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Young Fathers in Jail: Associations between Father Experiences, Father–Child Relationships, and Community Stability

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ABSTRACT

Research on paternal incarceration has paid less attention to young fathers incarcerated in jail settings where most residents are either pretrial detained or serving out short sentences. This study describes the characteristics of a sample of 103 jailed fathers aged 18 to 25, including two subsamples consist of participants who had opportunity to recidivate ($n = 83$) and participants who completed trauma history questionnaire ($n = 62$), and explores associations between father experiences, father–child relationships, behavioral health factors, and recidivism. Results show jailed young fathers have several risk factors as well as strengths. Their father–child relationship is positively associated with training on fathering skills, employment experiences, and self-efficacy, and negatively associated with incarceration history. Employment is the only variable that identifies the differences in recidivism. Implications for a future research agenda are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Fathers; jail; incarceration; characteristics; father–child relationship; recidivism

Fatherhood is common among incarcerated individuals. More than half of incarcerated individuals in state and federal prisons in the U.S. have children under age 18 and more than 90% of these incarcerated parents are fathers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Despite a growing base of literature on fathers in the general population (e.g., Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; see Shafer & Bellamy, 2016) and on paternal incarceration (e.g., Curtis, 2011; Haskins et al., 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017; Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011), little is known about fathers incarcerated in jails, particularly the young fathers (generally defined as fathers under the age of 24 or 25 across studies). Our review of major literature databases indicated that in the past 10 years, less than 10 studies specifically on young fathers in jail with various foci (e.g., father–child relationship, reentry needs, impact of incarceration on children) have been published. Fathers in jail may be there awaiting trial, sentencing, or serving a short sentence. Jails are different than prisons because prisons are reserved for people serving sentences typically greater than a year or serving the remainder of a suspended sentence because of violating conditions of community supervision (e.g., probation or parole). The reasons there is a dearth of research on fathers in jail are threefold.

First, previous research has focused more on convicted fathers in prisons than fathers in jails, probably due to the transitional nature of jail settings that bring more difficulties to

researchers in recruiting, maintaining, and tracking study participants. Prisons are administered by states or the federal government and typically hold incarcerated individuals with sentences of more than 1 year (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). Jails are often run by local law enforcement and are primarily comprised of pretrial detainees or otherwise convicted individuals with short stays (Zeng, 2020). Compared to prisons which have a relatively stable environment but are often located far away from communities, jails are less likely to have programming supports for individuals, the release dates for individuals are much less predictable, but individuals have opportunities to stay connected to families. These contextual features imply that fathers in jail may have disruptions from their children and families that differ from fathers in prison.

Second, there has been more research on the child and maternal outcomes as a result of paternal incarceration (e.g., Arditti et al., 2003; Geller et al., 2011; Haskins et al., 2018; Turney et al., 2017) while less research has been conducted on the incarcerated fathers themselves, such as how they manage their dual identity as an incarcerated individual and a father (e.g., Tripp, 2009), and what challenges they may face both in and out of jail (e.g., Freudenberg et al., 2007; Lindquist, 2000), though the answers to these questions have important intervention implications to incarcerated fathers.

Third, among the few studies that focus on fathers in jail, the ages of fathers range from 18 to 59 but the studies do not address specific age periods (e.g., Modecki & Wilson, 2009; Spjeldnes et al., 2015; Tripp, 2009; Turney et al., 2017). However, fatherhood may have special implications to incarcerated young individuals compared to older ones. For example, incarcerated males in their early twenties may not feel ready for father roles because of their own lack of financial stability (Buston, 2010), though being a young father could actually help create a new positive identity that facilitates their reentry (Maruna, 2001; Meek, 2011). Also, a study on incarcerated fathers ($N = 5,809$) indicates a negative relationship between father's age and contact with children, wherein young fathers have more frequent contact with their children while being incarcerated (Galardi et al., 2017). Thus, prior research suggests that incarcerated young fathers, particularly those at their initial stage of early adulthood, may have special characteristics and support needs and thus warrant attention as a subgroup of incarcerated fathers.

This study focuses on fathers age 18 to 25 to describe the experiences of jailed young fathers and explore associations with father-child relationships and factors that influence community stability such as employment, fathers' behavioral health factors, and recidivism. The study is informed by theoretical perspectives of Stryker's (1987) and Burke's (2006) identity theories. Jailed young fathers have dual identity as an incarcerated individual and as a father. The identity as an incarcerated individual, in addition to environmental factors, may disrupt establishing an identity as a parent as well as disrupt their experiences with community stability (Burke, 2006; Stryker, 1987). We examine recidivism as an important outcome of the postrelease experience of incarcerated individuals. However, other factors are analyzed as well because recidivism is an outcome variable that reflects systemic policies and practices in addition to individual behavior, thus recidivism in and of itself is not a good sole indicator of postrelease decision-making and experiences. Overall, the purpose of this study is to build on current knowledge on jailed young fathers and provide evidence that may inform policy and program shifts that positively support their reintegration into families and communities.

Theoretical framework

Stryker's (1987) and Burke's (2006) identity theories could be used to explain the formation and development of paternal identity. According to Stryker, individuals have multiple identities organized in hierarchy and behave in ways that reflect social expectations of the identity with the highest ranking. This process involves the internalization of social expectations related to the major identity and the manifestation in behaviors according to the expectations (Stryker & Serpe, 1994; see literature review by Peled et al., 2012). Applying identity theory to the formation of paternal identity, "paternal identity emerges from how fathers internalize the roles they are expected to fulfill" (Peled et al., 2012, p. 894). Namely, fathers internalize social expectations of fathering roles in constructing paternal identity and conduct fathering behaviors according to the salience of paternal identity in their identity hierarchy. Moreover, fathers' perception of fatherhood is a developmental process influenced by fathers' individual experience as well as changes in child development, family crises, and historical shifts in society (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009). Incarceration can disrupt the ability of young fathers to form a positive fathering identity.

Identity theory shows the social expectations of fathering as a primary role is essential in forming paternal identity. Lamb et al. (1985, 1987) define fathering role as consisting of three dimensions: (1) interaction or engagement with the child, referring to father's direct contact with his child through caretaking or other activities; (2) accessibility or father's availability, referring to being present or accessible to child regardless of direct or indirect interaction; and (3) responsibility or father's duties, including caretaking, financial contribution, and future planning for child. Financial support was once identified as a main fathering role but in recent years there has been a trend that requires a change of fathering from financial providers to fathers who are expected to undertake more daily physical and emotional childcare tasks (Buchler et al., 2017; Charles, Spielfogel, et al., 2018; McGill, 2014).

