

## **The effects of biological fathers' incarceration on adolescent children and the challenges of absentee biological fathers**

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### **Abstract**

In western cultures, invested in a discourse of heteronormativity, biological fathers are the 'breadwinners' of families, and mothers, the 'caregivers'. In societies with this dominant discourse, the traditional family structures discourage fathers from being involved parents. However, criminological and psychological fields acknowledge that incarcerating biological fathers distresses families, especially children. Research on incarcerated fathers consistently demonstrates the harmful effects of incarceration on children across many developmental outcomes. This paper explores the damage of paternal incarceration and its effect on adolescent children. Attachment Theory is the primary theoretical framework applied, with a qualitative research approach, and a purposive sampling method. Fourteen biological fathers, incarcerated for various offences, were interviewed in Cape Town, South Africa. In addition, five of the incarcerated fathers' adolescent children participated in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with the fathers and focus groups undertaken with the adolescents. The findings indicated intersections with adolescent deviant behaviours, parental incarceration, and the absence of paternal parenting roles/responsibilities. Additionally, the fathers struggled to maintain their role as 'fathers', after incarceration, as they were excluded from family decision-making, and their children's development. The adolescent children were also emotionally affected by the stigma of an imprisoned father. They experienced feelings of abandonment and yearned for the father-child relationship during adolescence. In addition, the incarcerated fathers faced challenges with the demands of survival in prison, and elected to adopt a 'criminal mind-set', to blend in. Penitentiary conditions, and 'criminal' activities, often superseded any family obligations, where support, contributions, or participation in decision-making was required. Ultimately, the importance of joint decision-making, caregiving and parenting, for the children's optimum development, was revealed, with suggestions for interventions. Incarceration of biological fathers has specific consequences for the whole family, especially adolescent children. The social patterning of repression, negatively affects the incarcerated and their families, who are mere bystanders.

### **Introduction**

Warner (1993: xxii) asserts that "heteronormativity" refers to the process by which heterosexuality presents itself as "society". The heteronormative, nuclear family has always

been protected by society, social workers and policies. However, Blau and Abramovitz, (2007: 166) alert that the ‘traditional’ family construction, favoured for a long time by social workers as the dominant one, is problematic, and often an area of interest for many social scientists. Several studies reveal that parenting, globally and nationally cannot be viewed in isolation of its intersectionality with the economic, political, educational and overall well-being of its nation (Richter, Chikovore & Makusha, 2010): 360-365; Meintjies & Hall, 2013: np).

Demonstrating the changing structure of the nuclear family unit, a study conducted by Meintjies and Hall (2013: np) revealed that many children in South Africa do not reside in the most “common” family type, as 64 percent of South African children live in an extended family environment and only 33 percent in nuclear families. Statistics South Africa (2012) presented data, which indicated that a large percentage of black and coloured children lived in poverty, and in an extended family environment, rather than with their biological parents. However, in traditional African, and other families, the father still constitutes the authority figure, and consequently, shoulders the major responsibilities for the members of his family (Nosseir, 2003: 5; Nsamenang, 1987: 273).

There is a significant need to explore and describe the various nuances pertaining to fatherhood, specifically in South Africa, because of the paucity of research. The majority of offenders incarcerated in South African prisons are in fact males, implying that the notion of absent fathers may be of concern. At the end of 2016, South Africa’s inmate population stood at 157 013 people, according to the World Prison Brief Report (2016). Admittedly, this total number includes males and females.

