

# PATERNAL IMPRISONMENT AND FATHER–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

## A Systematic Review

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Although father–child relationships (FCRs) are central to children’s experience of paternal imprisonment, few studies address this subject. A systematic review was conducted to synthesize the literature on paternal imprisonment and FCRs. Four academic databases were searched for peer-reviewed studies. Thirty studies were identified. It was found that FCRs most often deteriorate due to paternal imprisonment, but sometimes remain stable or change positively. Four key factors were found to influence FCRs: (a) the quality of preprison FCRs, (b) the frequency and experience of father–child contact during imprisonment, (c) the child’s primary caregivers’ role in facilitating father–child contact, and (d) prison barriers for maintaining FCRs during imprisonment. The interplay between these factors is essential for understanding FCRs in this context, which may explain children’s divergent experiences of paternal imprisonment. An integrated framework of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment is presented. Limitations and directions for research are discussed.

**Keywords:** parental incarceration; parenting; prisoners; social bonds; incarceration

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There is mounting evidence that imprisonment of fathers negatively affects their children’s behavioral outcomes. The adverse consequences of paternal imprisonment for children include increased chances of engaging in antisocial and delinquent behavior

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(Murray et al., 2012), traumatic symptoms (Arditti & Savla, 2013), health vulnerabilities (Mitchell et al., 2017), stigma (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008), being at risk for intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior (Besemer & Farrington, 2012), and increased vulnerability to internalizing problem behavior (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Murray & Farrington, 2008). However, not all research uniformly points to negative effects of paternal imprisonment for children's wellbeing and behavioral outcomes (Johnson & Easterling, 2012).

Although effects of paternal imprisonment are negative on average, many children are resilient to the negative consequences of paternal imprisonment (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018). Some studies even found that most children with an imprisoned parent fall in a relatively low risk group in terms of behavioral problems and social competence (Johnson et al., 2018; Kjellstrand et al., 2018; Kremer et al., 2020). Although these differential consequences of paternal imprisonment for children are increasingly being pointed out by researchers (Arditti, 2012; Haskins et al., 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018; Turney, 2017), the mechanisms through which these occur remain understudied (Poehlmann-Tynan & Eddy, 2019).

An important mechanism that may explain the heterogeneous consequences of paternal imprisonment for children are father-child relationships (FCRs) during imprisonment. High-quality parent-child relationships and caregiving relationships are thought to be a key factor for children's resilience (Masten, 2014) and may buffer the adverse effects of paternal imprisonment. FCRs during imprisonment are important for children's resilience and wellbeing (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013) and have been found to improve postrelease reintegration of formerly imprisoned fathers and adjustment outcomes for children (Lösel et al., 2012). However, there are many obstacles that hinder FCRs during imprisonment. Due to the physical separation of fathers and their children, paternal imprisonment threatens central components of father involvement (see Lamb et al., 1987/2017); imprisonment reduces the options for father-child contact, fathers' physical and psychological accessibility, and fathers' options for caregiving and arranging resources for children. During imprisonment, father-child contact is generally limited to visits and telephone contact, and letter writing. Imprisonment may disrupt fathers' experience of their paternal role (Arditti et al., 2005). A review of studies on imprisoned fathers' family relationships concluded that relationships were at risk because of the disrupting effect of imprisonment on fathers' paternal identity, the limited options for performing family rituals, and the lack of opportunities for father-child interaction during imprisonment (Dyer et al., 2012).

Despite the importance of FCRs for children's resilience, research directly addressing FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment is scarce. In this study, we aim to develop a framework to integrate the findings on FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment by conducting a systematic review. The framework may enhance our understanding of the divergent outcomes of paternal imprisonment for children and may inform the development of interventions aimed at strengthening FCRs during imprisonment. The review incorporates the perspectives of imprisoned fathers, their children, and the children's caregivers.

We focus on father-child relationships and do not include mother-child relationships in the review because the family processes that are associated with paternal imprisonment and maternal imprisonment may differ (see Dallaire, 2007a), and because worldwide many more children experience paternal imprisonment compared to maternal imprisonment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Philbrick et al., 2014). Compared to imprisoned

fathers, imprisoned mothers more often resided with their children prior to imprisonment and provided their daily care, more often face shorter prison sentences, and more often expect to reside with their children after release (Foster, 2010; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). In addition, whereas children typically continue to live with their mother when their father is imprisoned, most children reside with their grandparent when their mother is imprisoned (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010) or are placed in foster care (Dallaire, 2007b). As such, maternal imprisonment more often leads to residential instability and altered care arrangements for children compared to paternal imprisonment (Poehlmann, 2009; Tasca et al., 2011). Taken together, there are likely to be relational challenges which are unique to imprisoned mothers and their children (Dallaire, 2007a).

In the following section, various theories are reviewed to identify the dimensions that constitute FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment. This provides a starting point for developing an integrated framework. These dimensions are then used to categorize the findings of the studies identified in the systematic review.

### THEORIZING FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships have been defined as consisting of interactions between individuals and their perceptions of the relationship quality (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987). Interactions—behavioral and observable in nature—and perceptions of relationship quality— affective and cognitive in nature— influence each other in a reciprocal and bidirectional manner. In a relationship, each interaction is affected by previous interactions and by the expected future course of the relationship (Hinde, 1997). These notions highlight the importance of time in relationships, as interactions are shaped both by the relationship history and by expectations of the future relationship (see also Lollis, 2003). As such, interactions are nested within the past, current, and expected future relationship (see also Kuczynski, 2003). When applied to FCRs and paternal imprisonment, this implies that preprison FCRs and expectations for the postprison relationship affect in-prison father-child interactions and the perceived FCR quality.

From this conceptualization of relationships, the first two dimensions of the integrated framework are derived. The first dimension consists of factual father-child interactions during imprisonment, which take place through visits, telephone calls, and mail. The second dimension consists of perceptions of FCR quality during imprisonment, which needs to be understood in the context of preprison FCRs and postprison relationship expectations. Importantly, father-child interactions and the perceptions of FCR quality reciprocally affect each other.

