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## THE PATH AND PROMISE OF FATHERHOOD FOR GANG MEMBERS

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### Abstract

While an increase in research on criminal desistance has occurred in recent years, little research has been applied to the gang field. Using qualitative interview data, this article examines fatherhood as a potential turning point in the lives of 91 gang members in the San Francisco Bay Area. Fatherhood initiated important subjective and affective transformations that led to changes in outlook, priorities and future orientation. However, these subjective changes were not sufficient unless accompanied by two additional features: first, changes in the amount of time spent on the streets and, second, an ability to support oneself or one's family with legal income. Though fatherhood is no panacea, becoming a father did act as an important turning point toward desistance and motivator for change for some.

### Introduction

Over the past twenty years, scholarship on youth gangs has grown significantly, and with the emergence of youth groups around the globe, a more culturally informed awareness is taking place (Decker and Weerman 2005; Hagedorn 2007; Klein, Weerman and Thornberry 2006). Following the tradition of American gang studies, much gang research in other countries has focused on questions of prevalence, formation, organization, and drug and crime involvement. The U.K. is no exception as researchers try to counter media frenzy while also working with communities to establish a knowledge base on youth groups with characteristics of street gangs. A small but growing body of research points to the emergence of street gangs in many U.K. cities with members being predominantly male, criminally active, and carrying weapons (Bullock and Tilley 2008; Mares 2001). However, the application of the "American-style gang label," may reify and further stigmatize marginalized youth when researchers focus principally on gang members' criminal activity (Aldridge, Medina and Ralphs 2008).

Because so much work on gangs has focused on criminal involvement, it is difficult to imagine life beyond the gang context. For example, what role does parenthood play in gang life? Anecdotal evidence shows that many gang members in America become parents at an early age and the risk factors associated with early fatherhood are abundantly present in gangs. Indeed, gang membership itself is a risk factor for early pregnancy and teenage parenthood (Thornberry et al. 2003: 169). Beyond this link, however, little is known about the process and context of parenthood, and fatherhood in particular.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we know little about how gang involvement shapes parenting or how becoming a parent shapes involvement in gangs.

Drawing on the experiences of 91 gang members in San Francisco, who became fathers, we explore the meaning of fatherhood for them and the role it plays in decisions to persist or desist

<sup>1</sup>Of course both male and female gang members become young parents. However, it's important not to conflate the experiences of men and women in gangs, so we focus on gang fathers in this study, and explore the experiences of gang mothers elsewhere (see Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie 2005).

in gang life and associated risky behaviors. We examine fatherhood as a potential key turning point in these young men's lives. *How does becoming a young father shape their life-course trajectories? What is the relationship between fatherhood and desistance from crime, substance abuse, and other risky activities? What is the impact of fatherhood on their gang involvement? How do they navigate between the conflicting models of masculinity connected to their roles as gang members and as fathers?* For many of the young men, fatherhood acts as a significant turning point, facilitating a shift away from gang involvement, crime, and drug sales; a decline in substance use; and engagement with education and legitimate employment. Many, though not intending to become fathers, and often initially dismayed by that development, describe the experience of fatherhood as radically changing (or even saving) their lives. While most of the young men credit fatherhood with this transformational capacity and see it as a turning point, not all are able to turn away from risky activities. Even for those who are successful, the desistance process is often a gradual one, fraught with pitfalls. We examine some of the structural and subjective factors that aid or hinder these efforts. Finally, we consider potential policy implications of their struggles and successes.

## Turning Points and Desistance from Crime

Criminologists have sought to explain why crime tends to decrease with age, why some people desist from crime earlier or later than others, and what factors contribute to desistance or persistence in criminal careers. The life-course perspective has arguably emerged as the dominant paradigm on desistance, particularly Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control where stable employment and good marriages mark significant turning points in the life courses of previously crime-involved men, enabling them to desist from crime (Laub and Sampson 2001; Sampson and Laub 1993, 2005). Drawing on social-control theory, they argue that the social bonds engendered by strong marriage and/or employment can counteract juvenile trajectories of delinquency and crime.

This work emphasizes these exogenous turning points as catalysts that redirect behaviors and trajectories, thereby commencing the process of desistance. The effect of marriage on desistance has been one of the most consistent findings in the field (see also Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood and Marshall 1995; Rand 1987, for contrary evidence see Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002), although some suggest that the results are spurious, due to selection biases (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1994) or due to decreased exposure to delinquent peers after marriage (Warr 1998). The relationship between work and desistance is also well-documented, although the specific nature of this relationship remains a contested issue (Pezzin 1995; Uggen 2000; Wadsworth 2006).