Anderson, Monde and Tawanda (2014: 47-55) assert that the issue of fatherhood in South Africa is complex, and dilemmas, such as absent fathers, and those who reside with their children, as well as the reality of the social constructions of fatherhood, warrant much more debate and attention. Many researchers agree that a father’s primary role incorporates the emotional, psychological and behavioural aspects of a relationship between an adult male and a child (McKeown, Makeig, Brown, Jung, Kinderman, Bell & Sejnowski, 1998: 5; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004: 161; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005: 249). Lamb (1987: 111) developed a three-part definition, which enables researchers to measure the behavioural aspect of a father’s role. According to this author, ‘engagement’ refers to the father’s direct contact with the child, through caretaking, playing, or any other shared activity. *Accessibility* refers to a father’s availability for engagement, for example, being around in close proximity, without interacting directly with the child. Ultimately, according to this theory, or body of work, *responsibility* refers to the choices, decisions and actions of a father, concerning the best interest of the child. Marsiglio, Amato, Day and Lamb (2000: 296) concur that being an *involved* father implies being actively involved in nearly every aspect of the child’s life, from direct interaction (play) and responsibility for childcare, to being accessible to the child.

Wildeman and Western (2010: 158), however, caution that, globally, many men in conflict with the criminal justice system also struggle with chronic unemployment, untreated addiction, poor health, and mental illness. This implies that they are unable to fulfil their traditional responsibilities and, therefore, become absent fathers even before incarceration. The absence of a father is associated with adverse consequences for children, women and families, as well as for the men (Richter, Desmond, Hosegood, Madhavan, Makiwane, Makusha, Morrell & Swartz, 2012: 2). When the attachment, or bond, between a child and parent is interrupted, it presents negative consequences for the child, during later development. By applying Attachment Theory, one of the child development theories (Bowlby, 1969; Petras, Derozotes & Wills, 1999), this paper explores the effects of the incarceration of biological fathers on their adolescent children, as well as whether imprisoned biological fathers view their roles differently, because of the incarceration.

South African society is characterised by a history of children not residing with their biological parents, because of multiple factors, such as poverty, migration, educational opportunities, incarceration or cultural practices, and many children are exposed to a series of different caregivers, or are reared without fathers (Roman, Human & Hiss, 2012). Attachment Theory, concerned with the fundamental issues of safety, protection and emotional security that the child derives from the parental relationship, was an appropriate lens to study absentee fathers and the effects on their children (Brooks, 2011: 53). This theory states that a child develops into a healthy, functioning adult in the context of a continuous relationship with, and an emotional attachment to, a parent figure; therefore, achieving and maintaining proximity to that parent figure provides the child with a feeling of safety (Petras, Derozotes & Wills, 1999). According to Grossman and Grossman (2007: 1), attachment serves to ensure protection and care; and secure attachment relieves distress, restores physiological homeostasis and encourages exploration. Feeling secure is the basis for becoming emotionally, socially and cognitively acculturated. This term 'attachment' is used to describe the parent-child relationship and refers to "an enduring affectional tie that unites one person to another over time and across space" (Brooks, 2011: 53)

Grossman and Grossman (2007: 2) claim that Attachment Theory suggests a causal relationship between individuals' experiences with their parents, or attachment figures, and their capacity to form close bonds later in life. Young and Smith (2000: 130) assert that children could adjust to a parent being in prison by maintaining regular contact with the incarcerated parent. However, institutional, attitudinal and practical barriers make this difficult to maintain.

Researchers agree that, when fathers are separated from their children through incarceration, the outcomes are generally negative. However, the reality may reflect a different aspect, namely, whether the biological father lived with his children, prior to his incarceration, or whether he was simply the biological father with his own constructions of fatherhood. In the USA, according to Mumola (2000), nearly 3.6 million parents are under some form of correctional supervision, including parole. In addition, almost 1.1 million of these parents are incarcerated in federal, state, or local jails, and have an

estimated 2.3 million children (Mumola, 2000: 2-3). According to Richter et al (2012: 2), however, South Africa has the highest rate of absentee fathers in the world.

