

**Co-parenting in families with an imprisoned parent:
A systematic review**

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Abstract

Objectives<We explored the literature to investigate the main results of research into the practice of co-parenting in families with an imprisoned parent. Moreover, we aimed to point out the theoretical approaches used to analyze co-parenting in the case of parental detention and the methods by which co-parenting is recognized and measured. *Method*<We used the EBSCO platform to explore the databases PsycINFO and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. First, we researched parenting OR co-parenting AND (incarcerated mother OR incarcerated father); the next search was for family AND (incarceration OR prison OR jail). Then we searched for fathers OR mothers AND (incarceration OR prison OR jail), and the final search attempt was for wives OR partners OR husbands AND (incarceration OR prison OR jail). *Results*<After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, we selected 14 studies for this literature review. *Conclusions*: The number of studies about co-parenting in families dealing with parental detention is limited. Most of what is known about the co-caregiving system or alliance and children's adjustment has come from studies of families with young children. The methodological procedures used to explore the relationships between incarcerated parents, children, and home caregivers were individually focused. What emerged from this literature review is the need to rec-

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ognize the triadic nature of family relationships and therefore the need to adopt procedures that would allow us to analyze the triadic processes characterizing a family system.

Keywords: imprisoned parent; co-parenting; co-parenting alliance; co-caregiving system; systematic review.

Introduction

The growing number of children with an imprisoned parent has increased the political, social, and academic attention being paid to the persons in jail and their families (Western, Pattillo, and Weiman, 2004). An estimated 800,000 children live such an experience on a daily basis across Europe (Moore and Convery, 2011). The number of children with incarcerated parents is also growing rapidly in the United States (Mumola, 2000), where more than 1,700,000 children have a parent in prison (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). The children of imprisoned parents are considered a vulnerable group. Research suggests that these children often have poor outcomes in regard to well-being, education, and relationships (Boswell and Wedge, 2003; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Wildman, 2009). However, it is important to acknowledge that prisoners' children are not a homogeneous group. On one side, they experience similar stressful circumstances; on the other, they experience differences in coping styles, social support networks, and other factors that predict different outcomes for them. In particular, Murray (2005) noted that the impact of parental imprisonment is contingent on prior relationships between parents and between parent and child as well as on the preimprisonment predictability in the daily functioning and stability of family relations (Murray, 2005; Poehlmann, 2010). Studies have also found that in addition to children, incarceration affects prisoners' other family members, who often experience altered life trajectories (Goffman, 1961; Hairston, 1998, 2001, 2004). In particular, research has highlighted that incarceration decreases the likelihood that couples will stay in a committed relationship or marriage (Western, 2006; Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan, 2004). Furthermore, being in prison can have serious implications for the prisoners' role and identity as parents. They often do not feel legitimated and acknowledged as parents because the opportunities to be involved in parenting practices (e.g., playing and caring for children) are denied as part of the restriction of liberties connected with imprisonment. Furthermore, typical parenting supports (through partners, family members, and professionals) are often unavailable to jailed persons (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2011).

However, despite these research findings, little is known about the dynamics by which incarceration affects families and children. This is particularly true when the imprisoned parent is the father because most of the intervention policies and research focus on maternal imprisonment (Arditti, 2003, 2005; Poehlmann, 2005; Travis and Waul, 2004). Nonetheless, understanding how imprisonment shapes family relationships would help to generate programs and policies that can support family relationships and implement the justice system's important goals. Instead, research in this field has a fragile empirical base (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003), which is associated with an even weaker theoretical foundation (Dyer, 2005). By and large, studies converge on the idea that the maintenance of a relationship with an imprisoned parent can positively affect children's social, behavioral, and emotional outcomes; in contrast, inconsistent, restricted contact or no contact has the opposite effect. This is why most programs provide opportunities to maintain contact and supportive relationships between parents who are prison inmates and their children (Boswell and Poland, 2007; Murray, 2005; Poehlmann, 2010).

Nevertheless, the maintenance of a positive relationship between an imprisoned parent and her or his child cannot rely on only sporadic contact. The question is how can the incarcerated parent be present in her or his children's everyday life even if he or she is not there physically? This challenging question cannot be addressed without bringing the other parent or the children's caregiver into the picture. How do these characters support the imprisoned person's parenting role? What is their role and how important is it in predicting the development of a positive relationship between imprisoned parents and their children?

On this point, the literature offers an important hint. In fact, it documents that the quality of relational dynamics in well-functioning families implies a communication capable of promoting co-parenting. Co-parenting is based on the parents' ability to cooperate in a coordinated manner to sustain the children's development; it also includes the parents' capability for supporting each other, negotiating conflicts, and sharing parenting tasks (McHale et al., 2011). For families living apart, the possibility for the couple to continue to cooperate as parents is undermined by one parent's absence from the household. These families have a challenging task to cope with: The absence of one member entails the transition from an intra-familial triadic dynamic to a situation characterized by the coexistence of dynamics inside and outside the household and by the possible involvement of external caregivers (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, etc.; Fruggeri, 2018). Even if the scenario is quite complex, rela-

tionships can still survive if nurtured in the best way possible according to the family's life circumstances (Walsh, 2016). It is from this perspective that we have formulated the aims of this review.

The Aims of the Review

We explored the literature to determine the main results of the research about the practice of co-parenting in families with an imprisoned parent. Moreover, we aimed to point out the theoretical approaches other researchers have used to analyze co-parenting in cases of parental detention and the methods by which they recognized and measured co-parenting.

Method

Research Parameters

We used the EBSCO platform to explore the databases PsycINFO and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. First, we researched parenting OR co-parenting AND (incarcerated mother OR incarcerated father). This research resulted in 200 records. Given the number of studies we found, we conducted further searches to ensure that all the pertinent studies were captured. The next search was for family AND (incarceration OR prison OR jail). This captured all of the entries that related to the family and incarceration of a family member (parent), resulting in 250 records. Then we searched fathers OR mothers AND (incarceration OR prison OR jail), and this search resulted in 290 records. The final search attempt was wives OR partners OR husbands AND (incarceration OR prison OR jail), with 190 records related to the intimate relationships of imprisoned persons. We limited all of the searches to articles and book chapters.

