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Paternal incarceration, child care instability, and children's wellbeing

Kristin Turney[1] | **Daniela E. Kaiser**[2]

[1]Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine, California, USA

[2]Department of Criminology, Law and University of California, Irvine, California, USA

Correspondence
Kristin Turney, Department of Sociology, University of California—Irvine, 3151 Social Science Plaza, Irvine, CA 92697, USA.
Email: kristin.turney@uci.edu

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines the relationship between paternal incarceration, child care instability, and children's well-being.

Background: Despite the established repercussions of paternal incarceration for children and families, little is known about how paternal incarceration is associated with child care arrangements and how unstable child care arrangements moderate the deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration for children's well-being.

Methods: We use data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a cohort of urban children born around the turn of the 21st century, to examine the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and child care instability (measured by long-term instability, multiplicity, and back-up care arrangements). We also examine how child care instability moderates the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors.

Results: Analyses suggest three main findings. First, paternal incarceration is positively associated with long-term child care instability, net of prior instability and factors associated with selection into paternal incarceration. Paternal incarceration is not associated with multiplicity or back-up care. Second, the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors is larger among children with unstable care arrangements than among those with stable care arrangements. Third, children living with their father prior to his incarceration, compared to children not living with their father prior to his incarceration, experience larger consequences of paternal incarceration.

Conclusion: We document the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability and how this instability moderates the association between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors.

KEYWORDS
child care, child well-being, incarceration

As U.S. penal populations have grown dramatically since the mid 1970s, paternal incarceration has become a normative life course event among poor children and children of color (Sykes & Pettit, 2019). The extraordinary and unequally distributed risk of paternal incarceration has motivated research assessing the consequences of paternal incarceration for families and children. This scholarship documents how paternal incarceration is a stressor that generates considerable instability for families, leading to mostly harmful repercussions for children's well-being (Adams, 2018; Foster & Hagan, 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021).

Though research on the consequences of paternal incarceration provides good reasons to expect that paternal incarceration alters children's care arrangements, the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability remains unexplored. Theoretically, the stressor of paternal incarceration likely disrupts romantic and coparenting relationships, engenders stress, and drains family resources (Adams, 2018), all of which may increase child care instability for families (Pilarz et al., 2022). Additionally, child care instability may moderate the well-established harmful repercussions of paternal incarceration for children's problem behaviors (Geller et al., 2012). Paternal incarceration creates considerable changes to family dynamics and, when paternal incarceration occurs alongside childcare instability, the consequences for children's problem behaviors may be especially detrimental (whereas stable child care arrangements in the context of paternal incarceration may mute these detrimental consequences).

In this paper, we use data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a cohort of children born in urban areas around the turn of the 21st century, to examine the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration (measured as incarceration in the past 2 years), child care instability (measured as long-term instability, multiplicity, and back-up care

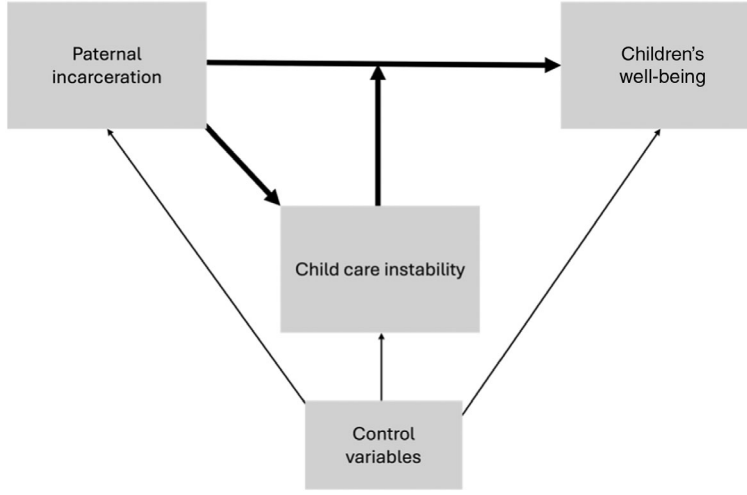

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model linking paternal incarceration, child care instability, and children's well-being.

arrangements), and children's well-being (measured as children's problem behaviors) (Figure 1). We focus on paternal incarceration, as opposed to maternal incarceration or the more general parental incarceration, given both its commonality and distinct consequences for family instability (Turney & Goodsell, 2018). First, we estimate the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability, conditional on experiencing any non-parental child care. Second, we examine how child care instability moderates the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's well-being. All analyses adjust for characteristics associated with selection into paternal incarceration, as fathers' confinement may reflect characteristics of families that increase child care instability and impair children's well-being (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). This study provides the first quantitative accounting of how fathers' confinement shapes child care instability among children. By documenting a relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability—an important aspect of family life with implications for children (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020)—we highlight the role of the criminal legal system in reproducing and augmenting inequalities in children's outcomes.

IMPORTANCE OF STABLE CHILD CARE FOR CHILDREN

Stable child care, which we define as a component of children's broad caregiving environment that involves non-parental care arrangements (including center-based care, relative care, and non-relative care), is important for children's well-being. Scholarship on non-parental child care conceptualizes child care instability as comprising three components: long-term instability, which refers to changes in non-parental caregiving arrangements over time; multiplicity of caregivers, whereby children regularly experience concurrent child care arrangements; and back-up arrangements, used by caregivers when their regular child care routines are disrupted due to unforeseen circumstances (Adams et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2008; Pilarz & Hill, 2014).

