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**To cite this article:** Marlize Rabe & Marcel Londt (2022) Exploring the Ties of Incarcerated Fathers with Their Families and Communities in the Western Cape—The Perspectives of Care Professionals, *South African Review of Sociology*, 52:4, 42-57, DOI: [10.1080/21528586.2023.2173643](https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2023.2173643)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2023.2173643>



Published online: 15 Feb 2023.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Exploring the Ties of Incarcerated Fathers with Their Families and Communities in the Western Cape—The Perspectives of Care Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

It is often argued that incarcerated men who stay connected with their families are less likely to reoffend. Despite the growing literature on non-residential fatherhood in South Africa, little research has been conducted on incarcerated men in South Africa. In this article, we draw on the expertise and perspectives of three research participants who used to work closely, as care professionals, with incarcerated men in the Western Cape. By drawing on Bronfenbrenner's human development theory, the journeys of incarcerated men as fathers are explored here. The diversity and the nature of offences are important when the links between fathers, their children and other family members are considered during their entry, stay and release from correctional facilities. The care professionals are all attuned to the agency of the individual men, the close ties some have with deviant communities, the complexities of family environments and the socioeconomic pressure under which many incarcerated fathers and their families live. The context of a society, with a violent past and present, is also highlighted.

## KEYWORDS

Fatherhood; incarceration; Western Cape; South Africa; Bronfenbrenner's human development theory; care professionals

## Introduction

Fatherhood amidst incarceration, as one form of non-residential fatherhood, is the focus of this research. Since very little has been written about this in South Africa (Londt, Kock, and John-Langba 2017; Prinsloo 2007), care professionals, defined here as social workers or specialised senior correctional officers who work daily with incarcerated fathers, have been approached as experts on aspects of fatherhood under these conditions. The perspectives of such care professionals are of importance as they are not only bystanders, but often actively involved in giving direction to relationships between fathers and their children, as well as other family members.

It is often argued that incarcerated men are less likely to reoffend if they retain close ties with their families (Clarke et al. 2005; Freeks 2020; Matshaba 2016; Turner et al. 2020), but incarcerated fathers may not necessarily have a positive influence on their children or their families in general (see Khumalo 2021; Londt, Kock, and John-Langba 2017).

Hence, when focusing on fatherhood and rehabilitation amidst incarceration, individual factors, relationships with partners, families, communities, societies and incarceration conditions are all relevant (Hayes et al. 2018). To make sense of these multiple factors, Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1986) human development theory, which embraces the reciprocal exchanges between the wider ecology (environment) and the family, will form the basic theoretical departure point for the current study. This theory is still regarded as ground-breaking in understanding the links between the individual, the family, communities and wider society, whilst also taking the life course of an individual's life trajectory into consideration (Ceci 2006). This theory and its later developments will thus be ideal to guide a closer understanding of the current research topic.

In gaining a better understanding of incarcerated fathers and their environments, care professionals who were closely involved with rehabilitation programmes are the focus in this study. The research question is: How do care professionals perceive the relationships between incarcerated fathers and their families?

Because there is little research on the topic of incarcerated fathers in South Africa, this is an exploratory study and hence a qualitative research approach was employed. Individual semi-structured interviews were held with two social workers and a former correctional officer involved with rehabilitation programmes of inmates in Western Cape communities. Below, we provide an overview of recent historical factors related to current incarceration dynamics in South Africa which form part of the macrosystem of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Within this history, we interweave the perspectives of our participants, because they lived and worked sequentially, with some overlaps, during these periods. Between them, they covered a period of more than four decades within the sector, focusing on rehabilitation of male offenders. The broader context of fatherhood in South Africa is then further discussed, but first we explain the theoretical framework and methodology in more detail.