For all studies found we only read the abstracts and keywords.

Inclusion Criteria

Of all the 930 findings, we considered only those based on co-parenting, defined as a relationship between the parents or caregivers characterized by communication, cooperation, and coordination in caring for children during a parent's detention. The parents could be together or divorced. In this review, we included all of the studies that analyzed co-parenting through self-reports or interviews and observational methods.

Finally we only included studies conducted since 2000 because we were interested in having an overview of the last twenty years of research in this scientific field.

Exclusion Criteria

Of the 930 articles, we excluded, first of all, all double studies. We excluded, also, all studies focused on the effects of a parent's detention on the child's psychological adjustment (e.g., the presence of internalizing or externalizing symptoms) if they focused on only one parent, not considering how co-parenting connects with the child's psychological adjustment. Moreover, we did not consider articles that, despite being detected by the keywords parenting, co-parenting, caregivers, or caretaking, actually analyzed only the parental identity and the well-being of the incarcerated person.

Finally we didn't consider paper written in a language other than English or Italian.

Comparison Criteria

We used the following comparison criteria to analyze and describe the studies:

- the main results of the studies about co-parenting in families with an incarcerated parent;
- the theoretical approach these studies used;
- the methods by which other researchers identified and measured co-parenting.

Results

The research carried out using the chosen keywords allowed to obtain a very high number of articles; probably because they were too generic in relation to the topic of our interest. However, the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria allowed to select only studies coherent with the objective of this review.

In particular we selected 14 studies for this literature review, as summarized in Table 1.

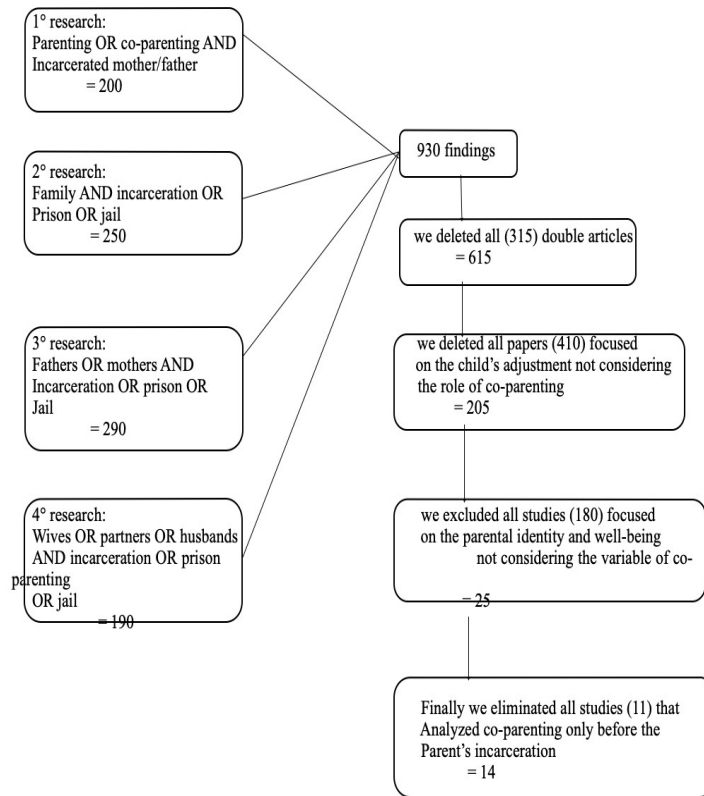


Fig. 1 – Diagram of selection process

Tab. 1 – *Studies analyzed for the literature review*

Study	Research aims	Theory and main theoretical constructs	Methods, sample, instruments, and variables	Select findings
Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Piettsch (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Analyze the co-caregiving relationships in extended kin systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Co-parenting; □ Co-caregivers alliance 	Narrative literature review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Children’s behavioral problems escalate when different co-caregivers fail to coordinate parenting efforts. □ When the alliance between caregivers is characterized by solidarity, children show better self-regulation, more prosocial behavior, and improved emotional understanding. □ A good co-parenting alliance can help foster secure attachments, and the socioemotional competences that secure attachments serve as assets for the child when he or she faces major stresses.
Loper, Phillips, Nichols, & Dal-laire (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Examine the level of agreement between inmate parents and caregivers regarding the co-parenting alliance. □ Examine the relationship between the co-parenting alliance and the effects on children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Co-parenting □ Parental alliance 	<p>Participants: 57 inmate parents (23 male, 34 female), 57 children’s caregivers (6 male, 51 female), and 57 children (27 boys, 30 girls)</p> <p>Method: Self-report questionnaires</p> <p>Instruments and variables: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Self-Reported Parenting Alliance Measure (Abidin and Konold, 1999); □ Questionnaire about contact between the inmate parent and child; □ Behaviorally Observed Appreciation of the In- </p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Inmate parents and children’s home caregivers have different perspectives on the quality of their co-parenting alliance. □ Inmate parents and home caregivers have different understandings of the other parent’s judgment and involvement in children’s lives. □ An implicitly strong parenting alliance is associated with a more positive experience during contact; a contact that includes criticism of the caregiver may be toxic to the child’s mood and undermines the alliance.