Research suggests that child care instability is consequential for both children and the adults in charge of their care, even though instability may also signal the availability of support networks that can provide caregiving assistance. Children are more likely to thrive when they experience predictable routines in familiar settings and are under the care of people with whom they feel secure (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Continuity in child care arrangements fosters positive interactions between children and caregivers and promotes the development of secure attachment relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013), which are key to children's learning and social competence (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). As such, child care instability may hinder the formation of secure caregiver-child relationships and force children to adapt to multiple environments with different rules and discipline styles, all of which can lead to behavioral, socioemotional, and cognitive problems (Ahnert et al., 2006; Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Morrissey, 2009; Pilarz & Hill, 2014). Moreover, child care instability is often stressful and disruptive for caregivers' routines, as it involves re-accommodating and coordinating child care and work schedules (Chaudry, 2004; Pilarz & Hill, 2017), which may strain parenting practices and contribute to children's problem behaviors (Fiese et al., 2002).

PATERNAL INCARCERATION AND CHILD CARE INSTABILITY

Paternal incarceration likely facilitates child care instability—including frequent changes in arrangements, multiple arrangements, or needing back-up care—among children receiving non-parental care. Paternal incarceration is a stressor that shifts the structure and functioning of families in ways that may facilitate child care instability. First, the dissolution of romantic relationships that is common following paternal incarceration can alter children's living

arrangements and prompt changes in child care arrangements that engender long-term child care instability (Pilarz et al., 2022; Turney, 2015). Relatedly, paternal incarceration reduces father-child contact and involvement of fathers in children's lives (Geller, 2013), thereby reducing the pool of caregivers mothers can resort to for child care and potentially increasing instability. Second, fathers' confinement deteriorates mothers' mental health (Wildeman et al., 2012), which may render caregiving more challenging and increase the likelihood of child care instability. Third, paternal incarceration increases financial difficulties that push mothers to undertake new employment responsibilities (Bruns, 2019), which may be precarious and characterized by changing and unpredictable work schedules (Schneider & Harknett, 2019), and fosters housing insecurity (Geller & Franklin, 2014). Unstable work commitments may impede parents' ability to consistently ensure children's attendance to child care centers, encourage multiple simultaneous care arrangements, and prompt them to rely on back-up care arrangements (Carrillo et al., 2017; Harknett et al., 2022). Unstable housing can disrupt children's attendance to child care centers or non-institutional care arrangements (Lowe et al., 2003), thereby increasing long-term child care instability (Pilarz et al., 2022). And, though our primary focus is on child care instability among families relying on non-parental care, the changes stemming from paternal incarceration may prompt families to make other changes to their care arrangements, wherein they either enter or exit a non-parental care arrangement (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012).

Additionally, it is likely the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability is more pronounced for children living with their fathers prior to incarceration. Among children with residential fathers, paternal incarceration may be conceptualized as a family structure transition—as it results in the forceful removal of a parent from the household and prompts the renegotiation of family roles—that disrupts child care arrangements (Crosnoe et al., 2014). Residential fathers are more involved in their children's lives than their nonresidential counterparts (Castillo et al., 2011; Harris & Ryan, 2003), thereby making their removal from family systems particularly disruptive to available caregiving resources. Residential fathers also contribute more financial resources to their children's households than nonresidential fathers (Carlson et al., 2017); accordingly, their confinement may have especially severe consequences for families' economic resources and, therefore, child care instability.

THE MODERATING ROLE OF STABLE CHILD CARE

Both child care experiences and paternal incarceration are consequential for children's well-being, particularly children's behavior (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Crosnoe et al., 2014; Geller et al., 2012; Pilarz & Hill, 2014; Wildeman, 2010). Child care instability may moderate the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors. The consequences of paternal incarceration for children's well-being may be especially deleterious among children navigating child care instability. These children are both navigating the strains of paternal incarceration—including material hardship, eroded maternal mental health, and the psychosocial consequences of having a parent removed from their life—and are deprived of the familiar and predictable care routines important for child development (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Pilarz & Hill, 2014). The disruption and uncertainty of child care instability may exacerbate challenges endured by these children. Relatedly, the consequences of paternal incarceration on children's well-being may be muted when children do not experience childcare instability. Having a stable and familiar care routine during a difficult period in family life may allow children to feel secure, partially protecting them from the deleterious consequences of paternal absence and familial strains. Variation in the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors by child care instability may be especially apparent among children who resided with their fathers prior to incarceration, as the forceful removal of a parent from the

child's household may disrupt care arrangements in ways that are detrimental to children's problem behaviors.

ACCOUNTING FOR SELECTION INTO PATERNAL INCARCERATION

Though it is likely that the stressor of paternal incarceration—and the corresponding changes to family life—increase child care instability, and that child care instability moderates the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's well-being, it is also possible these relationships result from characteristics associated with selection into paternal incarceration. Families who do and do not endure paternal incarceration are quite different from one another, with those enduring paternal incarceration commonly embedded in other structural disadvantages that may lead to child care instability or impaired child well-being (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Those exposed to paternal incarceration, for example, are more likely to be people of color (Sykes & Pettit, 2014). Those exposed to paternal incarceration also experience different family environments than those not exposed to paternal incarceration, as they are less likely to be married, have lower relationship quality, and more strained co-parenting relationships (Giordano, 2010; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). They experience socioeconomic disadvantages prior to incarceration exposure including lower levels of educational attainment, greater financial challenges, and a greater likelihood of living in under-resourced neighborhoods (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). They have more physical and mental health difficulties (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Characteristics such as domestic violence, impulsivity, cognitive ability, and incarceration history are especially associated with selection into incarceration (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Sampson, 2011). It is important to account for these characteristics, all of which may render the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability spurious.

METHODS

Data

We examined the relationship between paternal incarceration, child care instability, and children's well-being with data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a cohort of children born to mostly unmarried parents in urban areas between 1998 and 2000 (Reichman et al., 2001). Parents have been interviewed seven times, including at their child's birth and when their child was about 1, 3, 5, 9, 15, and 22 years old. We used the first four waves of data given our focus on early childhood. These data have been used extensively to understand the repercussions of paternal incarceration for families (for a review, see Turney & Haskins, 2019) but, to date, no research examines how paternal incarceration is linked to child care instability.