## Theoretical approach

Because the focus here is on the perspectives of care professionals on how incarcerated fathers and their families adapt within dynamic community settings, Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development with its focus on the family within a wider ecology (environment) will be used as an anchor point for the study. The theory has been developed over a number of decades (1970–2005) highlighting different aspects, but in essence individuals within the family circle are studied by taking the mutual influences they have on each other into consideration, whilst also focusing on the broader communities or environment (Rosa and Tudge 2013, 243). During the 1980s, Bronfenbrenner (1986) made this broader approach clear when he incorporated external systems in analysing the family, as opposed to mainly focusing on intrafamilial dynamics.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) analyses the broader environment of human development by firstly looking at *mesosystem models*, where actions or events within families have reciprocal influences in other settings in which family members operate (e.g. school). Secondly, settings in which the individual does not engage with directly, but where other family members spend time, are also of importance. For example, if the focus is on the child, the parents' work environment (or incarcerated environment as is the case in this research) has an indirect influence on the child. The latter is referred to as *exosystem*

*models*, as it is external to the individual. The third consideration is *chronosystem models*, where the chronological individual life events and larger environmental changes are taken into account. This part of the theory is closely related to the life course approach of Glen Elder (1999), where larger historical events are taken into account when undertaking an analysis of individual lives. All of these interactions occur in a larger environment, called the *macrosystem*. In our study, this macrosystem relates to the past and current violent communities of the Western Cape, which offers few opportunities for people.

None of these systems were directly observed in this study, but during the discussions with the care professionals, the interplay between the different models were highlighted with a focus on the physical incarceration milieu (exosystem), the path of incarceration for the individual and the family (mesosystem) and to some extent the changes over time with children's chronological age (chronosystem).

## Methodology

As stated, there is little research on incarcerated fathers in South Africa, which leads to this exploratory research where a qualitative research approach was employed. The second author has a vast network of care professionals from where participants were recruited. We thus made use of purposive sampling of care professionals based on their known work experience in dealing with the general well-being of incarcerated men. We expected to interview approximately ten research participants, but the first three participants had overwhelmingly rich in-depth information and experiences, which compelled us to pause and analyse this material on its own.

Because the second author knew the participants, the first author invited the participants to take part in the research via email and provided them with the necessary information about the research and informed consent letters. The first author also conducted the interviews to create a more neutral research environment, although research of this nature, which seeks deeper understanding, cannot be unbiased and no research is truly neutral if seen from an interpretivist paradigm, which we subscribe to. However, the outsider perspective embodied by the first author was seen as more conducive because participants would explain issues in far more detail than if they had spoken to the second author, whom they would have assumed to know much of the information already (Rabe 2003; Xu 2016). Individual semi-structured interviews were held online due to the lockdown regulations associated with COVID-19 in 2021. All interviews lasted approximately 60 min each. Two of the interviews were held in Afrikaans and one in English, with some Afrikaans expressions kept when deemed necessary.

The participants all gave informed voluntary consent to take part and were willing to share a lot of information and even their real identities. However, we received ethical clearance from University of the Western Cape for this research and we are compelled and committed not to divulge any identifying information about specific correctional centres, any incarcerated people or other specific elements as anonymity is pledged to our participants as well as others, even though they are not directly involved in this study. As none of the participants are currently employed within the correctional sector, there were no gatekeepers from whom we had to obtain additional ethical clearance.

We interviewed one man and two women using the pseudonyms James, Arlene and Liesl. James started working as a warder early on in his life and later in his career

became involved in training related to rehabilitation and he provided invaluable close-up insight into the inner workings of incarceration. Liesl entered the correctional sector as a social worker in the 1990s wanting to “make a difference in people’s lives” and Arlene joined approximately a decade after Liesl. Both female participants worked at various correctional centres in different capacities. Their careers within this sector were dedicated to rehabilitation and support, which included reaching out to families of incarcerated men. Liesl worked initially on court reports for people awaiting trial, but she explains how social workers were replaced with correctional officers with some behavioural science training. During the last few years of Liesl’s career she played a managerial role within the social work services. She believes one has “to walk a path with a client and his family” and her experience of the increasing emphasis on quantity instead of quality contributed to her early retirement. Arlene experienced the working conditions as difficult at first, but she persevered and when looking back, she regards this as an important period of growth in her life. All three participants could identify specific cases and projects that stood out for them as highlights of their careers. We provide minimal additional information about the research participants to protect their real identities.

We used “member checking” of the transcripts by emailing it to the participants and revisions were required for one interview due to software issues. Thematic analysis of the transcripts included open, axial and selective coding (Neuman 2014: 480–485). The authors also had a number of reflective discussions as the process unfolded. These conversations were important soundboards between the second author, who dedicated much of her career to the rehabilitation of men who have committed serious offences, and the first author, who comes from a different discipline without any clinical experience.

