a fellow
drug addict with whom he has had an on-again, off-again relationship.
Just after his first child was born, Jimmy went to prison for the first time,
for burglary (he has thirty-four burglaries on record, all motivated by
his drug habit). When his children were six and seven years old, Jimmy
was again imprisoned, and Shirley met and married another drug addict.
When Shirley married a second time, her drug habit escalated, and after
about a year of heavy using she lost custody of the children. Because he
was in prison, Jimmy could not intervene. Currently, both children are
in foster care. Jimmy regularly sees his daughter, whom he has taken
with him to church on Father's Day, though he has not seen his son since
his release three years ago.

Jimmy describes his most recent incarceration (he served an addi-
tional fifteen months because of a positive drug test while out on parole)
as a "blessing in disguise." He "found God again" in prison and was
able to "get himself together." He does not blame the loss of his relation-
ship with his children's mother or his son on his repeated incarceration,
because, he says, he was too busy using drugs and burglarizing factories
to have much of a relationship with them anyway. Now, for the first
time (and thanks to a cooperative foster parent who is a fellow Christ-
ian), he has been able to forge a relationship with his daughter. He
thinks she loves and respects him now because "Daddy got himself
together."

Jimmy's story shows that prison may function as a turning point and
an opportunity to redirect one's life for those fathers whose lives have
become so out of control (usually because of alcohol or drug addiction)
that they need a powerful shock or a highly structured environment, like
prison, to break their downward spiral. In Jimmy's case, his criminal
lifestyle and the drug addiction that fueled it had already broken his
bond with his children. Serving his most recent sentence, and the rekind-
led religious fervor that resulted, helped him to break the cycle of burg-
larly and drug use and to "keep clean" during the three years since his
release. Thus incarceration contributed both directly and indirectly to his
rehabilitation as a father.

Jack, a thirty-three-year-old white father from Philadelphia, was con-
victed of five incidents of driving under the influence (DUI) in a single
month after the mother of his children left him. Like Jimmy, serving
time gave Jack the necessary perspective on his life and offered him an
opportunity to renew a latent religious commitment. During his inter-
view, Jack exclaimed,

Jail was the best thing that happened to me! I sat down on Christmas
eve in jail. Christmas Day in jail. I reflected on what I'd done. So I did
a little soul-searching. I remember I was in maximum security. . . .
Every night my conscience would come to me and beat the hell out of
me. . . . [Before imprisonment], when I was at home watching TV, my
conscience would kick in and I'd turn the channel. . . . This was the first
time my conscience actually had me alone so it could work on me,
which it did. About four or five nights, whack, whack. . . . On the fourth
night, I said, "Please, help me, God. I'm your son. I want to start again."
And I felt forgiven. Well, that happened just before the first of January.
And I've been praying to God ever since. I'm not born again or a Bible-thumper; I just got God back in my life.

Wilbert, a thirty-eight-year-old African American father, tells a similar story. When he was interviewed in 1998, he had been free for just two months after serving a six-month prison sentence for drug dealing. Before he was arrested, he had been an alcoholic, a drug addict, and a full-time drug dealer. In fact, he was so involved in drug trafficking that he used to "stay out in the street all night long for weeks and change clothes right in the middle of the street. The water plugs would be on, and I would wash up in the water plug, get a bar of soap, and change my clothes in the middle of the street, because I was out there on drugs, selling drugs around the block, going in and out of jail."

As Wilbert himself summed it up, "I pretty much didn't give a damn—I was running around and I didn't care about anything." While he was incarcerated, he asked the mothers of his thirteen-year-old son and ten-year-old daughter to bring them for a visit, but "they made up excuses: they don't have time, they have [other things to do]—you know how it is," probably because he had not seen either one of them for quite some time before his arrest. Sitting in jail for five months while awaiting to be sentenced, Wilbert got a chance to think about his life and how he wanted things to be different.

I went to prison a couple of times, but this last time really did something to me—it made me find myself. Maybe the first month or so when I was in there, I would say that I wanted a beer, or when I got out I am going to get this weed or this paper (drug money). But I didn't get out in a month, I didn't get out in three or four months, ... by then I was looking at the right thing to do. I was going to church in there. I was working in an upholstery shop, making something like a dollar something a day, but I learned a lot. I was vocational training, upholstery skills. I could always use it [later].

There are fathers who try but fail to reconnect with their children when they leave prison, either because they cannot locate the child, because their child's mother or guardian is unwilling to facilitate a reconciliation, or because the child does not want a relationship with his or her father. It is also true that the experience of prison does not motivate some fathers to stop offending and reorient their lives. The most "hardened" criminal in our sample was an African American in Philadelphia who calls himself "O." When he was seven years old, O began stealing the money his mother had set aside to pay his tuition at the local Catholic school. In his teens, he would rob anyone he happened to see if he needed money, and he claims the neighbors even started a petition to get him out of the neighborhood. He also broke into local stores and pawned the stolen goods to other stores nearby. By the time he was fourteen he had a crew of seven working alongside him, robbing stores and fencing the items to other local retailers, and reported making about $1,000 a week for the eight of them.