The interactions and relationships between imprisoned fathers and their children do not take place in a social vacuum, but are situated within larger family contexts (Lamb & Lewis, 2013). Interactions and relationships need to be understood in a triadic perspective. In the case of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment, the triad refers to the imprisoned father, the child, and the child's primary caregiver—typically the child's mother (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). The interdependence between family members in their interactions and relationships is further outlined in the family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Therefore, the third dimension of the integrated framework of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment is the family context in which FCRs are situated. Fathers' imprisonment endangers larger family processes, such as familial regularities, rules, and structures

(Dyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, the importance of the child's nonimprisoned caregiver "cannot be overstated" when discussing family relationships in the context of paternal imprisonment (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2015a, p. 54). This underscores the need to focus on the role of the larger family context in which father-child interactions and relationships are situated.

Furthermore, FCRs and father-child interactions take place within physical and social environments. The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) stresses the interrelatedness between individuals' development and the context in which development takes place. According to the model, children's development occurs through proximal processes, referring to progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between the developing person and the persons, objects, and symbols in its direct environment. Proximal processes include father-child interactions and relationships. These take place in children's immediate environments (e.g., the home or school) and are further affected by intertwining systems (e.g., the child's peer network and school environment). Whether the outcomes of proximal processes are developmentally generative or disruptive depends on the duration, frequency, interruption, timing, and intensity of the interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

When these notions are applied to the paternal imprisonment literature, it follows that the prison needs to be considered as an environment in which father-child interactions and FCRs take place and that the prison is therefore an important environment that may affect the child's development (see Arditti, 2005; Poehlmann et al., 2010). Therefore, the fourth and last dimension of the integrated framework is the prison context in which father-child interactions and FCRs are situated.

## METHOD

The systematic review was conducted following best practice guidelines (Siddaway et al., 2019) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). To identify relevant studies, we searched four scientific databases which contain most literature published in the social sciences (Academic Search Premier, SocIndex, PsychINFO, and Web of Science) in the period of January 2009 to July 2019. January 2009 was chosen as the starting point for our search because the most recent study included in a prior review dated from 2008 (Dyer et al., 2012), and because the amount of studies on families of people who are incarcerated has increased rapidly in the last decade (Condry & Smith, 2018; Lanskey et al., 2019). We developed the following search string: "*(father\* OR parent\* OR husband\* OR partner\* OR spous\* OR famil\*) AND (incarcerat\* OR imprison\* OR prison\* OR jail\* OR inmate\* OR detainee\* OR detention).*" To ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature, the search string was developed to broadly identify studies regarding people who experience incarceration and their families. We searched in the titles and abstracts of studies. After removing duplicates, this resulted in 4,237 hits.

## ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA AND SCREENING

Seven criteria were used to determine whether studies were eligible for inclusion in the systematic review:

1. The study (retrospectively) focused on FCRs during or shortly after father's time in jail or prison. Studies concerning (determinants of) the frequency of father-child contact, parenting behaviors or knowledge, parenting stress or fatherhood identity were excluded, as these fall outside the definition of relationships (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987).
2. The study focused primarily on imprisoned fathers. Studies that included imprisoned mothers were included when the study's emphasis was on imprisoned fathers.
3. The study was empirical.
4. The study was peer reviewed.
5. The study was written in English.
6. The study was published between 2009 and 2019.
7. The study did not concern an evaluation of an intervention.

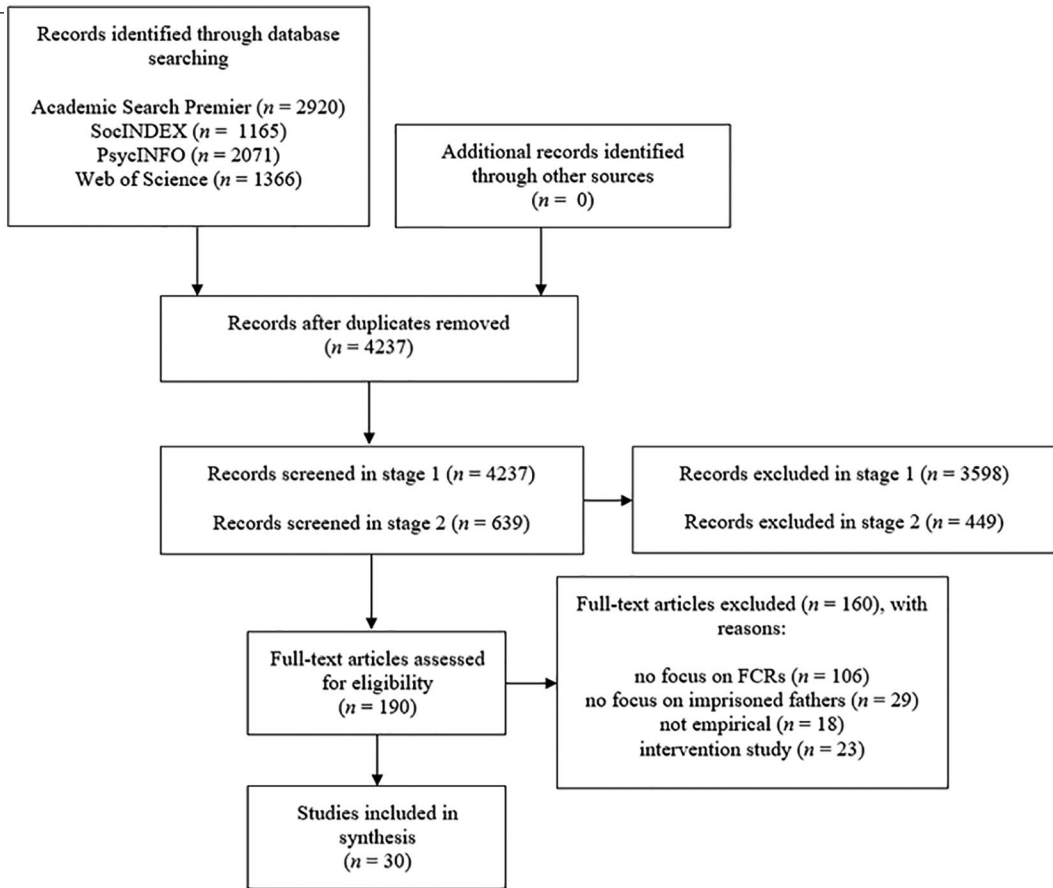
Studies were not selected on the basis of country, correctional institution, offense type, or sentence length. As such, studies from a wide variety of criminal justice systems, penal climates, and correctional contexts are included in the review. Although this may raise issues of comparability across national and correctional contexts, the primary purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive account of the characteristics and dynamics that affect FCRs during paternal imprisonment, regardless of national or correctional contexts. In addition, including studies from multiple countries and correctional contexts may aid in exploring a wide variety of relevant themes regarding FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment.