Shlafer & Poehlmann (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Analyze and describe children's and caregivers' perceptions and feelings about the caregiver-child relationship. □ Examine the contact between the child and the inmate parent. □ Analyze the association between the stability of the caregiving situation and children's behavior problems. 	Attachment theory	<p>carcerated Parent Toward Caregiver;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Positive Affect and Negative Affect Survey (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). 	<p>Participants: 57 families with children ages 4-15</p> <p>Method: Longitudinal mixed method (quantitative and qualitative analyses); self-report interview and questionnaires</p> <p>Instruments and variables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Interview about contact and relationships; □ Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden, 1986; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987); □ Revised Inventory of Parent Attachment (Johnson, Ketring, & Abshire, 2003); and □ Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991; Achenbach & Ruffle, 2000). <p>All questionnaires were administered at study intake and 6 months later.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Of the children with imprisoned parents, 39% do not discuss those parents. Of the children who discuss them, 41% reported positive perceptions and feelings about their relationship, and 31% reported negative ideas and feelings. □ Children who have contact with imprisoned parents feel less anger toward and alienation from the parent than children who have no contact. <p>Sometimes, contact with inmate parents does not occur because of children's negative feelings and the caregiver's preference. Most caregivers see themselves as children's protectors. Many of them restrict or control the children's contact with the inmate parent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ When caregivers report less positive feelings about children at intake, children are rated as displaying more externalizing behavioral problems at 6 months.
Flynn (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Analyze the impact of maternal incarceration, including subsequent care arrangements. □ Describe children's and moth- 	None specified	<p>Participants: 16 mothers and their children ages 10-18 (during mothers' imprisonment)</p> <p>Method:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Mothers are happier when children are with caregivers with whom they had a pre-existing relationship. □ Mothers express mixed feelings about 	

	ers' perceptions of the quality of the child's care and implications for mother-child relationships.		Self-report interview Instruments and variables: Interviews about mothers' and children's perception and satisfaction of the children's care during maternal imprisonment.		the care provided by fathers. □ Children's mixed feelings about their father's care are related to placement problems, difficulties in relationships, and personal problems.
Arditti, Smock, & Parkman (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Understand the experience of imprisoned fathers by considering their perspectives of their fathering experience and family relationships. □ Explore the way in which imprisonment influences fatherhood and the father's involvement. 	Responsible fathering (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998) and involvement (Lamb, 1986)	Participants: 51 inmate fathers with at least one child under age 18 Method: Semi-structured interview Instruments and variables: Interviews about father-child relationships during incarceration and about the nature of the men's contact with their children's mother or home caregiver.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Given the fathering limitations imposed by detention, men are entirely dependent on mothers or home caregivers for their relationship with children. □ Many fathers perceived mothers' gatekeeping, or efforts to prevent contact, as evidence of their powerlessness. □ Mothers facilitate contact when their relationship is still active and on friendly terms.
Fowler, Rossiter, Dawson, Jackson, & Power (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Understand parental strengths, strategies to manage separation from children and family, and support received to assist in parenting. 	Appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005)	Participants: 64 inmate fathers with children up to age 18 Method: Semi-structured interview and questionnaires with both closed and open responses Instruments and variables: Questionnaires and interview about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ demographic details; □ parental strengths; □ strategies to manage separation from children; □ support received to assist in parenting; and □ planning for release. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Several fathers identify an increasing awareness of the importance of a firm connection with their partners and children. □ Imprisoned parents' relationships with children and partners are more tenuous than with other family members such as mothers or grandmothers. □ Some of the men recognize that they would have minimal, if any, contact with their children on release, as their partners or the children's caregivers had actively restricted or stopped contact.

Swanson, Lee, Sansone, & Tatum (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Analyze the effects of two intra-familial barriers (children's and mothers' attitude) and of institutional barriers on inmate fathers' relationship with their children. 	None specified	<p>Participants: 185 inmate fathers</p> <p>Method: Self-report interview and questionnaire</p> <p>Instruments and variables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ inmates' self-report of the amount of contact with their children while in prison; □ questionnaire about inmates' willingness to be involved in their children's lives; and □ interview about institutional and family-related barriers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ The favorable attitude of the children's mother toward the father contributes to the likelihood of the father-child relationship during detention. □ Fathers who describe their children as having negative attitudes toward them are less likely to be involved with them. □ Favorable attitudes of family members appeared to be a necessary, albeit not sufficient condition, for a father-child relationship during detention. □ Pre-existing family relationships emerge as the most important factors related to inmate fathers' willingness for involvement with their children.
Tasca (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Examine children's connection with their imprisoned mothers and fathers, focusing on the caregiver in the likelihood of prison visits. 	Ecological perspective	<p>Participants: 300 inmate fathers and 300 inmate mothers</p> <p>Method: Structured interview</p> <p>Instruments and variables: Interview about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ parental prison visitation; □ caregiver; □ child's situational factors; □ parent's characteristics; □ child's characteristics; and □ institutional barriers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Children are more likely to be brought to visit their inmate parent by grandmother and mother caregivers. □ Prior parental involvement matters in whether children visit a mother or a father in prison. □ In the case of a lengthy period of parental confinement, personal visits are viewed as especially important by caregivers to sustain a bond between the inmate parent and the child.