Analyses relied on two analytic samples to address our two primary research questions, both of which were restricted to families who used any form of non-parental child care. (See Table S1 for logistic regression models that estimated the likelihood of using any child care, which shows a positive association between paternal incarceration and any child care.) The first analytic sample, used to estimate the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and child care instability, included 2454 families. We excluded the 677 families who did not participate in the 3-year survey (as this is when child care instability is measured), the additional 1765 families who reported no non-parental child care at the 3-year survey, and the additional 12 families missing values on any of the three indicators of child care instability. The second analytic sample, used to estimate how child care instability moderates the association between recent first-time paternal incarceration and children's well-being, included 1844

families. We excluded the 610 families from the first analytic sample who were missing data on children's problem behaviors (mostly due to caregiver non-participation in the 5-year in-home survey, which is when children's problem behaviors were measured, and not item non-response). There were few meaningful differences between the two samples, and supplemental analyses that estimated child care instability with the smaller analytic sample came to similar conclusions.

Measures

Paternal incarceration

The main explanatory variable was an indicator of recent first-time paternal incarceration between the 1- and 3-year surveys, a binary variable indicating the father was incarcerated in jail or prison during this time. We examined recent first-time paternal incarceration to establish time-ordering between the explanatory variable and the outcome variables (measured at the 3-year survey). Both mothers and fathers were asked to report on paternal incarceration at the 3-year survey. Mothers were asked if the father had spent any time in jail or prison if she reported at the 1-year survey that the father had never been incarcerated. Fathers were asked if they had ever been incarcerated at the 3-year survey (and we used information from their reports at the 1-year survey to make their measure comparable to mothers' estimates). The measure of paternal incarceration indicated recent first-time paternal incarceration, ideal for strengthening causal inference (as those enduring recent first-time incarceration were compared to all others, including those who had been incarcerated previously). Therefore, the reference group included children with never incarcerated fathers, children whose fathers were incarcerated prior to the 1-year survey (including before the child's birth), and children whose fathers were incarcerated both prior to the 1-year survey and between the 1- and 3-year surveys, a point we return to in the Discussion.

Child care instability

The three measures of child care instability were all measured at the 3-year survey and reported by children's mothers, following prior research (Pilarz & Hill, 2014). First, long-term instability was a count variable that indicated the number of times the child changed care arrangements since the 1-year survey (range: 0 to 20). Second, a binary variable indicated the child had two or more current care arrangements. Third, a binary variable indicated the mother had to make special care arrangements in the past month. This information was ascertained when mothers reported the child was being cared for by someone other than their mother and/or father. Some regression models included lagged measures of child care instability, measured at the 1-year survey (and with long-term instability referencing the number of care arrangements between the baseline and 1-year surveys).

Children's problem behaviors

Children's problem behaviors were measured with caregivers' (almost always their mothers) responses to a series of statements about their children's behaviors (0 = *not true* to 2 = *very or often true*) at the 5-year survey, following the Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL). Statements included both internalizing behaviors (e.g., "feels has to be perfect") and externalizing behaviors (e.g., "destroys own things"). The final measure was an average of caregivers' responses to 52 statements ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Control variables

The multivariable analyses adjusted for variables associated with selection into paternal incarceration. Control variables were measured at the baseline or 1-year surveys (and therefore prior to paternal incarceration) unless otherwise noted.

Demographic characteristics included mother's race/ethnicity (white [non-Hispanic], Black [non-Hispanic], Hispanic, other race [non-Hispanic]), immigrant (1 = *born outside the United States*), age, and childhood family structure (1 = *lived with both biological parents*).

Family characteristics included mother's relationship with the child's father (married, cohabiting, non-residential relationship, and separated), repartnership status (1 = *repartnered*), relationship quality with child's father (1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*), number of children, and grandmother in the household. Parenting characteristics included parenting stress, measured by mothers' responses to four statements including "taking care of my child is much more work than pleasure" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = 0.61$); engagement with child, measured by responses to eight statements including "sings songs or nursery rhymes to child" (0 = *0 days per week* to 7 = *7 days per week*, $\alpha = 0.81$); shared responsibility in parenting, measured by mothers' responses to four statements including "father looks after child when you need to do things" (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*, $\alpha = 0.88$); and cooperation in parenting, measured by mothers' responses to six statements including "father respects the schedules and rules you make for child" (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*, $\alpha = 0.96$).

Socioeconomic characteristics included mother's education (less than high school, high school diploma or GED, post-secondary), employment (1 = *worked for pay in the past two weeks*), income-to-poverty ratio, and neighborhood disadvantage (measured by averaging standardized measures of census tract-level percent without college degree, percent unemployed, percent below the poverty line, percent receiving public assistance).

Health characteristics included mother's depression, a binary indicator of major depressive disorder in the past year; overall health (1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*); perceived social support (a sum of six items including "could count on someone to provide you with a place to live"); drug use (1 = *used illicit drugs in the past month*); and heavy drinking (1 = *had five or more drinks in one sitting in the past month*).

Characteristics especially associated with selection into paternal incarceration included mother's reports of domestic violence (1 = *father slaps, kicks, or hits*); mothers' (measured at the 3-year survey) and fathers' impulsivity, measured by responses to six statements including "often, I don't think enough before I act" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = 0.84$ for mothers, 0.84 for fathers); mothers' and fathers' cognitive ability, measured by the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale; and mothers' and fathers' incarceration history (1 = *incarcerated prior to the 1-year survey*, with mothers' incarceration history indicating incarceration between the baseline and 1-year surveys and fathers' incarceration history indicating any incarceration history [including prior to baseline]).