### **South Africa’s violent contexts: living with the past**

As stated, incarcerated individuals’ links with their family are increasingly investigated, as it is argued that continuous links with family members have great potential in reducing recidivism. A growing body of research focusing on incarcerated fathers emerged, usually with the aim of integrating formerly incarcerated men back into their families, but also their communities. This approach is based on the belief that certain bonds, such as father–child relationships, are beneficial to children, fathers and overall family relationships (Hayes et al. 2018; Prinsloo 2007). Such research thus assumes that family and community bonds are beneficial for individual family members. However, in certain South African communities and families, as in many other contexts, the picture is far more complicated, because it is influenced by a violent past which is difficult to change. In theoretical terms these aspects inform the macrosystem.

The work experiences of our research participants started in 1977 when the oldest participant, James, became a trainee warder. He describes the six-month training that he received in the midst of the apartheid struggle as “very difficult”, “hard” and “military in nature”. He also recalls personal experiences of humiliation as he as a person of colour<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Although the term “person of colour” is more readily associated with the USA, it is used here to avoid the term “Coloured” that is still used as one of the racial categories (together with African/black, Indian/Asian and white) in official South African documentation to gauge redress within these racial apartheid categories. This research was undertaken in the Western Cape where large groupings of so-called Coloured people live and where some people self-identify as Coloured. Yet, many people also reject this term due to its political connotations and a grand narrative of

was not treated as an equal by the white warders. Examples include official systems, such as unequal pay based on race, and unofficial practices, which included derogatory statements he had to endure. These harsh treatments of warders of colour were indicative of a general environment where “there were no human rights in prison” (James). Such discriminatory treatment was even more discernible with prisoners, as segregation according to race was also practiced when imprisoned (Muthaphuli 2015, 133).

The Western Cape, the context of this research, has been notorious for its gang violence for decades. It is often shown how this violence spilled over from the harsh apartheid era. This violence was fuelled by forced removals of people of colour during the second half of the twentieth century. The violence continued to fester and grow in post-apartheid South Africa where it became entrenched in many communities (Hendricks 2020; Lindegaard and Gear 2014; Stuurman 2020). James helps us to understand these historical links within incarcerated environments (which forms the macrosystem) when he recalls how inmates were treated when he was still a young warder. He explains how they pushed bowls of food through door hatches, the number of bowls determined by the number of shoes from the inmates lined up outside of cells. He mentions by name some of the notorious gang leaders in the Western Cape, who were young men when entering the prison system for the first time and how they were treated as less than human, exacerbating the violent lives they became accustomed to.

Lindegaard and Gear (2014) argue that gangs can provide protection (especially against random acts of violence) or pose a threat to the individual. Violence is linked with expressions of masculinity and status and the ability to use violence is an important survival skill. Inmates have to find their way within such a harsh and dangerous environment and hence loyalty towards the gang is strengthened—illustrating a particular meso-system as identified by Bronfenbrenner. In some cases, the gangs even replace families (Petrus and Kinnes 2019; Van Wyk and Theron 2005). Similarly, Arlene argues that a gang operates as a type of family with strong bonds where “brotherhood” is prioritised above all else.

Such a type of brotherhood is dramatically illustrated by James when he recounted how, during the apartheid years as a young warder, he entered a cell one morning and asked “in a military voice, who sleeps there?” But when he removed the blanket from the person, he discovered that he was decapitated and his heart was removed and presumably eaten by his fellow inmates. The silence from the other inmates who stood in two neat lines, ready for their inspection, not uttering a word, whilst he discovered the body in their presence, demonstrates an alternative code of conduct that is carefully monitored by other gang members. The violent histories of gangs thus lay the groundwork for continued violence.

The links between chronological individual life events and larger environmental changes (*chronosystem models*) may start through young men being targeted by gangs (Geldenhuys 2020, 19f; Stuurman 2020, 51) and reaffirmed by James:

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similarity it evokes for a diverse group of people. Although the concept “person of colour” does not address the diverse experiences and backgrounds at all, it is more neutral in the South African context. This specific participant used the term “brown people” (*bruin mense* in the original Afrikaans interview) when referring to his own racial identity—a common phrase in the Western Cape.