Nesmith & Ruhlman (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Explore the impact of parental incarceration on children and their caregivers. □ Answer the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What are the unique aspects of caring for a child in this context? b) What are the caregivers' main concerns in regard to parenting? c) In what ways are the caregivers affected by caring for a child who has an inmate parent? d) Where have the caregivers found support, if any? 	None specified	<p>Participants: 21 female caregivers (mothers, grandmothers, and aunts) with 34 children (21 boys and 13 girls) ages 8–17</p> <p>Method: Self-report interviews</p> <p>Instruments and variables: Interviews, to capture the fluid roles and meanings of parental incarceration, on the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ the caregiver's relationship to the child and the child's inmate parent; □ how the child learns about the parent's incarceration; □ the perceived influence of imprisonment on the caregiver's life and the child's life; □ how the imprisonment affects their parenting decisions; and □ in what ways the caregiver struggles or finds support. 	<p>The following are unique aspects of raising the child of an inmate parent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ the acute stress caused by the arrest experience that the caregiver or the child may have witnessed directly; □ the caregiver's perception of the risks, benefits, and obstacles to prison visits. <p>Even when contact is desired by all family members, caregivers report it is difficult because of physical distance, visiting and phone regulations, and the discomfort of the visiting space.</p> <p>Parental incarceration has the following impacts on caregivers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Facing stigma: the sense of stigma is powerful when caregivers feel they are judged for the inmate parent's actions. □ Financial strain: The imprisonment leads to significant income loss. □ Sources of caregiver support: The imprisonment implies the loss of both formal and informal support.
Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Examine the following differences between the parenting contexts and experiences for inmate mothers and fathers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) the level of contact before and during imprisonment; b) the caretaking arrangements for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Parenting Stress (Rodgers-Farmer, 1999) □ Parenting Alliance (Weissman & Cohen, 1985) 	<p>Participants: 111 inmate men and 100 inmate women who had at least one child under age 21</p> <p>Method: Self-report questionnaires</p> <p>Instruments and variables: □ Parenting Stress Index- Modified (Abidin,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Inmate fathers, in comparison to inmate mothers have the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) less contact with children prior to and during imprisonment; b) a poorer parenting alliance with their children's caregivers; and c) higher levels of parenting stress concern

children during parental imprisonment; and
 c) the levels of parenting stress and parenting alliance with caretakers.
 Examine whether parenting stress and alliance are related to adjustment in prison (depression and violent behavior).

1995);
 Prison Violence Inventory (Warren et al., 2002);
 Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996); and
 Parenting Alliance Measure (Abidin & Konold, 1999).

ning their attachment to children and competence as a parent.
 Many inmate parents maintain contact with their children through indirect means.
 A strong alliance with caregivers is a key element for continued contact for both mothers and fathers.
 A strong alliance with caregivers is associated with reduced parenting stress among fathers, even when their contact with their children is limited.
 For both mothers and fathers, elevated levels of parenting stress are associated with higher levels of self-reported prison violence and aggression.
 Increased depressive symptoms are associated with parenting stress for inmate mothers.

Loper & Clarke (2013)

Investigate the relationship between two potential correlates of an inmate mother's child-caregiver alliance and child contact:
 a) the inmate mother's early attachment quality; and
 b) the inmate mother's relationship with the child's caregiver.

Co-parenting family structural framework (Minuchin, 1974)
 Attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1973; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985)

Participants:
 138 inmate mothers: 51 whose children are placed with their maternal grandmother and 87 whose children are with another caregiver
 Method:
 Self-report questionnaires and interview
 Instruments and variables:
 child-related information;
 caregiver status;
 Adult Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 2005);

The inmate mother's sense of warmth and acceptance by her own mother is associated with a more positive co-parenting alliance with her child's caregiver.
 Effects are moderated by children's placement, with the positive association occurring only if the children are placed with the maternal grandmother.
 Inmate mothers who recall a childhood that lacked warmth and acceptance from the individual who now cares for their child

Beckmeyer & Arditti (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Examine the association of in-person visiting frequency and problems with offender-child proximity, offender-caregiver relationship quality, and offenders' parenting distress and co-parenting. 	Family process model (Broderick, 1993; Arditti, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Parenting Alliance Measure (Abidin & Konold, 1999); and □ contact with children and caregivers. <p>Participants: 69 inmate parents</p> <p>Method: Self-report questionnaires</p> <p>Instruments and variables: a) questionnaire about in-person visiting frequency and problems; b) questionnaire about family relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Co-Parenting Scale (Ahrns, 1981); and □ Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995). </p>	<p>feel a sense of disconnection that interferes with a successful co-parenting alliance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Visiting frequency and problems are associated with inmates' perceptions of their family relationships and parenting experience. □ Problematic visits are associated with inmates' reporting less proximity to their child but unrelated to the quality of their relationship with the child's caregiver. □ The offender-caregiver relationship quality influences inmate parents' contact with their children and their ability to be involved in their children's upbringing. □ Frequent and less problematic in-person visitation is associated with less parenting stress but unrelated to co-parenting.
Roy & Dyson (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Explore the process of negotiation between mothers and fathers to secure, restrict, and define the fathers' role in their children's lives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Ambiguous loss □ Models of normative paternal involvement □ Identity theory 	<p>Participants: 40 inmate fathers</p> <p>Method: Field notes and life-history interview.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Gatekeeping emerged as a complex and often ambiguous process of negotiation and identity transformation. □ Gatekeeping is an active process of negotiating overlapping role expectations as partners and parents. □ Mothers may exercise control and restrict fathers' access to children but can also exercise control to open the gates for involvement during incarceration.

Arditti, Molloy, Spiers, & Johnson (2019) □ Examine how children and their caregivers interpret the children's experiences with their nonresident fathers within the context of parental incarceration. □ Environmental press (ecological theory) □ Family relationships quality

Participants:
27 caregivers and 33 children
Method:
Semi-structured interviews

□ *Babymama drama* as a process of gate-keeping requires an active response from fathers.

□ Caregivers' and children's narratives about nonresident fathers are situated within complicated ecologies of environmental press such as incarceration, geographic separation, and relationship quality challenges that change as families adapt to new realities and shifts in kin networks.

□ Children's perceptions and actions contribute to defining the patterns of their incarcerated fathers.

□ Maternal mediation is not a simple judgment, but it is driven by real concerns about children's well-being in highly stigmatized environments.

The Topics

The 14 studies included in this review share the main goal of analyzing how parenthood is performed in families with an incarcerated parent. Considering the issues addressed, we grouped the studies into three macro categories, respectively focused on the following topics:

- The parental detention and the co-caregiving system: Some of the considered studies analyzed whether parental detention modified the organization of the co-caregiving system and the quality of the relationships within it.
- The home caregiver as gatekeeper: Another group of the studies analyzed the role of the home caregiver in preventing or supporting the relationship between the child and the imprisoned parent.
- The co-parenting alliance and the quality of family members' well-being and relationships during parental detention: A third group of the articles analyzed how the maintenance of the co-parenting alliance influences the child's psychological and behavioral adjustment, the incarcerated parent's psychological adjustment, and the degree or quality of the contact between the child and inmate parent.