In this study, we chose father-child relationship as an access point to learn more about young fathers in jail because, as suggested by previous research, father-child relationship may have important implications for incarcerated fathers' community stability in terms of their behavioral and mental health, perception of social support, postrelease reintegration, and recidivism. Also, it appears that incarcerated fathers' perception of father-child relationship is an important indicator of their internalization of the socially expected fathering role, and thus provides understanding about how they construct their paternal identity. We consider some of our analysis and results through the lens of identity theory. By exploring how young fathers' experiences were associated with father-child relationship and if any of these father experiences, father-child relationships, and behavioral/mental health factors were predictors for postrelease outcomes, the field may better understand the group of young fathers in jail and thus provide support for successful postrelease reintegration.

Literature review

General profile of incarcerated fathers

According to Glaze and Maruschak (2010), incarcerated fathers accounted for 49% of incarcerated individuals in state and federal prisons in 2007. More than half of fathers in prison had one or more prior incarcerations. For fathers in state prisons they were a source

of support prior to incarceration: 35.5% lived with one of their children in the month before arrest; about 54% fathers were primary financial supporters to their children. Both national statistics and primary studies on small samples of fathers in prison indicate that this group has relatively low education, low income, high rates of substance abuse and mental/behavioral problems, experiences of violence and traumatic events, and multiple incarcerations (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Kjellstrand et al., 2012).

Jails in the U.S. held 738,400 individuals on any given day at midyear 2018 (Zeng, 2020). Although there is no official count on fathers incarcerated in jail, an estimate in 2002 shows that 66.2% of people in jail are parents and 86.4% of jailed parents are fathers (McMillen, 2012). In general, jailed fathers also have a high prevalence of substance abuse, with marijuana the most commonly used drug (Bronson et al., 2017), have high recidivism rate, and face multiple health and social problems (Freudenberg et al., 2007). Small sample studies show that among jailed fathers, only a small number finish high school, and they often have several prior incarcerations (Modecki & Wilson, 2009).

Research on incarcerated fathers indicate that this group is different from the general population in education, socioeconomic status, and behavioral characteristics (Modecki & Wilson, 2009). Incarcerated young fathers have been described as having multiple competing and challenging identities including early entry into parenthood, criminal history, disadvantaged background, and behavioral and mental problems that may prevent them from being stable fathers (Ladlow & Neale, 2016, p. 114). Although there are no direct national statistics on recidivism rates among incarcerated fathers, their potential risk of recidivism could be high as they share many factors, such as low levels of education, criminal history, unemployment, substance abuse, and younger age, that are known to associate with higher recidivism rates (Alper et al., 2018; Luther et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2016; Spjeldnes et al., 2012). Also, research shows childhood trauma may have an indirect impact on recidivism through the mediating role of depression among women released from prisons (Tripodi et al., 2019), it is not clear whether this pathway holds for incarcerated men or fathers, though exploratory research finds that unaddressed childhood trauma is perceived by incarcerated African American fathers as a major barrier for reentry (Skinner-Osei & Stepteanu-Watson, 2018). In recent years, researchers have called for a switch from the “risk framework” to a “redemption approach” that emphasizes the construction of positive identities of young fathers with incarceration histories in an effort to encourage positive fatherhood and improve community stability postrelease (Ladlow & Neale, 2016, p. 114).

Parental status and dual identity

Parenthood can bring incarcerated men both challenges and opportunities. Compared to incarcerated nonparents, incarcerated parents may have a higher level of distress and anger associated with child living arrangements and child contact (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014). Incarcerated fathers often experience emotional stress related to fatherhood and express concerns about the loss of father involvement (Arditti et al., 2003; Hairston, 1998). Parental status is positively associated with hostility among fathers in jail (Lindquist, 2000) and prison (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014). Loper et al. (2009) found that self-reported violence and aggression among incarcerated fathers were associated with their increased parenting stress and poor relationships with caregivers of their child/children. Social ties including family

and parent–child relationships maintained by incarcerated fathers are commonly assumed as protective factors (Hairston, 1998), however, when these ties cannot be maintained or there is a perception of inability to fulfill family roles due to stigmatization and separation from supportive networks in the situation of incarceration, parental status might become a stressor that impact adjustment and mental well-being for people in correctional facilities (Lindquist, 2000).

Most incarcerated fathers value their paternal identity and try hard to be good parents (Hairston, 1998; Kazura, 2001). A qualitative study conducted by Tripp (2009) found that jailed fathers have a strong commitment to their paternal identity and use diverse strategies to minimize their connection with their “inmate” identity and to sustain their father identity. For example, they discourage visits from their children so children do not see them as “inmates,” often use “turning point narratives” that frame the current incarceration as “the last time” and as a turning point toward improved selves and better fathers, and describe how their father’s identity-shaped decisions they made to seek help in the incarceration process (p. 38).

Father–child relationship among incarcerated fathers

The father–child relationship has important implications for both incarcerated fathers and their children. For incarcerated fathers, a self-perception of poor fathering role and father–child relationship is associated with higher risk of depression (Hairston, 1998; Swanson et al., 2013); conversely, a perception of a good father–child relationship is associated with an estimated higher level of social support from all sources including family, friends, and significant others (Swanson et al., 2012). Healthy father–child relationships have positive effects on incarcerated fathers during incarceration and after release (Hairston, 2007; Swanson et al., 2013). Fathers with closer relationships with children before and during incarceration are more likely to have higher levels of father involvement, more weekly work hours, and lower recidivism rate after release (Visher et al., 2013). For children experiencing paternal incarceration, maintaining father–child relationships through appropriate contact is associated with positive child outcomes despite the incarceration context (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

Multiple factors, including the location of prison or jail, institutional policies such as visitation policies (e.g., the number and length of visit allowed, visitation conditions) and communication policies (e.g., the cost of phone calls), and family circumstances, such as children’s attitude and children’s mother’s attitude, may influence incarcerated fathers’ relationship with their children (Swanson et al., 2013). Moreover, the experience and characteristics of incarcerated fathers may play a role in their father–child relationship. Charles, Gorman-Smith, et al. (2018) found that fathers’ criminal and antisocial behavior was associated with lower levels of father involvement when fathers had low-quality relationships with their male relatives. Galardi et al. (2017) found that fathers with more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) had less contact with their children while being incarcerated, and fathers’ age, race, education, marriage status, children’s age, and fathers’ commitment to children all influenced their frequency of contact with children. Furthermore, though it has been found that fathers with trauma-related symptoms are more likely to have negative parenting behaviors in the general population (Stover et al., 2012), little is known about how ACEs and trauma history may impact parenting or father–

child relationships among incarcerated fathers, a population known to have high rates of exposure to childhood and adult traumatic events (Pettus-Davis et al., 2019).