Despite these advances, a number of areas need further development. First, many seminal works in desistance studies are based on individuals who came of age decades ago (e.g., Sampson and Laub's use of data on white men who came of age in the 1950s U.S.) and the meaning of key social institutions - marriage, parenting, and employment - have since undergone dramatic transformations in America and in Europe. It is unclear whether these have the same effect in recent cohorts or among diverse populations. Second, while some research focuses on external turning points for desistance, as in institutions of social control, other researchers now emphasize subjective, emotional, or cognitive changes for facilitating desistance (see, e.g., Barry 2007; Bottoms et al. 2004; Giordano et al. 2002; Giordano, Schroeder and Cernkovich 2007; Maruna 1997; Runggay 2004). Is the effect of turning points such as marriage, work, or parenthood primarily the result of these as constraining institutions or is it the result of changes in identity, self, and subjectivity? The interplay between external constraints and the subjective require further investigation and the need for contextual understanding. Third, some researchers (Forrest 2007; Giordano et al. 2002) have called for

more analysis of why particular turning points contribute to the desistance of some people but not others.

This article attempts to contribute in these areas. In examining the experiences of racially diverse men who came of age in the 1990s and early 2000s in San Francisco, we build on these theoretical perspectives to account for current societal conditions and heterogeneous populations. We explore subjective and objective barriers to desistance, emphasizing the interplay between structure and agency, and examine the differential impact of the same turning point (fatherhood) on different men's trajectories. In particular, we focus on two substantive areas that are understudied in this life-course research on desistance: fatherhood and gang membership.

Unlike marriage and employment, the effect of *fatherhood* has been much less studied in desistance scholarship. There is conflicting evidence about the relationship between fatherhood, crime, and desistance. Rand (1987) found that fatherhood had no effect on desistance. Farrington and West's (1995) study of working-class men in London found that marriage decreased chances of offending, whereas having a child outside of marriage increased rates of offending. Stouthamer-Loeber and Wei (1998) show an association between teen fatherhood and prior delinquency and the latter did not decrease after becoming a father. Massoglia and Uggen (2007) found that the effect of children on desistance depends on how desistance is conceptualized or measured—using varying measures they find fatherhood increasing, decreasing, or having no effect on desistance rates. We argue that one reason for the confusion about this relationship is that, while fatherhood *can* act as a turning point leading to desistance, this is far from an automatic process. Inability to support one's child through legitimate work and difficulties in 'knifing off' from peers may be major obstacles in fathers' desistance. Edin, Nelson, and Paranal's (2004) research on unskilled working-class men in the eastern U.S. is one of the few to examine the role incarceration and fatherhood play in desistance. They find that "the event of fatherhood can sharply alter how men perceive the risk and rewards of criminal activity ... fatherhood in and of itself can prove a powerful turning point that leads men away from crime and toward a more mainstream trajectory" (p. 53).

To date, neither the desistance literature, nor the life-course perspective, have been well-integrated into gang research. Gang involvement is one of many variables within some desistance studies (with the somewhat unsurprising finding that being a gang member decreases one's chances of desistance [Rand 1987]), but gang membership has not been a central focus of desistance scholarship. Evidence suggests that gang membership not only selects for delinquent youth, but also facilitates delinquency and decreases the chances of desistance from crime (Gordon et al. 2004) and that increased time spent in a gang has increasing and compounding negative ramifications (Thornberry et al. 2003). These findings highlight the need for further work integrating gang and desistance research.

The life-course perspective is woefully underdeveloped within gang research. As Venkatesh (2003) argues, an individual's motivations for, and investments in time and energy into the gang may change over time, "especially over the life course as youth mature and move in and through other social institutions. This basic principle of sociological reasoning, the hallmark in life-course research, has been missing in street gang scholarship" (p. 9). While once assumed to be a transitory experience in the life course, with aging out as an almost definitional aspect of gang experience (see, e.g., Thornberry et al. 2003), for many today in the U.S., gang membership is no longer a fleeting youthful period. Within post-industrial economies, many manufacturing and trade opportunities, once available to young working-class men, have eroded or disappeared. The lack of opportunities as they mature into adulthood compels many to carry on gang activities well into their twenties and beyond (Fagan and Freeman 1999; Venkatesh 1997; for a cross-national comparison see Hagedorn 2007). This diminution of the

age-out effect in gangs further points to the need to examine the relationship between gang membership and life-course trajectories.

Thornberry and colleagues' (2003) longitudinal study of teenagers and gang members does connect the life-course and gang research,<sup>2</sup> examining risk factors leading to gang involvement and consequences stemming from it: "in the short term, gang membership facilitates deviant behavior: delinquency and related behaviors increase when boys join gangs and decrease when they leave them. In the long term, gang membership increases disorderly transitions to adulthood and decreases the likelihood of desisting from crime" (p. 187).

Among the "disorderly transitions" they examine are early pregnancy and teen fatherhood. Though parenthood has not been a central issue in desistance literature, it is prominent in life-course research. The life course is generally expected to unfold in a set of culturally normative, age-graded stages. In the U.S. this means that one completes high-school before starting a career and one marries before parenting. Of course, some transitions happen out of order (parenthood before marriage) or are off-time, too early or too late. A basic premise of the life-course perspective is that off-time transitions are likely to be disruptive, leading to problems at later stages. This approach has been applied to early/teen parenting, underscoring the difficulties and negative consequences associated with early fatherhood due to the stress of navigating the parenting role before one is developmentally ready (Buzi et al. 2004) or because early fatherhood requires economic contributions before one has completed schooling or secured employment (Marsiglio and Pleck 2004). Scholarship on early fatherhood and the life course tends to emphasize the potential for this precocious transition to disrupt life-course trajectories, leading to diminished economic potential and increased chances of delinquency, crime, or incarceration (Pirog-Good 1996).