The selection of studies took place in three stages (see Figure 1). In the first preselection stage, the first author removed irrelevant entries (e.g., editorials, opinion pieces, book reviews) and studies regarding imprisoned women on the basis of the titles and abstracts, leaving 639 entries. In the second stage, the first and second author selected studies based on the inclusion criteria by reading the titles and abstracts. Selection of studies was carried out double blinded using Rayyan (a web application for systematic reviews, see Ouzzani et al., 2016). Conflicting decisions in the second stage (8%) were discussed until consensus was reached. In the final stage, the 190 remaining studies were assessed full-text by the first author, after which decisions were discussed by the first and second author until consensus was reached. In this stage, 160 studies were excluded for one or more reasons, including study did not focus on FCRs ( $n = 106$  studies), study did not focus on imprisoned fathers ( $n = 29$  studies), study was not empirical ( $n = 18$  studies), and study reported on an intervention ( $n = 23$  studies). The final selection consisted of 30 studies.

#### DATA EXTRACTION

Information on the analytic strategy, study participants, sample size, country, correctional context, participant characteristics, and relevant findings were extracted from the studies. After re-reading the studies, the findings and conclusions were classified into the four dimensions of the integrated framework: father-child interaction, perception of FCR quality, family context, and prison context. Subthemes within these dimensions were identified by following a process similar to thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Five studies in the review included a minority of imprisoned mothers in the sample. The percentage of imprisoned mothers in the samples ranged from 7% to 39%. The results of these particular studies did not substantially diverge from the other studies and therefore did not significantly alter the content of the review. The findings about imprisoned mothers were not included in the results section of the systematic review.



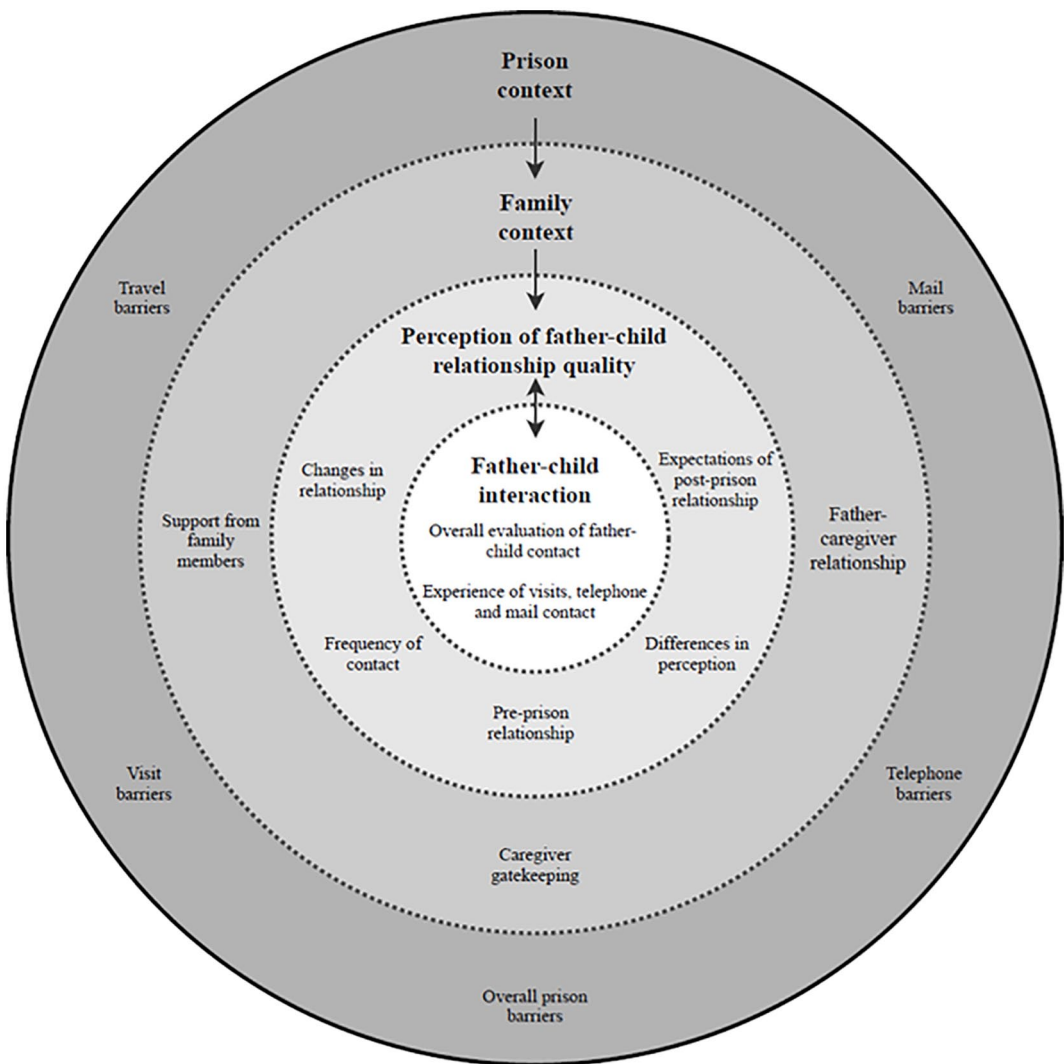
**Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram**

Note. PRISMA = Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses; FCR = father–child relationships.

