



Care in the prison estate?

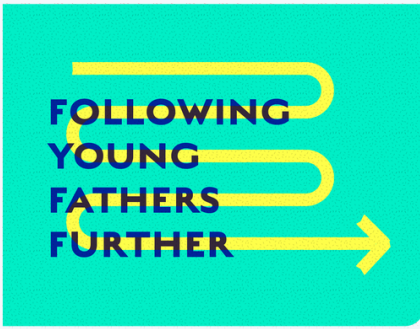
The importance of redemptive, compassionate and
family-focused support for young fathers

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Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative study exploring the lived experiences and support needs of young fathers, aged 25 and under, who are in prison. The broad aim of the study was to understand how some of the most marginalised young fathers experience parenting while separated from their children, including the extent to which they receive and experience support while in the prison system. Based on data generated from in-depth interviews with 12 young fathers in prison and with 4 professionals providing support, the study helped to identify some of the more distinctive issues that highly marginalised and vulnerable young men experience in the UK, practitioners for Pact work at the intersection of criminal justice, child and family welfare, mental health, wellbeing provision and health and social care

The study involved a collaboration between the Following Young Fathers Further team at the University of Lincoln and the Prison Advice & Care Trust (hereafter Pact). Pact is a pioneering national charity in the UK that supports prisoners, people with convictions, and their children and families. Through the provision of services at key stages of the criminal justice process, including court, prison, release, and in the community, Pact provides a care-driven and public health-based approach to support. This is underpinned by the view that justice ought to be a process of restoration and healing and that the innate dignity and worth of every human being is valued. Practitioners for Pact work at the intersection of criminal justice, child and family welfare, mental health, wellbeing provision and health & social care (Pact, 2024).

The Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) research study is funded by the UK Research & Innovation scheme (Grant no: MR/Y00356X/1, 2020-27), University of Lincoln. Existing research highlights a pressing need for change in the current UK welfare and policy context where young fathers are often constructed as a 'problem' and a risk (Duncan, 2007; Neale and Tarrant, 2024). Directly addressing this issue, FYFF aims to advance understanding and transform the way that society constructs and responds to young fathers (defined in policy and practice terms as any young man who experiences a first pregnancy or becomes a young father aged 25 and under) in both national and international, comparative contexts. The study is already producing a unique extended, qualitative longitudinal and international evidence base, and evidenced practice and policy solutions that promote gender equality and the citizenship of young men who are fathers. While existing research in the UK has sought to understand young fatherhood as a diverse and dynamic experience (e.g. Neale et al. 2015; Neale and Tarrant, 2024) understanding of young fathers' parenting journeys and how these intersect with the criminal justice system over time are less understood.

Young fathers in prison: existing literature

Qualitative research about young fathers in custody settings has been conducted but is limited. More generally, young fathers are marginalised in social sciences research (Davies and Hanna, 2020) and it is only in the past decade that more sustained funding Evidence confirms that disadvantaged young fathers face numerous challenges in assuming and sustaining a parenting role and identity, despite their expressed intentions to remain involved in their children's lives (Neale et al. 2015; Neale and Tarrant, 2024). Disrupted education and precarious employment trajectories, insecure family connections and relationships, challenges securing housing, and poor mental health and well-being, may all contribute to parenting journeys that are variable and insecure (Neale and Tarrant, 2024).

These challenges are magnified for those involved in the criminal justice system especially where young men have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, face challenges associated with poverty, lack social and familial support, and experience volatile relationships, mental health concerns and lower educational attainment (Buston et al., 2012; Buston, 2018; Neale and Ladlow, 2016).

Young people in custody are among some of the most vulnerable people in society. According to Neale and Ladlow (2016), most will have experienced professional intervention by the time they enter the Criminal Justice System, with 71% experiencing some involvement with, or in the care of, social services (Youth Justice Board, 2007). Official statistics on the fatherhood status of incarcerated youths are not routinely collected (Meek, 2011) but, on estimate, young offenders are six times more likely to be fathers than non-offenders of the same age (Dennison and Lyon, 2001; Neale and Ladlow, 2016). Between 25-50% of young offenders are also thought to be fathers or expectant fathers (Meek, 2007a; Buston et al. 2012).

As Earle (2012) notes, incarceration may reduce men to perceptions that they are diminished, as non-fathers. Maintaining contact with their children while incarcerated also presents a particular challenge (Meek, 2007), as do resettlement processes (Bulman and Neale, 2017). The need to disclose a criminal record, for example, compounds the issue of securing employment and family appropriate housing (Bulman and Neale, 2017) and relationships with children, co-parents and wider family members may need to be repaired and re-built. Furthermore, these processes may impact on how young men are viewed as fathers, exacerbating the popular and policy perception that they are 'feckless', absent and irresponsible (Neale and Tarrant, 2024).

There are notable examples of good practice in support for young fathers in prisons including access to parenting classes for fathers (e.g. Jarvis and Graham, 2004; Meek, 2007, b; Earle, 2012), although these are not uniformly delivered and are often dependent on funding and/or the commitment of specific professionals with an interest in supporting men as fathers. While recent participatory research has been conducted with young offender fathers in prisons, the focus of this work has been to educate young men about contraception and early pregnancy as a preventative approach (e.g. Lohan et al. 2018; Robinson et al. 2022).

From a methodological perspective, this research highlights the feasibility and value of engaging young men in prison settings for the purposes of promoting social justice and restorative practice.

The research we report here has identified a gap in knowledge about how young men who are currently incarcerated might be better supported to sustain relationships with children that they already have. This research proposes to address this issue via interviews with young fathers who are currently incarcerated with consideration of how these young men can be better supported to remain as engaged fathers in custody settings, as well as beyond.