It should be noticed that minority groups, especially African American males, are over-represented in the criminal justice system including in jails (Carson, 2020; Zeng, 2020). Historically, African American families were portrayed as different from the mainstream family structures due to low proportion of children living with married parents and high proportion of families headed by single females (e.g., McCord, 1991; Moniyhan, 1965). But many social scientists reconceptualized African American families as strong and resilient by evaluating families within their social and economic context rather than comparing with Eurocentric family models (Maley, 2014; Perry & Johnson, 2017). Current research acknowledges that struggles including unemployment, low income, and incarceration that disproportionately impact minority groups may interfere with African American fathers' ability to fulfill their perception of their own fathering roles or maintain family stability (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997; Perry & Johnson, 2017). More emphasis is placed on African American families' strengths, such as the role of extended family that supplements father's contributions (Perry & Johnson, 2017), fathers' dedication to their children and families (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997), and a higher level of father involvement than White fathers after the end of parents' relationships (Edin et al., 2009). Relevant to incarcerated fathers, research specifically on incarcerated African American fathers shows that they have considerable insight about responsibilities of fatherhood (Shannon & Abrams, 2007), have significantly more contact with their children compared with White fathers while being incarcerated (Galardi et al., 2017), and higher level of education and fewer incarceration experiences of fathers are associated with responsive parenting styles while the inverse is associated with restrictive parenting styles (Modecki & Wilson, 2009).

Research questions

Based on the gaps in current literature on young fathers incarcerated in jail and our theoretical framework, three research questions are explored in this study:

I: What are the group characteristics of young fathers (18 to 25 years old) incarcerated in jail?

II: Are there associations between jailed young fathers' experiences (including incarceration history, employment experience, training in fathering skills, self-efficacy level, depression level, substance use experience, violence exposure experience, and trauma history) and their father-child relationships?

III: Are there associations between recidivism and jailed young fathers' individual experiences and their father-child relationship?

Method

Data collection

Our data were from the baseline survey and follow-up recidivism records of 103 jailed fathers who were recruited to participate in a postrelease fathering-based transitional program delivered by a nonprofit organization in an urban Midwestern city. The post-release transitional program was designed to provide young fathers incarcerated in one of

the two city jails with case management, workforce activities leading to employment, mentoring services, and trainings to promote responsible fatherhood. However, due to complications on the part of the community service provider, the majority of study participants did not access these services. Participants ($N = 103$) had an average age of 22.6 (ranged from 18 to 25). For analysis involving trauma experiences the sample size was 62 because 41 participants did not finish assessment on their sexual trauma experience. Most of participants were Black (90.3%), which was representative of the demographics of the two city jails where the study was conducted as more than 85% of the population in the two jails were African American. The sample included fathers serving a short sentence as well as fathers in pretrial detention. The current length of incarceration for most participants was less than one month as of data collection. This is aligned with the estimated national average of stay in jail (25 days) in 2018 (Zeng, 2020). Participants generally had low levels of education, with 44.7% who did not finish high school; low income prior to incarceration, with 33% reporting no income and 40.8% reporting an annual income less than 10,000 USD. The study was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board of Human Research Protection Office.

Participants were screened for eligibility before enrollment to the study. Eligible participants must have been 18 to 25 years old, a father (biological, adoptive, or stepfather), incarcerated in one of the two city jails at enrollment, to be released to the metro area where the study took place, and have an anticipated release date. The two city jails were managed by the same jurisdiction but one jail was low and medium custody and the other was maximum custody. Participants who could not speak English, who did not cognitively understand study participation, or who had sex offense records were excluded from the study (because the nonprofit organization excluded individuals incarcerated for sexual offenses from the program). Eligible fathers were identified at booking as meeting the major inclusion criteria, then all names of eligible fathers were provided to the research team. A researcher then scheduled an individual meeting with each eligible father to describe the study, obtain consent and then conduct an interview packet immediately after consent. All potential participants were informed that their sentence, program participation, employment opportunities, or any other aspects of their supervision by the correctional department would not be affected by their choice to participate the study. The study was conducted through a research center on criminal justice issues and by a team of researchers with extensive experience in collecting sensitive data. All researchers were master or doctoral level professionals or students and received training on the study protocol including appropriate consent and data collection procedures, requirements on research with protected populations, and how to handle adverse or other reportable events. Researchers' performance was monitored in weekly research team meetings.

Participants were enrolled 37 to 47 days prior to their release. Participant enrollment occurred on a rolling basis ranging from May 2015 to August 2016. The prerelease/baseline interview consisted of surveys on demographics, family formation, and father-child relationship, as well as assessment instruments on general self-efficacy, psychological distress, substance abuse, and exposure to trauma and violence. Potential risks of engaging in the research activities (e.g., emotional distress triggered by survey questions) were disclosed to participants during the consent process, and participants were informed that they could refuse to answer or terminate the study at any point with no consequence. If a participant was found to be in need of medical or psychological referrals, he would be connected to the

case manager or social worker in the correctional department. All participants had equal chance to participate in either the postrelease transitional program designed by the study or the routine program mainly for employment seeking offered by the jail. Official records on recidivism for 83 trackable participants were obtained from the city's Division of Corrections and were collected up to May 2017 (20 participants who went straight to state prison from jail were not included in the recidivism analysis because they did not have the opportunity to recidivate).

Measures

We used 10 variables to describe the group characteristics of study participants and explore the associations between father-child relationships and community stability factors, such as incarceration history, employment experience, training on fathering skills, general self-efficacy, depression, substance use, community violence exposure, trauma history, and recidivism. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess scale reliability for all applicable variables.