As illustrated in the literature, it can be concluded that incarceration leads to the loss of relationships, the disconnection of strong family ties and the breaking of bonds, which may take years to restore, or may even be permanently lost (Richter et al 2012: 2). Incarceration discourages marriage and family formation, both directly, by making it more difficult for fathers to live with their spouses and children after release, and indirectly, by reducing fathers' employment prospects and earning capacity (Hobson, 2002: 6). Wildeman and Western (2010: 158) state that incarceration elevates the risk of divorce and separation, diminishes the financial resources and well-being of wives, or girlfriends, left behind, and is linked to increases in children's aggression, behavioural problems and social marginalisation. Belsky (1984: 83) concurs that incarcerated fathers worry about their children, and still want to be good parents, even from prison; however, trying to account for the actual parenting behaviour is somewhat restricted by prison constraints. A significant theme in a study conducted by Looney (2001) is the prevalence of emotional distress symptoms, such as helplessness, frustration and guilt, because of the restrictions on prisoner's relationships, as fathers.

It could be concluded, however, through literature, that all men have a "paternal identity", and their actions are strongly constructed in a much more gendered way (Marsiglio, 1995: 78). This paper also raises the questions of whether these incarcerated fathers viewed their roles as fathers differently after incarceration, and whether their perceptions influenced their relationships with their children.

### **Research methodology**

This study attempted to answer the research question, 'What are the effects of incarceration on the adolescent children of biological fathers, who are incarcerated?' A qualitative research design was used to explore the experiences of incarcerated biological fathers, who were purposively selected to participate in this study, by utilising the administrative database of the correctional facility, with guidance from staff at the reception. These particular participants were selected, as they shared certain similarities and experiences that were relative to the research study. All the biological fathers were incarcerated at the time of the study.

Initially, the study sample consisted of 20 subjects; however, due to the inclusion criteria, the sample was reduced to 14. The study was conducted in 2014/5 at correctional facilities in the Western Cape West Coast region. In addition to the 14 biological fathers, five adolescents were also selected to participate in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with the incarcerated fathers, using a semi-structured interview guide. Focus group discussions were conducted with the adolescents.

## **Characteristics of the participants**

When the population criteria were outlined, the criterion of whether the incarcerated participants were the natural fathers to their offspring was considered and, therefore, any other aspects of the participants, which did not appear significant to the purpose of this study, were disregarded. The socio-economic characteristics of the population consisted of 14 incarcerated fathers, between the ages of 30 and 50 years, who were either Coloured or African. No Caucasian participants displayed any interest in participating in the study, although they were included in the initial sample of 20. Seven of the incarcerated participants were married and seven were in co-habiting relationships with their female partners.

The adolescents, four male and one female, all approximately 16-years-old, were approached and recruited during their visitations with their fathers and invited to participate in focus groups that were held in a safe and private place in the community where they were currently residing. The adolescents, who participated in the study, all confirmed that they had somewhat of a relationship with their fathers.

## **Data collection approach**

The study was approved by the Senate Ethics and Research Committee of the University of the Western Cape, while written informed consent was obtained from all the participants for their involvement in the study. The researchers adhered to all the relevant ethical considerations. Privacy, anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw, without prejudice, was practised throughout this study.

The researchers collected data through in-depth, face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. A semi-structured interviewing method was conducted with the 14 incarcerated fathers. Five adolescents (4 males and 1 female) participated in the focus group discussions that were conducted by a qualified social worker.

## **Limitations of the study**

The researchers encountered a delay in gaining approval for the research study to be conducted at the selected Department of Correctional Services correctional facility in the West Coast Region of the Western Cape. In addition, a sample of 20 participants was initially chosen for this research study, but due to inclusion criteria, and some participants withdrawing, the sample was reduced to only 14 participants.

## **Results and discussion**

The main findings of this study revealed that the incarcerated fathers had trouble maintaining their role as fathers, prior to, and after, incarceration. In addition, they were concerned about the financial adversity their families had been subjected to, when they were incarcerated, and that their spouses/partners had been forced into single parenthood and were lonely and humiliated as a result of their incarceration. The incarcerated fathers also felt excluded from all decision-making processes, which isolated them from the development of their children. Their responses indicated that they struggled with being

absent in the lives of their children. The majority of the participants regretted being isolated from all decision-making processes, everyday tasks, activities and extra mural activities of their children. They also admitted that, even as present fathers in the home, they were still absent. Two of the participants acknowledged that their own self-absorbed habits caused detachment from their families, even before their incarceration. It was alluded in the findings to the possibility that, prior to their incarceration, these fathers had attachment issues that were exacerbated by the incarceration.