Methodology and methods

The research design for this study broadly aligned with that of the Following Young Fathers Further study, utilising qualitative methods to explore retrospective and prospective accounts of young fathers' biographies, parenting journeys and criminal justice pathways. In its links to a qualitative longitudinal study, the interviews were oriented around a temporal framing, exploring their life histories, current experiences of fathering from prison, as well as their aspirations

and future orientations. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 fathers, aged between 18 and 30 years old in two Young Offenders Institutes (YOI); a Category C in the West Midlands of England that holds 466 predominantly young men and a Category C in the Southeast of England for men aged over 18, holding 360 young men).

The inclusion criteria that guided the selection of young fathers who participated was as follows:

- Aged 25 and under at the time of interview and have at least one child,
- Had a child or experienced a first pregnancy when aged 25 and under and no older than 30 years old.

An overview of the young fathers who participated in the study is provided on page 7 in Table 1.



Table 1: Participants

Father	Age	Age of first parenthood	Ethnicity (as described)	On Birth Certificate	Care experience?
Dennis	21	20	Mixed heritage White/Black Caribbean	N	N
Emmerson	21	19	Mixed heritage White/Black Caribbean	N	Y
Fletcher	19	18	White British	N	Y
Jackson	23	18	Black Caribbean	N	N
Joel	21	17	White British/traveler	Y	Y
Lyle	30	19	Mixed heritage: Pakistan/ Nigerian	Y	N
Marvin	24	20	Black/African British	N	N
Noah	20	18	White British	Y (for 1st child not for the 2nd)	N
Seb	22	22	White British	N	N
Theo	26	25	Maltese/Polish parents [White European]	N	Y
Tyson	21	19	Black Caribbean	Y	N
Vince	18	17	White British	N	Y



The interviews captured the meanings and understandings participants attribute to their needs and experiences as young parents, as well as retrospective and prospective accounts of their parenting journeys and their intersections with the criminal justice system over time. Three interviews were also conducted with professionals working for Pact to provide support to fathers in prison. The interviews conducted with both participant groups explored: the contemporary criminal justice context from participant perspectives, understanding of existing support for young fathers, and whether there are any gaps in knowledge about how young fathers can best be supported as involved parents both in prison and when they leave.

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) was employed across the dataset generated with the young fathers, an approach that supports both longitudinal and comparative analyses and readings of data. Data was also coded in NVivo to support data management and retrieval. The codes represent overarching themes, developed to both manage and interpret the data and explore the diverse pathways of young fathers, into and through prison, and their views on support in these contexts. The interview data with professionals was combined, where relevant, to provide detailed and nuanced insights about young fathers' experiences from a different perspective, as well as important context to the criminal justice system.

These analytic methods have enabled comparison and contrast of the data generated with both staff and prisoners on aspects of the research, increasing the depth and comprehensiveness of the analysis and the recommendations for practice that we make.

Given the sensitivities involved in researching young fathers in prison, the study received ethical approval both from the University of Lincoln Ethics Committee and HMPSS ethics. Particular attention was paid to the practicalities and pragmatics of accessing prison settings, the sensitivities of researching the histories and life courses of young fathers in prison, and anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were recruited with the support of Pact, who acted as gatekeepers with established relationships of trust with the young fathers.

Brief context to the lives and circumstances of the young fathers

The interviews provided important insights into the pathways of these young men into the criminal justice system, confirming them as some of the most disadvantaged, excluded, and vulnerable of young men. Reflecting previous criminological research (Maguire, 2021), their accounts of their childhood biographies and experiences were replete with diverse sets of disadvantages that created vulnerability to imprisonment. This included challenging home lives, residence in deprived neighbourhoods, care experience, disrupted educational trajectories and (under)-employment

In this sample, it was notable that none of the fathers had planned to become fathers. All but one of the young men grew up in low-income localities and families, five had diagnoses for ADHD and/or autism, and five were care-experienced (a mix of formal state care and kinship care). Seven had disrupted educational pathways and had been excluded from school and two had been admitted to Pupil Referral Units.

Their sentences ranged from 8-9 months to up to 7 years. Seven of the young men were no longer in a relationship with the mother of their children and while in prison, five did not see their children at all. Reasons for incarceration, associated with behaviours and incidents that have been conceptualised in academic literature as 'protest masculinities' (Connell, 2000; Maguire, 2021), reflected those of many young men in the British prison system. These varied from drug/gang related activity including intent to supply, violence, robbery, and carrying a knife.

Several of the young fathers were from ethnic minority communities and had engaged in violence associated with street experiences of racism and discrimination.

This report presents findings about their experiences in the prison system, highlighting a contrast between the 'risk' based culture of the prison and the caring and compassionate ethos of Pact. Six themes are explored, four that provide insights into the experiences, needs and concerns of young fathers and two about what they valued about Pact and what they'd like more support with. The themes are: 1) the experiences of young fathers in prison; 2) sustaining communication and relationships with children; 3) incarcerated coparenting arrangements with 'baby mums'; 4) securing recognition as a father: birth certificates; 5) 'What works': existing provisions of advice, advocacy, and support for young fathers and; 6) possible adaptations to the service.

Recommendations for future practice based on these findings are then outlined to conclude the report.

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Findings

Experiences of young fathers in prison

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the young fathers in this study considered the conditions of prison to be especially harsh. They describe a complex mix of isolation, of navigating often difficult dynamics in relationships with other prisoners and prison officers and constraints on finances and credits.