But what about those who are already on a disrupted life course, or whose trajectories already seem to be a negative, as in the case of many young gang members? Can fatherhood disrupt the trajectories of crime or substance abuse? Do early transitions to the adult-role of fatherhood aid in speeding up the age- or developmental-related desistance process?

We explore how this new circumstance may be a turning point in which decisions are weighed differently and new responsibilities, opportunities, and constraints add to their life choices and identities. There are a number of possible responses. First, unable or unwilling to perform this role effectively, gang fathers may give up on responsible fathering and continue their involvement with crime, gangs, or substance use unaffected. Second, they may consider gang activity as a viable life-course opportunity, driving them further into an underground economy, to support their children. Third, they may drop out of or lessen their gang involvement as part of becoming a father. We consider these and other responses among 91 young gang-involved fathers. As this is an exploratory study, we cannot fully disentangle issues of cause, effect, and selection here. Yet, this qualitative analysis has much to contribute to this typically quantitative field of study. We offer an extended exploration of the *meaning* of these young men's experiences with fatherhood and its implications for desistance

## Research Methods and Sample

San Francisco, California, is an important location for conducting research on youth gangs due to its concentrated ethnic and cultural diversity. Of the total population of 776,733, 44% are white (non-Hispanic origin), 31% are Asian, slightly more than 14% are of Hispanic origin, and eight percent are African-American (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). National estimates of

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<sup>2</sup>See Laub and Sampson (2001) for a discussion of key differences between psychological/developmental and sociological/institutional life-course approaches.

gang membership are diverse and some of the estimation difficulties are related to the perennial problems of gang definitions (Bursik and Grasmick 2006; Esbensen et al. 2001; Joe 1993; Maxson and Klein 1995).

The 91 men interviewed for this study between 2004 and 2006 were ethnic minorities from low-income backgrounds. Most lived in one of ten neighborhoods (especially Mission, Bayview Hunters Point, Potrero Hill, Tenderloin, Chinatown), with distinctive ethnic cultures, a strong working-class presence, public housing, and a high concentration of gang activity.

All of the men are self-described current or former gang members and fathers. We have adopted self-nomination as the most reliable way of assessing gang membership (Esbensen et al. 2001: 124), although we also use additional information from our fieldworkers and community key-informants to verify gang involvement of potential respondents. Self-identification poses some challenges, particularly for cross-cultural comparisons where the meaning of “gangs” varies dramatically from that in the American context (and from one American city to the next) (see Aldridge et al. 2008 for more on the difficulties faced when applying the label “gang”—particularly in the British context). However, almost all of the gang-identified men we interviewed participated in groups that fit under the Eurogang project’s definition of gang or troublesome youth group (Klein and Maxson 2006) used by one of the largest sets of comparative, cross-national gang research: “Durable and street-oriented youth groups whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity” (Klein et al. 2006: 415). While this definition is not without problems (Pitts 2008), it does establish a common framework and vocabulary for comparisons. Viewed through the lens of Maxson and Klein’s (1995) five-part typology of gang membership, the men we interviewed were involved primarily in “compressed gangs” (adolescent group of a few years’ duration, 10–50 members, with versatile criminal patterns), which Klein and colleagues (2006) describe as the most common in Europe and the U.S., as well as to a lesser extent the traditional or neotraditional gangs (larger, multigenerational groups with denotable subgroups), which though found in the U.S. (and comprising the dominant stereotype of American gangs) are as of yet uncommon in Europe (Klein et al. 2006).

Gang members who are fathers were recruited using snowball-sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), growing out of our long-standing research on and contact with gangs in San Francisco. The interviews were conducted by fieldworkers who were matched to the groups they were sampling, either by their knowledge of the specific communities, their ethnic background, or their own experiences with gangs. We gave respondents a US\$75 honorarium in recognition of their participation and time.

The face-to-face interviews consisted of a combination of quantitative and qualitative interview methods and most interviews took approximately 2.5 hours to complete. Open-ended questions focused on life histories and an in-depth examination of activities in three key moments: a year prior to the pregnancy; the year during the pregnancy; and what happened after they became fathers.

The respondents ranged in age from 16 to 44 years, with a median age of 23 years. The majority first became fathers between the ages of 14 and 28, with a median age of first birth at 18. Thirty-seven became fathers as minors (under 18) and 13 became fathers after the age of 21. We interviewed men who recently faced the potential turning point of fatherhood but also men who faced this turning point quite a while ago, allowing us to trace the life-course trajectories for those men, and get a sense of long-term effects of fatherhood on their desistance efforts.

## Education, Income, and Employment

Overall, the respondents reported limited education. Less than half received a high-school diploma, and more than one-quarter dropped out of school and never returned. Sixty percent of respondents were not attending school, but more than one-quarter were attending college, primarily through reentry programs after dropping out.