Children's characteristics included mothers' reports of child's sex (1 = *boy*), low birth weight (1 = *born less than 2500 g*), age (in months), and temperament ($\alpha = 0.51$).

Finally, some analyses adjusted for measures of child care experiences including time spent in child care (part time [20 h or less a week], full time [more than 20 h and up to 40 h a week], more than full time [more than 40 h a week]) and primary type of child care arrangement (child care center, family home/non-relative care, relative care).

Analytic strategy

First, we present descriptive statistics for families who did and did not experience recent first-time paternal incarceration, considering the three measures of child care instability (long-term

instability, multiplicity, and back-up arrangements) and the control variables. We examined statistically significant differences across groups with chi-square tests or t-tests, depending on the distribution of the outcome variable.

Second, we estimated the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and child care instability at the 3-year survey. We used negative binomial regression models to estimate long-term instability, given the count variable and the overdispersion (Long & Freese, 2006), and linear probability models to estimate multiplicity and back-up care arrangements. The first model estimated the bivariate relationship. The second model adjusted for all control variables to account for selection into paternal incarceration (and therefore help isolate the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability). The third model further adjusted for a lagged dependent variable to additionally isolate the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability. The fourth and fifth models examined residential father families (that is, families where the child's parents were living together prior to paternal incarceration [at the 1-year survey]) and non-residential father families, respectively.

Third, we estimated the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors at the 5-year survey with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. We first presented these models for all families in the second analytic sample and, given that earlier results showed the association between paternal incarceration and child care instability was concentrated among residential father families, we also presented models that restricted the second analytic sample to children with residential fathers at the 1-year survey. The first model estimated the bivariate association and the second model adjusted for all control variables (again to account for selection into paternal incarceration), both of which establish a baseline association between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors. The subsequent models examined variation by child care instability at the 3-year survey, focusing on differences between the following subgroups of children: those with and without long-term instability, those with and without multiplicity, and those with and without back-up care arrangements. Supplemental analyses examined interactions between paternal incarceration and each of the three measures of child care instability using the second analytic sample.

Missing data was relatively uncommon. On average, variables were missing 6% of observations (and only six variables were missing more than 10% of observations). We preserved missing data with multiple imputation, pooling results across 20 data sets.

Sample description

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics. More than one-tenth (11.0%) of children experienced first-time paternal incarceration between the 1- and 3-year surveys. Child care instability was also relatively common. Children changed child care arrangements almost one time between the 1- and 3-year surveys, on average. About one-seventh (13.9%) of children had multiple care arrangements at the 3-year survey, and one-fourth (27.5%) of children experienced backup care arrangements in the month prior to the 3-year survey. About three-fifths (58.8%) of children were in child care for between 20 and 40 h per week. Center-based care was the most common type of primary care arrangement, experienced by about half (48.7%) of children, followed by relative care (37.8%) and family home/non-relative care (10.7%).

Table 1 also includes demographic, socioeconomic, and familial characteristics of families. Most mothers identified as members of racial/ethnic minoritized groups, with more than half (51.6%) identifying as non-Hispanic Black and nearly one-quarter (22.6%) identifying as Hispanic. About one-seventh (13.0%) of mothers were born outside the United States. Mothers were, on average, 26 years old at the 1-year survey and had two children. More than half of them were living with their child's father (28.2% married and 26.0% cohabiting) but separation was also common (reported by nearly two-fifths [39.4%]). Mothers reported, on average, "good" relationship quality with their child's father (3 on the scale of 1 to 5). About one-fifth of

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of variables used in analyses.

	First analytic sample		Second analytic sample	
	M or %	(S.D.)	M or %	(S.D.)
Children's problem behaviors	0.17	(0.17)	0.17	(0.17)
Paternal incarceration	11.0%		11.4%	
Child care long-term instability	0.81	(1.23)	0.84	(1.28)
Child care multiplicity	13.9%		14.4%	
Child care backup arrangements	27.5%		27.4%	
Mother race/ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	22.1%		21.7%	
Black, non-Hispanic	51.6%		53.4%	
Hispanic	22.6%		21.7%	
Other race, non-Hispanic	3.7%		3.3%	
Mother foreign-born	13.0%		11.0%	
Mother age	26.41	(6.00)	26.15	(5.90)
Mother lived with both parents at age 15	42.4%		40.5%	
Mother relationship with child's father				
Married	28.2%		26.3%	
Cohabiting	26.0%		26.3%	
Non-residential romantic relationship	9.8%		10.4%	
Separated	39.4%		39.5%	
Mother repartnered	11.9%		12.7%	
Mother relationship quality	3.15	(1.43)	3.12	(1.43)
Mother number of children	2.21	(1.26)	2.21	(1.24)
Mother lives with her mother	21.1%		21.3%	
Mother parenting stress	2.22	(0.67)	2.20	(0.66)
Mother engagement	4.84	(1.52)	4.90	(1.47)
Mother shared responsibility in parenting	2.75	(1.14)	2.74	(1.15)
Mother cooperation in parenting	3.29	(0.95)	3.29	(0.95)
Mother educational attainment				
Less than high school	23.0%		22.7%	
Less than high school or GED	28.0%		27.8%	
More than high school	48.9%		49.5%	
Mother employment	64.5%		65.4%	
Mother income-to-poverty ratio	2.08	(2.42)	2.01	(2.37)
Mother material hardship	1.13	(1.62)	1.15	(1.58)
Mother neighborhood disadvantage	−0.16	(3.48)	−0.07	(3.44)
Mother depression	16.2%		16.1%	
Mother overall health	3.80	(1.02)	3.81	(1.01)
Mother social support	4.18	(1.78)	4.14	(1.75)
Mother drug use	1.9%		2.0%	
Mother heavy drinking	6.5%		7.2%	
Mother domestic violence victim	4.2%		4.3%	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	First analytic sample		Second analytic sample	
	M or %	**(S.D.)**	**M or %**	**(S.D.)**
Mother cognitive ability	6.93	(2.58)	6.93	(2.56)
Mother impulsivity	2.01	(0.61)	2.01	(0.61)
Father impulsivity	1.99	(0.66)	2.00	(0.66)
Mother previously incarcerated	0.4%		0.4%	
Father previously incarcerated	30.3%		31.6%	
Baby boy	53.2%		52.5%	
Child born low birth weight	9.5%		9.7%	
Child age (in months)	35.69	(2.51)	35.52	(2.36)
Child temperament	3.43	(0.75)	3.44	(0.76)
Any child care, lagged	67.4%		68.8%	
Child care long-term instability, lagged	0.34	(0.80)	0.36	(0.82)
Child care multiplicity, lagged	9.1%		10.0%	
Child care backup arrangements, lagged	17.2%		16.9%	
Time spent in child care				
Child in part-time care	27.7%		26.7%	
Child in full-time care	58.8%		59.7%	
Child in more than full-time care	13.4%		13.6%	
Primary type of child care				
Child care center	48.7%		48.4%	
Family home/non-relative care	10.7%		10.8%	
Relative care	37.8%		38.0%	
N	2454		1844	