Father-child relationship was measured by 10 to 29 items depending on the age of child about whom participants selected to answer the questions. If participants had more than one child, the child for the survey was selected randomly. Participants would randomly select the name of a child from slips of paper with names of their children listed separately and apply questions only to the child selected. The measure was developed for the nonprofit organization by a private research firm. The 29 items align with Lamb's three dimensions of fathering role (interaction, accessibility, and responsibility). Participants were asked to think over the 6 months prior to their current incarceration and identify their behavior or child's behavior listed in the items regarding their relationship with their child. Participants whose child was under 4 years ($n = 69$) responded to the first 10 items covering daily childcare and accompanying behaviors such as *taking child to parks and recreation centers; kissing, hugging, and disciplining child; bringing or building things for child; attending religious activities with child; and fathers' feeling of whether "my child trusts me."* Participants whose child was above 4 but under 6 years ($n = 23$) responded to the first 10 items, as well as another nine items that emphasized father-child emotional interactions pertained to the developmental stage of child: *"My child shared with me when he/she was upset about something/succeeded at something," "When I brought my child something, I knew what he/she wanted," "I showed up on time when my child expected me to be there," "I have done chores with my child," etc.* Participants whose child was above 6 years ($n = 11$) responded to the previous 19 items, as well as additional 10 items on fathers' engagement in child's school-related activities and child's future planning: *"I have spoken with my child's teachers," "I helped my child do homework," "I knew how well my child was doing in school subjects," etc.* All the answers to the 29 items were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Often*, 5 = *Always*). Cronbach's alpha for the items under each group of participants was provided (child under 4, $\alpha = .51$; child above 4 but under 6, $\alpha = .84$; child above 6, $\alpha = .92$). For each participant, an average score of answers to all the items that were applicable to him was calculated. Although the scales used for measuring father-child relationship were designed primarily for programming purpose and formal validation studies of these scales were not available, the items were consistent with theories on fathering roles and closely mapped onto those contained in validated instruments for measurement of fatherhood such as the Paternal Involvement in Child Care

Index (PICCI) developed by Radin (1982) and the Child–Parent Relationship Scale – Short Form (CPRS-SF) developed by Driscoll and Pianta (2011).

Incarceration experience consists of three aspects measured by (a) previous incarceration (1 = Yes, 2 = No); (b) incarceration times for participants who chose “yes” in previous question (1 = Once, 2 = Twice, 3 = Three, 4 = Four, 5 = Five, 6 = Six or more); and (c) length of current incarceration (1 = Less than one month, 2 = 1–3 months, 3 = 4–6 months, 4 = 7–12 months, 5 = Greater than 1 year). Research shows that self-reports are a reliable and valid measure of incarceration history as they are highly congruent with official incarceration records (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2014).

Employment experience consists of four aspects measured by: (a) employment, based on the question “were you employed one month before present incarceration?” (1 = Yes, 2 = No); (b) length of job. If participants answered “yes” to previous question, they were asked “how long were you at your previous job?” (1 = 1 month or less, 2 = 1 to 3 months, 3 = 3–6 months, 4 = 6–12 months, 5 = More than 1 year); (c) weekly working hours (1 = 1–10 hours, 2 = 11–20 hours, 3 = 21–40 hours, 4 = 41–59 hours, 5 = 60 or more hours); and (d) self-reported employment skills consists of 29 items covered participants’ self-evaluation of their knowledge and skills related to job seeking, interview preparation, and job maintaining. All the answers to (d) were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always). The sum of scores on the 29 items were calculated ($\alpha = .96$). Evidence suggests that self-reported work histories are generally accurate (Bourbonnais et al., 1988; Johns & Miraglia, 2015). Though the accuracy of self-reported employment seeking and maintaining skills is unclear in literature, the items used in our study were designed specifically for programming purpose. We assume participants were likely to reflect truthfully on their employment skills for their own benefits.

Training in fathering skills was captured by 10 items centering on the amount of fathering information/training that participants received from family, mentors, education, or service settings prior to their current incarceration. Topics under this survey include “what makes an effective father,” “how to use fathering skills in daily life,” “the importance of establishing paternity,” “children’s developmental stages,” etc. All the answers were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 4 (1 = None, 2 = A little, 3 = Some, 4 = A lot). The sum of scores on all the items was calculated ($\alpha = .91$). Similarly, measurement on training in fathering skills in our study was designed for programming purpose. We assume participants were likely to provide relatively accurate information.

General self-efficacy was measured by the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE), a widely used 10-item self-administered questionnaire developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) to assess individuals’ belief in their ability to cope with daily hassles and stressful life events. The GSE shows favorable properties based on predictive and concurrent validation procedures (e.g., Lönnfjörð & Hagquist, 2018). Participants in this study were asked to complete the scale by recalling their experience over the 6 months prior to their incarceration. Answers were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 4 (1 = Not at all true, 2 = Barely true, 3 = Moderately true, 4 = Exactly true). A sum of responses to all 10 items yielded the composite score for each participant ($\alpha = .84$).

Depression was measured by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), a 10-item questionnaire for measurement of anxiety and depressive symptoms that a person has experienced in the previous 4 weeks (Kessler et al., 2002). Validation research shows that K10 appears to be psychometrically sound in measuring nonspecific psychological distress

across racial groups (e.g., Bougie et al., 2016). Answers to K10 were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 (*1 = None of the time, 2 = A little of the time, 3 = Some of the time, 4 = Most of the time, 5 = All of the time*). A sum of responses to all 10 items yielded the composite score for each participant ($\alpha = .88$).

Substance use was measured by the Chemical Use, Abuse, and Dependence Scale (CUAD), a semi-structured instrument for detection and diagnosis of substance use severity and substance use disorder in research and clinical contexts (McGovern & Morrison, 1992). Though systematic review suggests that tools for assessments of substance misuse generally have no adequate evaluation on their properties, CUAD are recommended as the best available tools for routine clinical use (Sweetman et al., 2013). Participants were asked to report their habits of substance use in the 6 months prior to incarceration. We used two dimensions as measurements for participants' substance use experience: (a) substance use frequency. Participants reported their frequency of using alcohol, amphetamines, cannabis, cocaine, hallucinogens, inhalants, opioids, PCP (pentachlorophenol), sedative, and other substances in a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 5 (*0 = Not at all, 1 = Less than once per month, 2 = Once or twice a month, 3 = Once per week, 4 = Two to several times a week, 5 = Daily*). A sum of responses was calculated; (b) substance use duration. Responses were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 4 (*0 = Not at all, 1 = Less than 1 month, 2 = Between 1 and 6 months, 3 = Between 6 month and one year, 4 = More than a year*), and a sum of responses was calculated. Overall, 20 items were involved in the measure of participants' level of substance use ($\alpha = .67$).

Community violence exposure was measured by the Survey of Exposure to Community Violence (Self-report Version), a scale developed in a low-income racially minority sample (Richters & Saltzman, 1990) and was then used in populations with various racial and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2009; Scarpa, 2001). Participants were asked to recall their experience over the 6 months prior to their incarceration and report how often they had seen or heard the listed 12 types of violence in their home and community. Responses were in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 4 (*1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = A few times, 4 = Many times*) and a summed score was calculated ($\alpha = .88$).