Accessibility is a critical component of a father's involvement, as it enables many of the interactions that may enhance, or undermine, family relationships and child well-being (Geller, 2013: 6). This deficit underscored the tenets of Attachment Theory that refer to the bond as "an enduring affectional tie..." (Brooks, 2011: 53).

Regarding the children of these men, the separation affected them psychologically, when they were exposed to the stigma attached to having an incarcerated father. Arditti (2012: 181) cautions that more than enough research on attachment and loss confirm that the incarceration of a parent provides a context for adolescent trauma. Arditti (2012: 184) argues that this trauma is shaped by the pre-incarceration interaction with the parent, the quality of care during the incarceration, as well as the prison visitation and 'secondary' visitation that is transferred to the non-imprisoned family members, in the case of this study, the adolescents. The following aspects emerged from the data of this study and were addressed against two aspects, the experiences of the incarcerated father, and the consequences of the incarceration on the adolescents who participated in this study.

### **Dilemma of the absent father**

Among the findings it was also alluded to the possibility that these fathers had attachment issues prior to their incarceration, which issues were exacerbated by the incarceration. However, it is unclear whether this may have been a direct consequence of the incarceration. The absence of their own fathers while growing up, their own non-participative behaviour as fathers, their constant re-offending, the loss of relationships and a lack of masculine identity, were identified as causal factors that led to the incarcerated fathers becoming absent fathers. Most found it difficult to execute their role as a father as they lacked the natural ability of being a competent father. Some of them did not understand the characteristics, roles, qualities and abilities of being a responsible father. Only 1 felt somewhat competent as a father. However, the absence of a father figure in their childhood is not a direct consequence of their incarceration, but could be considered as a factor in their own parenting style, or construction of fatherhood. Madhavan, Townsend and Garey (2008: 647) caution against the tendency of assuming that the absence of a father implies an automatic loss of the parent-child relationship. Richter et al (2010): 360-365) assert that father absence in the home is linked to higher levels of mortality, male labour migration and children born out of casual relationships, particularly in the South African context.

School dropouts, low academic performance, lack of parental control, rebellion, wrong influences and peer pressure were just some of the social problems highlighted as concerns by

the incarcerated participants. Parental factors are one such distal factor that can be considered to predispose adolescents towards at-risk substance use behaviour (Henry, 2010: 2). Parents, as primary caregivers, exert the original, and perhaps the most significant, influence on the development of the child's present and future emotional health state (Leslie, 1988, as cited in Pretorius, 2000: 1; Vuza, 2017). Clearly, the presence of a father was important to the adolescents, as every personal success that could not be shared with their fathers, led to disappointment and regret for the adolescents. Some of the comments made by the adolescent participants are provided as follows:

*“It is sad for me, because at school, children talk about their fathers and I can't speak about my father, but I know when he is released we will spend that time together. “I was in Primary school in my last year, it was prize giving and it was bad for me. I was the head girl and I always wanted my father to see it. He was not there for me and it touched me” (Adolescent Participant 5).*

*“I want a relationship with my father, play soccer with him on the field; I can't anymore, now I must sit at home and look after my sisters” (Adolescent Participant 3).*

*“It was not easy with my father not being here. I dropped out of school, could not focus at school, no one cared and” (Adolescent Participant 2).*

However, the incarcerated fathers viewed the consequence of their physical absence as having little control, or discipline over their children. The following accounts that, refer to the absence of the father, were given by the incarcerated participants:

*“The children are out of order, their mother cannot control them, my son is a bright child, but he failed twice and poor in school, he is improving now. The absence makes it difficult to give input into their lives, periods of development lost and time lost” (Incarcerated Participant 6).*

*“My daughters do what they want, there is no supervision, no one to guide them. I just hear that they struggle and hear of the lack/negative performance and unable to do anything” (Incarcerated Participant 13).*