Close to half of the fathers had jobs, although the overall median job income was relatively low at US\$1300 per month. Additional income among gang fathers came from a variety of sources, especially drug sales. Two-thirds of respondents admitted to drug sales and hustles, and more than 40% provided details on drug sales earnings, with median sales of US\$800 per month.

## Family Patterns

The majority of the men were neither married nor cohabiting with a partner; only three men reported being married. Though some respondents denied paternity early in the pregnancy, all ultimately admitted their paternity and claimed their children. Slightly more than one-third of the fathers lived in households with their children at the time of the interview, although many more had tried and failed to live as a family with their child and the mother in the past. In general, the number of fathers who resided with their children declined with age. Among non-custodial fathers, parental involvement varied widely. Some were heavily involved in their children's lives, providing financial and childcare support and seeing them regularly. About 15% of them, however, no longer had any contact with their children.

Our sample comprises multiple ethnic groups and gangs. Latinos/Hispanics represented the largest group in the sample (31%)<sup>3</sup>, followed by African-Americans (30%), and Filipino-Americans (27%). The remaining 13% were of other backgrounds, including Cambodian, Samoan, white, Chinese, and mixed ethnic groups. Slightly more than 15% of respondents were immigrants. This dataset presented us a somewhat unique opportunity to make comparisons between different ethnic groups vis-à-vis fatherhood and gang involvement. Comparative research on young fathers of different ethnicities within the U.S. has found that cultural differences may play a role in the involvement of young fathers with their children (Anderson 1999; Cochran 1997; Hernandez 2002; Marsiglio et al. 2000). If the experience of young fatherhood is mediated by ethnicity and culture, we might expect the effect of becoming a young father on desistance also to vary by ethnicity.

We found some important variations within our sample along ethnic lines, although we recognize the statistical limits given our sample size and non-random sample. Latino fathers were more likely to have dropped out of high-school (about one-third of Latinos as compared to 15% of African-Americans and 25% of Filipinos) yet had the highest employment (64%) followed by more than half of Filipino fathers and 45% of African-Americans. Some differences exist in family formations—Latinos were most likely to have more than one child (28% vs. 22% of African-Americans and eight percent of Filipinos) and had a higher incidence of having children with more than one woman. Nearly 60% of the men interviewed fathered their first child with a partner from their same ethnic group, with African-Americans and Filipinos more likely to have multi-ethnic relationships than Latinos.

Despite these differences, what we found more striking in our data were the fundamental commonalities among the fathers across racial/ethnic lines— particularly in the men's narratives about the role that fatherhood played in shaping and changing their lives. Though

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<sup>3</sup>The ethnic category Hispanic/Latino is a broad classification which includes immigrants from throughout Latin America, Puerto Rico and Cuba. In our sample, 21 of the 28 Hispanic/Latinos were born in the U.S. Of the remaining seven, three were born in Mexico, three in Nicaragua and one in Ecuador.

there is significant variation in levels of desistance from gang life and the way different men perceive fatherhood, these variations did not largely break down along racial/ethnic lines.

### Gang Involvement and Risk Behaviors

As gang research in the U.S. and internationally have shown, there is much variability in levels of gang participation and organization ranging from highly organized criminal gangs with clear hierarchies and involvement in criminal activities to non-hierarchical collectives with intermittent participation in crime (Klein and Maxson 2006; see Marshall, Webb and Tilley ([2005] for a U.K. meta-analysis). Our respondents hail from multiple gangs and the nature of gang involvement varied considerably, with some heavily involved in large, structured gangs, and others in loosely structured gangs of a more transient nature.

There were common threads among diverse gangs: loyalty and defending the honor of their gang, often through violence; participation in a variety of criminal activities and hustles, including drug sales; displays of street smarts; and drug and alcohol consumption. Approximately two-thirds had participated in drug sales at some point in their lives, with close to half still selling, either to supplement their income or as a primary income source. Smaller, but not insignificant, numbers reported involvement in robberies, car-jackings, home invasions, or weapons-carrying. More than 80% had been arrested previously, and more than two-thirds reported multiple arrests. All reported marijuana use in their lifetime and almost two-thirds were current users. The second most frequent drug tried was cocaine (56%) followed by ecstasy (52%). Fewer than five percent of respondents had used either of these substances in the past week. Twenty-two respondents said that they had not used any drugs within one year or more, and 49 respondents indicated that they had used drugs within the past week.

### Narratives of Transformation

These young men were heavily involved in gang life prior to fatherhood. Some dropped out of school or were regularly truant. They struggled to find employment, and even those who completed high-school found good jobs difficult to obtain. Early education and employment experiences did little to promote a sense of masculinity and competence. Instead, they were left with a sense of inadequacy and disconnection from legitimate social structures that might foster their future success as a man and as a father. Street gang life was the most common “career” path. The cool, tough, image of gang life was attractive as a financial opportunity and as a masculine identity. Most of the men describe their pre-fatherhood life as one largely organized around life on the street. Typically, they spent most days and every evening out on the streets with fellow gang members — hustling for drug sales or just hanging out with their friends, drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana.