Trauma history was measured by the Trauma History Questionnaire (THQ), a 24-item self-report scale covering crime-related trauma, general disaster trauma, and physical and sexual trauma experience. Research shows that THQ is reliable and valid in capturing initial information regarding trauma history across clinical and nonclinical samples (Hooper et al., 2011). We used two dimensions: (a) trauma events, namely the number of traumatic events that participants reported they have experienced; (b) trauma frequency. For each reported event, the participants also indicated the number of times they have experienced it. A summed number of times of each trauma event was used as a measurement for each participant's trauma frequency. Among the 103 participants who completed the baseline interview, 41 participants did not finish assessment on their sexual trauma experience due to a misoperation of our research assistants who accidentally left off sexual trauma questions in implementation, which means only 62 participants provided valid data on trauma experience. Cronbach's alpha for the measure of trauma history in the available sample is .72.

We defined recidivism as a new arrest, adjudication, conviction, or incarceration. This definition was used in order to be consistent with the measure of recidivism used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Alper et al., 2018). Recidivism was recorded as a categorical

variable with binary results of “yes” or “no,” in which “yes” referred to new crimes or probation/parole violations that resulted in a new arrest, adjudication, conviction, or incarceration since the release from last incarceration. As the enrollment to the study was on a rolling basis and each participant had a different release date, combined with the national statistics that the average length of stay in jail was 25 days in 2018 (Zeng, 2020), in our study, a period of 2 years was the longest possible time that participants may have to recidivate when recidivism data were collected.

Analytic strategy

Based on our research questions and the properties of variables, Spearman correlation, Pearson correlation, Independent Samples *t* test, or Mann–Whitney *U* test, and Pearson chi-square test were conducted to explore the associations between participants’ experiences (incarceration history, employment experience, training on fathering skills, self-efficacy, depression, substance use, violence, and trauma experience) and their father–child relationships. Chi-square test, *t* test, and Mann–Whitney *U* test were performed to examine the associations between each applicable variable and recidivism. Variables that emerged as having associations with recidivism were included in a logistic regression analysis to further examine their predictive effect on recidivism.

Results

Group characteristics of sampled young fathers in jail (See Table 1)

Details on descriptions of the sample’s characteristics in terms of percentages, means, and standard deviations are listed in Table 1. Here we only describe results not listed in the table or explanations necessary for understanding results in Table 1.

Among all children (179) of enrolled participants, 20.1% of them were less than 1 year of age, 49.2% were between ages 1 and 3, 20.1% were between ages 4 and 6. Thus, the majority of children were at or less than 6 years of age. No participants reported being legally prohibited from seeing their child. But among the 23.3% of participants who were expected to pay child support, 70.8% of them once had late or skipped payments. Most of participants (89.2%) reported that they received some form of information or training in parenting skills, nearly half of them (47.6%) reported that they knew well what actions are considered child abuse, child neglect, and domestic violence, as well as the harmful effects of these kinds of behavior. Approximately 28.2% of participants had been contacted by police for hitting or screaming at their child’s mother or a member of their family. The average score on participants’ father–child relationships is 4.2 (out of a total of 5), indicating participants generally perceived themselves as having a good father–child relationship.

The Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale has 10 items with responses to each item ranging from 1 to 4. Thus, the total score of self-efficacy ranges from 10 to 40. The higher the score, the more confirmed the people’s belief in their ability to cope with difficult situations or stressful life events. In our study, participants have a mean score of 33.6 on general self-

Table 1. Characteristics of sampled young fathers in jail.

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i> (%)
Demographics				
Age	103	22.6	2.0	
Race	102			
Black/African American				93 (90.3)
White (non-Hispanic)				1 (1.0)
Multiracial				8 (7.8)
Education	103			
High school not finished				45 (44.7)
High school degree or GED				40 (38.8)
Some college or technical degree				17 (16.5)
Income	99			
No income				34 (33.0)
Less than \$10,000				42 (40.8)
\$10,000 to \$19,999				10 (9.7)
\$20,000 and above				13 (13.1)
Relationships and children				
Have a wife	103			1 (1.0)
Have a girlfriend or partner	102			78 (75.7)
Lived with girlfriend or partner	78			48 (46.6)
Have child with current wife/partner/girlfriend	103			28 (27.2)
Have child/children	103			
1 child				55 (53.4)
2 children or more				48 (46.6)
Child's mother	103			
1 biological mother				71 (68.9)
2 or more biological mothers				32 (31.1)
Children's age	179	2.8		
Children lived with fathers in the sample	179			79 (44.1)
Pay child support	103			24 (23.3)
Incarceration experience				
Have previous incarcerations	103	2.7	1.6	81 (78.6)
Length of current incarceration (in month)	100	1.1	0.4	
Employment experience				
Employed one month before incarceration	103			56 (54.4)
Legal jobs	56	1.3	0.5	
Length of job	56			
1 month or less				5 (4.9)
1 to 6 months				27 (26.1)
6 to 12 months				10 (9.7)
More than 1 year				14 (13.6)
Weekly work hours	56			
1 to 20 hours				8 (7.8)
21 to 40 hours				31 (30.1)
41 or more				17 (16.5)
Father-child relationship [1, 5]	95	4.2	0.5	
General self-efficacy [10, 40]	102	33.6	5.0	
Depression [10, 50]	103	24.0	9.4	
Substance use	103			86 (83.5)
Community violence exposure	103	22.3	7.6	
Trauma experience	62			
Crime-related trauma				
Events		2.0	1.1	
Frequency		0.3	1.3	
General disaster trauma				
Events		4.8	2.0	
Frequency		9.0	7.2	
Physical and sexual trauma				
Events		1.1	0.9	
Frequency		4.2	5.8	
Recidivism	83			
Yes				41 (49.4)
New crimes				22 (26.5)
Probation/parole violations				19 (22.9)
No				42 (50.6)

N = total number of sample; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *n*(%) = number of cases (in percentage)

efficacy. This score is higher than the international average self-efficacy score (29.55) generated from 19,120 participants across 25 countries (Scholz et al., 2002).