## RESULTS

### OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The studies included in the systematic review used qualitative ( $n = 19$ ), quantitative ( $n = 8$ ), and mixed ( $n = 3$ ) methodologies. Four studies were longitudinal. The primary informants of the studies were imprisoned fathers ( $n = 15$ ), full families (consisting of imprisoned fathers, children, and caregivers;  $n = 4$ ), children and caregivers ( $n = 4$ ), imprisoned fathers and caregivers ( $n = 3$ ), children of imprisoned fathers ( $n = 3$ ), and caregivers ( $n = 1$ ). Although not consistently reported in all studies, the average age of children ranged from 3.9 to 12.9. Among studies where the mean duration of sentence was reported, the mean ranged from 24.2 months to 163.3 months. Studies were conducted in various countries, including the USA ( $n = 15$ ), Australia ( $n = 5$ ), Hong Kong ( $n = 3$ ), the UK ( $n = 3$ ), Italy ( $n = 1$ ), South Korea ( $n = 1$ ), and Denmark ( $n = 1$ ). One study was conducted in four countries (UK, Romania, Germany, and Sweden). The correctional contexts



**Figure 2: Integrated Framework of Father-Child Relationships and Paternal Imprisonment**

in the studies were prisons ( $n = 19$ ), jails ( $n = 3$ ), and a combination of prisons and jails ( $n = 1$ ). Seven studies did not report the correctional context. A full overview of the 30 studies included in the systematic review is provided in the Supplemental Appendix (available in the online version of this article).

The subthemes identified in the 30 studies are thematically organized in the integrated framework of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment displayed in Figure 2. The subthemes are placed within the four dimensions that constitute FCRs that were identified in our theoretical framework: father-child interactions, perceptions of father-child relationship quality, family context, and prison context. In the figure, the dashed lines and arrows indicate that different dimensions of the framework may overlap and mutually reinforce each other.

## FATHER–CHILD INTERACTION

The first dimension of FCRs concerns the interactions between imprisoned fathers and their children. The subthemes identified within father–child interactions in the 30 studies are: overall evaluation of father–child contact, experience of visits, experience of telephone contact, and experience of mail contact.

### Overall Evaluation of Father–Child Contact

Even though families appreciated in-prison contact as a means to maintain FCRs during imprisonment, contact was often considered to be of low quality. Developmentally promotive interactions were concluded to be largely absent in prison due to the irregularity and limited frequency of father–child contact (Dennison et al., 2017). Whereas children considered father–child contact to be valuable when preprison FCRs were good, it was reported to be awkward, unenjoyable and of low quality when preprison relationships were fragile (Chui, 2010; Oldrup, 2018; Smith & Young, 2017). While surrounded by logistical and emotional challenges, family contact was also reported to be a source of relief and happiness for children (Lanskey et al., 2016).

### Experience of Visits

Visits were often described as being of low quality (Chui, 2016b; Dennison et al., 2014; Martin & Phaneuf, 2018). Visits were found to be associated with stress among imprisoned fathers, caused by embarrassment, feelings of guilt and the emotional nature of visits (Martin & Phaneuf, 2018), and by having to balance between children’s needs and prison’s strict visiting rules (Moran et al., 2017). Children were reported to react emotionally during and after visits (Comfort et al., 2016), not perceive visiting as a positive experience (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010), and to be scared and quiet during visits (Chui, 2010). Visits were further experienced as unpleasant due to the unfriendly nature of the prison environment, the restrictions of physical contact, the lack of privacy, and the lack of age-appropriate activities (Oldrup, 2018; Saunders, 2017). Particularly younger children and children with less secure attachment to their caregiver were found to show more problematic behavior during visits (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017). It was suggested that visits that include physical activity were particularly valued by children with fragmented preprison FCRs (Sharratt, 2014). During visits, caregivers were found to often coach children about what to say to their imprisoned father (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017).

### Experience of Telephone Contact

Telephone calls provided an opportunity for fathers and children to stay up to date with each other’s daily lives (Lanskey et al., 2016; Sharratt, 2014). Telephone calls were indicated to be a valuable alternative for father–child contact when children found visits too distressing (Sharratt, 2014). High-frequency telephone contact was reported to be highly valued by children when preprison FCRs were good (Sharratt, 2014), but was difficult when preprison FCRs were strained (Oldrup, 2018; Sharratt, 2014). Although telephone calls were a relatively common mode of communication, they were reported to be brief and of low quality by both fathers (Dennison et al., 2017) and children (Oldrup, 2018). Prison’s fixed telephone schedules were further difficult to synchronize with the daily lives of



children (Oldrup, 2018), which was indicated to cause frustration among imprisoned fathers (Comfort et al., 2016) and children (Oldrup, 2018).

### **Experience of Mail Contact**

Few studies addressed experiences of father–child contact through mail. Letters and photos were experienced as a valuable form of contact as these can be relived multiple times (Moran et al., 2017). Children’s drawings were reported to be valued by fathers during their imprisonment, as it made them feel connected to their children (Charles et al., 2019). Mail contact was reported to be valuable when preprison relationships were good (Chui, 2010).