### Life Changes—Fatherhood Means Change

By conventional standards—and by the accounts of the men—their life trajectories, pre-fatherhood, were fraught with peril. Most faced futures of incarceration or possibly violent death, fates met by many of their friends. Indeed, fatherhood was credited with not only *changing* their lives but, literally *saving* their lives. As one man bluntly put it “*I woulda been dead or in jail if I wouldn’t have my kids*” (Angel, 25, Latino<sup>4</sup>). Yet, that was life “before.” Fatherhood introduced dramatic differences in their lives. While a few claim that fatherhood didn’t change their lives at all, the vast majority of young men recount fatherhood as a turning point. Xavier (19, Latino) describes radical changes in his lifestyle brought about by his girlfriend’s pregnancy:

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<sup>4</sup>The names of all participants have been changed to protect anonymity.

I didn't even wanna be out there [anymore]. I wanted to get a legal job ... Instead of being out on the street, I was in the house or the hospital ... I wasn't smoking weed or doin' drugs ... Bein' more responsible, more disciplined. And stopped chillin' outside as much ... I stopped robbin' people, stealin' cars.

Some men explained that the responsibilities of fatherhood (and in some cases the demands of the baby's mother) necessitated a reorganization of their time that led to fewer opportunities to participate in criminal activities; they were simply too busy to get into trouble. *"I didn't have it in me no more to be violent and go out and do shit no more. 'Cause I was too busy thinking about what the fuck I was gonna do"* (Andre, 22, African-American).

Spatial reorientation was a recurring theme, with fatherhood leading to movement from the streets into the home. Roy (23, Filipino) notes:

Before that, the only thing I really actually would do every day would be kick it with the homies [fellow gang members] ... [but after the pregnancy] I didn't kick it with them at all ... I was kickin' it hella much indoors with [the mother]. I was hella indoors.

Here is a shift away from time spent with gang peers, an issue further discussed below. Fatherhood leads to busier lives, moving inside, with little time or opportunity to get into fights or criminal activities that were previously endemic to their lives.

Some men argue that fatherhood motivated them to change their lives and desist from crime because they wanted to become positive role models for their children—role models they themselves lacked when younger:

[Fatherhood] changed me a whole lot as far as being more responsible, being more true. And knowin' that I have to take a different road. I can't be out there on the streets drinkin' all the time. I can't be gettin' high ... I can't be doin' stupid stuff. Because if I'm incarcerated, who's to watch my two boys? Where would they be? They need a role model. (Jesus, 34, Latino)

Other researchers have dismissed such motivations for non-custodial fathers; "it is likely that a relatively small proportion of men in [Roche's study] actually lived with their children. Thus parenthood would not inspire males to act responsibly or as positive role models" (Roche et al. 2006: 255). Our findings, however, suggest that even fathers who don't reside with their children take pride in and place importance on their father identity and are motivated to change. These and other subjective aspects of becoming a father appear to be as determinative of fatherhood's potential as a turning point as does the objective fact of becoming a father itself and the related structural constraints. Pride in and prioritization of their children doesn't mean that they always fulfilled their paternal responsibilities or met the expectations of their children's mothers for financial, emotional, or physical/child-care support. Indeed, in a separate, on-going research project interviewing female gang members, one-third of whom were themselves mothers, a lack of sufficient support or even regular contact from their children's fathers (who were often gang members) was a consistent theme (Hunt et al. 2005).

### Subjective Transformations

Some men's explanations of how fatherhood acted as a turning point seem straight out of social control theory, in which the fathers describe the constraining effects of fatherhood and related social institutions externally pressuring them. Efren (22, Filipino) describes his imposed curfew: *"Sometimes I gotta be home 'cause she [his baby's mother] be checkin'. It's like you got a curfew all the time."* As in this example and others, the effect of fatherhood interacts with or is mediated through the role of the baby's mother in exerting social control. Also significant are the internal and subjective transformations linked to fatherhood, especially to personal identity and emotional transformation (see Giordano et al. 2007). Numerous respondents



describe themselves as becoming “calmer” as a result of being a father, while others say that now they are more peaceful. *“I’m more relaxed, calm. And I love bein’ a father ... I was a bad little motherfucker before. Now I’m just mellow”* (Raja, 22, Samoan). With this affective transformation, new fathers become calmer, less impulsive, less prone to violence, and are more able to resist temptations to get caught up in the vagaries of gang life.

### New Priorities and Future

Becoming a father led many to re-evaluate their past activities and their priorities. Alejandro (21, Latino) contrasts his priorities before his girlfriend’s pregnancy (*“My priorities was my gang”*) with life afterward:

Fatherhood’s changed me a lot. I don’t think about gangs no more. I think of my kids if anything. Before I do anything negative I always think twice ... I love my kids to the death. ... They get me goin’ everyday day every time I wake up ... They keep me motivated.

Some fathers reported that this was the first time in their life that they felt *any* sense of priorities: *“I didn’t have no priorities then [before the pregnancy]. I just thought I was the best thing that got on this earth”* (Sean, 22, African-American). Whereas before, they say they didn’t care about anything, fatherhood has now provided them with something or someone to care for and about. Fatherhood facilitates a reorientation to a life with a future and new possibilities.