Participants had a mean score of 24 on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10, total score ranges from 10 to 50). In a study on normative data of K10, the mean score for adults without physical/mental comorbidity in general population was 13.2, for adults with any mental disorder was 19.1 (Slade et al., 2011). According to the cutoff scores in clinical research, scores from 10 to 15 indicate low or no risk on anxiety or depressive disorders, scores from 16 to 29 indicate medium risk, and scores from 30 to 50 indicate high risk (Andrews & Slade, 2001). In our study, more than three-quarters of participants (77.7%) had a medium or high risk of anxiety or depressive disorders.

Of all participants, 83.5% had different levels of substance use and duration over the 6 months prior to incarceration, 42% reported daily use of drugs or alcohol, and 90.3% had different levels of violence exposure. Among the 62 participants who completed the Trauma History Questionnaire, 88.7% experienced different forms of crime-related trauma events, all of them experienced general trauma events, and 74.2% of them had physical and sexual trauma experience.

For the 83 participants whose recidivism data was tracked within 2 years of release from the incarceration which they were enrolled in this study, 50.6% ($n = 42$) had no recidivism, 26.5% ($n = 22$) had a new charge for criminal behaviors, and 22.9% ($n = 19$) had violations for the condition of probation or parole. The overall recidivism rate within 2 years of release was 49.4%. According to the Department of Corrections of the state where the study was conducted, recidivism rates as calculated up to the middle of 2016 in that state was 43.9% for all releases and 36.9% for first-time releases in 2014. The recidivism rate in our sample seems slightly higher than the average of the region during the same period.

Associations between group characteristics and father–child relationship (See Table 2)

Using Spearman correlation and Pearson correlation, statistically significant positive relationships were found between father–child relationships and several variables including training on fathering skills ($r = .32, p < .01$), self-reported employment skills ($r = .42, p < .01$), length of job prior to the incarceration ($r = .21, p < .05$), weekly work hours ($r = .28, p < .01$), and general self-efficacy ($r = .31, p < .01$). A negative relationship was found between father–child relationship and times of incarceration ($r = -.22, p < .05$). No, statistically significant correlation was found between participants' trauma experience and their father–child relationship, nor between participants' depression level and their father–child relationship.

Because preliminary exploration suggested that the values of father–child relationship variable were not normally distributed, Mann–Whitney U Test was conducted to compare the differences of father–child relationships within binary variables, such as employment and previous incarcerations. Results suggested that there were statistically significant differences in father–child relationships ($U = 834.5, p < .05$) between participants who had a job prior to incarceration (median = 4.4, range = 2.14) and who had no job (median = 4.1, range = 3.26); also between participants who had multiple incarcerations (median = 4.2, range = 3.33) and who had not (median = 4.4, range = .94), $U = 520.5, p < .01$. Furthermore,

Table 2. Associations between group characteristics and father–child relationship.

Correlations for variables		Father–child relationship				
		<i>R</i>	<i>p</i>			
Incarceration times		-.221*	.032			
Length of current incarceration		-.083	.425			
Length of job		.205*	.046			
Weekly working hours		.282**	.006			
Self-reported employment skills		.417***	.000			
Training on fathering skills		.322**	.001			
General self-efficacy		.307**	.002			
Depression		-.196	.057			
Substance use frequency		-.061	.560			
Substance use duration		-.027	.794			
Community violence exposure		.102	.325			
Trauma events		-.083	.535			
Trauma frequency		-.187	.159			
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> Test for variables		Father–child relationship				
		<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Employment	Yes	4.4	2.14	834.5*	-2.148	.032
	No	4.1	3.26			
Previous incarceration	Yes	4.2	3.33	520.5*	-2.098	.036
	No	4.4	0.94			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; *Mdn* = median

since nearly one-third of participants reported once being contacted by police for hitting or screaming at their child's mother or a family member, and prior research on fathers as perpetrators of domestic violence suggests that fathers value their fathering role and yearn for a deeper connection with their children despite violence against child's mother (Fox et al., 2002; Perel & Peled, 2008), we explored whether father–child relationships were different between participants who reported having domestic violence behavior and those who did not. Results from Mann–Whitney *U* test showed that there was no significant difference in father–child relationships between the two groups of participants in our sample ($U = 900$, $p > .05$).

Predictors of recidivism (see Table 3)

Chi-square test, *t* test, and Mann–Whitney *U* test were performed to examine the associations between recidivism and variables/dimensions including previous incarceration, employment, father–child relationship, self-efficacy, depression, substance use experience, violence exposure experience, and trauma history. Univariate analysis suggested that employment (employed or not), substance use frequency, trauma events, and trauma frequency surfaced as making a difference in recidivism rate. Among the 42 participants who did not recidivate within 2 years of release, 32 (76.2%) of them had a job prior to incarceration; among the 41 participants who recidivated, 15 (36.7%) of them had a job prior to the incarceration in which baseline survey conducted. Chi-square test suggested this difference in employment was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 13.25$, $p < .01$). Also, Independent Samples *t* Test and Mann–Whitney *U* test showed there were statistically significant differences in substance use frequency (recidivism (median = 5, range = 17), no recidivism (median = 5, range = 12); $U = 845.5$, $p < .05$), trauma events (recidivism

Table 3. Logistic regression models for predictors of recidivism.

		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Model 1 (<i>N</i> = 83)	Employment	1.623	0.497	5.069**	0.001	[1.92, 13.42]
	Substance use frequency	0.132	0.073	1.141	0.069	[0.99, 1.32]
	Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients		0.000			
	Hosmer and Lemeshow Test		0.218			
Model 2 (<i>N</i> = 52)	Employment	1.559	0.619	4.752*	0.012	[1.41, 15.99]
	Substance use frequency	0.079	0.091	1.083	0.383	[0.91, 1.29]
	Trauma events	0.045	0.097	1.046	0.644	[0.87, 1.26]
	Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients		0.048			
	Hosmer and Lemeshow Test		0.214			
Model 3 (<i>N</i> = 52)	Employment	1.535	0.616	4.641*	0.013	[1.39, 15.51]
	Substance use frequency	0.079	0.091	1.082	0.384	[0.91, 1.29]
	Trauma frequency	0.008	0.027	1.008	0.754	[0.96, 1.06]
	Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients		0.051			
	Hosmer and Lemeshow Test		0.263			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; *B* = unstandardized coefficients; *SE* = standard error; *OR* = odds ratio; *CI* = confidence interval

(median = 9.5, range = 11), no recidivism (median = 7, range = 11); $U = 260.5$, $p < .05$), and trauma frequency (recidivism (median = 15, range = 41), no recidivism (median = 7.5, range = 39); $U = -13.5$, $p < .01$) between participants who then recidivated and who did not.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to further examine the predictive effect of the four variables/dimensions (employment, substance use frequency, trauma events, and trauma frequency) on recidivism. As we only had completed trauma experience data for 62 participants, and “trauma events” and “trauma frequency” were two dimensions measuring one variable that could not be included in one model, we established three regression models to investigate the predictive effects of each variable/dimension.