... the main guy in the gang, because remember each of them, the gang members come to report to one guy, so this guy, he recruits for his gang through being a social father, to give that child an identity, to give him a pair of Nikes, to buy him a Gatsby,<sup>2</sup> to get him dependent through substance abuse, and to get him dependent by asking his mother: "Auntie, what do you need?" To come to him and say: "Listen sir, I don't have anything to eat." Then he sends his right-hand man, the guy next to him, and he says to him: "I give you a R100, go and give it to that auntie." Then he goes to the auntie, and he says to the auntie: "I see your child has capabilities. I see your child has a knack for numbers, I will put your child through school and university." What the auntie doesn't know, her child, she is signing him over to the gang.

Due to the high absence of biological fathers, social fatherhood is clearly distinguished from biological fatherhood and the breadwinner role by many South African researchers (Richter and Morrell 2006; Van den Berg and Makusha 2018; Van den Berg, Makusha, and Ratele 2021). Social fatherhood is defined as "a person who takes on the responsibility and role of being a father to a child, but who is not the biological male parent of the child. The status of fatherhood is therefore a social status rather than a biological one, and may be actively sought by and/or ascribed to the person by their family or community" (Van den Berg, Makusha, and Ratele 2021, 8). Although none of the research participants were familiar with this term or this approach to fatherhood studies, it made sense to them when the interviewer explained the term and asked questions about it. Above, in the quotation from James, it was even taken up in his explanations based on observations he made in his career (we analyse this further in the next section). It is also important to note that despite the prominence of gangs in the Western Cape, the incarcerated population consists of various categories of offenders—the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa identifies nine special categories of offenders.

The historical 1994 democratic elections in South Africa lead to a new Constitution and Correctional Services have made major shifts after having been set up separately from the Department of Justice and promulgating the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 (Muthaphuli 2015: 134). Similar to other government departments in South Africa, various policy changes took place after the first democratic election and a White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (Department of Correctional Services 2005) was also published. All these changed policies and legislation documents aimed to create a culture where human dignity is prioritised, with an emphasis on rehabilitation and restorative justice. In the same vein, correctional officers' skills and competencies are heavily relied upon: "These skills and competencies include being a rehabilitator, attending to others, the ability to work with people, multi-functionality and the ability to isolate themselves from corrupt and dishonest practice" (Fourie 2015: 80). Within such a changed environment, James describes his personal journey as a "Damascus" or "Rubicon" moment, especially when he started to work with a particular non-government organisation (NGO). He states that "we are now in a new dispensation where I would like prisoners to learn how to handle their conflict in a constructive manner, without knife stabbing, without weapons".

### **Incarcerated fathers in South Africa**

The research on fatherhood in South Africa is growing at a rapid pace (see Van den Berg and Makusha 2018; Van den Berg, Makusha, and Ratele 2021) and the absence of

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<sup>2</sup>A popular type of street food in Cape Town, which consists of a sandwich with rich fillings.



biological fathers in family households in South Africa is well documented. Only 36% of children under the age of 18 years live with their biological fathers, but an additional 35% of children live with an adult man in the same household who is not their biological father (Budlender in Van den Berg and Makusha 2018: 7). In the latter case, some of these would be fulfilling the role of a social father. Non-residential fatherhood is one of the main factors contributing to household fluidity in South Africa and hence it receives a lot of attention (Van den Berg and Makusha 2018; Van den Berg, Makusha, and Ratele 2021). The high frequency of absent biological fathers is not necessarily due to abandonment; Rabe (2016) and Hall and Posel (2018) highlight various reasons for the absence including the way in which absence is recorded in quantitative research, racial policies of the apartheid era which led to entrenched split family patterns, labour migration, care arrangements, educational opportunities, available housing, undisclosed fatherhood, precarious economic environments, shifting mother–father relationships and the death of the biological father. Although absence due to incarceration is also relevant, it is the least studied area of non-residential fatherhood in South Africa.