Some scholars argue that the erosion of viable economic opportunities for inner-city men has led to alienation and feelings of hopelessness about the future (Anderson 1999). Life-course scholars believe the possession of a future-orientation is a key factor in predicting which high-risk youth most successfully transition to adulthood or obtain social mobility (McCabe and Barnett 2000). For some gang fathers, the fact that they can see a future is new:

“I had never thought about a future before. My future was never important to me just besides day-to- day. It didn’t matter. Now I had to start thinkin’ about, ‘Oh my God, I got a kid. I gotta start thinkin’ about a future” (Deangelo, 29, African-American).

There seems to be a fundamental shift in outlook from a present-oriented life in which they never looked beyond today to one that includes a future-orientation.

By beginning to look at the future - “something to live for” - many men re-evaluate the risks and benefits of their gang and crime involvement. This change may be partly due to general maturational processes, but certainly this maturation is related to impending fatherhood. The consequences of enacting gang masculinity (including incarceration, violent injury, or death) are costly for any young man, but these consequences may become more serious to young fathers, who now have more to lose.

[I] started thinkin’ about my [friend] who had died ... And if I keep puttin’ myself out here in this trap, I can really just die out here ... Man, I gotta think about my child. (Gregory, 25, African-American)

Fathers describe a new situation in which the risks of gang life, which they often had discounted or not worried about previously, are now too great for them. Such worries don’t always lead to desistance. In some cases this leads to less risky illegal income generating strategies. Leo (21, Latino) says that he continues selling drugs, but that *“it’s more careful now.”* He and other fathers may be more likely to take their drug sales off the streets or to limit their clientele, or which drugs they sell, as was the case for Gregory who continues to sell marijuana but says that he has completely *“dropped slingin’ crack. I choose never to sell no crack again,”* so that he can be there for his son. In other cases, though, young fathers attempted to forego criminal pursuits entirely and navigate the legitimate economy to provide for themselves and their

children. As a result, fatherhood provides a significant turning point to their desistance from crime.

### The Timing of Changes

Although these fathers' narratives of change are often dramatic with descriptions of sudden changes in *outlook*, actual changes in *behaviors* were gradual, suggesting that desistance is best understood as a *process* - gradual and cumulative - rather than as an abrupt or discrete phenomenon (Bottoms et al. 2004; Kazemian 2007; Laub and Sampson 2001). Despite the, sometimes, sudden change in priorities brought on by fatherhood, it often took considerable time and effort for the men to reorient their day-to-day practices, to find legal means of financial support, or to shift away from gang-dominated peers. Joel (27, Filipino) describes his gradual move from drug use and hustling to sobriety and legitimate work: "*About six months into her pregnancy I cut down alot. I wasn't even smoking [marijuana]. I mean, I was still smokin' but not ... regularly ... I stopped hustling more. I started working more.*" In the early days of his son's life he continued selling to pay bills, but eventually stopped selling and using.

The beginning of the turning point also varied, with some motivated to change immediately upon learning about the pregnancy or the mother's decision to keep the baby. Others didn't change their lifestyles at all during the pregnancy, but reported a new desire to change after the baby's birth. Serge (30, Latino) comments that during the pregnancy:

I was still off the hook, hella violent. And I didn't give a fuck if I lived or died ...  
When she was pregnant I didn't feel shit! When he was born and I seen his little face,  
that's when I got a lotta feelins like, "that's my little man right here."

It was when he saw his child that he felt motivated to change. Yet some men, who eventually were motivated to change, took considerably longer, making changes only when faced with the possibility of losing their children due to state intervention or blocked access by their child's mother. Pablo (23, Latino), not only continued dealing but brought his infant son to the corner where he would sell drugs. But when he got arrested for drug sales while with the baby, he faced the threat of losing custody. This was his turning point.

Because I have my kids, because I'm not in jail, I'm working ... [Child Protective Services] almost took [my child] ... And I was ... "No, I gotta stop selling dope" ...  
It scared me, because they tried to send me to prison for five years.

The prospect of prison scared him, but no more so than the thought of losing his son—and the threat of prison became more serious now that he was a father. Fatherhood didn't operate directly or independently to cause his desistance, but instead reflected the interaction between fatherhood and incarceration threats.

In other cases, it was not the birth of their first child that marked the turning point, but subsequent children or even a step-child. Sometimes becoming a father for a second or third time is the trigger, after which they attempt to avoid earlier, much regretted mistakes. Eddie (30, Latino) admits that he has had little contact with his first three children (the first of whom was born when he was fifteen) or their respective mothers. But with this fourth child:

I really didn't start bein' a real father until my last daughter ... But I was older by then. I was tired of doin' all the shit I was already doin't. But she's changed me a lot ... My last daughter is when I consider myself becomin' a father. [Before] my life had no purpose. I didn't care about anything.

Clearly fatherhood alone was not sufficient to change, and Eddie himself points to the importance of age. Yet, as he recognizes, it is not merely age that brings change, but the "age readiness" of taking on the role of being a "real" father. It's not merely fatherhood as a

biological fact that acts as the turning point, but “activating the father role”—something that requires choice and agency (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004).