The first time he got caught was when he was twelve. He had stolen a bike that belonged to the son of a police officer who lived in O's neighborhood, and the boy's father made sure that O was put in juvenile detention. Over the next six years, he was in and out of juvenile institutions for various offenses.

When he was eighteen he stopped burglarizing stores and began pimping the women who would become the mother of his three kids; he later reported having made a good living doing so. When he was nineteen, he pulled a knife on three policemen whom he claims were harassing him. They also found a pound of marijuana on him, for which he served his first sentence as an adult. Although his children's mother is now dead (she was murdered by a client while he was in prison), O occasionally sees his sixteen-year-old daughter, who lives with her mother's mother and now has a child of her own. Regarding his children, O says, "Sometimes I worry about how my children are doing because I'm not in touch with them, and I never really been in touch with them. I see them from time to time, but it really worries me because there is not a bond there." Despite these worries, O's lifestyle has not changed, and he has no connection at all to his two younger children.

CONCLUSION

The first conclusion we draw from these case studies is that for male prisoners with children, the same life event—incarceration—can result in several different pathways, depending on the father's prior situation and his response. For those fathers who have fairly solid ties to family and whose lifestyle before imprisonment had not driven a deep wedge, incarceration disrupts the bonds fathers have to their romantic partners and to their children. Following Sampson and Laub, we expect that such disruption might well have a negative impact on the prospects of the father's rehabilitation and may reinforce his criminal trajectory rather than reverse it. Perhaps lowering some of the barriers to contact with children while imprisoned would mitigate this impact (for a review of these barriers, see Haertel 1998 and Nurse 2000, 2002).

A second conclusion we draw is that for fathers whose lifestyle before incarceration has already driven a wedge between them and their children (and their children's mothers), incarceration offers the opportunity to rebuild severed social ties by curbing the destructive behavior
that led to separation in the first place. For these men, the potential of reconnecting with their children may offer a powerful motivation to go straight that is not present for nonfathers. Of course, not all fathers will experience their time in prison as a turning point to desistance, and further research might be able to identify the confluence of factors that allow fathers to effect such a turnaround while incarcerated.

Third, we also find that fear of incarceration, when combined with the event of becoming a father, can act as a powerful deterrent to criminal activity and may reverse a father’s career trajectory. For those who reported engagement in offending behavior before having a child but were not incarcerated, criminal behavior suddenly becomes far more “costly” and fraught with risk. Fatherhood, on the other hand, offers powerful perceived rewards to men if they can manage to avoid those things (incarceration or addiction) that might disrupt the father-child bond.

Finally, these qualitative data show that crime can have two different faces. Sometimes low-income men use criminal activity only occasionally to supplement their income from unstable or part-time work in the formal economy, much the same way that low-income mothers rely on kin or off-the-books jobs to supplement their meager incomes from welfare or low-wage work (Edin and Lein 1997). Ironically, the pressure for these men to supply additional income is most acute when they first become fathers and must procure expensive items like strollers, cribs, and playpens. Forays into crime to provide for these family needs or to get by during work slowdowns and layoffs are quite different from the patterns of “real” criminals like O or those fathers who steal or deal to support a drug habit. One possibility is that the courts might try to distinguish between these two different faces of crime, perhaps by taking testimonies from mothers of the father’s children into account, and then factor this into the sentencing process. It is also quite apparent that a major culprit in damaging ties between fathers and family is severe drug and alcohol addiction and abuse. Although incarceration may sometimes help these men “dry out” enough to reconnect with children, more emphasis should be put on proactive policies that prevent substance abuse and the crime that almost inevitably follows.

A limitation of the study is that because we cannot assess the representativeness of the sample, we cannot reliably estimate the size of the three groups identified here. Moreover, owing to the qualitative nature of the data we have drawn on, the size of the effects cannot be reliably measured. Knowing the relative size of the groups, as well as the size of the effects of incarceration for each, is vitally important for policy and is thus an important direction for future research.

NOTES

1. A fourth important trend is that the proportion of low-income fathers who are involved in the child-support enforcement system has grown significantly, award amounts have increased, and child-support enforcement policies have become increasingly punitive: many states now routinely garnish wages, seize tax returns, prosecute fathers who flee across state lines to evade a child-support order, revoke driver’s and professional licenses, and imprison men for nonpayment of child support (Garzinkel, Moyar, and McLanahan 1996).

2. There are, however, a few excellent studies of incarcerated fathers’ bonds with their children, both within prison (Hairston 1998) and after release (Nurse 2001).

3. The median age at first fatherhood is lower for those men who are involved in criminal activity than for the general population (Lerman 1995).

4. Laub and Sampson (1993) advocate a “person-centered” approach to research on criminal careers (Magnuson and Bergman 1988, 1990), which focuses on “persons” rather than “variables” and examines the life histories of persons over time.

5. All names of interviewees and their friends and family are pseudonyms.

REFERENCES


