

Paternal Incarceration and Kin Support:
Understanding Contradictions between Perceived and Actual Financial Support

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Abstract

Paternal incarceration has been shown to exacerbate economic hardships for families. Although families may need financial support from kin during this financially destabilizing time, some research indicates that paternal incarceration diminishes the availability of support. Research in this area has focused on perceptions of support, but no study has examined actual support received. I use data from Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($N = 3,637$) to show that paternal incarceration increases mother's likelihood of receiving financial support and the amount they receive. This provides encouraging evidence that mothers can rely on kin during paternal incarceration but stands in contrast to previous research. Thus, I also examine reasons for this seeming contradiction between mothers' perceptions of support and the support they actually receive. These results suggest that mothers connected to incarcerated fathers are more likely than other women to activate support, or draw on the support they perceived was available.

A growing body of research documents the detrimental consequences of men's incarceration for the economic stability of the families they leave behind.¹⁻⁴ Yet some research indicates that paternal incarceration may diminish the availability of financial support from kin at a time when families need it most.⁵ Research in this area has focused on perceptions of kin support, but no study has examined actual support received. In this study, I use data from Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey of parents who share children, to investigate how paternal incarceration is associated with mothers' receipt of financial support from family and friends. I examine both the likelihood of receiving financial support and the dollar amount received. Previewing the results, I find that paternal incarceration increased mothers' receipt of financial support and the amount received. This provides encouraging evidence that mothers can rely on kin support but stands in contrast to previous research. How can it be that paternal incarceration is associated with less perceived support and more actual support? How do we make sense of these seemingly contradictory findings? In the second stage of the analysis I examine this mismatch more closely to better understand the relationship between perceived and actual support among this population. The analysis investigates two hypotheses: 1) mothers connected to incarcerated fathers are more likely than other women to activate the support they perceive is available to them and 2) mothers receive greater amounts of PFTs during incarceration but exhaust their supports and later perceive less availability.

Methods

Data. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey following a cohort of 4,898 families with children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large U.S. cities. Parents were sampled at a ratio of one marital to three non-marital births; thus, the sample is relatively low-income. Baseline surveys were conducted soon after the child's birth, and follow-ups occurred when the child was 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years old. I use primarily data from the 3- and 5- year surveys when partner incarceration is most accurately measured. The analytic sample for the analysis presented here contains 3,637 women who completed the three- and five-year surveys and provided information on dependent and independent variables. I preserve observations missing values for covariates using multiple imputation by chained equations.⁶

Financial support from kin. The analysis considers two measures of actual support received, both of which reflect receipt occurring over the 12 months prior to survey. Support received is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether a mother received financial support from anyone other than their child's father (excluding public and private agencies). Amount of support received denotes the total dollar value received from these sources. An alternative specification of support received (used in the second stage of analysis) denotes whether mothers received \$200 or more in the twelve months prior to the five-year survey. In addition, one variable captures perceived financial support; it is a dichotomous variable indicating whether mothers' thought they could count on someone to loan them \$200 in the year following survey.

Paternal incarceration. The primary explanatory variable measures whether the focal child's father was incarcerated at any point between the three- and five-year surveys, including incarceration at the five-year survey. I also control for partner prior incarceration, which measures whether a woman's partner was incarcerated at or before the three-year survey.

Control variables. The analysis adjusts for several individual-level characteristics associated with receipt of financial support and attachment to incarcerated men. These variables are measured at or before the three-year survey, prior to the measurement of recent partner incarceration and are listed in the note below Table 1.

Analytic Strategy. In the first stage of the analysis, I estimate whether mothers' received support using logistic regression. I use Tobit regression to estimate the amount mothers received. Tobit model coefficients cannot be interpreted in the same way as coefficients from a linear regression model. Rather, the coefficient is the combination of: 1) the change in PFT value for those greater than \$0, weighted by the probability of receiving and 2) the change in the probability of receiving, weighted by the expected value if greater than \$0.⁷ Thus, I decompose the Tobit coefficients and report both the coefficients and weighted expected values. The analysis proceeds as follows: Model 1 includes all partner incarceration variables. Model 2 adds control variables. Model 3 adds a lagged measure of the dependent variable. Model 4 restricts the sample to women whose partners were incarcerated at or prior to the three-year survey.