*“I asked the parole board to at least think of my kid's future because their school work is suffering. My wife cannot help them with their school work, she is a factory worker” (Incarcerated Participant 14).*

The findings indicate that fathers play a vital role in the family. The absence of a father in the family during childhood reportedly affects the developmental stages of a child's life. This confirms that, when the attachment is interrupted between the parent and the child, negative consequences ensue for both parties. This is also consistent with the findings of a research study conducted by Allen and Daly (2007: 8-12), which revealed that the impact of father involvement is evident in the way a child progresses as an infant, toddler and school-aged child, eventually becoming better adults and life achievers. Solomon and

Zweig (2006: np) strongly suggest that forced separation can disrupt parent-child bonds, harming children's social and emotional well-being. The separation, due to parental incarceration, may be more detrimental than divorce.

### **Criminogenic factors, incarceration effects and recidivism**

According to Camp and Gaes (2004: np), criminologists and correctional practitioners have long debated whether prisons are criminogenic, rehabilitative, or whether they simply encourage criminal behaviour, and should be regarded as criminogenic spaces. The findings revealed that 2 of the participants indicated continuous re-offending and criminal involvement, which caused them to neglect their roles and responsibilities as fathers. Re-offending led to a cycle of constant incarceration or an increase in their existing sentence. Their words reflect as much in the following quotations:

*"I was involved in hectic crime involvement"* (Incarcerated Participant 3).

*"I was mixed up in continuous re-offending and crime involvement"* (Incarcerated Participant 13).

Five of the incarcerated participants admitted to gang involvement, for survival, and although they acknowledged no attachment to gangsterism, they remained part of the gang.

*"I am part of the 26 gang, not active anymore"* (Incarcerated Participant 1).

*"With gangsterism in prison, you must survive to all those things, the different behaviours, cultures and different types of people. The survival in prison and benefit, I am part of the 26 gang, but not active and even though not satisfied, you have to cope and make the best of it"* (Incarcerated Participant 5).

*"Prison is a strange place, a place for survival and gangsterism is the only survival. It is not good to be part of a gang and it can affect your sentence"* (Incarcerated Participant 14).

According to Haysom (1981: 2), prison gangs are not unique to South African prisons. What makes them so distinctive in South Africa, however, is, firstly, their form of operation, and secondly, that they operate nationally. The influence of this association appears to create more dissonance for the adolescents who have to contend with this identity of their fathers. The adolescents that participated in this study were reluctant to engage in any discussions about their fathers' suspected (or known) gang involvement for fear of safety and repercussions in their neighbourhoods.

Another defining feature of gang involvement for the fathers may be the historical roots of gangs in their communities. The researchers are of the opinion, however, that the culture of the prison gang becomes a norm, as well as a lifestyle, to which the incarcerated becomes accustomed, and from which they experience great difficulty of extricating themselves.



Prison gangs serve as a buffer against poverty because when a gang member scores he is expected to share with the other members (Pinnock, 1997: 10). The findings of this current study revealed that the majority of incarcerated participants gang connections were for survival purposes in the correctional facility, and the period of involvement was determined by how easily anyone could rehabilitate from gang associations.

Regarding offending behaviour, some of the incarcerated fathers admitted that they were caught up in severe criminal activities, which resulted in them re-offending, and disregarding their role as fathers. They admitted that it became a norm together with longer sentence times. The implication of this appeared to mitigate any trust that the adolescent attempted in the rebuilding of the parent-child relationship.

From the findings of this study it could not be determined whether the participants in had prior gang involvement, whether their offence was related to gang activity and/or whether this resulted in their incarceration. Most of the participants promoted the narrative that gang membership in prison is related to protection and survival.