The parental detention and the co-caregiving system

Six studies explored the impact of parental detention on the caregiving system. Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that children who have regular contact with the incarcerated parent tend to show less anger toward and alienation from him or her. However, maintaining such contact does not depend only on children's willingness: Sometimes contacts are interrupted or limited because of a caregiver's choice, based on the caregiver's ambiguous feelings concerning the benefits of maintaining the relationship between the child and inmate parent. Shlafer and Poehlmann also found an association between the caregivers' negative feelings about the child's maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent and the presence of behavioral disorders in children. Furthermore, they detected a greater instability of the caregiving system when the mother is incarcerated. Regarding the possible impact of maternal detention on the caregiving system, Flynn (2012) highlighted the inmate mothers' positive perception when their children were in the charge of a caregiver with whom they had a previous good relationship. On the other hand, when the caregiver was the father of the children, the mothers showed ambiguous feelings and concerns about the quality of paternal care because they did not consider the fathers able to fulfill their parental role. The children also showed ambiguous feelings toward paternal care and difficulties in daily interactions when their father had a new partner.

The importance of the mothers' and children's attitudes also emerged in studies specifically focused on paternal detention. In particular, Swanson, Lee, Sansone, and Tatum (2013) analyzed the effects of two possible types of factors influencing fathers' perception of their relationship with their children: the mothers' and children's attitude (factors within the family) and institutional procedures (factors outside the family). The results confirm the authors' hypothesis that the mothers' and children's positive attitudes contribute to the likelihood that the relationship between the inmate father and his children is not only perceived as safe but also preserved. The authors highlighted how the paternal perception of children's negative attitude is associated with lower paternal involvement in the children's lives. However, the same study found that family members' positive attitudes are necessary but not sufficient to maintain the relationship between an inmate parent and his or her child throughout the parent's detention. In this regard, it is necessary to acknowledge the effects of institutional barriers: geographic distance, strict internal rules for visits and phone contacts, and inadequacy of space for families and children during visits. Furthermore, Swanson et al. (2013) underlined the importance of the quality of family relationships before a parent's detention; the quality seems to considerably affect the caregiver's willingness to continue to involve the father in the children's lives. The continuity of the quality of family relationships, before and during detention, also emerged in the study in which Fowler, Rossiter, Dawson, Jackson, and Power (2017) aimed to analyze the resources and strategies the family system uses to cope with the separation between the child and the inmate parent. Their results show a high awareness among incarcerated fathers of the importance of a strong connection with their partner and children during their absence from home. When fathers reported being restrictions by the partner or caregiver from having contact with their children, they also showed concerns for their future based on the belief that these restrictions might continue after their release.

Regarding the intra-familial characteristics that may hinder the inmate's parenthood, Tasca (2016) identified two types of dyads that are functional to the maintenance of the relationship between the incarcerated parent and the child. When the mother is incarcerated, the ideal dyad is maternal grandmother and child; when the father is incarcerated, the functional dyad is mother and child. Finally, Tasca (2016) highlighted that in the case of a long penalty, these caregivers (grandmother and mother) see the visits as the way to support the emotional bonding between the incarcerated parent and child. The results of this study do not seem to confirm the idea of interdependency between the intra- and extra-familial factors described by Swanson et al. (2013); however, the re-

sults confirm that the degree and quality of parental involvement before detention affects the frequency and quality of the visits by and interactions of children with their inmate parent.

Nesmith and Ruhland (2011) explored the following critical issues emerging from the relationship between the family and society during one family member's detention: the stress of having to cope with the social stigma, which is stronger when the relationship with the inmate is or was romantic because the caregiver feels he or she is judged for the (ex)partner's actions; the stress of having to cope with economic difficulties, because the arrest of a parent implies the loss of substantial economic income; and the lack of support, because detention often implies the loss of formal and informal support.

The caregiver as gatekeeper

The concept of gatekeeping refers to the caregiver's need to mediate the relationship and the interactions between the child and the incarcerated parent. Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) highlighted how at times, despite the child's willingness, the relationship with the incarcerated parent is strongly limited or interrupted because of the decisions of a caregiver who considers the relationship with the inmate parent potentially dangerous for the child. Likewise, Fowler et al. (2017) underlined paternal concerns about the relationship with children in all cases in which the relationship is hindered by the caregiver during detention. Similarly, Swanson et al. (2013) described the mother's attitude as one of the possible intra-familial barriers to the continuity of a meaningful bond between father and child. Generally, one can see that the concept of gatekeeping is strongly linked to the caregiver's position and role: a position in which it is not possible to abstain from exerting an influence on the nature and quality of the contacts and interactions between an inmate parent and child (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2011). Nesmith and Ruhland highlighted, in accordance with Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010), how the caregiver's attitude toward the relationship between the child and the inmate parent is deeply influenced by his or her perception of the risks and benefits of maintaining such a relationship for the child. Arditti, Smock, and Parkman (2005) found that given the limitations of detention, fathers feel they depend entirely on the mother or caregiver for the management of the long-distance relationship with their children. Most of these fathers perceive the caregiver's control and limitations as further confirmation of a total lack of power due to the fact that the control pertains not only to visits but also any other type of contact (calls, e-mails, mails, etc.).