When looking at research on incarcerated populations, there is a focus on the male incarcerated population. This can partly be explained by the overall low percentage of female incarceration compared to male incarceration. Globally, women and girls constitute 6.9% of the incarcerated population, and in Africa it is on average 3.4% (Walmsley 2017: 2). According to the 12th edition of the World Prison Population List (Walmsley 2018), the total inmate population in South Africa was approximately 158 111 (97% male), which translates roughly into 280 prisoners per 100 000 population, compared to the estimated global rate of 150 per 100 000 population. Moreover, in 2013 the number of people serving lifetime sentences in South Africa were 11 000 compared to 400 in 1994 (Super 2016, 326). This latter figure may be explained in various ways, but it certainly means that many fathers are incarcerated with limited opportunities to have a relationship with their children.

Given that there is a limited number of studies conducted on incarcerated women in general in Africa, the focus on motherhood amongst incarcerated women is disproportional (see Gobena and Duff Hean 2019; Hesselink and Dastile 2010; Luyt 2008; Namondo Linonge-Fontebo and Rabe 2015) and far outweighs the small number of studies focusing on fatherhood amongst incarcerated men in Africa (Khumalo 2021; Londt, Kock, and John-Langba 2017; Prinsloo 2007). The South African White Paper on Corrections (2005) mentions motherhood 13 times and fatherhood is never mentioned. There seems to be no indication of the number of male prisoners who are fathers in South Africa or the number of children with incarcerated fathers (see also Matshaba 2016: 52), as is also the case elsewhere (Clarke et al. 2005). The challenges of pregnant inmates and dealing with very young children, sometimes born within the confines of correctional facilities, certainly contributed to this specific research focus on motherhood in the case of incarcerated women.

One of the few studies in South Africa on the topic of incarcerated fathers focused on incarcerated fathers who had shown progress towards rehabilitation (Prinsloo 2007: 31). A fatherhood skills project was launched in the latter dominant study where men had to commit to the programme, certain skills and knowledge were imparted during group-work sessions and these were then implemented during visits from family members. The project was deemed successful based on the men's feedback, but it was limited, it



focused on specific categories of inmates and it was not rolled out on a large scale. Approaches such as the above is commonplace in pilot programmes to foster better relations between fathers and their families, but many categories of incarcerated men are implicitly or explicitly excluded and men who are close to being released from prison are favoured to partake in such programmes (see Clarke et al. 2005; Prinsloo 2007). Qualitative research in the Western Cape on a wider range of offenders, conducted by Londt, Kock, and John-Langba (2017), revealed that adolescent children may shy away from having contact with their incarcerated fathers, especially if he is affiliated to one of the notorious gangs and contact with him may place them in danger. Danger could include being recruited into his gang or being a target of revenge by a rival gang. Similarly, Matshaba (2016), in a qualitative study in the Free State Province on children of incarcerated fathers, found mixed reactions amongst the participants. Some longed for his return due to emotional and financial support provided by the father before being incarcerated; others are glad that the father is incarcerated as he is remembered as violent and abusive.

### **Incarceration and family ties**

Clarke et al. (2005: 222) state that:

... it is important to examine what constrains and enables fathering in this institutional context. At a very basic level, we need to understand how imprisoned fathers, if they are motivated, can better keep in contact with their children, show them affection, and display commitment ...

In general, no more than 28% of offenders in South Africa were participating in rehabilitation programmes in 2005 (Muthaphuli 2015: 137). According to Matshaba (2016), low self-esteem, violence and severe overcrowding in South African prisons contribute to low participation in rehabilitation programmes. In addition, many incarcerated men return to violent communities with high unemployment rates upon release, conditions that had most likely contributed to their initial incarceration. To reiterate our theoretical approach in this regard, human development and relationships occur within a specific social context.

Both the interviewed social workers saw family ties with fathers as an integral part of their work. Liesl explained how fathers starting their sentences are treated in a thorough manner:

We do the assessment, and if the father should mention to you that he has problems, that he does not see his child, or something to that effect, then we try to contact the mother ... and we ask: "Don't you want to bring the children to visit the father?"

Liesel explains further that if the mother then does not bring the children to see the father, or they cannot get hold of the mother, a complicated process, which is seemingly partly based on goodwill and partly on available time, is set in motion. This process involves ties with colleagues or correctional officers at other offices being involved to determine the reasons for the family's absence by visiting the family home. Two broad categories are identified for not visiting the father: firstly, a lack of finances to travel to the specific correctional services centre, especially in cases where the family lives far

away (also noted in the USA, for example—Welch et al. 2019), or secondly, not wanting to have contact with the father. In the former case, alternative ways of communication such as the children writing letters to the incarcerated fathers are suggested. In some cases, communication channels between the father and mother are encouraged if the mother is willing.