### **Substance use and abuse**

There is a link between the use of alcohol, drugs, violence and crime (Valdez, Kaplan & Curtis, 2007: 596). Substance abuse by parents interferes with their ability to care for and monitor their children. Children could become victims of violence, not only of those in their own homes who used alcohol and drugs, but also of individuals in their social environments (parents or peers), who used such substances (Republic of South Africa (RSA), Department of Social Development (DSD)/Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities (DWCPD)/UNICEF, 2012: 5-6)

Six participants admitted to misusing substances (alcohol, drugs, or both) and attested to the adverse effects of substance abuse on their lives. Two participants admitted to a broad life experience with drugs at a very early stage in their lives. The majority of the incarcerated participants could relate to substance abuse as a way of life, but had no insight into how it actually destroyed their homes. One participant disclosed that he was never home, and that drug addiction became an existence over which he had no control. One participant also disclosed how he lost his business due to his drug addiction and presently could only look back with remorse and regret

*“I used drugs together with the mother of my child. We had a bad lifestyle, surrounded by lies. I went on drugs due to suicidal thoughts and attempts. I lost control over myself when I went into drugs and did something that I am now paying for. I went to prison and due to drugs. I lost everything and used the money of my business to buy drugs and eventually exhausted all the funds, committed crime and went to prison. I lost my business due to drugs and went to prison for murder and isolated from my family”* (Incarcerated Participant 9).

*“I was a drug smuggler, used alcohol heavily and my life was fast and hectic”*  
(Incarcerated Participant 10).

Horgan (2011: 9) indicates that problems experienced by the children of drug users during crucial phases of their development reflect the impact of their parents’ substance misuse and could result in negative effects that endure regardless of their parents’ drug-use status. It was evident from the participants’ responses that the choices they made were the causal factors of their incarceration. The bond between the imprisoned parent and their children may have been compromised prior to their incarceration, thereby compromising the health, well-being and adjustment of their child.

### **Paradox of the visitation**

Arditti (2012: 214) warns that the visitation between family members or children and an incarcerated parent can be particularly traumatic, as it may revive the trauma associated with the removal, conviction, as well as the dramatic change in the lifestyle that the family may have been accustomed to. Another aspect is for the young adolescent to bear witness to a father, who is incarcerated, being subjected to specific sanctions, rendering him overly submissive and compliant. This may be related to a father who joined a prison gang or maintains associations with a gang for survival or safety reasons. One participant related the following:

*“My sister said she doesn’t want to come because my father’s gang connections is going to break into our home and rape her, because of what he has done.”* (Adolescent Participant 4).

Another perception held by the majority of adolescent boys who participated in this study was that their fathers’ gang association in the prison escalated the harm/risk to their family in the community. Some of the adolescent boys, who declined to participate in the study, admitted that they refused to visit their fathers in prison for fear that they would be expected to join the community-based arm of the gang. The following response supports the reticence of a number of adolescents, who were approached to participate in the study:

*“No Miss, I am nearly in Matric. The gang will hurt me if I don’t come with them because my father is an ‘ou’ in the prison gang. My father was mad at me because I did not want to bring a ‘parcel’ to him.”*

Arditti (2012: 195) defines secondary prisonisation (i.e. secondary victimisation effects of primary imprisonment) as the transformation of the non- incarcerated family members’ lives as a result of interacting with the inmate and the correctional system. These adaptations may include the changes in routines, social lives, their priorities and their appearance all based on their adaptation to his incarceration as the following response conveys:

*“My father does not want me to dress up, or wear new stuff, when I visit him because the authorities will think that we are using the money he stole from his work.”*

The visitation process of prisons in South Africa is complicated by the grading system used for inmates. This system dictates that an inmate is required to serve a certain length of time with no additional charges (further charges) that may result from their incarceration before they are entitled to direct/contact visitations. For most children and adolescents, the actual visitation process is traumatic and frightening.

### **Psychosocial impacts**

Psychosocial impact generally refers to how the individual is impacted by social relationships and their environment. The psychosocial effects for both the incarcerated fathers, as well as their children, appeared to rest in the perceptions of themselves with an incarcerated parent, the possibilities that their lives were destined to repeat the offences of their fathers, and the overall psychosocial vulnerabilities that appear to be the aftermath of parental incarceration. Most of adolescent participants articulated their anxiety and reticence to develop intimate or dating relationships for fear that they may be genetically disposed to repeat their fathers' rule-breaking and criminal behaviour.