In Model 1, we only used employment and substance use frequency as covariates in order to make use of the recidivism data on 83 participants. Logistic regression analysis shows that the model is effective ($p < .01$ in Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients) and the model has a high level of goodness-of-fit ($p > .05$ in Hosmer and Lemeshow Test). After controlling for substance use frequency, participants who were not employed prior to the baseline survey had a higher risk of recidivism compared to people who were employed ($p < .01$, $OR = 5.07$, 95% *CI*: 1.92–13.42).

In Model 2, we used employment, substance use frequency, and trauma events as covariates. Overall 52 cases that had both recidivism data and completed trauma experience data entered analysis. The coefficients of regression model are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Goodness-of-fit of model is high ($p > .05$). Also, after controlling for substance use frequency and trauma events, participants who were not employed prior to the baseline survey had a higher risk of recidivism compared to people who were employed ($p < .05$, $OR = 4.75$, 95% *CI*: 1.41–15.99).

In Model 3, we used employment, substance use frequency, and trauma frequency as covariates. Similar to Model 2, an amount of 52 cases entered analysis. Model 3 has statistically significant coefficients ($p = .05$) and a high level of goodness-of-fit ($p > .05$). After controlling for substance use frequency and trauma frequency, people who were not employed prior to baseline survey had a higher risk of recidivism compared to people who were employed ($p < .05$, $OR = 4.64$, 95% *CI*: 1.39–15.51).

Overall, logistic regression analysis shows that employment (employed or not) is the only dimension that can explain the differences in recidivism (recidivated or not) after controlling for substance use and trauma experiences.

Discussion

Descriptive statistics of our study participants provided a profile for young fathers incarcerated in jails of this urban Midwestern city: Consistent with other incarcerated study samples, almost all of the fathers are not currently married, many of the participants have children with multiple biological mothers, most of the participants have low levels of formal education, low income, multiple contacts with the correctional system, high unemployment rate prior to incarceration, and limited work histories. One-tenth of participants never received training in fathering skills and nearly 40% of them have alleged domestic violence history. At the same time, participants' generally perceive themselves as having good father-child relationships. They show high self-efficacy but also have high prevalence of depression, substance use, and trauma experiences.

The characteristics of our sample share many similarities with previous descriptions on incarcerated fathers in terms of overrepresentation of unmarried status (Kemper & Rivara, 1993), low education, and multiple incarcerations (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Modecki & Wilson, 2009), high prevalence of substance abuse (Bronson et al., 2017; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), mental health issues (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), violence, and trauma experiences (Kjellstrand et al., 2012), and other behavioral health problems (Ladlow & Neale, 2016). Though these features seem to confirm the "risk framework" of incarcerated young fathers (Ladlow & Neale, 2016, p. 114), the current study identified strengths in the study participants. Fathers in our study reported perceived good father-child relationships, which are related to high levels of father involvement including daily child-care and father-child interactions. This strength or characteristics corresponds to findings on unmarried young fathers that indicate they have high levels of father involvement such as accompanying the child, physical care, and strong emotional attachments even when not able to provide regular financial support (Hairston, 1998). Another strength is that the young fathers in our study showed high level of general self-efficacy. Substantial research has suggested that paternal self-efficacy, which refers to a father's beliefs in his competency to complete childrearing tasks and which comes from a harmonious father-child relationship (Kwok et al., 2013), is positively associated with father involvement and child outcomes (Kwok et al., 2013; Trahan, 2017; Trahan & Cheung, 2016). As paternal self-efficacy is an extension of general self-efficacy, it is reasonable to assume that the high levels of general self-efficacy among the young fathers in our study are beneficial for their father-child relationships and may help promote high levels of father involvement. Our study results have supported the positive association between general self-efficacy and father-child relationship. However, it should be noticed that our study participants also had high prevalence of depression. As self-efficacy is usually negatively associated with depression or serves as a mediator between stressful life events and depressive symptoms (Dhillon & Arora, 2017; Maciejewski et al., 2000), it is unclear why the two conflicting characteristics coexist in our study participants. This puzzle requires further examination in future research.

Our finding on the negative association between father-child relationship and times of incarceration is congruent with previous research that shows that fewer incarceration events are related to responsive parenting styles, which tend to generate positive father-child relationships (Modecki & Wilson, 2009). Also, we expected a positive association between father-child relationship and training in fathering skills. It added to the evidence

that paternal education increases the likelihood of high-level father involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). Contrary to previous research on the general population that revealed negative associations between depression and father involvement (Lee et al., 2012; Sweeney & MacBeth, 2016; Takehara et al., 2017), we did not find statistically significant relationship between the two variables, though the p value for a negative correlation is .057. It is not clear if increasing the sample size would generate a statistically significant finding, but future studies that examine the two variables or identify possible mitigation factors would be helpful to promote understanding of the relationships between depression and father-child relationship.

We found positive associations between father-child relationships and fathers' employment experiences. This may provide a lens for how participants in this study sample could construct their fatherhood identities. Theoretically, when fatherhood identity is salient among individual's multiple social identities, it is more likely to be invoked across various situations and thus promote fathering behaviors congruent with it (Stryker & Burke, 2000), such as higher level of father-child interaction, more fathering involvement, and behaviors that indicate fathering responsibilities. The positive relationship between fathering involvement and employment in our sample suggests that financial contribution, represented by employment, may be an important part in participants' perception of fatherhood. Research on disadvantaged fathers have generated similar findings, in which stable employment and higher income are associated with higher level of father involvement (Castillo et al., 2013; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999), while unemployment and low income can impair fatherhood identities (Randles, 2020; Roy, 2006). Research on young male criminal-justice-involved individuals also suggests that they tend to view financial provider as a key role of fatherhood (Buston, 2010). Thus, despite the trend of requiring traditional breadwinner fathers to become more equal partners in parenting (Buchler et al., 2017; McGill, 2014), our finding adds to existing evidence that disadvantaged fathers, including those in situations of unemployment, incarceration, and poverty, may still view financial contribution as an essential part in constructing their fatherhood identities (Strier, 2014; Weinman et al., 2005).