Taken together, these findings illustrate the dual nature of father–child interactions during imprisonment. On one hand, father–child interactions may be a source of comfort and an important way to maintain FCRs during imprisonment. On the other hand, father–child interactions may be a source of stress for both imprisoned fathers and their children. The quality of preprison FCRs, support of the caregiver, and the prison barriers and facilities for maintaining family contact appear to be the primary drivers of these divergent experiences.

## **PERCEPTION OF FATHER–CHILD RELATIONSHIP QUALITY**

The second dimension of FCRs concerns perceptions of the relationship quality between imprisoned fathers and their children. The subthemes identified within the perceptions of FCRs quality in the 30 studies are as follows: changes in FCRs, differences in perceptions, the relationship between father–child contact and FCRs, preprison FCRs, and expectations for postprison FCRs.

### **Changes in Father–Child Relationships**

Overall, paternal imprisonment was found to lead to a deterioration of perceived FCR quality. Imprisoned fathers reported feelings of “missing out” on their children (Charles et al., 2019; Dennison et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2017), feelings of loss, failure, and regret (Walker, 2010; Fowler et al., 2017), experiences of emotional difficulties of not “being there” for their children (Moran et al., 2017), and not being able to parent effectively from prison (Charles et al., 2019; Dennison et al., 2014, 2017). Paternal imprisonment was reported to disrupt family activities, particularly when preprison relationships were close (Chui, 2016a). Perceptions of FCRs were found to be negatively affected by imprisonment because of a lack of regular father–child contact, connection, and sharing experiences (Dennison et al., 2014; Smith & Young, 2017). FCRs were suggested to be particularly negatively affected by repeated imprisonment (Walker, 2010).

However, not all FCRs were negatively affected by paternal imprisonment. For substantial numbers of families, FCRs were found to be relatively unaffected by paternal imprisonment (McKay, Lindquist, et al., 2018; Song et al., 2018). The impact of paternal imprisonment on fathers’ perception of FCRs ranged from negative to positive (Dennison et al., 2014). The direction of change was suggested to depend on preprison FCRs (Dennison et al., 2014; Walker, 2010). In some cases, imprisonment was reported to lead to positive changes in perceptions of FCRs, which was attributed to fathers re-evaluating their parenting role in prison (Charles et al., 2019; Dennison & Smallbone, 2015; McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018), and to caregivers and children viewing imprisonment as an opportunity to repair fragile FCRs (Saunders, 2017; Tasca, 2018).

### **Differences in Perceptions**

Perceptions of FCRs during imprisonment were found to differ between informants. Whereas imprisoned fathers reported very positive perceptions of FCRs on average in one study (Lee et al., 2012), a majority of children (59%) reported mixed or negative feelings about the relationship with their imprisoned father in another study (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Imprisoned fathers were further found to be more likely to perceive increased father–child closeness during imprisonment and were more optimistic about the current and future FCR than were caregivers (Comfort et al., 2016; McKay, Lindquist, et al., 2018). Differences in perceptions remained after release, as paternal imprisonment was found to be related to lower postrelease father involvement when using reports of fathers and caregivers, whereas paternal imprisonment was not related to FCR quality when using children’s reports (Washington et al., 2018).

### **Father–Child Contact and Father–Child Relationships**

For imprisoned fathers, higher frequency of father–child contact was found to be significantly related to higher perceived FCR quality (Lee et al., 2012), lower levels of perceived degradation of FCRs (Song et al., 2018), and increased confidence in the father–child attachment relationship (Laquale et al., 2018). For children, in-prison parent–child contact was associated with less feelings of anger and alienation toward the imprisoned parent (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Longitudinal studies concluded that more father–child contact during imprisonment positively affected father-reported postrelease FCR quality (Lanskey et al., 2016; McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018; Visher, 2013). One of these studies found this relationship also when controlling for preprison father involvement (Lanskey et al., 2016). Another study, however, found that the association was no longer statistically significant after controlling for the father–caregiver relationship quality (McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018). Father–child contact was further associated with increased child–caregiver role reversal as depicted by children’s family drawings (Dallaire et al., 2012). Caregivers were more often depicted as having less authority and being more vulnerable among children with more father–child contact, pointing to possible negative consequences of in-prison visits for family relations.

### **Preprison Father–Child Relationships**

Having positive preprison FCRs was reported to influence children’s motivation for maintaining father–child contact and their experience of contact during imprisonment (Saunders, 2017; Sharratt, 2014). Almost all fathers who were involved in their children’s lives before imprisonment were found to remain in contact with their children during imprisonment (Tasca, 2018). Caregivers of families where fathers were involved with their children before imprisonment emphasized the importance of maintaining the FCR for the child’s wellbeing and the need to “stick together” as a family during paternal imprisonment, whereas caregivers of families where preprison FCRs were strained considered the absence of father–child contact during paternal imprisonment to be in the children’s best interest (Tasca, 2018). The odds for imprisoned fathers’ parental involvement were found to be 6 times higher when fathers were involved with their children before imprisonment (Dennison & Smallbone, 2015). Imprisoned fathers with closer preprison FCRs reported maintaining

more father–child contact during imprisonment (Walker, 2010) and were more optimistic about the postrelease FCRs compared to fathers with fragile preprison FCRs (Kelly-Trombley et al., 2014). In families where preprison relationships were fragile, caregivers and children reported not perceiving an impact of paternal imprisonment on family relationships (Chui, 2010). In sum, preprison FCRs were key in determining how imprisonment affected in-prison FCRs.