An experience common among the young fathers interviewed was that they felt infantilised by prison officers, which they felt was at odds with their identities as fathers:

Yeah obviously they think they know what's best but I'm twenty one. Obviously, I'm not a grown man but I'm grown from how I used to, how old I was before you get me. Like twenty-one, come on now, I'm getting there. And...yeah obviously the way they speak to you, they sometimes they speak to you like I'm a kid and that. I'm telling them straight, I'm saying like, 'yo I ain't no kid, you know. Like you don't talk to me like that. Talk to me how you want me to talk to you', you get me. Like just cause I'm in prison, don't think I'm any less of a human, do you get me? Emmerson

But...apart from that no, the rules here are bogus. Like just they change them whenever they want. ... every time you step out your cell to go into the yard. I'm not a little kid. Like I think that, I got fed chicken nuggets and hoops the other day [laughs]. Like...so it's supposed to be a C cat. Lyle

These processes of infantilisation represented a culture in which young fathers as prisoners are subject to deficit and stigmatising approaches based on their young age, a distinctive contrast to the offer of Pact in its focus on prioritising their identities as fathers and employing a caring and compassionate approach.

In parallel with research elsewhere, it was apparent that the possibilities of fathering are rare for young fathers in prison (Sandberg et al. 2022), especially where they experience restrictions to contact and communication time with their children and where they are not asked about their parenthood status or acknowledged as fathers by prison staff.

Most notable was that when these young men entered prison they were potentially already disconnected from their identities as fathers, especially where they had not met their child or had only spent a short amount of time bonding with them. Some remained in contact with their children while others were keen to protect their children from the knowledge that their father was in prison:



...there's always gonna be difficult things to explain...it's hard to do that with a child, innit. Like, say for example me being in here, she'll ask me where I am, and I can't really explain to her properly where I am and when am I gonna be home. ... 'I miss you daddy, when are you coming back daddy?' 'Ah soon.' 'But when's soon? You told me soon not too long ago.' It's just difficult in that sense, innit?... because my daughter doesn't even know I'm in prison, she just thinks I'm in, like, the army or something...I don't want her to think that oh, daddy's a bad person....when she's a bit older I can explain that obviously it was a mistake. Jackson

Many of the fathers reported that communication to their children was often blocked or restricted by the prison often without direct communication.

This creates barriers for contacting children and other professionals involved in managing child protection cases, risking embedding the view of the fathers as entirely absent:

I do write letters, yeah, but I'm...yeah, I do try, but it's the same. I'll be honest with you, it can take up to like a month for them to get letters. It's shambolic the way it does. It's like got to a point where I was just like there's no actual point because by the time they've got the letter, you've spoken about, what, another 30-odd times, 20 times in between, so it doesn't really make the same, you know, effect that it once would. She can email me, but costs money, so it's just like I don't, I feel guilty telling her to, you know, email, do this, do that...Even to send photos on there, it's an extra so and so amount of money. Everything's like, you know, financially gaining by them. Theo

... this video visit I had, they cancelled it. The other day I had one, like, literally probably about a week ago and they've cancelled it and not rebooked it and didn't even tell me they'd cancelled it. But... but they done it to my cellmate as well...They're just cancelling everyone's, I'm not sure what's going on. And obviously when you cancel it, you're meant to rebook it, and just haven't got back to me. I even wrote an email to them, I haven't heard nothing back... I've literally done that about a week ago. I did it the day it happened and still haven't heard nothing back. Theo

But they say you've still got equal rights. That's not the case cause I'm getting paperwork late. I didn't know about court dates. Paperwork come through the day before court dates... I got moved from [SouthernEnglishTown] to here when I had, I've still got the family hearing, and I've got two other court dates that I'm supposed to be attending that as well so I can't attend them no more. Lyle

According to Pact Liaison Worker Nancy, there is a benefit for young fathers when professionals support them to both access and harness the power of

fatherhood, not least because younger fathers have the space and time to learn and to reflect on past mistakes, with fatherhood prompting a renewed impetus and context for growth and change:

I think the younger they [young fathers] are, the more you can probably try and still get to them and teach them, they still have time. That's the difference between the younger guys and the older guys, I think they still have time to make that change and make mistakes, I guess, but you know, they have, they've got time where they can learn and grow, whereas when you go to like the older prisons, a lot of the guys are, you know, they've lived life, they don't really care anymore, that kind of thing. So there's time to still get through to some, some of the gents, the younger ones, yeah. Nancy, Pact Liaison Officer

The interviews with just this sample of young fathers confirm that fathering identities provide an important opportunity for the encouragement of redemption, reform and change for these young men. As reported in the wider young fatherhood literature (Cundy, 2012), the earlier young men are engaged as dads, from first learning of the pregnancy and onwards, the more likely that it may become a catalyst for change.


Enabling and ensuring sustained communication with families while young fathers are in prison is essential to the longer-term value and effectiveness of this approach.



Sustaining communication and relationships with children

The young fathers described a range of contact arrangements with their children while in prison with variations in whether and how often they saw and communicated with them.

