RISKY AND RESOURCEFUL:
Parenting experiences of (ex) offender fathers

Dr Liz Walker *received a British Academy Small Research Grant to study the experiences of fathers who had spent time in prison. Here she reveals that it is a complex picture.*

SOCIAL INCLUSION and support are central tenets of government family policy, and fatherhood is widely regarded as crucial to family well-being and positive childhood outcomes. Recent social policy such as *Every Parent Matters* (2007) and legislation including the *Childcare Act* (2006) promote the involvement of fathers in the family. Yet, within the contexts of child welfare, probation services and the criminal justice system more generally, fathers are often viewed as highly risky and/or irrelevant, and thus disregarded. Popular representations of (some) men as irresponsible, reckless or negligent lie at the heart of the deficit model of fatherhood, and it is this model that often informs the assumptions and approaches of professionals within a range of practice settings. This 'deficit approach' is particularly acute in the context of vulnerable and marginal families, where the expectation is that men really do not parent effectively.

The British Academy provided funding for the research outlined here.[1] The study sought to understand how a group of (ex) offender fathers reflected on their practices, perceptions and aspirations as fathers. While fatherhood in general has been the subject of extensive scholarship over the past two decades, offender fathers (and other groups of 'marginal men') have received scant attention in the research literature, although the ever increasing numbers of men and women serving custodial sentences in this country mean that prison experiences are reshaping and defining family life. For example, in May 2009, the prison population in the UK was 82,965, 95% of whom were men. Exact numbers of fathers in prison are not available, but estimates suggest that approximately 60% of men in prison have dependent children under 18. This research also contributes to the wider debates on fathering and family through an exploration of fathering in a context of significant adversity and vulnerability.

Photo: Fulvio/DOF-PHOTO.

Interviews

The research was conducted in the North East of England during 2007/08 using a qualitative research design, drawing on qualitative research methods, specifically narrative interviews. The final sample of 16 fathers was accessed through National Probation Services (NPS) in the region, who gave permission for the study to proceed. Probation officers identified respondents for the sample from their case load. The sentences of the men included in the final sample ranged from 4 months to 14 years, with half (8) having served sentences of 2–3 years. All but one of the men were white and their ages ranged from 20 to 49, with most (13) between the ages of 25 and 39. Six served sentences for violent crimes including murder, manslaughter and rape, 6 had been in custody for drug related offences, 3 for robbery, and 1 for driving offences. All but 3 of the men were repeat offenders, and all interviewees were on licence at the time of interview.

Individual circumstances

This study highlights the very complex social and economic context (both past and present) in which these men parent. Seven of the 16 men have step-parents, 8 described their own dads as 'absent' and said they were 'brought up exclusively by their mothers', and 3 had themselves been in the care system as children. Eleven fathers had between 2 and 4 children, and 1 had more than 5. Eight were fathers to stepchildren and children of partners with whom they lived. The majority of the men were involved in negotiating and managing multiple relationships, family and contact/custody arrangements for their children. For example, one man found it very challenging to be a father to his three children, as they had different mothers who were all now in different relationships. Some of the men interviewed also had family

Image: Action for Prisoners' Families (www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk).

members in prison: one interviewee's father and brother were both serving custodial sentences, while another had a child in prison (for the same offence as his) and one awaiting trial. Others had siblings who have also served custodial sentences.

Seven interviewees identified that they had struggled with drug and alcohol dependency, and 3 had diagnosed mental health problems. All but one of the interviewees identified severe difficulties in meeting the costs of maintaining their homes and providing for their children – factors that are all-important indicators of family vulnerability. The terrain in which they were fathering was unpredictable, inconsistent and, for the overwhelming majority, economically impoverished. The base from which these men were attempting to parent was very fragile.