### **Expectations for Postprison Father–Child Relationships**

Various studies addressed fathers', caregivers' and children's hopes and expectations for postprison FCRs. Fathers reported to be motivated to maintain FCRs during imprisonment and to have a positive outlook for postprison FCRs (e.g., McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2017). Similarly, the majority of caregivers and children reported they desired father's involvement in their lives (Tasca, 2018; Yocum & Nath, 2011). Older children and children with strained preprison FCRs, however, reported less confidence in the postprison FCR (Yocum & Nath, 2011). Fathers' positive in-prison actions, such as working, completing an education program, and refraining from institutional infractions, and fathers' attunement to the family during contact moments were reported to positively affect children and caregiver's hopes for the postrelease FCR (Yocum & Nath, 2011). Some children and caregivers reported expressing fear about the father's release (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Even when contact was maintained during imprisonment, children reported experiencing insecurity about the postrelease FCR (Oldrup, 2018). Repeated imprisonment was indicated to make children feel deceived and lose hope for the future FCR (Yocum & Nath, 2011).

Taken together, these findings on perceptions of FCR quality show that although imprisonment negatively affects perceptions of FCR quality overall, there are different trajectories of how paternal imprisonment impacts FCRs, ranging from negative to positive. How FCRs change due to imprisonment appears to depend mostly on preprison FCRs. Maintaining frequent father–child contact was found to benefit in-prison and postprison FCRs. Perceptions of FCRs were found to differ between informants, with imprisoned fathers generally being more optimistic regarding the FCR than children and caregivers. Children with fragile preprison FCRs, older children and children of fathers who experienced repeated imprisonment were found to be more skeptical of postprison FCRs.

### **FAMILY CONTEXT**

Within the third dimension of FCRs, family context, the following subthemes were identified in the 30 studies: caregiver gatekeeping, the father–caregiver relationship, and support from family members.

#### **Caregiver Gatekeeping**

The primary caregiver's role as the gatekeeper of father–child contact and relationships was often mentioned in studies, referring to the caregiver's role in facilitating or restricting father's involvement in their children's lives during and after imprisonment. Caregivers reported various reasons for limiting father–child contact during imprisonment, including not wanting to expose children to the prison environment (Charles et al., 2019; Comfort et al., 2016), protecting the child from father's bad behavior, fear that contact would increase

children's problematic behavior, the intimidating prison environment, and the unfriendliness of prison staff (Chui, 2010; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Gatekeeping was reported to be more prominent among caregivers with younger children (Chui, 2010; Saunders, 2017; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010).

### **Father–Caregiver Relationship**

The father–caregiver relationship was found to be important in caregivers' gatekeeping decision making. The odds of fathers' in-prison parental involvement were found to decrease tremendously if problems in the father–caregiver relationship were reported (Dennison & Smallbone, 2015). Caregivers reported to cease father–child contact if they did not consider father–child contact to be in the child's best interests due to fragmented family relationships (Tasca, 2018). Disharmony between father and caregiver was found to lead to decreased father–child contact, which negatively impacted FCRs (e.g., Dennison et al., 2017). Some fathers reported giving up on the FCR if the caregiver's support was absent (Chui, 2016b).

### **Support From Family Members**

In some cases, the caregiver's gatekeeper role was reported to be circumvented by other family members, relatives, friends, mentors, or organizations (Charles et al., 2019; Saunders, 2017; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Other adults than the child's caregiver were reported to be helpful in supporting FCRs (Saunders, 2017). Particularly the women in imprisoned fathers' families, such as the child's aunt or grandmother, were found to be important in facilitating father–child contact (Walker, 2010).

Taken together, these findings indicate that the caregiver's role is essential in the family context for FCRs during imprisonment. Caregivers may facilitate or restrict father–child contact, especially for younger children. Family members or other adults may also facilitate father–child contact. Caregivers' gatekeeping decisions were found to be affected by the father–caregiver relationship, child age, and caregivers' worries of the negative effects of exposing children to the prison.

## **PRISON CONTEXT**

The final dimension of FCRs within the context of paternal imprisonment is the prison context in which interactions and relationships take place. The following subthemes were identified in the 30 studies: overall prison barriers, travel barriers, visit barriers, and telephone and mail barriers.

### **Overall Prison Barriers**

Overall prison barriers included rigid prison regulations limiting contact (e.g., Sharratt, 2014), difficulties in synchronizing prison time schedules with the lives of families outside of prison (e.g., Oldrup, 2018), and the intimidating nature of the prison (e.g., Saunders, 2017). Imprisoned fathers reported experiencing difficulties in parenting while being physically separated from children (Dennison & Smallbone, 2015). Fathers expressed a need for prison programs aimed at father–child communication (Dennison et al., 2014, 2017; Martin & Phaneuf, 2018) and for opportunities to practice and acquire new

parenting skills (Dennison et al., 2017). Participating in parenting programs was reported to lead to more frequent, lengthier and more intimate family interactions (McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018).

### **Travel Barriers**

Barriers related to traveling included large distances between the prison and family home (e.g., Dennison et al., 2017). A related issue was the traveling cost associated with visits (e.g., Dennison et al., 2014, 2017). For some families, a lack of transportation to the prison was problematic (Saunders, 2017; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010).

### **Visit Barriers**

Barriers that affected the visit experience included child-unfriendly prison procedures (Charles et al., 2019), invasive institutional policies (e.g., searches) (Comfort et al., 2016; McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018), a lack of family-friendly spaces that allowed for meaningful father-child contact (Dennison et al., 2017), uncomfortable visiting spaces (McKay, Feinberg, et al., 2018), short duration of visits (Chui, 2016a; Martin & Phaneuf, 2018), lack of physical contact (e.g., Saunders, 2017), the emotional nature of the visit, particularly at separation (Dennison et al., 2014; Kelly-Trombley et al., 2014), limited visiting times, and the lack of age-appropriate activities for children (Saunders, 2017). These barriers led some fathers to decide not to let their children visit them in prison. Fathers' reasons for not desiring visits included not wanting to normalize prison for children, and preventing traumatic visiting experiences for children (Kelly-Trombley et al., 2014; Moran et al., 2017). Visiting conditions further affected children's behavior during visits, as children were found to show more problematic behavior during Plexiglas visits in comparison to face-to-face and video visits, and showed more problematic behavior when the waiting time before the visit was longer (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017).