For predictors of recidivism, our study found that employment is the only variable that explains the differences in recidivism after controlling for substance use and trauma experiences. Previous research on the relationship between employment and recidivism reports mixed findings. Though many studies identify employment placement and retention as predictive of reducing reoffending (e.g., Carter, 2017; Cook et al., 2015), employment is not always associated with decline in recidivism (e.g., Bushway & Apel, 2012; Visher et al., 2005), and the effect of employment on recidivism may vary by individual characteristics. For example, a study found that employment opportunities benefit older justice-involved people (aged 27 years or above) but have little effect for younger ones (in early twenties or below) on recidivism (Uggen, 2000). Our finding shows that employment is predictive of recidivism among study participants in our sample.

However, it was contrary to our expectation that father-child relationship was not found to be a predictor for recidivism. Previous studies suggest positive family social support, including perceived strong father-child bond is beneficial in reducing recidivism (Bales & Mears, 2008; Maley, 2014; Spjeldnes et al., 2012). Particularly, incarcerated fathers who have close relationships with their children before and during incarceration are more likely to have higher levels of father involvement, more weekly work hours after release, and are less

likely to recidivate (Visher et al., 2013). The statistically non-significant association between father-child relationship and recidivism in our study indicates that further research is needed on this topic, but here we try to understand it in two ways.

First, all participants in the study were voluntarily enrolled in the fathering-based postrelease program from which our data was collected. It was possible that fathers chose to participate in the program were more motivated for further information on how to improving/maintain bonds with their children or anticipated having more access to their children after release from jail than those fathers who opted not to participate. Regardless, self-selection bias may partly account for the universally high scores in father-child relationship in our sample. It should be noted that when there lacks variability in values, statistical significance may go undetected even if a trend is in fact present. Second, the statistically non-significant finding may suggest a need to examine the interactions among predictors or the salience of some predictors over others. For example, there is evidence that the predictive effect of family ties on recidivism reduced to a statistically nonsignificant level when employment was included in the prediction model, suggesting family social support may not impact recidivism directly but provide motivation for formerly incarcerated individuals to engage in more conventional activities after release from incarceration (Berg & Huebner, 2011). Also, some studies indicate that formerly incarcerated individuals prioritize employment as one of the most urgent concerns (Solomon et al., 2004). In a survey on 1,946 individuals in New York City jails (Freudenberg et al., 2007), adult males reported the top three problems they expected to face after release were unemployment, education, and housing, while adult females' top three problems were housing, substance abuse, and financial support. Taken together, research on predictors of recidivism needs to understand the nuance of their roles and identify predictors of priority by group characteristics, such as age, sex, and ethnicity

This study has strengths and limitations. Given the difficulties in recruiting and maintaining research participants in the relatively unpredictable jail settings, the use of recidivism data within two years after release is a strength of our study as it adds to the richness of information in our sample and helps building a better understanding of the population of interest. It should be noted that the 83 participants may have had federal cases which were not reflected in our recidivism data because we did not collect federal incarceration information. In terms of measurement, father-child relationship in our study was measured from fathers' perspectives. We did not have observational data on the actual experiences of fathers or the actual experiences of children of the fathers in this study. Thus, social desirability effects associated with self-reported data are possible. As aforementioned, all participants were voluntarily recruited in the program as well as in the study, thus selection bias may exist and influence the findings. In addition, participants with multiple children were asked to select one child at random to answer survey questions. This method was based on practical considerations in data collection. It should be acknowledged that parent-child relationships can differ with each child (e.g., by gender and age), selecting one child to focus on may impair the precision of measurement, though the randomized selection process could partly offset this impairment. Furthermore, the Cronbach's alpha for the items measuring father-child relationship of the study participants whose child were under 4 was .51, suggesting a not satisfying internal consistency of these items. This low Cronbach's alpha value may be due to the small number of items (10 items for this group of participants) that didn't

cover enough aspects of father–child relationship pertaining to the child’s age. Adding more relevant items on father–child interaction and father’s duties including daily caretaking and financial contribution in future survey may help improve the reliability of measurement.

We recognized that our sample sizes are relatively small and we only have full trauma data for 62 participants due to data collection errors. This might have an impact on the robustness of our findings. Future research should be conducted on larger samples when possible. Also, the lengths of time over which recidivism data were collected varied by participant. Outside of recidivism, all the data we used came from the baseline survey. Thus, the finding that employment is predictive of recidivism among our participants should be interpreted in caution because employment variable in our study reflects participants’ prior-incarceration rather than postrelease employment experience. These limitations suggest that our study results should be reviewed in context and additional research is needed. However, despite the above drawbacks in measurement and data collection, this study contributed to current literature by adding to the little knowledge on jailed young fathers’ characteristics and experiences, as well as on the associations between father–child relationships, behavioral health factors, and recidivism. The study underscores the importance of establishing a more robust set of literature specific to young fathers incarcerated in jail settings.

Conclusion

Young fathers in jail are underrepresented in literature. The paucity of research on this group of individuals suggests that classification studies on incarcerated populations are necessary in future research to provide accurate portrayals of differential experiences. Our study shows that these young fathers have several risk factors that may influence their father–child relationships. Given the unclear effectiveness of most parenting programs targeting incarcerated young fathers (Buston et al., 2012), more research is needed to understand how to best intervene on these risk factors. Meanwhile, despite the disadvantaged status of these young fathers, we agree on the importance of constructing noncriminal identities and call for a strength-based perspective. This means the intervention/helping efforts should not only focus on risk factors but integrate strengths such as self-perceived good father–child relationships and high levels of self-efficacy, both of which suggest a potential for positive outcomes. Given this study only uses quantitative data, future research should consider integrating qualitative interviews with fathers in jails to increase the richness of data. Also, along this line of research on jailed young fathers, we call for more studies on another incarcerated population who received similarly little attention: jailed mothers.

As found in our study, several dimensions of employment surfaced as important predictors of father–child relationships and recidivism. This finding has two implications. First, incarcerated young fathers may view financial contribution as a major part of fatherhood; thus, sustainable employment placement may be essential in helping young fathers with incarceration history establish their paternal identity and successfully return to families and communities. Second, because pretrial detention disrupts employment, the use of lengthy (i.e., anything beyond a day) pretrial incarceration could have consequences beyond the father. Both policy and programming shifts that could mitigate that impact should be seriously reconsidered.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Disclosure statement

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The work described in this manuscript has not been published previously. It is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. Its publication is approved by all authors and explicitly by the responsible authorities where the work was carried out. If the manuscript is accepted, it will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically without the written consent of the copyright-holder.

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