In the second stage of the analysis, I will use logistic regression to show that paternal incarceration is associated with a decrease in perceived support (replicating part of Turney et al.'s analysis). Then, to examine the relationship between paternal incarceration and the mismatch between actual and perceived support, I use two strategies. First, to examine the exhaustion of support, I restrict the sample to women who received at least \$200 in financial support in the year prior to the 5-year survey, and estimate perceived support (reported at the 5-year survey) as a function of paternal incarceration using logistic regression. Second, to examine activation of available support, I restrict the sample to women who perceived financial support was available (reported at the 3-year survey), and estimate support actually received (\$200 and above, reported at the 5-year survey) as a function of paternal incarceration, also using logistic regression.

Sample Description. Thirty percent of sample reported receiving financial support, with an average value of \$558. At the same time, 85% of mothers perceived they could count on someone for a \$200 loan. Twenty-two percent of mothers experienced the incarceration of their children's fathers between the three- and five-year surveys. The sample as a whole is relatively disadvantaged across a wide range of other characteristics. About three-quarters of the sample is non-Hispanic Black or Hispanic. One-third of mothers had not received a high school diploma or GED when their child was born.

Results

Table 1 shows results from models estimating support received. Model 1, which adjusts only for prior paternal incarceration, shows that recent paternal incarceration is significantly associated with receiving support and receiving a greater dollar amount of support. These associations remain statistically significant, but diminish somewhat in strength as additional covariates and a lagged dependent variable were added to the model (Models 2 and 3). In Model 3, paternal incarceration is associated with a 6 percentage point higher probability of PFT receipt. Additionally, decomposing the coefficient for amount received reveals that the weighted expected value for mothers involved with incarcerated fathers was \$226.23 more than for

mothers involved with non-incarcerated fathers. These associations persist in Model 4, which restricts the sample to mothers connected to fathers with a history of incarceration.

Table 1. *Logistic and Tobit Regression Models Estimating Actual Financial Support Received as a Function of Recent Paternal Incarceration*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Unadjusted		+ Controls		+ Lagged DV		Restricted Sample	
	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Predicted values	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Predicted values	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Predicted values	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Predicted values
Support received	0.51*** (0.11)	0.10	0.38** (0.11)	0.07	0.34** (.12)	0.06	0.38** (0.14)	0.08
Amount received	1185.19*** (313.74)	302.97	968.95** (315.11)	245.67	899.56** (293.07)	226.23	693.72** (212.22)	218.23
<i>N</i>	3,637		3,637		3,637		1,566	

Note: Coefficients for recent paternal incarceration shown. Standard errors in parentheses. Predicted values are differences in probabilities for logit models and differences in dollar amounts weighted by the probability of receipt/giving for Tobit models. PFT = private financial transfers. DV = dependent variable. All models include city fixed effects. Models 2-4 adjust for prior paternal incarceration, race/ethnicity, education, relationship status, age, lived with both biological parents at age 15, immigrant, cognitive score, impulsivity, fair or poor health, depression, substance abuse, multiple partner fertility, number of children living in household, grandparents live in household, public assistance, public housing, household income, father provided financial support. Models 3-4 adjust for a lagged measure of the dependent variable. The sample for Model 4 is restricted to mothers connected to father who have a history of incarceration. The size of the restricted sample varies by imputed data set; the minimum is shown. **p*<.05 ***p*<.01 ****p*<.001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 2 shows preliminary results from the second stage of the analysis. Model 2 indicates that among mothers who received support in the past, paternal incarceration is associated with 4 percentage point lower probability of perceiving financial support is available. Among mothers who perceived support was available, paternal incarceration is associated with an 8 percentage point higher probability of receiving support. Although these results suggest that paternal incarceration is associated with both exhausting support and activating support, exhausting support is relatively rare among the sample. Just 4% of mothers who experienced paternal exhausted support, compared to 30% who activated support (results not shown). Future analysis will explore how these analyses can be combined to compare exhaustion and activation of support directly.

Table 2. *Logistic Regression Testing Exhausting Support and Activating Support Hypotheses*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Unadjusted		+ Controls	
	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Predicted values	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Predicted values
Panel A. Exhaust Support				
Perceived financial support (if received support)	-1.01** (0.37)	-0.05	-0.81* (0.40)	-0.04
	798		798	
Panel B. Activate Support				
Received financial support (if perceived support)	0.63*** (0.12)	0.12	0.44** (0.13)	0.08
	2,680		2,680	

Note: Analysis uses complete cases, but imputed data will be used in future iterations. All variables noted in Table 1 are included in Model 2, with the exception of substance abuse and city fixed effects.

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