### **Telephone and Mail Barriers**

Various barriers related to telephone and mail contact were identified in the studies. Prison barriers regarding telephone contact included high telephone costs (e.g., Dennison et al., 2014), limited availability of telephones in prisons, limited privacy during phone calls (Lanskey et al., 2016), and fathers not being able to initiate telephone calls themselves (Sharratt, 2014). Barriers regarding mail contact were related to the long duration for mail to arrive (Lanskey et al., 2016), literacy issues, and family members' worries of mail being inspected by correctional staff (Chui, 2010).

Taken together, overall prison barriers, travel barriers, visit barriers, and telephone and mail barriers were found to impact FCRs. The consequences of prison barriers for FCRs seem to be more severe for FCRs when preprison FCRs are fragile, as high prison barriers were reported to lead to the discontinuation of father-child contact when preprison FCRs were poor (Sharratt, 2014; Tasca, 2018). Family-friendly activities and child-friendly visiting environments were suggested to be particularly valuable for maintaining FCRs when preprison relationships were fragile (Sharratt, 2014). Prison barriers, therefore, seem to endanger FCRs particularly among families with fragile preprison FCRs. While it is beyond

the scope of this review, it is important to note that prison barriers are shaped by national and local penal climate and the criminal justice system.

## DISCUSSION

Although FCRs are likely to be important in explaining the heterogeneous consequences of paternal imprisonment for children, research addressing this subject is scarce. We conducted a systematic review of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment, in which we identified 30 studies. The most influential dynamics that shape FCRs during imprisonment are as follows: (a) the quality of preprison FCRs, (b) the frequency and experience of in-prison contact, (c) the caregiver's gatekeeping role in facilitating or restricting father-child contact, and (d) prison's barriers for maintaining FCRs. Although these factors have previously been addressed in the literature on FCRs, our review underscores the need to address these factors simultaneously to adequately understand FCRs when fathers are imprisoned.

### INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK OF FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AND PATERNAL IMPRISONMENT

The framework displayed in Figure 2 outlines the need to understand the interplay within and between the different dimensions of the framework to obtain an integrated perspective on FCRs. To understand how father-child interactions during imprisonment are experienced by fathers and their children, the father's role in the family and FCRs prior to imprisonment need to be taken into account. The frequency and experience of father-child interactions simultaneously determine the course of how the in-prison FCR evolves, and affect fathers' and children's outlook for the postrelease FCR. Whether FCRs change negatively, positively or remain stable during imprisonment depends on preprison FCRs, on the frequency and experience of in-prison father-child contact, but also on caregivers' decisions regarding gatekeeping. Gatekeeper decisions are, in turn, influenced by the father-caregiver relationship, the preprison FCR and the child's age. Fathers', caregivers', and children's decisions on whether and how to maintain father-child contact during imprisonment are further influenced by the barriers the correctional complex poses for maintaining father-child contact. Such prison barriers shape the quality of interaction, and therefore also influence the way how FCRs change during imprisonment. Prison barriers have been suggested to be particularly harmful for FCRs when preprison FCRs were already fragile. Listing these arguments alongside each other provides a clear illustration of the interrelationship between the father-child interactions during imprisonment; the past, present, and future perception of FCR; the family context; and the prison barriers.

The integrated framework is able to summarize and to connect the available evidence on FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment. The evidence reviewed in our study underlines the interdependence between the frequency and experience of father-child interactions and perceptions of FCRs. When studying FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment, distinguishing between the past, present and future relationship (see Lollis, 2003) implies distinguishing between preprison, in-prison, and postprison FCRs. Despite its importance, the dimension of time is often not explicitly addressed in studies on FCRs and paternal imprisonment. Many studies in the review further illustrate the need to view FCRs in a triadic perspective, as caregivers' decisions were found to be highly influential in determining

how FCRs evolve during imprisonment. Caregivers also play an important role in the children's behavior during and experience of visits. Finally, the role of the prison context is central to how FCRs are experienced and develop during paternal imprisonment. The prison context may be too restrictive for developmentally promotive parent-child interactions to take place, which suggests that in-prison father-child contact can also lead to developmentally disruptive outcomes for some children (Dennison et al., 2017). However, the conditions under which in-prison father-child contact lead to developmentally promotive or to developmentally disruptive outcomes are poorly understood.

#### LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The conclusions we were able to draw from the systematic review are subject to the limitations of the primary evidence. Although eleven studies included perspectives of multiple actors within the same study, the majority was based on perceptions of either the imprisoned father, the child, or the caregiver. This may be problematic, as imprisoned fathers tend to underestimate the consequences of their imprisonment on the FCRs (Comfort et al., 2016; McKay, Lindquist, et al., 2018) compared to caregivers and children. Simultaneously including perspectives of imprisoned fathers, their children, and caregivers is an important step forward in the literature on paternal imprisonment. However, interviewing full family units in studies of parental imprisonment is logistically challenging and costly.

Furthermore, most research in our review is based on cross-sectional designs. Longitudinal designs for studying relationships would enhance our understanding of how FCRs develop over time. Given the importance of preprison relationships, there is a need for studies that include preprison measurements of FCRs (Poehlmann-Tynan & Eddy, 2019).

Purposive and convenience sampling are common in the literature on FCRs and paternal imprisonment. Although these sampling methods are instrumental in reaching the difficult to reach target population, issues regarding generalizability remain. Samples are further subject to bias arising from selective nonresponse. It is plausible that families with fragmented or harmful FCRs are underrepresented in samples, as these families may be less likely to participate in interviews. Families facing domestic violence, substance abuse or legal restrictions regarding parent-child contact and families in which fathers are convicted for sexual crimes are rarely included in study samples. The findings from studies on FCRs and paternal imprisonment are therefore likely to apply mostly to families with at least a moderate quality of family relationships.