The majority of the dads expressed their intentions to be involved and engaged as fathers. They saw their children regularly, especially where they remained in a relationship with their co-parent and/or where they had established a positive co-parenting relationship with the mums of their children following separation:



He still recognises me. When I'm on the phone I say hiya to him and he's like, 'hi dad' and stuff like that. He's just started speaking and when I'm on videos as soon as he sees me he's full of smiles and...he's crawling round and he's jumping at the camera, try and grab at me through the phone...and he's constantly saying, 'dada dada' which really lifts me spirits. Noah

Where co-parenting relationships were strained, paternal grandparents played an important role in helping to ensure

continued contact and relationships between fathers and their children:

In the future, I'm hoping we can have a civil relationship, get on for the sake of our daughter...my baby mother literally does not want no contact with me, so...my mum picks her up from my baby mum, my daughter, and then my mum and my family brings her up, yeah.
Vince

I've not seen me youngest cause he's only just been registered. I've seen him on video calls and stuff like that though so I have seen him. But in terms of seeing him face to face in a visit with me only having eleven days left in custody...I'm just gonna wait...So, there's no point travelling all this way...to see him for two hours. Noah

In his quote above, Noah nods to the challenges wider families may have in visiting prison regularly. The physical and geographical barriers meant that many

families were struggling to bring children, an issue that has more recently been further compounded as the cost-of-living has increased:

Got a visit with [son] tomorrow.....There's nothing better than actually seeing them face to face and that like. The phone calls are good and that, like it's nice to talk to 'em but, you know what I mean, I dunno, when you're face to face it's just, it doesn't feel like you're in prison. It feels like you're just out for a meal or something, you know what I mean? I used to get it once a week every Sunday. And then lately it's just getting a bit too expensive to come now. So it's now getting like every two weeks. Seb

Every month but then the cost of living, travel, it gets expensive now, so sometimes that decreases but we try every month. If I could get, like, maybe twice or three times a month, I'm happy, but...Marvin

It was notable that two of the young dads felt that they were protecting their

children by not revealing to them that they were in prison. Jackson and Jamal explain:

when I call, her mum will pick up first, I'll have a one/two conversation with her, ask her if she needs anything, how's she been, de, de, de, de, what's the latest, yeah, then I'll speak to my daughter, innit....I haven't seen her. I've seen her on the outside though, like when I come out and that I would meet her or what not. Yeah, we've met a couple of times but obviously nah, not while I'm here though. While I'm here, I'm just riding it. Jackson.

Maybe having to explain certain things, innit. Like, yeah, like difficult, there's always gonna be difficult things to explain and those are, it's hard to do that with a child, innit. Like, say for example me being in here, she'll ask me where I am and I can't really explain to her properly where I am and when am I gonna be home. I can't really tell her the exact time I'm gonna be home, but you get what I'm saying, that's the difficult things, innit. You get what I'm saying. Jamal



For those whose contact with their children was curtailed, investment in fatherhood as an identity and as a potential route to adaptation and change (Neale and Tarrant, 2024) was often a missed opportunity.

One member of Pact suggested that greater awareness of the biographies of these young men and insight about their parenting journeys would be useful information for prisons and professionals to capture to address the isolation many young fathers experience in prison, and as a basis for ensuring stronger links to families:

a deeper understanding that perhaps for a lot of them, for the majority even, you know, there are no, very few very strong links with families, regarding babies and very small children. Some of the lads who join, you know, who come into custody may not have even met the child or it might be an ex-partner that they've got no contact with. Or the child is very small so they can't even make their own feelings known and, and ask where Daddy is and "can I see Daddy?" And, you know, they seem very isolated a lot of them when it comes to relationships that involve very small children. Janet, Pact

In the later sections of this report, the family days provided by Pact are examined as an example of caring and compassionate support for young fathers

and their families, providing opportunities for them to bond with their children and engage in physical intimacies in ways that they cannot otherwise do.



Incarcerated coparenting arrangements with 'baby mums'

Negotiating incarcerated coparenting arrangements involves establishing rules, responsibilities, and contributions with a partner (Tadros and Ogden, 2020; Sandberg et al. 2022) while an individual is under the supervision of the criminal justice system. The participants described a variety of coparenting arrangements, practices and experiences with the women they call their 'baby mums'.

Some remained in relationships despite the challenges of parenting and 'being together apart', some had established more positive co-parenting relationships no longer being in a relationship and others continued to have acrimonious relationships. According to Pact worker Rachel this impacted on the extent of contact they have with their children:

some of them are in contact with their families, as in with their children, some are in the process of getting to have that contact, whether because it's restrictions or because the family, the baby's mum doesn't wanna, you know, be involved in the thing, or they've got a new relationship. Rachel, Pact Worker

For many young parents, including those who are not in the criminal justice system, the gendered construction of parenthood can be especially polarised for young parents (Neale and Tarrant, 2024). The primary caring role of young mothers (and periphery role of fathers by implication) is further reinforced when fathers are in prison, meaning that primary caregivers more often have the discretion to operate either as gatekeepers to their children, or gate openers, often with the support of family members and/or professionals working with them (see also Neale and Tarrant, 2024).

The physical barrier of being incarcerated means that the challenges for young fathers of proving their worth and establishing their credentials as parents with a right to be part of a child's life, are all the greater for this group of young fathers (Neale and Patrick, 2016; Tarrant and Neale, 2017).



For those young men who are separated from their baby mum, several demonstrated recognition of the importance of building friendships with their children's mothers and the

importance of prioritising positive communication and relationships to ensure continued contact. Reflections from Jackson, for example, exemplify this understanding:

if your child's with the mother, like your relationship with her depends on your relationship with the child, innit. That's what I realised a lot, like you can try and be bitter, you can try and be this, be that, but it's just gonna push you further away from your child, innit. Jackson

Being incarcerated also means having less influence over decisions around care arrangements for children with little say over where they are placed should concerns be raised about the capacity of the child's mother to be the primary caregiver. Where the mothers may be struggling to provide care themselves, fathers may lose access to their children where they have been placed in state care.

Here, Luke explains his, perhaps misplaced anger towards his baby mum, when his child is removed from her care, while Vince espouses his hopes for a mechanism of support to maintain contact with his daughter:

I'm upset that she lost my kids 'cause I told her that if anything happens to my kids, it's on you. Luke.