The 'collateral impact' of imprisonment, in particular the social, emotional and economic costs to families of offenders, is well known. Their intricate family networks, however, also provided invaluable support – these complex networks facilitated their fathering. Their partners, mothers, siblings, other family members and friends variously enabled and negotiated their relationships with their children, both in prison and post-release. It was often their families (in particular their mothers) that took on the role of parent which the (ex) offender was unable or at times, unwilling to do.[2]

Disruption

The research shows that the lives of many of the men interviewed are characterised by continual disruption and change. They are constantly forming and reforming relationships with their children, partners, parents and friends. This is an obvious consequence of a prison sentence, compounded by repeat offending. They describe this as 'continually picking up the pieces of their lives'. Fatherhood therefore is intermittent, as are their relationships with their partners and parents. Describing the effect of re-imprisonment on his relationship with his son, one man said,

> We lost touch when I went to prison. I started fighting through the courts to be able to see him. I fought for phone contact once every two weeks and then writing. Speaking on the phone was not the same as being there all the time. After I started to see him again I was recalled. There was a double impact because I just started to re-build something with him and then I went back in for 7 months. [It was] too painful to continue... we were so close before but not so much now. He is holding back and I can't blame him. I suppose in his own little head he does sort of think why has my dad stopped seeing me, why has he left me. And he's probably a bit apprehensive that I am going to disappear again, so you know it just seems a bit, I can't think of the right words. We have 5 hours now every fortnight.

Many relationships broke down while the fathers were in prison, and the strength of their relationships with their children was in part dependent on their status as resident/non-resident fathers prior to imprisonment.

Failure

When reflecting on their time in prison, most of the men said their relationships with their children were characterised by loss and failure. They said they had failed their children and themselves through their absence, crimes and drug/alcohol dependency. One interviewee, who experienced prison before and after his daughter was born, said,

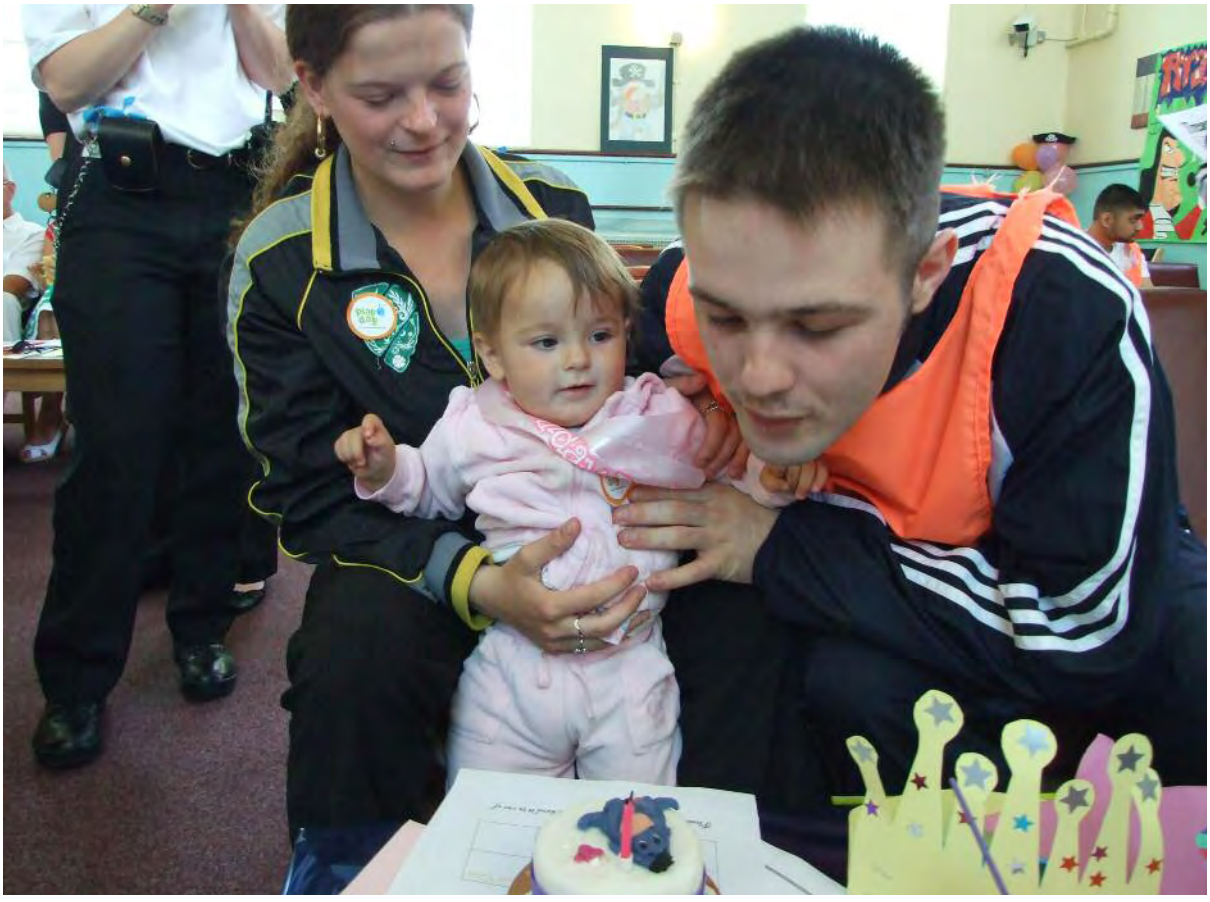
> This last one [most recent sentence], it was the worst prison sentence that I've actually done and I've done a few, you know what I mean. It hit me hard, a year away from my daughter's life. It was devastating. I felt gutted. I mean I deserved to be there, don't get me wrong, but I were gutted, it hurt a lot. Now there is still that gap from when I was in prison. It isn't as good as what it could be. You know you have missed out, although my relationship is good with her I know it should be better and it does hurt a bit, you know what I mean. I mean when you are doing things, you never think of the consequences and people don't think oh I'm going to get caught or anything like that. And when you do get caught and reality hits you, if you care enough about your children and your family, it does affect you. It hit me hard, a year away from my daughter's life.