The gradual effect of fatherhood as a turning point may initially seem to undermine it as an explanatory mechanism. It may be helpful to think of turning points as exogenous “triggering events” that begin the gradual desistance process (Laub, Nagin and Sampson 1998). Giordano and colleagues (2002) question the term “turning point,” preferring instead “hooks for change,” to highlight the individual’s role and agency in grasping the opportunities from these hooks. This agency is apparent here as some do and some don’t respond to these hooks for change in their decisions to continue or desist. Similarly, Maruna (1997) argues against the concept ‘turning point’ because change is not automatic; instead agency must be emphasized in the desistance process. The turning-point concept may be more robust than this, and may allow for more agentic accounts than those critiques would imply. However, our analysis leads us to agree about the importance of agency and contingency in the desistance process. The agency and decisions of each man, and his subjective interpretations of fatherhood, are a crucial determinative factor in shaping the efficacy of this potential turning point.

### Limits to the Effectiveness of Fatherhood on Desistance

These men’s narratives make it seem as if fatherhood is a magical cure, an incredibly strong cause of desistance. A young gang member becomes a father, his outlook on life and his priorities are dramatically reoriented, his life-course trajectory is forever changed. Yet, if we look beyond their self-descriptions of transformation and place these narratives in the context of their ongoing experiences, even their own self-reports of continued gang-related activity belies the notion of fatherhood as panacea. Though fatherhood acts as a *potential* turning point for the majority, not all are able to successfully navigate this new life-course. With the youngest of the fathers it’s not possible to gage the permanence of the fatherhood-effect on their desistance; “what makes a turning point a turning point rather than a minor ripple is the passage of sufficient time ‘on the new course’ such that it becomes clear that direction has indeed been changed” (Abbott 1997: 89). However, with older fathers, for whom the initial turning point is now years behind them, we have better purchase for charting these changes and will examine some of the obstacles to fatherhood and desistance.

When a gang member becomes a father an additional dimension of masculinity -with its choices, responsibilities, and significance - is interpreted and added to his repertoire of identities (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2004). While gang involvement provided one form of masculinity - marked by aggression, violence, or drug use -fatherhood offers alternative scripts of masculinity - the breadwinner and good provider, the protector and teacher. Fatherhood is also understood as a measure of a man (Marsiglio and Pleck 2004). “*Fatherhood has changed me a lot ... It turned me into a man basically*” (Chris, 31, African-American). Affirmation of the masculine identity of father enabled some respondents to dissociate from the more destructive modes of masculinity connected with gang life. “*It helped me grow into a man and, I guess, stop doin’ all that violent stuff I was doin’*” (Jorge, 34, Latino).

Yet fatherhood as a route to masculine identity is not unproblematic. The expectations associated with competently enacting a father identity were often at odds with those associated with their gang identities. Masculinity is negotiated and enacted differentially in different situations and different spaces (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Public masculine displays on the streets may vary from those in the privacy of the home, and various stages in an individual’s life course may reflect different expressions of masculinities (Collier 1998). One area of particular difficulty for many men was in negotiating the role of breadwinner. Although their motivations and self-concept may have changed, along with their newfound desire to earn

legitimate incomes and provide, young fathers were often no better positioned than before to become the breadwinner.

### The Challenges of Economic Provision, Fatherhood and Desistance

The streets provided a variety of opportunities to assert their manhood and to earn money, most of them risky and illegal. With a child, there was added pressure on the young men to provide. Indeed financial pressures were most frequently cited as the most difficult aspect of being a father. “*I’m stuck in a box, you know, that I cannot move ... I try to save money, I try to take care of my family at the same time. Try to get certification ... I just feel I’m ... tied up, you know*” (Pablo, 23, Latino). These pressures make the idea of returning to drug sales tempting. To meet these financial expectations, most men carried on with familiar money-making strategies, at least early on in their fatherhood. James (23, Filipino) engaged in legal work but did not find his earnings sufficient in the long term. After his baby’s birth, he and the mother worked. They began to set goals for themselves -getting their own place and the mother going back to school. He supplemented his delivery-driver income by drug selling. While his girlfriend was unhappy about this, she eventually relented, “*You gotta do what you gotta do.*”

The decision to continue hustling brought a variety of reactions from the babies’ mothers. Some were kept in the dark, others accepted or even expected the father to support the child through illicit means, but nevertheless, this was a source of conflict. Bryon, (34, African-American) who was making “*a lot of money*” from drug dealing when his girlfriend got pregnant, “*had it all figured out,*” that he could keep on as before, and things would work out. His girlfriend, however, thought differently and wanted him to get a legal job, which he thought was completely unrealistic. Looking back, though, he regrets his decisions, because he wound up going to prison and losing years with his child. While Bryon was eventually able to turn things around, renew his relationship with his son, and has not used or sold drugs for years now, other respondents were never able to shift to a conventional life-course trajectory. Despite wanting to move into a legitimate lifestyle, many men, with criminal records, low education, and limited job training, find it difficult to secure stable legitimate work, and rely on drug sales to support their children. For example, Jefe, (29, Latino), who supports himself almost exclusively through drug sales, has completely lost access to one of his children, and has only sporadic interaction with his second. He remains involved in the gang today.