Roy et al. (2005) explored the process of negotiation between mothers and fathers to secure, restrict, and define the fathers' role in children's lives during their detention. The authors used the concept of *babymama drama* to represent maternal efforts to either discourage or encourage fathers' involvement. Situated in a correctional facility, gatekeeping emerges as a complex and often ambiguous process of negotiation and identity transformation. Maternal gatekeeping, for these authors, is more than the mothers' values or beliefs about paternal involvement: It is an active process of negotiating overlapping role expectations as partners and parents, and it requires a focus on what goes on between mothers and fathers. In conflictual partnering relationships, mothers may exercise greater control and restrict fathers' access to children; however, mothers may also exercise control to open gates as catalyst for fathers' involvement during incarceration. The authors found that *babymama drama* as a process of gatekeeping requires an active response from the fathers. Incarcerated fathers and their children's mothers could develop a sense of empathy with each other, and this empathy could be vital to the encouragement of fathers' involvement.

Arditti et al. (2005) highlighted how mothers tend to promote contact between the father and child when the marital relationship is still good or amicable. In a more recent study, Arditti, Molloy, Spiers, and Johnson (2019) described the nonresident fathers' involvement as the result of a complex interaction between relational and environmental elements such as the length of detention, geographic separation, relationship quality challenges that change as families adapt to new realities, and a shift in kin networks. Moreover, for the authors, the children's perspective provides a window to gain insight into how they see their fathers and their own agency with regard to either encouraging or withdrawing from relationships with them. In other words, the results of this study demonstrate how children's attitudes and actions contribute to defining the incarcerated father's involvement (Allgood, Beckert, and Peterson, 2012; Dunn, 2004). Given the complex family relationships and subtle family processes implied in the situation, the maternal mediation relative to the nonresidential incarcerated fathers' involvement may not be due to a simple judgement on fathers but to caregivers' real concerns about children's well-being in challenging environmental contexts (Roy and Burton, 2007). For these reasons, the authors used the term *mediation* to sidestep the traditional definition of gatekeeping in favor of promoting a more nuanced understanding of the process caregivers activate when navigating relationships between children and incarcerated fathers. Mediation often includes recruiting other social father figures, kin caregivers, and adult volunteers.

On one hand, the inmate fathers tend to perceive the caregiver's control and mediation as a barrier to their parental role; on the other, the caregivers tend to describe the need for this control because they feel that without their efforts to coordinate and mediate the interactions, no contact between the child and inmate father would be possible (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2011). As the studies discussed in the following paragraph will highlight, the caregiver's efforts to mediate and coordinate have positive effects only if these actions occur in a relationship characterized by a positive co-parenting alliance, which in this sense can be seen as the main factor for overcoming the one-directional role of the home caregiver as gatekeeper.

The co-parenting alliance and the quality of family members' well-being and relationships during parental detention

The co-parenting alliance has been defined by Cohen and Weissman (1984) as the mutual and shared efforts being made for the future of the couple and the family. Five studies analyzed the effects of maintaining a co-parenting alliance on the child's psychological and behavioral adjustment, on the inmate parent's psychological and behavioral adjustment, and on the degree and quality of contact between the child and incarcerated parent (Beckmeyer and Arditti, 2014; Cecil, McHale, Strozier, and Pietsch, 2008; Loper and Clarke, 2013; Loper, Carlson, Levitt, and Scheffel, 2009; Loper, Phillips, Nichols, and Dallaire, 2014). One of these studies (Loper et al., 2014) analyzed the degree of agreement between the inmate parent and caregiver about their perception of the degree and quality of their co-parenting alliance and the effects of this alliance on the child's psychological adjustment. The results show that the inmate parents tend to describe higher levels of co-parenting alliance than the caregiver; the higher emphasis incarcerated parents assign to the parental alliance could have a protective function with respect to their parental identity and sense of familial belonging. The difference between the inmate parent's and caregiver's perception emerges also with respect to the degree and the implications of the inmate parent's involvement in the child's life: The inmate parent shows a more positive perception of his or her parental competence and of the frequency of contact with the children. Moreover, in the presence of a solid co-parenting alliance, children show a more positive emotional adjustment during contact (also indirect) with the inmate parent. On the contrary, an inmate parent's critical attitude toward the caregiver negatively affects the child's emotional state and the co-parenting alliance.

In their review, Cecil et al. (2008) analyzed co-caregiving alliances in extended kin systems, the most typical family circumstance for incarcerated mothers. The benefits of cooperation among the adults responsible for children's care and upbringing are many: When the alliance is characterized by greater solidarity, children show better self-regulation, more prosocial peer behaviors, and greater empathy and emotional understanding (Lindahl, 1998; Lindahl and Malik, 1999; McHale, 2007; McHale and Cowan, 1996; McHale, Johnson, and Sinclair, 1999). On the contrary, when detachment and antagonism are present between parents, children show more behavioral problems and greater likelihood for insecure parent-child attachment (Johnson, 2003; Katz and Low, 2004; McConnell and Kerig, 2002; McHale and Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, and Frosch, 2001). The early socioemotional competences that secure attachment breeds serve as an asset for the child when he or she faces major stressors later in life (Farrington and Welsh, 2007).

In three other studies (Beckmeyer and Arditti, 2014; Loper et al., 2009; Loper and Clarke, 2013), the researchers aimed to explore and analyze the parental alliance and co-parenting in relation to other specific contextual factors: the mother's detention versus the father's, the degree and quality of the relationship between the incarcerated parent and caregiver prior to arrest, the frequency and quality of contact during detention, and both parents' level of stress during detention. For these studies, the researchers used the construct of parental stress, which Rodgers-Farmer (1999) defined as a condition in which one or both parents experience a discrepancy between their resources and the requirements linked to their parental role. All in all, these studies found that the inmate fathers describe lower levels of contact with children before and during detention than the mothers do. They also found that a lower alliance with the caregiver is associated with higher levels of parents' stress, specifically linked to a low degree of sense of competence and of their attachment bond with the children. However, when the co-parenting alliance is maintained, the fathers show lower levels of parental stress even in the case of limited direct contact with their children during detention (Loper et al., 2009). Nevertheless, for the inmate mother and father, maintaining a positive parental alliance seems to be the key element for preserving contact with the children during detention. Finally, for both parents, a low parental alliance is associated with higher levels of parental stress and violent behaviors during detention (Loper et al., 2009).