Arlene provides a close-up picture to this initial process of adapting to the incarceration from the perspective of an incarcerated man:

The support system within a prison is very important, it becomes really lonely, especially if you're a first-time offender and you don't know prison. He comes in feeling lonely and it is a very cold place. So, when you have that support where a mother or your wife visits you at least three times a month, it makes a big difference. And you know some of them would say that it helps them to go through their prison sentence much quicker.

Arlene also expressed empathy for the family of the incarcerated father, especially when dealing with repeat offenders:

When I interviewed the moms and kids, it is a very emotional time for them, because some of the fathers were in prison long-term, 25 years, and it was just the start of their sentences. And then you also have the mothers that just gave up, because he was a habitual criminal and he was reoffending, and they couldn't go through that anymore. And then you get those moms that just lost everything. When the father went to prison, they basically lost their home, they lost sources of income, and they had to move in with the in-laws or the extended family and that is sad to hear.

The importance of the breadwinner role to be taken up by fathers, is well established in South Africa (Rabe 2016) as well as other countries in the Global South, such as Mexico (Sandberg, Agoff, and Fondevila 2022), and should not be underestimated when considering family dynamics. When a father is incarcerated, it includes income loss for the family if the father earned an income prior to incarceration (see Matshaba 2016: 53f) which invariably will also play a role during the parole and release phase. And, as indicated by Arlene, changed family structures may also result if the couple cohabitated prior to the man's incarceration. Although nuclear family households make up only 41.5% of households in South Africa, it is the more dominant form in the Western Cape (50.4%) with extended family households second (26.6%) in this province (Statistics South Africa 2022: 9). Arlene reflects further:

The prisoner has remorse to a certain extent, but he has no idea what his family actually experiences when he goes to prison, and what he leaves behind—the scars and the trauma that he leaves behind.

The role of the family, and specifically mothers as gatekeepers, is thus a crucial element from the start of the incarceration process. Arlene explains how some mothers try to cope with the father being incarcerated:

With one of the kids, when the father was incarcerated, the mother would tell the child that he is on holiday. So, if it comes to visitations, he would think that his father is in on holiday. But obviously the older they get, the more they understand that he is in a prison. And then, also, the older they are, they do understand, because when they are among their peers and the labelling and those names that they eventually are called by their friends, it scars their self-image, it just creates a low, low self-esteem within the kids ... There are some kids that reject their fathers because they are in prison, but mostly because of, what I experienced,

because they are angry, because “you left me”. And I think also the stigma of prison, and how they label prison and how they see prison, it is a place for dangerous criminals.

We can see from Arlene’s comments that the lives of the children are severely disrupted in many ways and mothers may try to shield the children from the negative effects of having an incarcerated father. Yet, as children grow older, they cannot be shielded from the truth and the ways in which community members react to incarcerated men. The chronosystem is thus of importance here as children become increasingly aware of their father’s status within the wider community as they grow older; in other words, the intersection between the social environment and chronological age is exemplified by Arlene’s comments.

Just as some families experience intense trauma, some of the incarcerated men also have to deal with their own trauma. James, for example, used to play popular music to incarcerated men over weekends. In some cases, the type of music they may have heard as children, some of them would say to him:

Mr James, please man, please mister, man, because, because what he hears, takes him back to that time when his father, his biological father hit him with a pipe, hmm? Hit him with a spanner. When he fled from his father by lying on the rooftop of the house.

Evidence suggest that the children of delinquent parents are more likely to become offenders themselves, although the various factors involved in such intergenerational patterns form complicated trajectories (Bijleveld and Wijkman 2009; Troy et al. 2018). Poor parenting, especially by fathers, is often associated with male children becoming delinquent, but more longitudinal research is required in South Africa in this regard.

Because James worked with dangerous criminals for a number of years, many of his comments relate back to such cases and how this impacted on father–child relationships:

What is their chance of success? If I am the offspring of Gang Leader A [notorious gang leader who fathered many children] who later became Anonymous A [mentions his nickname which indicates his reign of terror]. The gang leader of this gang whose legacy at its core, is that I am holding the tail of Satan—it’s evil. So the moment a young future gang leader enters prison, today in 2021, if any of these township children come to prison today ... then he comes to prison from a street gang, he emanates from street gangs into a prison number gang and you see the tattoos on him says mum and dad, and I ask him: “Who is your mum?” and he says: “the mum stands for men-use-men and dad stands for day-after-day.”