Note: N for measure of children's problem behaviors is smaller in first analytic sample ($n = 1844$).

mothers (21.1%) were living with their mother at the 1-year survey. Nearly half (48.9%) had education beyond high school and nearly two-thirds (64.5%) were employed. Mothers had household incomes about twice as high as the poverty line, on average. About one-sixth (16.2%) reported major depressive disorder in the past year and relatively few (1.9% and 6.5%, respectively) reported illicit drug use or heavy drinking in the past month.

RESULTS

Descriptive differences by paternal incarceration

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of all variables included in the analyses, separately for children who did and did not experience first-time paternal incarceration between the 1- and 3-year surveys. Children enduring paternal incarceration had more problem behaviors than those who did not (0.23 compared to 0.16, $p < .001$). Children who endured paternal incarceration, compared to those who did not, experienced more long-term instability (on average, 0.97 care arrangements compared to 0.79, $p < .05$) but not more multiplicity (13.3% compared to 13.9%, *n.s.*) or backup care arrangements (31.0% compared to 27.1%, *n.s.*). There were no differences in hours spent in child care or primary care arrangements by exposure to paternal incarceration.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of variables used in analyses, by paternal incarceration.

	Paternal incarceration		No paternal incarceration		
	M or %	(S.D.)	M or %	(S.D.)	
Children's problem behaviors	0.23	(0.24)	0.16	(0.16)	***
Child care long-term instability	0.97	(1.64)	0.79	(1.16)	*
Child care multiplicity	13.3%		13.9%		
Child care backup arrangements	31.0%		27.1%		
Mother race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	15.2%		22.9%		**
Black, non-Hispanic	57.1%		50.9%		*
Hispanic	25.9%		22.2%		
Other race, non-Hispanic	1.8%		4.0%		^
Mother foreign-born	7.7%		13.7%		**
Mother age	24.33	(4.86)	26.66	(6.08)	***
Mother lived with both parents at age 15	31.9%		43.7%		***
Mother relationship with child's father					
Married	12.9%		30.0%		***
Cohabiting	35.5%		24.8%		***
Non-residential romantic relationship	12.0%		9.5%		
Separated	45.8%		38.6%		*
Mother repartnered	15.8%		11.4%		*
Mother relationship quality	3.05	(1.32)	3.17	(1.45)	
Mother number of children	2.29	(1.29)	2.20	(1.25)	
Mother lives with her mother	21.0%		21.1%		
Mother parenting stress	2.25	(0.67)	2.21	(0.67)	
Mother engagement	4.99	(1.35)	4.82	(1.54)	^
Mother shared responsibility in parenting	2.70	(1.09)	2.76	(1.15)	
Mother cooperation in parenting	3.35	(0.89)	3.29	(0.96)	
Mother educational attainment					
Less than high school	28.4%		22.4%		*
Less than high school or GED	28.8%		27.9%		
More than high school	42.8%		49.7%		*
Mother employment	60.6%		65.0%		
Mother income-to-poverty ratio	1.42	(1.55)	2.16	(2.49)	***
Mother material hardship	1.53	(1.92)	1.08	(1.57)	***
Mother neighborhood disadvantage	0.57	(3.18)	−0.25	(3.50)	***
Mother depression	17.4%		16.0%		
Mother overall health	3.77	(1.07)	3.81	(1.01)	
Mother social support	3.81	(1.82)	4.22	(1.77)	***
Mother drug use	1.5%		2.0%		
Mother heavy drinking	6.8%		6.5%		
Mother domestic violence victim	2.7%		4.4%		
Mother cognitive ability	6.71	(2.33)	6.96	(2.60)	
Mother impulsivity	2.13	(0.64)	2.00	(0.61)	***

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Paternal incarceration		No paternal incarceration		
	M or %	(S.D.)	M or %	(S.D.)	
Father impulsivity	1.99	(0.67)	1.99	(0.66)	
Mother previously incarcerated	0.4%		0.5%		
Father previously incarcerated	0.0%		34.1%		***
Baby boy	56.8%		52.7%		
Child born low birth weight	8.0%		9.7%		
Child age (in months)	36.07	(2.53)	35.65	(2.50)	**
Child temperament	3.46	(0.79)	3.43	(0.74)	
Any child care, lagged	61.8%		68.1%		*
Child care long-term instability, lagged	0.33	(0.80)	0.34	(0.81)	
Child care multiplicity, lagged	6.3%		9.5%		
Child care backup arrangements, lagged	15.6%		17.4%		
Time spent in child care					
Part-time care	23.0%		28.3%		
Full-time care	61.4%		58.5%		
More than full-time care	15.6%		13.2%		
Primary type of child care					
Child care center	54.2%		48.1%		
Family home/non-relative care	7.7%		11.1%		
Relative care	36.5%		38.0%		
N	271		2183		