Given the complex nature of relationships, future research on FCRs and paternal imprisonment should move beyond relatively simple measures of FCRs, such as the frequency of father-child contact or relationship satisfaction. Although observations of family interactions are considered optimal for assessing parent-child relationships, conducting observations in correctional settings is logistically difficult. Only one study in our review used observational measures to study interactions during visits (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017). In other studies, participants described interactions retrospectively. These studies therefore refer to narratives of father-child interactions, which are filtered by the affective and cognitive components of FCRs (see also Hinde, 1997). Methods for effectively and accurately assessing FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment should be explored.

In addition, comparative studies that focus on differences between countries, criminal justice systems, and correctional settings (e.g., comparing prisons and jails) may aid the

research on paternal imprisonment and FCRs. One study in our review (Sharratt, 2014) compared children's experiences of parent-child contact across different countries, and concluded that there are important country-level differences in terms of the barriers for maintaining contact and the nature of visiting environments. Furthermore, the effects of parental imprisonment on children's outcomes have been found to differ across national contexts (Murray et al., 2014), which may be explained by country-level differences in social patterns (e.g., divorce rates), penal climate (e.g., punitive vs. liberal prison climate, rehabilitative focus of prisons), and criminal justice system (e.g., sentence length). Cross-national and cross-correctional comparative studies may disentangle the relative importance of these factors for the impact of paternal imprisonment of FCRs.

Certainly, there are other relevant factors for studying FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment that have not been addressed in our review. It is likely that the child's age is an important dynamic of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment. Generally, younger children have less autonomy in decisions regarding father-child contact (Saunders, 2017). The child's age was found to be an important dynamic in caregivers' gatekeeping decisions (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Younger children are also less likely to be informed about their parent's imprisonment (Chui & Yeung, 2016), which may lead to difficulties in re-establishing family roles after release (Chui, 2016a), and to ambiguous loss—loss paired with a great deal of uncertainty and a lack of closure—among children (Arditti, 2016). In addition, it is plausible that an intimidating prison environment impacts younger children more severely than older children. However, older children may have increased awareness of the meaning of imprisonment and the stigma attached to it. Gender differences between children may further affect FCRs during imprisonment. Research addressing the effects of age and gender on FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment is scarce. The average age of children in the studies included in our review ranged from 3.9 to 12.9, implying that experiences of adolescents in particular are under-represented in the literature.

Characteristics of the father's sentence, the type and severity of the crime, and circumstances of the arrest may additionally affect FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment. Lengthier sentences have a larger impact on the FCR history than shorter sentences, and the consequences for FCRs therefore likely to be more severe. Particularly when prison spells are longer, families undergo many changes. This may strain family relationships (Nurse, 2002). The type and severity of crime is further suggested to influence the FCR during imprisonment. For example, children have been reported to cut ties with their imprisoned father due to the nature of the crime (e.g., family violence; Luther, 2016). When children are aware of their father's crime, it is plausible that decisions regarding father-child contact are affected by the severity of the crime. Studies on the relationship between the nature of fathers' crimes and FCRs are lacking, however.

Finally, it is important to note that various aspects included in the integrated framework of FCRs and paternal imprisonment may also be relevant for relationships between imprisoned mothers and their children. Despite distinct relational challenges associated with maternal and paternal incarceration, many of the factors that were identified in this study may also be relevant in the context of maternal imprisonment. Future studies could address the similarities and differences between imprisoned fathers and imprisoned mothers to further unravel the relational challenges associated with paternal and maternal imprisonment.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The integrated framework developed in this review may be useful for developing interventions aimed at strengthening FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment. Prison-based parenting and family interventions typically include elements such as communication skills, parenting techniques, parenting from prison, child development, and in some cases opportunities for extended visiting (Eddy et al., 2008). A meta-analytic review concluded that in-prison parenting interventions had a small to moderate positive effect on the relationship quality between imprisoned parents and their children (Armstrong et al., 2017). However, the authors found significant heterogeneity between the studies in terms of program content and institutional context. In addition, it is likely that participants engaging in such programs differ from each other in terms of the dimensions that constitute FCRs. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of FCRs tailoring intervention efforts to families' needs is likely to improve the effectiveness of prison-based parenting and family interventions. The integrated framework may aid in addressing this heterogeneity for prison-based family interventions, and may aid community and social workers working with children with imprisoned fathers. Prison-based family interventions could be tailored to themes identified in the framework. For instance, one study suggested that activities during father-child visits are particularly beneficial for children with fragile preprison FCRs (Sharratt, 2014). Thus, a tailored approach could emphasize father-child activities rather than regular visits to aid the FCR when preprison relationships are fragile. Prisons could further decrease the negative consequences of imprisonment on FCRs by minimizing the influence of prison barriers, for example by placing imprisoned fathers close to their family home, aiding families with transportation, allowing visits in the evenings and weekends, reducing waiting times before visits, providing child-friendly visiting facilities, providing family-friendly activities, providing sufficient privacy during visits, reducing limits on physical contact during visits, reducing costs associated with telephone calls, providing a sufficient number of telephones, and providing literacy training to facilitate mail contact.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, our systematic review highlights the complex dynamics of FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment. We developed an integrated framework of dynamics that affect FCRs to advance research on mechanisms that explain the divergent outcomes of children with imprisoned parents. Preprison relationships, the frequency and experience of father-child contact, the caregiver's facilitative or restrictive role in father-child contact, and prison barriers shape FCRs and children's experience of paternal imprisonment. Addressing these factors systematically and simultaneously may contribute to explaining why some children are vulnerable and why other children are resilient in the face of paternal imprisonment. The integrated framework developed in this study may serve as a tool for tailoring policy initiatives aimed at strengthening FCRs in the context of paternal imprisonment to families' specific needs. When communicated effectively to prison staff and practitioners, the insights learned from research may improve efforts to relieve the difficulties faced by children with a parent in prison.

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## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental Material is available in the online version of this article at <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cjb>

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