I feel like we should have more support, like when baby mums stop you from seeing your kid, I feel like there should be like some sort of like fathers' rights to see you if you're in jail. Not just cause you're locked in, that doesn't mean, like, that shouldn't give them a reason to say, 'Oh, I'm gonna lock you out your daughter's life cause you're locked in,' and stuff like that. I feel like there should be a bit more research done around that sort of stuff. Vince

There are two pertinent considerations for support professionals to consider here. The first relates to the need for case workers to recognise the potential impact that the loss of a child to the care system might have on dads while they are in prison and have limited control over arrangements for a child. The second, related concern, involves the provision of timely and compassionate engagement with fathers around how to process their loss in a way that involves empathy for their co-parent. This might involve supporting them to consider and understand what might be happening for their child's mother to have led to this

outcome. Such an approach is vital for helping young fathers to navigate complex and distressing situations that may be beyond their control, for steering them away from blame, for fostering and sustaining effective coparenting relationships over time, and ameliorating gendered inequalities between coparents.

While the loss of a child to state care represents a very specific aspect of coparenting relationships that may not be experienced by every young father, our findings demonstrate the importance of the Pact offer in terms of prioritising support for young fathers in managing their coparenting relationships:

“So I’m like, if you like, the middleman [laughing]. I try to call, I will contact the parent or the mother. And also, when they come to visit, if they come to visit, I will also see them. So nine times out of ten, they’ll tell me they have a visit on this day, or the gent will tell me, and then I’ll make sure it’s my working day, that I’m there to greet and see them. Cause obviously most of the time we speak on a phone, but it’s sometimes nice to see them in person. And I always, even if the guy’s not on my case, again being in visits, I always check, just ask them “how are you doing?”, “How are you finding coming down here?”, “How are you finding, how is your gent coping inside?” Nancy, Pact Liaison Officer



Where Nancy highlights the importance of the relational work Pact engage in to ensure communication with coparents and across the wider family system, in line

with whole family system approach, Janet also demonstrates the importance of the redemptive approach to support with young fathers:

I just think the main thing that they're missing out on, that's what they feel like they're missing out on, is their children's life. And, you know, you could always say yeah, well it's your fault, kind of thing, but you know they've done what they've done, they've been judged for it, now it's about them trying to improve, you know, and it's about supporting them. So literally having more, even taking photos regularly. Like obviously, we try and take photos on a normal visit when we can but because obviously staffing issues, we can't always provide that, so it's about trying to have those memories through pictures, which families love. When we do take them, they're very, like, happy about it, like, 'I've not had a picture of my son for a year now,' you know, so when they do take a picture, they'll be like, 'Ah, this really is nice.' Because the children miss out as well, they don't have regular pictures of their dad. You know, they're growing, dad's growing as well, so you know it's about having an up-to-date picture or opportunity to take regular pictures ...Janet, Pact worker

Placing the child and their rights and need at the centre of the purpose of support is a powerful mechanism for the delivery of

what is also a father-inclusive form of support and engagement with these young men.



Securing recognition as a father: birth certificates

Related to the quality of the relationship that the young men had with their baby mum was the question of whether they are named on the birth certificate. Ethical and human rights questions have long been posed about the significance of essentially stripping children of their parents when their parent has offended (Shaw, 1992). Yet, this continues to be a very specific vulnerability for young fathers who are incarcerated either before or around the time of the birth of their child.

As well as the quality of their relationship with their co-parent, the young fathers gave a variety of reasons for this including being in prison already when their children are born and an inability to pay the £100 fee required to be named on the document. A consequence of this is that incarceration acts as a barrier both to achieving parental responsibility (PR) through being named as the biological father and their children's right to a father:

when they was doing the birth certificate originally, I was in prison, innit, so... Jackson

my mum told me about the parent, parental declaration form I could sign, get someone legal to sign it....They could give it to [partner/baby mum] she could take it to the registry. Obviously, I gave that option and she just didn't wanna do it, she said that I have to be there. I don't know, I just, I told her the solutions. Just never ever got put on it, so. Marlon

I just turned around to her and just, like do you know what I mean, I sit, sit the cards on the table, turn around to her and we had a discussion. And obviously saying like "when you're outta jail" and you're actually involved instead of being in jail then I'll put you on the birth certificate but there's no point in me doing it whilst you're in jail cause I don't know if you're gonna come out and actually be there for her, this and that. Emmerson

I weren't there at the time so...He's in my name but I've gotta sign it to be on it. I've gotta pay to sign....I think it's hundred quid. Noah

For some of the young fathers, however, support was not always forthcoming,

including in situations where PR was being withheld:

The only challenging thing I'd say is obviously with my baby mum arguing, stopping me from seeing the kid, not letting me be on the birth certificate, just stuff like that. That obviously, and that's another thing, if you lot could help, like obviously that's, there's not much help on stuff like that, is there, in prison, like getting put on the birth certificate... because it is my daughter and imagine my daughter growing up looking at her birth certificate and not seeing her dad's name on it. Vince

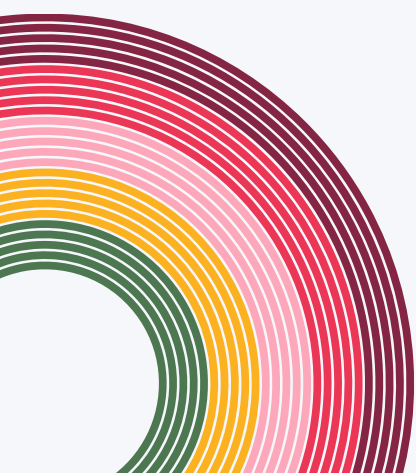
While Vince indicates that support for PR and birth certificates is not routinely provided, Pact staff demonstrated their awareness of the issue and also

independently observed that this is often an element of, or cause for, conflict in the co-parenting relationships of young fathers:

so, it's trying to help, what's the best way for, for all of them, to support all three of them, or four of 'em, in trying to help, but have that contact. Cause dad wants contact with the child but then obviously the mum has, and sometimes the dads are not on the birth certificate so it's about speaking to mum and saying, 'Okay, dad wants to be involved in the child, how best can we support that?' And maybe it's not face-to-face, it could be like via video calling. So, we encourage video calling or sending in pictures or, you know, drawings or whatever it is. So, I think building the relationship between the parents will help ease the contact with the children. Rachel, Pact worker

