

# Measuring Incarceration in the Fragile Families Study

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Health Surveys



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# The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS)

- Birth cohort study of 4,898 urban families with children born 1998-2000 in 20 large cities (pop. 200,000+)
- 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)

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



# Indicators of Paternal Incarceration (Direct, Y5-Y9)

Wave	Father Questions	Mother Questions
Y5	<p><b>f4i25</b> In the last two years, have you been booked or charged with breaking the law?</p> <p><b>f4i27</b> (if Yes to f4i25) In the last two years, have you been convicted of any charges?</p>	<p><b>m4c36</b> What was father doing in the last week?</p> <p><b>m4c37</b> Has father spent any time in jail in the past two years?</p>
Y9	<p><b>f5f25</b> Since your last interview, have you been booked or charged with breaking the law?</p> <p><b>f5f27</b> (if Yes to f5f25) Have you been convicted of any charges since your last interview?</p> <p><b>f5f28b</b> (if Yes to f5f27) Have you ever spent time in a correctional institution?</p>	<p><b>m5b29</b> What was father doing in the last week?</p> <p><b>m5b30</b> Has father spent any time in jail since [TIME]? ([TIME] may alternately refer to baseline or Y1 survey, or “in the past 6 years”)</p>



# Indicators of Paternal Incarceration (Indirect, Selected Examples)

Wave	Father Questions	Mother Questions
Y1	<b>f2k9b</b> Why aren't you looking for a job? ("Probation/In Jail" potential response)	<b>m2a9d</b> Why did the relationship end? ("Father Incarceration" potential response)
Y3	<b>f3a8b_4</b> Why relationship ended: father incarceration <b>f3k7</b> Why aren't you looking for a job? ("In Jail" potential response)	etc., etc., etc...



# Some opportunities to elaborate on direct reports...

Wave	Father Questions	Mother Questions
Y1	<p><b>f2fh20*</b> Do you have any charges pending against you? (How many? And which ones?)</p> <p><b>f2fh21b</b> How many times have you been convicted of something?</p> <p><b>f2fh21c</b> When was your most recent conviction?</p> <p><b>f2fh21d</b> What charges were you convicted of?</p> <p><b>f2fh24a</b> All together, how much time did you serve...?</p> <p><b>f2fh25*</b> When were you most recently incarcerated?</p> <p><b>f2fh26*</b> When were you most recently released?</p>	<p><b>m2c33b</b> Is jail/prison a local, state, or federal facility?</p> <p><b>m2c33d*</b> When did father go to jail/prison?</p> <p><b>m2c33e*</b> When will father be released?</p> <p><b>m2c36a*</b> What was father in jail for?</p> <p><b>m2c37a*</b> How long did he spend in jail?</p>



## All in all...

- Measures detailed, but inconsistent across waves and respondents.
- General solution: Any indicator of incarceration → 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.



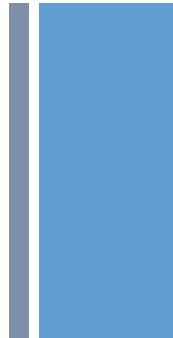
# Data Matching Pilot (Geller, Jaeger & Pace, Forthcoming, *ANNALS*)



- 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.