Measuring Incarceration in the Fragile Families Study

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Administrative data is provided by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) in the interest of information exchange. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not those of DCJS. Neither New York State nor DCJS assumes liability for its contents or use thereof. Funding for this research was provided by a seed grant from the Columbia Population Research Center at Columbia University.
The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS)

- Systematic oversample of nonmarital births ➔ Low-SES sample.
- Originally designed to examine nonmarital childbearing, the role of fathers, and welfare reform.
  - Has since expanded to look at broader social disadvantage.
  - High rates of reported paternal incarceration (~50%).
- Currently in its sixth wave of data collection (focal children now 15 years old).
Benefits of FFCWS for Incarceration Research

- Sampling plan provides majority-minority, low-SES sample, with high rates of father incarceration.

- Provides “comparison sample” of fathers without incarceration histories, but many socioeconomic disadvantages.

- “Couple data” includes self-reports and partner-reports.

- Connects incarcerated fathers (many who are non-custodial) to their families.

- Rich set of potential outcomes, observed confounders.
### Indicators of Paternal Incarceration (Direct, Y1-Y3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave</th>
<th>Father Questions</th>
<th>Mother Questions</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Y1   | f2fh19 Have you ever been booked or charged with breaking the law?  
      | f2fh21 (if Yes to f2fh19) Have you ever been convicted of any charges (not minor traffic)  
      | f2fh22 (if Yes to f2fh21) Have you ever spent time in a correctional institution? | m2c33 Is father currently working/in school/unemployed/in jail?  
|      |                  | m2c36 Has father ever spent any time in jail or prison? |
| Y3   | f3i25 Since C’s first birthday, have you been booked or charged with breaking the law?  
      | f3i27 (if Yes to f3i25) Have you ever been convicted of any charges (not traffic violations)?  
      | f3i29 (if Yes to f3i27) Have you ever spent time in a correctional institution? | m3c41 What is father currently doing now?  
|      |                  | m3c42 (if m3c41!="jail") Has father ever spent any time in jail or prison? |
# Indicators of Paternal Incarceration (Direct, Y5-Y9)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Y5</strong></td>
<td><strong>f4i25</strong> In the last two years, have you been booked or charged with breaking the law? <strong>f4i27</strong> (if Yes to f4i25) In the last two years, have you been convicted of any charges?</td>
<td><strong>m4c36</strong> What was father doing in the last week? <strong>m4c37</strong> Has father spent any time in jail in the past two years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Y9</strong></td>
<td><strong>f5f25</strong> Since your last interview, have you been booked or charged with breaking the law? <strong>f5f27</strong> (if Yes to f5f25) Have you been convicted of any charges since your last interview? <strong>f5f28b</strong> (if Yes to f5f27) Have you ever spent time in a correctional institution?</td>
<td><strong>m5b29</strong> What was father doing in the last week? <strong>m5b30</strong> Has father spent any time in jail since [TIME]? ([TIME] may alternately refer to baseline or Y1 survey, or “in the past 6 years”)</td>
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### Indicators of Paternal Incarceration (Indirect, Selected Examples)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y1</td>
<td><strong>f2k9b</strong> Why aren’t you looking for a job? (“Probation/In Jail” potential response)</td>
<td><strong>m2a9d</strong> Why did the relationship end? (“Father Incarceration” potential response)</td>
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</table>
| Y3   | **f3a8b_4** Why relationship ended: father incarceration  
**f3k7** Why aren’t you looking for a job? (“In Jail” potential response) | **etc., etc., etc...**                   |
Some opportunities to elaborate on direct reports…

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<tr>
<td>Y1</td>
<td><strong>f2fh20</strong> Are you currently involved in any legal proceedings? (How many? And which ones?)</td>
<td><strong>m2c33b</strong> Is jail/prison a local, state, or federal facility?</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>f2fh21b</strong> How many times have you been convicted of something?</td>
<td><strong>m2c33d</strong>* When did father go to jail/prison?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>f2fh21c</strong> When was your most recent conviction?</td>
<td><strong>m2c33e</strong>* When will father be released?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>f2fh21d</strong> What charges were you convicted of?</td>
<td><strong>m2c36a</strong>* What was father in jail for?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>f2fh24a</strong> All together, how much time did you serve…?</td>
<td><strong>m2c37a</strong>* How long did he spend in jail?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>f2fh25</strong>* When were you most recently incarcerated?</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
All in all…

- Measures detailed, but inconsistent across waves and respondents.

- General solution: Any indicator of incarceration $\rightarrow$ code as incarcerated
  - Some complications in ascertaining timing (Before Y1? Between Y1-Y3? Y3-Y5? Y1-Y9?)
  - Underlying assumption: potentially stigmatizing behavior less likely to be overreported than underreported.
  - Stick with binary indicators, since more detailed questions are inconsistently reported.

- Imperfect incarceration measure, but among the best there is for family-related outcomes.
Data Matching Pilot (Geller, Jaeger & Pace, Forthcoming, *ANNALS*)

- Submitted 333 fathers from NYC sample to NYS DCJS for “name search” for criminal history records.
  - Does official criminal history information identify incarceration experiences unreported in survey data?
  - Do official records provide detail on criminal histories unmeasured in survey data?
  - To what extent do official records miss criminal history information reported in surveys?
Key Variables (CCH Data)

- Records matched on:
  - Name
  - SSN
  - DOB
Findings

Unreported Criminal Histories

- Of the 333 fathers in the analysis sample
  - 44 have some direct report of incarceration in the Y1 FFCWS
  - An additional 10 were identified as sentenced to prison, jail, or “time served” by Y1 in the CCH data.
  - 23% increase in fathers identified as incarcerated

- 93 have reports of at least one arrest, conviction, or incarceration by Y9
  - An additional 28 have at least one criminal cycle in the CCH data
  - 30% increase in fathers identified as CJ-involved.

Findings underscore the challenges in identifying CJ-involvement in surveys – further support for “any mention” as an indicator of incarceration.
Directions for Future Research

Broader Survey Literature

- Collecting administrative data prospectively alongside survey waves could make matching more manageable.
  - Consent for comprehensive administrative record searches
  - Could identify states to search records.
  - Still won’t include sealed records in states that can’t release them.
  - Collecting data at every wave can help ascertain timing.

- Details provided in CCH data raise questions about how respondents might interpret survey questions.
  - Do respondents count “convictions after plea bargains” as convictions?
  - How about ACD’s? Pleas to violations (e.g., Disorderly Conduct)?
  - Do respondents count pretrial detention as incarceration?

- Future surveys might include cognitive tests in which respondents randomly receive alternate question wordings, to see if more explicit explanation leads to higher reporting rates.