Regarding maternal detention, Loper and Clarke (2013) observed that the presence during childhood of an attachment bond between the inmate mother and her own mother and a relationship characterized by a sense of warmth and acceptance is associated with a good co-caregivers al-

liance during detention when the child lives in the maternal grandmother's home. Given the same child's living arrangement but with a maternal attachment bond lacking in warmth and acceptance, the mother describes a sense of disconnection that negatively affects the building of a proper co-caregivers alliance. In cases of both the mother's and father's detention, Beckmeyer and Arditti (2014) analyzed the relationship between the frequency of visits in prison and the following aspects: the emotional bond between the child and inmate parent, the quality of the relationship between the incarcerated parent and caregiver, the degree of co-parenting alliance, and the level of parental stress. The results of this study highlighted how the frequency and issues linked to prison visits affect the inmate parent's perception of his or her own family relations and parental experience during detention. More specifically, the difficulties related to prison visits are associated with the inmate parent's perception of a lower emotional bond with the child, but they are not associated with the quality of the relationship between the incarcerated parent and caregiver. In other words, frequent and less problematic visits seem to promote lower levels of parental stress, but they do not seem to affect the quality and degree of the alliance between the inmate parent and caregiver.

Main Theoretical Models, Constructs, and Methods

The articles included in this review differ as to the theoretical models, constructs, and methodologies used.

The attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973; Main, Kaplan, and Cassidy, 1985) is the theoretical model used for the analysis of the children's feelings toward the inmate parent and caregiver and for the assessment of the quality of the bond between the child and his or her father and mother. One of the studies (Fowler et al., 2017) appears innovative for the theoretical model used to explore the sources and strategies through which the family system copes with the separation between the child and inmate parent: the appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). The article referring to such an approach explored the process of individual change through the recognition of one's own resources. Tasca (2016) referred to the ecological model by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which allows one to understand the individual–context relationship and the ways of acting within it; this model allows one to explore the complexity and multidimensionality of the human and social interactions. Finally, the family process model (Samani, 2005) is used in the study by Beckmeyer and Arditti (2014): This model conceptualizes the family process as the set of functions that organize a family system,

sustaining it in dealing with the adjustment to new needs and situations that, in these specific cases, are caused by parental detention. The main theoretical constructs used are co-parenting (Feinberg, 2003; McHale and Lindahl, 2011), parental alliance (Cohen and Weissman, 1985), and parental stress (Rodgers-Farmer, 1999), which we have described above. To explore the impact of parental detention on family relationships, Arditti et al. (2005) used the construct of *responsible fathering*, which implies the father does the following: provides material, emotional, and psychological support to his child; shares the child's care with the mother from pregnancy; and shares daily housework. Another central construct that was defined and declined differently in each of the studies is gatekeeping (Arditti et al., 2005, 2019; Fowler et al., 2017; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2011; Roy et al., 2005; Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010; Swanson et al., 2013). Finally, the theory of ambiguous loss has been used to examine fathers' and mothers' negotiations post incarceration (Roy and Dyson, 2005).

The methodology used to explore the above theoretical constructs relied solely on self-report tools: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The following instruments were used to measure attachment: the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden, 1986; Armsden and Greenberg, 1987) and the Inventory of Parental Attachment (Johnson, Ketring, and Abshire, 2003). The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment measures children's perception of their attachment to parents and peers considering three specific dimensions: (a) trust, (b) communication, and (c) alienation. The Inventory of Parental Attachment explores parents' perception of their attachment to their children. The tool to assess co-parenting and parental alliance mostly used across studies is the Parenting Alliance Measure (Abidin and Konold, 1999), which consists of 20 items that measure the perception of each parent about the strength of his or her own alliance. The Co-Parenting Scale (Ahrns, 1981) is another tool used with the same purpose; it measures the level of agreement on the caregiving methods, parental support, and sharing of family dynamics. The 120 items of the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995) allow analysis of the three main aspects of parental stress: (a) the child's characteristics, (b) the parent's characteristics, and (c) the contextual and institutional characteristics. In addition to these validated and standardized tools, researchers used questionnaires and tailored interviews to explore the ways and frequencies of contact and quality of family relations. Only in one study (Loper et al., 2014) was an observational procedure used with the aim of catching the nonverbal signals of the co-parenting

alliance and analyzing the relationship between the presence of these nonverbal signals and the child's emotional adjustment during contact (also indirect) with the inmate parent.

Discussion

Despite the limited number of studies included in this review, it was possible to draw an interesting path of analysis and reflection thanks to the multiplicity of research aims guiding the investigations. In fact, it was possible to analyze the impact of parental detention across different levels of complexity. The first group of articles offered a general picture of the implications of parental detention on the child caregiving system. Their main focus was the two possible types of barriers to parenting and maintaining the relationship between the inmate parent and child: the extra-familial barriers such as institutional restrictions and the intra-familial barriers such as the caregiver's negative and opposing attitude. The latter were the focus of studies that described the caregiver's role as gatekeeper of the interactions and relationship between the child and inmate parent. In these studies, albeit guided by relational questions, data analysis was conducted from either an individual or a dyadic approach based on the attachment theory. Analyzed from an individual perspective, a phenomenon like gatekeeping emerges as different according to each parent's viewpoint: For the inmate parents, the caregiver's mediation is a restriction of their parental role, but for the caregiver, it is a necessary regulatory function for maintaining contact and communication between the inmate parent and child.