Seven incarcerated participants experienced the loss of relationships, after incarceration. They referred to their loss of relationships as separated with no contact, separated but civil for the sake of the children, or divorced with no contact. They expressed that some of their partners decided to move on with their lives when they were incarcerated. They stated that losing their partners implied very little or no contact with their children. All the incarcerated participants shared the difficulty of losing their relationships and expressed unhappiness. One also revealed how difficult it was for him when he lost his parents while incarcerated. However, the incarcerated participants understood that they had lost their relationships because of their incarceration.

*“Being separated from my family was hard and felt like losing someone to death and I lost both my parents while incarcerated. It was difficult, but I understand that I committed a crime, and was punished for it. I am isolated from society due to crime and it was difficult to understand and difficult to have lost so much. The ex-wife decided that they should separate and go their separate ways. My son is in school, athlete and he went on with his life. My ex-wife met someone else and moved to Eastern Cape with him. She is currently in Eastern Cape with her boyfriend and children” (Incarcerated Participant 14).*

One of the adolescent children shared his experience of ‘labelling’, when fellow classmates discussed his biological father’s crime and incarceration. While sharing the incident he was emotional and clearly embarrassed about the incarceration of his father. He chose not to disclose that they were talking about his father as he was too humiliated. Instead, he joined in the conversation and laughed along with them. The stigma of his father’s incarceration was clear.

*“At school there were two children in my class, then they talk about my father that he killed the one child’s father and I sit there and listen. They don’t know that it is my father*

*that they are talking about, and then they say that they will do him what he did to the child's father” (Adolescent Participant 2).*

*“I said nothing, I don't know if they know it is my father that they spoke of, but I did not tell them. I rather laughed with them and talked with them, I was too shy to say that it is my father” (Adolescent Participant 3).*

The psychosocial impacts reveal marked effects of the disrupted relationship, compromised development and well-being for the adolescent children.

### **Masculinity, manhood and the role of the father**

Masculinity is a certain character and quality that is portrayed by men as society places expectations on men to show their physical strength, robustness and authority over women (Ratele, Shefer & Clowes, 2012: 553). The apparent lack of opportunities to demonstrate masculinity, or manhood, was perceived to have an effect on the functioning of the individual fathers and their families. Most of the participants claimed that it was traditional for men to be the providers, protectors and breadwinners of their families.

A father is central to the well-being of a child and contributes to all areas of growth and development; an aspect missed when the father is incarcerated. The findings indicate that fathers play a vital role in the family. As stated previously, the absence of a father in the family during childhood, reportedly affects the developmental stages of a child's life. One participant indicated that his wife was unable to fulfil the role of the head of the family as their teenage girls need their “dads” around to fulfil that role of dealing with the boys; there is just no substitute for that. Another participant indicated that he used to assist the children with school projects as he knew exactly what had to be done. He continued that, since his incarceration, their school performance had dropped as his absence had affected their competence and confidence. From these responses, it was clear that in these three homes the father-child and partner-to-partner relationships had been intact prior to incarceration. Two participants disclosed that they had grown up without a father and, therefore, had been deficient in their own role as a father. However, this cannot be ascribed to their current incarceration.

All of the adolescent participants identified important achievements in their lives, which their fathers did not witness and expressed their disappointment at that. Observing what their peers with fathers were sharing reminded them of the value of fatherhood and how much they yearned for it during this vital period in their lives.

*“It is sad for me, because at school, children talk about their fathers and I can't speak about my father, but I know when he is released we will spend that time together. I was in primary school in my last year, it was prize giving and it was bad for me. I was the head girl and I always wanted my father to see it. He was not there for me and it touched me” (Adolescent Participant 3).*

*“He is never there to see my achievements”* (Adolescent Participant 5).