Here James is referring to the close ties between gang members inside and outside of correctional centres and the operations of the notorious numbers gangs (see Petrus and Kinnes 2019: 180; Van Wyk and Theron 2005). It should be noted that another complexity with the gang ecosystem is that some prison gangs formed under the moniker of “The number” whose origins are located in the colonial control era of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. These number gangs in prisons engage in robust recruitment of new inmates in order to strengthen their credo and growth in prison (Shaw 2021). Therefore, the adaptation of the incarcerated father is intrinsically influenced by the progression of the prison gang.

In a 2021 national survey conducted with 1003 male respondents with access to the Internet, it was found that 83% of respondents agreed that “A man can be a good father even if he does not live with his child/children”, but only 43% agreed that “A man who is in prison can be a good father” (Van den Berg, Makusha, and Ratele 2021: 98). James was asked more specifically whether children should have contact with their

biological fathers if these fathers are such dangerous criminals; he considered this question from different angles:

That is a very complex question, ... it is very important to me, that he knows who his biological father is, he must know and he must have contact with that biological father, because, if fathers, if dads are in prison ... awaiting trial or sentenced, I want to reintegrate them with their core families. Who are their families? If that biological father is not there, then I, and we as wardens, men, we have to stand in for that father.

Such complexities with having contact with certain biological incarcerated fathers are influenced by various gatekeepers. As mentioned, the mother does play a gatekeeper role, but some of the complexities of this gatekeeping within the larger context are described by Liesl:

Some of the fathers are incarcerated for sexual crimes where the daughter or the stepdaughter was the victim, and the father is now at the point of getting out on parole. The mother visited him regularly, but the victim did not want contact with him, and then the mother signs that he can come out and then it is as if a bomb explodes. The child is 16/17 years old and they don't want the father at home, but the mother does. Then the little victim or the aunt contact Correctional Services to say: "How can we now allow the father to come out?" Then the mother says she needs the money as he is the breadwinner.

Again, the importance of economic aspects associated with fathers are highlighted. James also mentions the importance of being a breadwinner, but by underscoring the pressure on men to be a breadwinner:

Because the community will come and say: "We wait for you, we wait for you." He is just six months out of jail, then the community says to you: "You have to go and work, you stuff your face, you lie here in the house." Hmm? So, it is unrealistic to say: "We wait for you, we wait for you, we will have a party".

In some cases, the communities and families are facilitators of criminal behaviour, because formerly incarcerated men often cannot find gainful employment but there is pressure on them to find an income and hence they resort to crime. The links between individuals, their families and the broader communities are further explained by Liesel:

We believe that social responsibility is the contact with the family, which I think is of crucial importance, not only with his direct family, but also the extended family and the community. The community should receive him with open arms, and should give him work ... as well as support. I think what is important for me, is that they must receive him, but they should not support his undesirable habits. They must set boundaries for him and say: "Look here, if you come back and you come into this house—let us say he used to drink and his gangster friends would hang out with him in the house or whatever—it is not going to work like that." If he comes back to an area where he was a big gangster leader for example, then they should rather say: "Look here, we have family in a smaller town, let us rather make arrangements that you go and live there." They must come to such an agreement so that he can be supported like that.

This reimagined way of engaging with families and communities were questioned by the interviewer: "That is part of the ideal, but what is the reality?"

No, in reality it doesn't happen. I tried it many times and tried to speak to the family, but it doesn't work like that. The family tends to take him as he comes out, to fall in with his rules as he wants it.

Liesl also mentioned a case of corrective supervision during parole where the family lies to protect the father to say he is in the bathroom, when he has in fact left the house without permission. She explains that the family members may be fearful of the father, as they know what will happen if he returns and they did not lie as instructed by him. What we see is that the synergy between the patriarchal nature of many families, partly due to the father's economic role in the family, and the community where he may also be well-known and equally feared.