However, a less dualistic and more nuanced definition of gatekeeping emerged in several studies (Arditti et al., 2019; Roy and Burton, 2007). When the complex family relational dynamics involved in a situation of parental detention taken into account, the caregiver's mediation appears to be a multifaceted adaptive process which includes recruiting other social fathers, kin caregivers, and adult volunteers and dealing on the caregivers' behalf with the concerns for the children's well-being in challenging environmental contexts. Even if contextualized, gatekeeping maintains an individualistic view of the complex relationships between parents and children in the case of the fathers' detention. As Roy et al. (2005) suggested, maternal gatekeeping is more than mothers' values or beliefs about paternal involvement; it is a process of negotiating the overlapping role expectations of partners and parents who require an active response from fathers.

Once researchers underlined the opportunity to consider any strategy adopted by the caregivers with respect to the relationship between the incarcerated parents and their children as a result of an interpersonal negotiation, they also introduced new and more relational constructs such as co-parenting and the parental alliance. Co-parenting is, in fact, the parents' ability to cooperate to sustain their children during physical and psychological development and implies the ability to support each other, negotiate conflicts, and share parental tasks (Feinberg, 2003; McHale and Lindahl, 2011). When the parental couple succeeds in achieving these goals despite the physical distance, gatekeeping dissolves into a mutual relationship in which the caregiver alone does not take on the responsibility of the relationship between the inmate parent and the child: Both parents, sharing the responsibility of parenthood, negotiate decisions for the child's well-being. In this regard, co-parenting represents a protective factor for the maintenance of long-distance parenting. This is certainly an important movement toward more complex methodology, even if the relational perspective adopted in these studies was a dyadic perspective. Focusing on co-parenting and parental alliance, the researchers considered only the relationship between the two adults (parent or caregiver) supposing a linear relationship (causality) between the quality of this dyadic relationship and the child's behavioral and psychological adjustment. In other words, the child does not seem to have an active role (ability to influence) in the relationship between his or her parents; on the contrary, the child seems to undergo the quality of the parents' relationship.

The dyadic conception of relationships was also expressed in the methodological choices: The child's viewpoint and role in relation to the parental alliance were not explored. Children were included among the participants in only two studies (Arditti et al., 2019; Loper et al., 2014); however, in one of these cases (Loper et al., 2014), the authors did not explore the children's point of view but rather the parent or caregiver's point of view about the child's emotional and behavioral adjustment. Another characteristic of the sample considered in these studies, except for those of Loper et al. (2014) and Arditti et al. (2019), is the absence of the caregiver's perspective about the co-parenting and parental alliance, as the authors only interviewed the inmate parent. The procedures and the measurement instruments (questionnaires and individual interviews) used were coherent with the theoretical perspective, yet such self-report tools do not allow for the analysis of the co-parenting and parental alliance in their relational nature, giving only a subjective point of view of these processes.

A relational description of the processes involved requires observational methodologies that imply a direct observation of family interactions, thus an observation of what works in the family relationships, beyond the members' awareness. In this regard, Loper et al. (2014) combined self-report and observational procedures, with an aim of catching the nonverbal signals of the alliance between the inmate parent and caregiver and achieving an innovative result for literature: A strong and implicit co-parenting alliance is associated with the child's positive emotional adjustment also in the case of indirect contact with the incarcerated parent. However, given the limited sample size (57 families), the data are not generalizable, and other studies are needed to confirm the findings.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The number of studies about co-parenting in families dealing with parental detention is limited. Most of what is known about the co-caregiving system or alliance and children's adjustment has come from studies of families with very young children; consequently, the results cannot be extended to families with adolescents. However, despite the limited number of studies and the limitations of the considered samples, they shed light on the impact of parental detention across different levels of complexity: the transformations of the co-caregiving system, the role of the home caregiver, and the effects of the quality of the co-parenting alliance on the family members' well-being and relationships. We want to underline, though, that even if the studies aimed to explore the relationships between the incarcerated parent, the child, and the home caregiver, the methodological procedures were individually focused, thus detecting, in most cases, only the individual viewpoint of the family members about the addressed issues and matters.

Methodological choices, based on a systemic approach, would be more functional to the research questions formulated in the literature: Exploring the nature and quality of the family relationships implies considering the complexity of the processes through which these dynamics take place. The question is whether it is sufficient for the analysis of a co-parenting and parental alliance to take into account only the point of view of a single member, akin to the specificity of the caregiving system for children with a parent in prison. All in all, what emerged from this literature review is the need to recognize the triadic nature of family relationships and therefore the need to adopt tools and procedures that allow researchers to analyze the triadic processes characterizing a family system.

New possible research lines emerge from this analysis of the literature in terms of research aims and theoretical–methodological issues.

As to the research aims, it would be interesting to further explore how families with an incarcerated parent cope with the coexistence of triangular dynamics that are both internal and external to the household. Specifically, it would be interesting to extend, with appropriate relational methodologies, the ideas advanced in some of the articles considered in this review. In particular, it would be useful to analyze the impact of the parental alliance on the co-caring system from a triadic perspective. Given that the maintenance of a good co-parenting alliance decreases the risk of disruption of the attachment bond between the inmate parent and his or her child, what an effective co-parenting alliance looks like to a parent living outside the household should be explored. What are the dimensions of the alliance that emerge as the most important and effective? Furthermore, is there any active role that children play in supporting or preventing the development of a co-parenting alliance? What is the caregiver's role in either promoting or undermining the quality of the incarcerated parent's parenting skills? What behaviors and attitudes of an incarcerated parent with respect to his or her children assure the caregiver will support such a relationship? In other words, it might be reasonable to explore the effects of good triadic coordination on the quality of the relationship between the incarcerated caregiver, the parent, and the children.

These research questions may find an answer through the adoption of a triadic approach that allows for the analysis of different levels—the individual level, the dyadic level, and the family as system highlighting the interdependence of these relational contexts. The above theoretical concerns also have methodological implications: The interdependence can be analyzed only by multimethod procedures. The combined use of observational procedures and self-reports also would allow us to detect internal and external points of view, the represented and the practicing family (Reiss, 1989), and thus, to explore the different aspects of the complexity of family relationships when a parent is serving time in jail.

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