Conducting In-Depth Interviews with Jailed Fathers and Their Family Members: Opportunities and Challenges

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The rapid growth of mass incarceration in the United States, a phenomenon characterized by its concentration among already marginalized individuals, means that a historically unprecedented number of individuals experience the incarceration of a family member. In this paper, I describe the Jail and Family Life Study, an ongoing longitudinal and qualitative investigation of the complex and countervailing ways that the incarceration of fathers creates, maintains, and exacerbates inequalities among families and children. The Jail and Family Life Study includes in-depth interviews with 120 fathers incarcerated across three jail facilities—about half of whom are serving jail sentences and about half of whom are awaiting trial—in Orange County, CA, and their family members (including current and former romantic partners, children, and mothers). Fathers and family members are interviewed both during the father’s incarceration and after his release. First, I suggest that jails are an understudied yet critically important aspect of the criminal justice system and that jail stays have unique implications for family life. Second, I describe challenges to navigating access to jailed fathers, an especially vulnerable population, and their family members (including children, another vulnerable population). Third, I discuss challenges associated with interviewing multiple members of the same family, including navigating strained relationships, building rapport, and maintaining the confidentiality of all participants. Taken together, this ongoing data collection effort will contribute to the growing literature on the spillover consequences of incarceration.