Such reciprocal engagements between families and their environments, which are captured by the term mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's work, are implicitly understood by Liesl when she tried to convince families to send returning incarcerated individuals to other communities, to try and avoid the old engagements and practices. Yet, she encountered little success with such attempts. James is also concerned with these interconnections between individuals, families and communities, but he focuses specifically on the causes of violence and also draws in the wider South Africa society when responding to a question on the tenacity required to change dangerous men:

It is a job of perseverance, because we will make life easier for you and me if we work hard. We have to work hard, because we contributed to get him where he is now, he kills, he robs, he steals, he murders people, on a farm he burns an auntie, he burns an old auntie with an iron. How did he get to be like this? How, how did a person become this? What is my contribution to it?

Where James places the responsibility of the criminal behaviour we witness in the country at the door of the community and wider society (the macrosystem), Arlene reminds us of individual agency when asked why some incarcerated men do not take up some of the opportunities they are given (which includes a range of programmes they can enrol for whilst in correctional centres): "Ag it is just laziness, it is complacency, it's really, you know, that they just don't feel like educating themselves in any way." The chronosystem is thus of relevance here as the interchanges between the individual lives and the wider systems are feeding into each other. Arlene further explains that gang members may find it difficult to fully take part in the opportunities within correctional centres as gang members are strategically placed within the programmes to keep other members in check. The links between the communities inside and outside of correctional centres can thus both be beneficial and detrimental for rehabilitation, depending on the nature of the communities.

## Conclusion

The aim of the research was to see how the care professionals perceive the relationships between incarcerated fathers and their families. The participants all described it as crucial for the incarcerated fathers, but they consider carefully whether the relationship is also beneficial to the other family members. The mother's role has been described as prominent in the father-child relationships, but all family relationships can easily be directed by economic pressures, elevating the incoming earning capabilities of fathers (see also Sandberg, Agoff, and Fondevila 2022).

The pictures portrayed by the research participants above include empathy for the incarcerated individual, an understanding of the restrictions under which the families of incarcerated men live as well as a keen awareness of how the larger community and

society can undermine or contribute to individual rehabilitation. Bronfenbrenner's theory is of use here because the macrosystem, steeped in the violent past, breeds the conditions for gangs and other forms of crime. Moreover, these exosystems—for example, gang membership and life within a correctional centre—have a profound impact on the families of the incarcerated fathers. Given the complexity and wide range of crimes for which men are incarcerated, there can never be a blanket approach to incarcerated fathers. Extreme examples such as men who are incarcerated for gender-based violence or domestic violence (although the conviction rate is low for these crimes) should be carefully considered before contact with family members are encouraged. In the Western Cape, there is also a danger of being overwhelmed by the presence of the gangs, but we have seen a sensitivity for the different categories of offenders by the participants.

Incarcerated communities are so closely linked with the communities and families from where the incarcerated men originate and return to (the macrosystem), that preventing recidivism cannot focus on individual men only. Care professionals require instrumental support on a wider scale by focusing on the links between the macro-, meso-, exo- and chronosystem models if we want to realise the high ideals of rehabilitation and restorative justice. It is our hope that further in-depth research can analyse these elements more closely. Professional caregivers are trying to address aspects that are in fact much larger problems in the macrosystem, which has ripple effects on the chronosystems. It is impossible for care professionals to address these ripple effects effectively if the macrosystem is dysfunctional.

Engagements with the families of incarcerated men during different phases of the process were described as routine by the participants. However, it is clearly time-consuming, and Liesl describes how jobs were cut over time. For her, the system became a “wors-masjien” (literally a sausage maker); in other words, similar to an assembly line with little time to focus on the individual cases in enough depth. The research participants showed high levels of commitments to their former work, but fatigue caught up with some of them and contributed to an early departure from this type of work by at least one participant. The participants shared how their work impacted on their personal relationships, especially reflecting on the importance of such relationships for them. They also highlighted successful cases of rehabilitation, which provided them with intense job satisfaction. In the lives of the care professionals, another set of chronosystems are thus operating which may lead to experienced care professionals leaving correctional centres.

Clearly, this article has multiple limitations, in particular a small sample of care professionals who have all left correctional centres in the past few years, albeit for different reasons. Yet, it is our hope that these contributions from the research participants, who all had many years of experience in this environment, can be taken up in future multidisciplinary research teams.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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