However, some fathers interviewed tried to support their children and partners while in prison, describing themselves as 'fathering from the inside', through their continued involvement with their children, through letters, visits and phone calls. One man said,

> I spoke to my girls almost every day. They always sent me their school reports, so I knew how they were doing. I wrote to them to tell them how pleased I was with them doing all that.

Motivation

All of the fathers interviewed spoke of their children and their partners as a key motivating factor in 'keeping them going' in prison. Their children were a major part of getting through their sentences. They were critical to fathers' well-being and mental health. Their children made them feel motivated and productive. Fathering pro-



A prisoner is visited by his family. Image: Action for Prisoners' Families (www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk).

vided meaning and content to these men in ways that are taken for granted with 'other parents', and in ways that may not be fully considered in the lives of (ex) offenders. One interviewee provided a powerful description of what his 10-year-old son meant to him. He separated from the mother of his child many years ago and they have had a troubled relationship ever since. As a result of his last offence he was initially not permitted access to his son but, over the past year, with help from his probation officer, he has now secured one and half hours supervised access every fortnight. He says,

> My son means everything to me, I can't really explain [how] I lived my life up until I had my son and then when I had my son I felt like it was almost, and this might sound exaggerated but like he gave birth to me, you know. I didn't know what I did until I had a son because all the time I was with the bairn, and sort of like had him taken away from me I didn't know what to do with myself because my time was spent with my son, so to have him taken away from me, it was horrible, you know so. What I want is to be able to see my lad again, to take him away on holiday, to be to do…, to be free with him. Well, I want to be his father again.

Challenge

This research suggests that fathering can be resourceful, productive and generative in the context of offending, where the 'deficit model' of fathering is the norm. The challenges and dilemmas of choice faced by practitioners in key welfare professions such as social work and probation are acute. Yet this research on (ex) offenders suggests that assessing 'risk and danger', often pre-occupations in the context of vulnerable families, needs to shift away from a deficit model. This should involve: first, engaging with fathers' versions of events from a stance of openness and uncertainty, which might unsettle preconceived assumptions and practices; and secondly, working from a 'strengths-based', 'father-inclusive' perspective, which would facilitate recognition of the generative possibilities of fathering, in the context of multiple 'deficits'. A generative approach towards (ex) offenders would then challenge dichotomies where all (ex) offender fathers are either/or – 'risky or resourceful', good or bad.[3]

Notes

1. British Academy Small Research Grant (SG-46093).

2. L. Walker, '"His mam, my dad, my girlfriend, loads of people used to bring him up": The value of social support for (ex) offender father', *Child and Family Social Work* (in press).

3. L. Walker, '"My Son Gave Birth to Me": Offending Fathers – Generative, Reflexive and Risky?', *British Journal of Social Work* (2009), doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcp063

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