Continued support to young fathers around securing parental responsibility, alongside helping young fathers to build and sustain relationships with their co-parents, is already offered as part of Pact's wider relational work with families. As part of a gender equality and rights for the child driven agenda, attention to the ways in which young fathers have PR withheld while in prison, particularly by financial and systemic barriers, is key to reform.

As noted in the previous section, professional engagement with the wider family, including baby mums, may also be an important route to addressing these challenges. Young fathers in prisons would benefit from being routinely asked about whether they have PR and should continue to be considered a core offer to ensure that their children can maintain connections to their fathers over time.



'What works': existing provisions of advice, advocacy, and support for young fathers

In the isolating, demanding and often violent prison landscape, Pact provide vital support to young fathers and their families while they are in prison. Overall, the young fathers spoke positively about their engagement with staff from Pact describing the variety and the value of

Pact's offer to them and their families. Specifically, the young fathers benefited from holistic and tailored support around a range of issues that had both direct and indirect implications for their parenting:

There's support that you can get, like the Pact team, that can support you through anything that you go through, any challenges you're going through, difficulties of seeing your child or not seeing enough of your child, there's actually support there. Even if they don't come to you, you can go to them and be that voice and make it known. Marvin

The young fathers especially valued supported access to education and training, the provision of relationship advice and support,

help with establishing child contact arrangements, mental health and fathering support, and budgeting and finance management advice:

obviously just doing group sessions and that or one to one sessions and that. How to manage things better and shit....and stuff for my head and that for when, 'cause I've got anxiety and that's shit 'cause obviously I'm always thinking a' the worst outcomes in situations just now, you know. So... Emmerson

Done Storybook Dads. [Daughter] hasn't even listened to it yet cause obviously [girlfriend] has a PS4 and it won't work on a PS4 for some reason. I don't know why. But yeah, I've done Storybook Dads in like, what, 2021...I've done assertiveness and decision making, climate effects, social skills. I've done, like, cannabis awareness, I've done some parenting. I've done Dads Reconnected...I've done good relationships, I've done stress and conflict, and good communication....they've given me advice, I've spoke to [Pact support worker] a few times about my situations and they've given me advice in the best ways we can actually tackle the situation that I'm in at hand. But yeah, like, they do regular chats to see how I'm doing, mainly to see how my relationship with my child's doing, cause that's what's more important, you know what I mean. Marvin

Just seeing my family and just keeping in contact with them, you know, cause it is a strain financially and mentally to be able to keep in contact with my family in here. I feel like the prison itself don't really give a toss, to be honest with you, but Pact seem like they care a bit more and they're a bit more, you know, helpful with it. Theo

Pact also provide important advice around rehabilitation, raising awareness of the impacts of violent behaviours in the past through modelling a trauma-informed approach[1], teaching life skills to support them to engage in care and provisioning beyond prison, and highlighting the significance of empathy and compassion:

[1] This involves recognition that exposure to trauma can impact on neurological, biological, psychological and social development.

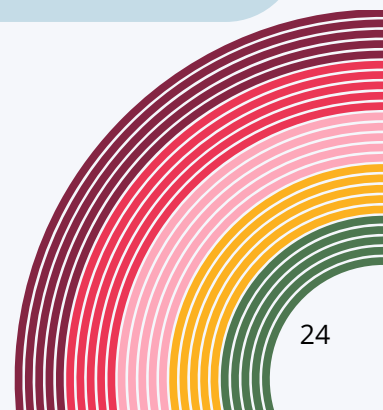
Yeah I mean it's made me realise a little bit more going through the victim awareness booklet and stuff like that what the victim may have felt like at the time of the...the robbery that I committed. It made me feel like, like realise, I mean I knew that it was wrong after I'd done it anyway but it, in terms a' going through the booklet it made me realise like in more depth of what he could have been going through and stuff like that. So very helpful. Noah

So I do think it's really important, you know, even if we do, and as well things like, you know, I dunno, teaching them how to cook, teaching them how to do this, teaching them how to manage budgets and all of that is really, really important so they are well rounded when it comes to care when they leave. Janet, Pact worker

Overall, it was apparent that continued and consistent delivery and presence

were key to the success and impact of the Pact offer for young fathers:

It's, obviously I think where a jail is so overcrowded and then it's hard to just sort one person's thing out innit cause obviously we're so busy. But when [Pact support worker] comes to see me, she does sort it, she makes sure that, I think it's more on the other people's side of getting hold a' them. But I when ask [Pact support worker] to do something she does do it. I don't have to say, 'can you keep doing?'. She'll try and sort it and obviously she'll tell me if she can't sort it. Fletcher



Family Days: spaces of care, compassion and connection

Perhaps the most valued aspect of the Pact offer is the provision of Family Days, which helped the dads to both see and interact physically with their children, their baby mums and family members. Providing an opportunity to sustain contact with their children and family members and overcome some of the physical barriers of being in prison,

including perceived fears around potential threats to family members, was an important reprieve from the challenges of prison life and enabled the young fathers to invest in their identities as nurturing and caring fathers. Family-friendly activities also help to create a space of fun and belonging:

There's bean bags, you throw the bean bags in the hoop. Finger painting, drawing pictures, we did the bean bag race last time. Egg and spoon race...face painting, picture painting, colouring in. 'Cause [Pact support worker] was telling me it was on the field in the summer, which is really nice to, like, be outside and doing all that kind of thing. Marvin

The family days innit. Like the family days we have here they're a bit, they're better than visits. Like I can actually do summat with them. In a visit I can just sit there and hold them, that's it innit.... if I hold someone's hand I can hold someone's hand. On a visit if I do that it's, you get surrounded by people and you're told you're trying to get drugs and that. But on the family day I can hold my girlfriend's hand and no-one can say anything. It's just, yeah I think there's more, there's more like a physical, physical thing innit. Like it's nice innit like.... Like it's just been, yeah like I dunno, it's just a good time innit. Like everything's just, it's like just a good, it's two hours of nothing but love innit. It's just nice innit." Seb

I've had two family day visits with him... Which are five hour one visits...I can get up and actually interact with him rather than a standard visit where you're sat on your chair. Where yeah I can hold me son but I can't get up and move around. I can't hug me partner properly. Whereas the family day visits you can get up, you can move round, you can play with your kids properly and stuff like that. You can actually sit on the sofas with your family and interact with them properly...rather than sitting like, you know, away from each other. Noah.

Pact staff also acknowledge the value of these days and their significance both in helping dads to reconnect with their families and to promote digital contact when physical co-presence is not possible:

including perceived fears around potential threats to family members, was an important reprieve from the challenges of prison life and enabled the young fathers to invest in their identities as nurturing and caring fathers. Family-friendly activities also help to create a space of fun and belonging:

So it's to help motivate and to mediate and build relationships with families and keeping in contact with families, because obviously most of these families are, you know, they've come from like [anon UK cities] and they're quite a distance away. So Pact try and help build those bridges and try and help the communication via, you know, trying to get them regular visits, like helping 'em set up the video calling, the family days, which are, you know, full days for those with children or young siblings or nieces and nephews. What else do we do? Obviously, family forums, so obviously helping families keep in contact and give us, I think it's an open communication about what the prison can provide and how we can support them in, you know, what we, you know, their son or their partner, whoever it is in prison. Rachel, Pact support worker

When the visitors do come here, we're part of the visit centre so, you know, we have face-to-face contact regularly during the week and obviously I'm available so if they've got any queries, like specific queries or anything, they've always got me via, you know, a phone call or email. So I think, and obviously with the family forum. So I think Pact do really well in regards to making, keeping that contact with families and, and families knowing where to come to, you know, when they do have some queries or issues, and I think we're the first point of call, Pact have different contracts that, you know, help prisoners when they do get released. Rachel, Pact support worker

In contrast to the regimented organisation of a day in prison, the family days offer an important space for care and connection with their children and family members,

but are also carefully managed in conversation with other agencies who have an awareness of the existing risks:

"They're allowed to wander around, interact with the children, play with them, read with them so those are great. Sometimes the contact is more formal. It might be via a solicitors, it might be by social services. Care teams, you do, you know, we obviously have to be aware of conflict of interests." Janet

Possible adaptations to the service

Where the young fathers were largely complimentary about the Pact offering, the delivery staff outlined numerous ways that they thought the fathers may benefit from further support,

providing the basis for recommendations premised on observations of the lived experience of young fathers in prison. Rachel reflects:

I mean ideal father inclusive support would include, from day one, triaging them, finding out what needs they have, if they have additional needs, making sure referrals are done straight away for that. Rachel

Nancy highlighted the value of building relationships with other professionals involved in the support of young fathers to enable a more collaborative, partnership-based approach to support. She identifies housing as one possible area in this regard.

In general, gaining knowledge and understanding of young fathers' biographies and support needs was recommended from the outset of their fathering journeys to enable a tailored and consistent approach. A key barrier to this is identifying funding and resource:

It's always more funding, isn't it, that's the issue. If there's more funding then things could, you know. Maybe more support within, I don't know if we could get involved within the housing side, or with, you know, just arrange an appointment, etcetera. Yeah, maybe support on that side. Nancy, Pact Liaison Officer

Rachel recommended:

"I think more programmes. More, like, group work. I think more of that and not just, even though we do provide booklets, and this is just the family services contract, I don't know, maybe other contracts do group work with them...So for about a period of three weeks, I would say, or whatever it is, you know, they come every morning, we sit down, have a proper face-to-face, you know, group session. I think that would be more impactful. Cause obviously other people, other prisoners can talk about their experiences and, you know, I feel like there will be more learning in that sense, and they feel that they're not alone or it's not just them that are going through it... obviously that would just need workers to be trained in particular.

Rachel

Rachel makes an important observation here about the importance of having a menu of support on offer for young fathers, to enable a more tailored and holistic approach to support.

A combination of 1-2-1 support, group and peer work and other activities is more likely to appeal to young fathers as a diverse cohort and to support those with children who are not yet verbal or ready to interact. Rachel concludes:

Like obviously, we try and take photos on a normal visit when we can but because obviously staffing issues, we can't always provide that, so it's about trying to have those memories through pictures, which families love...continued contact and having that, and giving them opportunities on, you know, giving them opportunities to have that contact, especially when they're living so far away, it's quite limited contact, isn't it? Like via phones or video calling. The video calling is only half an hour and for young babies, you can't do much over video call for young babies. You know, if their child's a new-born, they're just lying there, you know, they're not really having that interaction, are they? They're not, not being able to hold them or that, so it's about having that regular continued contact. Rachel.