Note: Analyses use first analytic sample. N for measure of children's problem behaviors is smaller ($n = 211$ for children who experience paternal incarceration, $n = 1633$ for children who do not experience paternal incarceration). ^ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Families who did and did not experience recent first-time paternal incarceration differed across a host of characteristics. Mothers of children who experienced paternal incarceration, compared to other mothers, were more likely to identify as non-Hispanic Black (57.1% compared to 50.9%, $p < .05$) and less likely to identify as non-Hispanic white (15.2% compared to 22.9%, $p < .01$). These mothers were less likely to be foreign-born (7.7% compared to 13.7%, $p < .01$) and, on average, were younger (24.33 compared to 26.66 years old, $p < .001$). There were also differences in family relationships prior to exposure to paternal incarceration. Mothers who shared children with recently incarcerated men, compared to their counterparts, were less likely to be married to these partners (12.9% compared to 30.0%, $p < .001$) and more likely to be separated from them (45.8% compared to 38.6%, $p < .05$). They were also more likely to be repartnered (15.8% compared to 11.4%, $p < .05$). Mothers of children exposed to paternal incarceration also experienced more socioeconomic disadvantages than their counterparts. They had lower educational attainment, with 42.8% having education beyond high school compared to 49.7% of their counterparts ($p < .05$). They had lower income-to-poverty ratios (1.42 compared to 2.16, $p < .001$), endured more material hardship (1.53 compared to 1.08, $p < .001$), and resided in neighborhoods with more disadvantage (0.57 compared to −0.25, $p < .001$).

Paternal incarceration and child care instability

Table 3 presents results from regression models that estimated the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and child care instability (long-term instability, multiplicity,

TABLE 3 Regression models estimating the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Bivariate		+ controls		+ lagged dependent variable		Residential relationship		Non-residential relationship	
	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)
Panel A. Child care long-term instability										
Paternal incarceration	0.20	(0.09)*	0.21	(0.10)*	0.20	(0.09)*	0.38	(0.14)**	0.09	(0.12)
Constant	−0.23		−0.33		−0.21		−2.65		−1.86	
Log likelihood	−3057		−2990		−2954		−1575		−1488	
N	2454		2454		2454		1500		954	
Panel B. Child care multiplicity										
Paternal incarceration	−0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)	0.04	(0.03)	−0.01	(0.03)
Constant	0.14		0.09		0.07		0.20		0.02	
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.01		0.03		0.04		0.04		0.04	
N	2454		2454		2454		1500		954	
Panel C. Child care backup arrangements										
Paternal incarceration	0.04	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.08	(0.04) ^	0.01	(0.04)
Constant	0.27		0.47		0.46		0.51		0.33	
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.01		0.01		0.02		0.03		0.02	
N	2454		2454		2454		1500		954	

Note: Analyses use first analytic sample. Child care instability estimated with a negative binomial regression model. Child care multiplicity and child care backup arrangements estimated with a linear probability model. All models except Model 1 adjust for all control variables in Table 1. Father's residential status measured prior to paternal incarceration (at the 1-year survey). ^ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

and backup arrangements). We only present coefficients for paternal incarceration, for parsimony, but full tables are in Table S2. The first panel estimates long-term instability. Model 1 shows a positive bivariate association between paternal incarceration and long-term instability ($b = 0.20$, $p < .05$). This association persisted after adjusting for control variables in Model 2 ($b = 0.21$, $p < .05$) and a lagged dependent variable in Model 3 ($b = 0.20$, $p < .05$). Model 4, which restricted the sample to residential father families, shows a positive association between paternal incarceration and long-term instability ($b = 0.38$, $p < .01$). Model 5, which restricted the sample to non-residential father families, shows no statistically significant relationship between paternal incarceration and long-term instability ($b = 0.09$, *n.s.*). The magnitude of the paternal incarceration coefficient was about four times as large among the residential father families compared to the non-residential father families (though the differences across these two subsamples does not reach statistical significance [$z = 1.58$]). This suggests that paternal incarceration, net of characteristics associated with selection into paternal incarceration, is associated with long-term child care instability when fathers were living with their children prior to incarceration.

The next two panels present estimates of multiplicity and backup arrangements. The association between paternal incarceration and multiplicity was small and statistically non-significant across all models, consistent with the bivariate findings in Table 2. The association between paternal incarceration and backup arrangements was small and statistically non-significant across the first three models, also consistent with Table 2. Examining variation by fathers' residential status, though, shows the magnitude of this association was seven times larger in residential father families ($b = 0.08$, $p < .10$) than in non-residential father families ($b = 0.01$, *n.s.*). This highlights how examining average associations can mask variation.

The above analyses do not consider features of the child care experience such as time spent in child care (part time, full time, more than full time) and primary type of child care arrangement (child care center, family home/non-relative care, relative care). Adjusting for these characteristics did not substantively alter the association between paternal incarceration and child care instability.

Paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors, by child care instability

Table 4 presents results from regression models that estimated the relationship between recent first-time paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors. The first panel presents estimates for the full second analytic sample. Model 1 shows a positive bivariate relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors ($b = 0.07$, $p < .001$). This association persisted, but was reduced in magnitude, with the inclusion of control variables in Model 2 ($b = 0.06$, $p < .001$). The subsequent models examined how child care instability moderated this association (by conducting subgroup analyses of the association between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors). These models show that the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors was larger when children experience multiplicity ($b = 0.09$, $p < .01$) than when they do not ($b = 0.05$, $p < .001$). Alternatively, the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors was similar when children experienced long-term instability ($b = 0.07$, $p < .01$), as measured by two or more care arrangements, than when they did not ($b = 0.06$, $p < .001$). There were also no differences in the association among children who did ($b = 0.06$, $p < .01$) and did not ($b = 0.06$, $p < .001$) experience backup arrangements. Supplemental analyses that instead rely on the full sample and include interaction terms between paternal incarceration and child care instability document substantively similar relationships; however, in all cases, the interaction terms are not statistically significant (possibly, in the case of the interaction term between paternal incarceration and multiplicity, due to the relatively small sample size [see Table S3 for relevant cell sizes]). Taken together, these findings provide some evidence that paternal incarceration was more strongly associated with problem behaviors among children experiencing child care multiplicity than their counterparts and simultaneously show that paternal incarceration was associated with problem behaviors for children who did and did not experience child care instability.

The second panel presents estimates for children with residential fathers. These estimates show that the association between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors was more than twice as large among those experiencing long-term instability ($b = 0.10$, $p < .01$) than those not experiencing long-term instability ($b = 0.05$, $p < .05$). The association was more than four times as large among those experiencing multiplicity ($b = 0.17$, $p < .05$) than those not experiencing multiplicity ($b = 0.04$, $p < .05$). There were no meaningful differences between those who experienced backup arrangements ($b = 0.06$, $p < .01$) and those who did not ($b = 0.06$, $p < .001$). Supplemental analyses that instead rely on the full sample and include interaction terms between paternal incarceration and child care instability again document substantively similar but statistically non-significant relationships, as in the full sample. Taken together, these findings show that, among children living with their fathers prior to his incarceration, paternal incarceration is positively associated with problem behaviors among children who did and did not experience child care instability, but the magnitude of the differences is larger among those enduring long-term instability and multiplicity.

DISCUSSION

Extensive scholarship has documented that paternal incarceration, a normative life course event among poor children and children of color, is a stressor that generates considerable instability

TABLE 4 OLS regression models estimating the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors, by child care instability.

	Model 1		Model 2		By child care long-term instability				By child care multiplicity				By back-up arrangements			
	Bivariate		+ controls		Long-term instability		No long-term instability		Multiplicity		No multiplicity		Backup arrangements		No backup arrangements	
	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)	b	(S.E.)
Panel A. Full sample																
Paternal incarceration	0.07	(0.01) ***	0.06	(0.01) ***	0.07	(0.03) **	0.06	(0.02) ***	0.09	(0.03) **	0.05	(0.01) ***	0.06	(0.02) **	0.06	(0.02) ***
Constant		0.16		0.09		−0.02		0.15		0.17		0.10		0.14		0.06
Adjusted *R*-squared		0.01		0.09		0.08		0.08		0.19		0.08		0.11		0.08
N		1844		1844		444		1399		266		1578		505		1339
Panel B. Sample of residential parents																
Paternal incarceration	0.06	(0.02) ***	0.05	(0.02) **	0.10	(0.04) **	0.05	(0.02)*	0.17	(0.08) *	0.04	(0.02)*	0.07	(0.02) *	0.05	(0.02) *
Constant		0.15		0.12		−0.14		0.17		0.21		0.15		0.05		0.08
Adjusted *R*-squared		0.10		0.09		0.05		0.09		0.30		0.07		0.07		0.10
N		930		930		208		722		127		803		257		673

Note: Analyses use second analytic sample. All models except Model 1 adjust for all control variables in Table 1. Long-term instability measured by two or more child care arrangements. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

in the lives of families and, ultimately, has detrimental consequences for children's well-being (Foster & Hagan, 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021). Simultaneously, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the implications of child care instability for children's short- and long-term prospects (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Pilarz, 2018; Pilarz & Hill, 2014). Our study links two bodies of work—one about the consequences of paternal incarceration and another about changes in child care arrangements—and provides the first quantitative accounting of the implications of paternal incarceration for child care instability (and, subsequently, how child care instability moderates the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's well-being). Our study yields four primary findings about the relationship between paternal incarceration and non-parental child care instability.

First, we find that children who have recently experienced first-time paternal incarceration are more likely to endure long-term child care instability—one of the three types of child care instability—than those who have not experienced recent paternal incarceration. And, though our primary focus is on non-parental child care instability, our supplemental analyses also show that children exposed to paternal incarceration are more likely to transition from parental care to non-parental care than children not exposed to paternal incarceration. The association between paternal incarceration and long-term child care instability may stem from a host of negative experiences endured by families of incarcerated men. The dissolution of romantic relationships that often follows paternal incarceration (Turney, 2015), coupled with accompanying alterations in living arrangements and residential moves (Braman, 2007; Schmidt et al., 2024), can prompt changes in child care arrangements that engender long-term child care instability (Pilarz et al., 2022). Moreover, paternal incarceration erodes maternal mental health (Wildeman et al., 2012) and destabilizes family economic well-being, both of which may render caregiving more challenging for mothers and increase the likelihood of long-term instability.

Second, in contrast to the finding that paternal incarceration is linked with long-term child care instability, results show no substantively meaningful or statistically significant association between paternal incarceration and the other two types of child care instability (multiplicity of child care arrangements and use of back up care). These two indicators of child care instability are measured at the time of the 3-year survey, as opposed to the measure of long-term instability that is measured over a 2-year period, so it is possible paternal incarceration creates an immediate crisis that resolves itself over time, a point that could be explored with more fine-grained temporal data on the timing of paternal incarceration and child care instability. Extended family members typically increase their involvement in children's lives and contribute to their socialization during periods of crisis (Crosnoe et al., 2014; Turanovic et al., 2012). Families may adapt to the stressor of paternal incarceration so that it does not create long-term strain.