The findings that relate to aspects of masculinity, fatherhood and manhood demonstrated that when this attachment is disrupted it becomes a challenge for the adolescents to achieve a well-adjusted, healthy sense of self and masculinity, amongst other developmental outcomes. During the interviews, it was obvious that the incarcerated participants tried to provide the best description of what the role of a father should be. They also believed that men should be the providers of their families. Some acknowledged that they lacked nurture, support and care-giving abilities.

### **Aggression**

There is an assumption that the prison space demands aggressive stances in order to protect oneself against victimisation. This is an untested assumption; however, the following emerged from the participants in this study.

*“Had aggressive ways, due to drug abuse, but calmed down. Prison has changed me, realized what drugs did and the importance of family”* (Incarcerated Participant 2).

*“I was aggressive, a drug smuggler, and loved money. I was also involved in serious crime involvement”* (Incarcerated Participant 3).

*“I was aggressive due to alcohol abuse, tik and mandrax and I had the wrong friends, but decided to leave them. I was also involved in gangsterism”* (Incarcerated Participant 6).

*“I am not aggressive, but when triggered I can become angry and abrupt”* (Incarcerated Participant 10).

The incarcerated participants admitted that aggression triggered aggression and was defined in terms of their interpersonal engagement in prison. Therefore, they understood that any form of aggression could have a ripple effect during their period of incarceration.

In terms of deviant and antisocial behaviours, only a few of the incarcerated fathers showed signs of aggression, which were apparently triggered by destructive behaviour, drug addiction, a negative lifestyle, smuggling, criminal involvement, friendships and gangsterism. One participant claimed the ability to control his anger, which was only triggered at times. One of the participants became conscious of the effect that drugs had on his life and how important family was

### **Conclusion**

From the results of this study, it is clear that two parents are vital to the development of any family pattern, especially concerning the education and guidance of children. Christian (2009: 3) concurs that because many more men than women are imprisoned; the number of single-parent-female households is almost five times higher than that of single-

parent-male households. Parental incarceration is associated with the risk that a child will experience material hardship and family instability (Christian, 2009: 3).

Attachment Theory was used to explore how the biological father's incarceration directly affected family strengths, personal attachments, separations and challenges for adolescents particularly. Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper and Shear (2010: 589) conclude that parental incarceration causes disruption in the attachment relationship, as a result of the parent being imprisoned, and that this damage and loss is more damaging if the parent was in a residential relationship with the child prior to imprisonment. The consequences of the incarceration of biological fathers also revealed the cyclical effect of being emotionally absent and uninvolved with their children, which resulted in diverse challenges for their adolescent children.

In addition, the findings revealed that the fathers engaged in criminogenic activities during their incarceration, which further aggravates issues, such as role modelling and providing appropriate guidance, or support, to both the children and those tasked with care-giving. The strong hold that gangs demonstrate over many communities, is a further challenge for the safety and well-being of an adolescent whose father is gang involved in prison, or possibly prior to incarceration. Incarceration created a further barrier to fulfilling their obligations. The lifestyle choices, which included substance abuse and gang associations, further contributed to the lack of adopting an appropriate masculine identity as fathers. They struggled to engage with their masculine identities as they were immersed in the gang subculture while incarcerated. From the responses provided by the participants, managing themselves during incarceration superseded any commitments to influence their children positively.

The sudden separation of father and adolescent child was a difficult and a serious experience. This deprivation contributed to a sense of loss and abandonment. The extra-mural activities and sharing of personal achievements were the most challenging markers directly attributed to the separation. It is unknown whether the quality of care and stability at the homes of these adolescents was sufficient, after the father's incarceration, to mitigate against the trauma of lost attachment and care. Ultimately, it is evident that additional research is required to explore the impact of the conditions in prisons on a broader scale as well as the effects of these conditions on the extended family network of the incarcerated individual. Attachment theory was a useful lens to explore this phenomenon, alerting to the importance of significant relationships with children and their significant caregivers.

The data strongly suggests that further research is essential to explore the fathering, parenting and quality of care prior to the parental incarceration, as well as to explore the quality of care, supervision and support, after parental incarceration, as well as the impact of visitation in South African prisons, specifically.

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