Conclusions

Based on multi-perspective qualitative data generated with young fathers, aged 25 and under, who are currently in prison, and insights from support workers from the care-driven support charity Pact, there is a clear need for consistent and supportive interventions in prisons that invest in the fatherhood identity as a rehabilitative approach. These young men describe, and have experienced, highly complex and difficult lives shaped by poverty, homelessness, histories of discrimination and violence (both as perpetrators and victims) and associated trauma, insecure relationships with family members, poor mental health and financial insecurity. Fatherhood is therefore one of few positive gendered resources available to young fathers while in the harsh context of prison (Sandberg et al. 2022). The earlier this identity is reinforced in their parenting journey, the higher the potential there is for engaging these young men in a trauma-informed way and around the much wider set of challenges that may impact on their well-being and that of their children and families.

In the two prisons we researched, the Pact offer distinctively reinforces the importance of their fathering identities and the familial relationships of these otherwise vulnerable and marginalised young men. Particular challenges that Pact might encounter in engaging with young fathers in prison include: withheld parental responsibility; little to no opportunities for young fathers to establish a fathering role, especially if they have yet to meet their children; a protection narrative among fathers that may see them individually withdraw from contact with their children; financial instability, which restricts contact with

children using digital technology; and the risk-based regimes of prison systems that are all too frequently replicated by prison officers.

The evidence generated confirms that Pact staff are positive about the existing offer and are committed to, and successfully deliver on, its aims to provide a care-driven, compassionate and redemptive approach to support. The young fathers we interviewed placed high value on their engagements with staff from Pact and responded well when they received holistic and tailored support that helped them to overcome the challenges they encountered, including those that impacted on their identity and role as parents and in being recognised and acknowledged as a father.

In adopting a social and strengths-based model of support, as opposed to one that is entirely built on risk, Pact are able to promote the significance and value of sustaining relationships with their children and their baby mums, while simultaneously creating spaces and opportunities for young fathers to invest in practices of connection, care and engagement with their children and co-parent, where feasible. Family days, story books, and other creative means of preserving those connections are key to a sustained relationship with children and for sustaining the resonance of being a father among these young men. Investment in fathering and father identities also increases the potential for ameliorating longer term challenges for young fathers in and through rehabilitation and resettlement processes.





Recommendations

The interviews with the young fathers and Pact professionals supported the identification of key recommendations for refining 'what works', identifying key areas of support and exploring possibilities for future development:

1) Raising awareness of the Pact offer:

Not all young fathers and prison staff are aware of the Pact offer. Improving uptake among young fathers who are already in prison and for those who are entering prison for the first time, might be achieved by informing fathers of the offer when they first enter the prison system and making prison officers aware of the offer in their training. Improved data collection about young men when they enter prison, including capture of their parent and relationship status, could also underpin more targeted support for young fathers. This data could support processes of triage, improve staff understanding and responses to their needs, and enable the development and delivery of tailored whole-family support around the father early in their prison and parenting journey.

2) Provision of a fatherhood programme:

Both young fathers and existing staff would benefit from more group sessions including family and/or fatherhood programmes to advocate for the transformative power of being a father for their own and family well-being. These work best when delivered as part of a menu of interventions that may include 1-2-1 support, peer support and family days. On a national scale, Pact might campaign for the consistent delivery of fatherhood support in all prisons and advocate for ensuring protected spaces and opportunities for direct contact with children.

3) Offering bespoke support around coparenting relationships and rights issues:

Young fathers need support around a variety of issues relating to fatherhood. This includes but is not limited to: support in being named on the birth certificate; managing relationships with coparents, especially where a child has been removed; education around the value and importance of sustaining contact with their children while in prison, and support with how to have difficult conversations with children around parenting from prison. A fatherhood programme that embeds the value of father involvement and its benefits for children, coparents and the young men themselves would serve to create a peer support network built around fatherhood as a shared identity and sit alongside more tailored 1-2-1 support. The programme might be co-designed with young fathers in prisons so that it responds more directly to their needs and interests.

4) Engagement with coparents and 'baby mums':

Supporting young fathers to sustain and navigate their relationships with their coparent, regardless of relationships status, is necessary to support their continued involvement. Pact might consider the establishment of relationship courses with mothers that are delivered with and for them, to refine and evidence a whole-family approach and to tailor support for the variety of coparenting arrangements young fathers experience and report. So much of father involvement in prison hinges on positive relationships with their coparent that it is not always enough just to work with fathers.

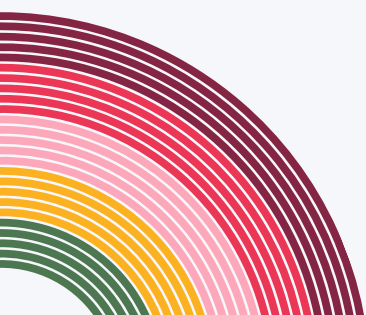


5) Advocating for greater privacy for young fathers to call family: Young fathers express fears about their family members being considered targets of violence. Advocating for safe and private spaces for fathers to communicate with family members from prison is encouraged as part of a caring, compassionate and family-centred approach.

6) Securing photographs and imagery of family members on behalf of young fathers: Young fathers who are estranged from their children say they benefit from and value access to photographs and imagery of their children to sustain a connection at a distance.

This currently comes at a cost to the young father. Pact may act as a mediator in securing these on behalf of young fathers in situations where they may not be able to afford or acquire these.

7) Future research possibilities: Further evidence of the longer-term parenting and criminal justice journeys of young fathers using qualitative longitudinal research will support more in-depth and nuanced insights of their changing needs, relationships, and resettlement processes and experiences.



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