Specifically, the lack of a statistically significant association between paternal incarceration and multiplicity may stem from weakened social support and isolation among mothers who share children with incarcerated men (Braman, 2007; Turney et al., 2012). Indeed, to have multiple care arrangements, mothers need a solid social network that can provide regular and concurrent sources of child care; mothers who share children with incarcerated men may not have a large pool of potential caregivers and, therefore, have a limited ability to employ more than one concurrent and regular child care arrangement. Similarly, we find no association between paternal incarceration and an increased use of back-up arrangements. Though use of back-up arrangements is commonly conceptualized as a form of child care instability, reliance on this type of care arrangement can also be viewed as a valuable familial asset that hinges on the availability of social networks that are robust enough to provide last-minute child care accommodations (Pilarz & Hill, 2017). Mothers may be unable to secure back-up care arrangements as incarceration depletes families' support networks (Braman, 2007; Turney et al., 2012), suggesting these weakened relationships may protect against some types of child care instability. Hence, the finding that families recently exposed to paternal incarceration do not exhibit an

increased reliance on last-minute care arrangements does not necessarily indicate that they do not experience disruptions in their caregiving arrangements, but rather that these families may lack resources needed to employ back-up care arrangements.

Third, we find that child care arrangements moderates the association between paternal incarceration and children's problem behaviors. Though paternal incarceration is positively associated with problem behaviors for all children, there is some evidence these negative consequences are more pronounced among children who experience a multiplicity of care arrangements (compared to those without multiplicity). For children living with their fathers prior to his incarceration, these negative consequences are also more pronounced among children who experience long-term child care instability (compared to those without long-term child care instability). These findings provide suggestive evidence that child care arrangements may moderate the relationship between paternal incarceration and children's well-being, as stable caregiving environments following fathers' confinement buffer the deleterious relationships and child care instability exacerbates these relationships.

Fourth, the statistically significant associations identified in our study are concentrated among children who were living with their fathers prior to incarceration. This finding is aligned with prior research on the consequences of paternal confinement for family life (Braman, 2007; Turney & Wildeman, 2013) and is consistent with expectations, as fathers who reside with their children prior to incarceration are usually more involved in their offspring's lives than their non-residential counterparts (Geller, 2013). Prior to their incarceration, residential fathers are likely to have been deeply embedded in their children's routines, playing an important role in their children's caregiving arrangements (Carlson et al., 2017). Their removal from households may push families to resort to non-parental forms of care to adjust to their changing household composition and caregiving resources. Moreover, resident fathers are likely to have contributed financially to their household prior to incarceration; as such, their removal likely has more pronounced changes in family finances that might prompt mothers to take on employment responsibilities that may bring about child care instability. Overall, this finding supports the notion that it is among the families of residential fathers that paternal imprisonment leads to the most substantial renegotiation of family roles (Geller et al., 2012).

Limitations

These results should be considered in light of several limitations. First, our measure of paternal incarceration includes only recent first-time incarceration (with children of fathers who experience a higher-order incarceration in the reference group along with children who experienced no paternal incarceration). This strengthens causal inference, as those with a recent experience of first-time paternal incarceration likely have similar unobserved characteristics as those who experience a higher-order incarceration, but may also yield conservative estimates. Second, though we work to establish proper time-ordering of our key variables (for example, by looking at paternal incarceration between the 1- and 3-year surveys as a predictor of child care instability at the 3-year survey), some child care instability may have occurred prior to paternal incarceration. Though the possibility of reverse causality (that is, child care instability affects paternal incarceration) is unlikely, future research should consider more fine-grained temporal ordering of the key variables (perhaps with an intensive longitudinal design).

Implications

These findings have implications for research, policy, and practice. Theoretically, we suggest that one form of instability endured by children, paternal incarceration, is linked to another

form of instability endured by children. We document empirical relationships between these two forms of instability, paternal incarceration and unstable care arrangements, and accordingly provide a foundation for future research on children's child care arrangements in the wake of paternal incarceration, an area of research seldom explored. Future research, especially qualitative research designed to understand complex processes, should consider how and under what conditions paternal incarceration structures child care arrangements and instability. Future research should also consider variation in the relationship between paternal incarceration and child care instability by demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, child age, or child sex, analyses we could not conduct because of sample size limitations. Considering the role of paternal incarceration in structuring child care quality is another fruitful area of research. Our findings also document how stability in caregiving arrangements can mute the deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration for children's well-being, another finding that should be explored in more detail with qualitative data. Further understanding how the stressor of paternal incarceration disrupts children's everyday developmental environments may provide additional insights to help guide policy and practice.

Our findings do have policy and practice implications. Understanding that paternal incarceration may disrupt child care arrangements suggests the importance of providing consistent and stable child care support to the caregivers of children enduring paternal incarceration. Providing these supports to families is critical because our research documents that stable child care may mute the deleterious consequences of paternal incarceration for children. Practitioners should work to reduce barriers (e.g., cost, transportation) to stable child care among children enduring paternal incarceration.

Conclusions

Overall, our research builds on scholarship on family instability (Crosnoe et al., 2014) to suggest that paternal incarceration can be conceptualized as a family structure transition, especially among children of residential fathers, that sets in motion changes in child care arrangements. We find that paternal incarceration is associated with instability in children's non-parental care, a key component of their caregiving environments. This is an important finding given that this form of instability is detrimental for child development and life outcomes (Ahnert et al., 2006; Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Morrissey, 2009; Pilarz & Hill, 2014). Our research contributes to scholarship on child care instability and children's well-being by showing that a disruptive family event—paternal incarceration—has implications for child care instability and, further, that child care instability moderates the relationship between this disruptive event and children's well-being.

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ORCID

Kristin Turney https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4642-3490

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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