The desistance process, even for those who were successful, was rarely linear and the boundaries between legal and illegal income were elastic and dynamic, with a “doubling up” of legal work and crime (Fagan and Freeman 1999).

(Interviewer): What sorts of things do you do to take care of your child? (Earl): What sorts of things? Work. If it comes real down to the bottom of the barrel like it’s been lately, I’ll hustle some trees [sell marijuana] ...” (Earl, 25, African-American).

Still his drug dealing has greatly decreased since becoming a father and is now “*the last resort.*” Almost half of the fathers indicated that they currently sold drugs, including almost one-quarter who secured the majority of their monthly income from drug sales. More than half reported some sort of employment income in the last month, but less than one quarter of the fathers relied solely on a job as their means of support. Employment rose and drug sales declined over time and age, but almost 30% of working fathers supplemented their legitimate income with dealing. While money wasn’t the only motivator for crime or gang involvement, most men expressed a desire to shift more fully toward legal work, but found it difficult because of low wages. Most of these young gang fathers, even though motivated to earn money legitimately, have far greater reserves of what McCarthy and Hagan (2001) refer to as criminal social capital (arising from associations within the gang) and criminal human capital (skills for

hustles) than conventional human capital or social capital (ties to legitimate income networks, years of education or vocational training).

But most men venture into legitimate work, with varying levels of success. Many tried multiple jobs, and most made an even greater attempt when they become fathers. Among fathers with jobs, approximately 20% were employed in counseling and educational capacities with youth gang members. This work conferred a sense of pride, useful contribution and economic viability. When they managed to break into a job in which they had a sense of dignity, gang fathers were more likely to sustain those jobs longer. Other job types supporting their masculine expectations and economic needs included security work and trades. On the other hand, employment in menial jobs such as janitorial, restaurant work, retail sales and telemarketing, was often short-lived, inconsistent, and instrumentally and intrinsically unfulfilling.

Many of these gang members, though lacking work opportunities and experience, aspire to lead a 'conventional' life, particularly to obtain legitimate employment, to have their own place, and to have a family. They are cognizant of their limited educational background and lack of technical training and realize that their future employment prospects lie in low-paid occupations unless they can obtain further education. The fathers are also fully aware that attempts to go 'legit' are further stymied by their criminal histories. Thus, economic structural realities represent the biggest barriers to a gang father's ability to care for his own family and perhaps to desist. Where they once may have been uninterested in or disdainful of various job-opportunity, training, or educational programs, after fatherhood many were increasingly desirous of such supports, but sometimes found them difficult to access. As young men they come into the work force with an already deficient educational foundation, alternative and illegal income sources may become normalized strategies for obtaining success and status as well as important for supporting children (Pirog-Good 1996).

### Gangs, Peers, and the Difficulties of Knifing Off

While financial problems may be the greatest difficulty in fatherhood expressed, the question of continuing involvement with fellow gang members appears to be one of the greatest predictors of success or problems with desisting from crime and transitioning into the legal job market. Cause, effect, and selection issues are difficult to disentangle, but most respondents who most fully desisted from crime and began to rely on formal work are also those who began to spend the least time with their fellow gang members. Although it is too simplistic to blame the men's peers for their own decisions to engage in risky behaviors, it is in their company that opportunities arise to get involved in fights with rival gangs, robberies and other crimes that they seldom commit on their own. For many men, fatherhood ushers in a profound change in who they spend time with, and where they spend it. This withdrawal from the street and the gang is fundamental to desistance.

Fatherhood initiates for many a reorientation of where their fellow gang members fall in their list of priorities.

It switched from spending a couple of hours with her and most of the day with my friends to spending the whole day with her and not spending any time with my friends.  
(Diego, 23, Latino)

Some describe simply drifting away from their gang peers, but for others it was a more conscious decision to disengage for their child's sake. Arvin, (25, Filipino) says that he quit hanging out with his friends and started spending more time with his family "*Cause I knew what I was doin was gonna catch up to me. I was gonna end up finally gettin caught, or end up in the cemetery somehow.*" Carlos (26, Latino) avoided his former friends and others from the neighborhood because "*the negative impact wasn't gonna be on me anymore it was gonna be on my daughter.*"

But ending, or even decreasing, involvement with gang friends is not always easy and can take an emotional toll on the fathers. Roy associates fatherhood with loneliness:

Before I used to always be around a lot of people from like being on the streets and stuff. So it feels lonely now 'cause it's just me, me and [my son], or me and my best friend.

Part of what makes this so difficult is the important social supports that the gang represented for the fathers. While gang life is clearly associated with risky and criminal practices and connected to negative life-course trajectories, being part of the gang also had positive features in their often otherwise troubled lives. The gang provides protection in their violent neighborhoods. Being part of the gang meant having “*that feeling of people being there for you and watchin’ your back*” (Russell, 22, African-American). Indeed, many men describe the gang as a surrogate family.

“Knifing off” from the gang seems to be a key for those who successfully desist. But, knifing-off successfully may be dependent upon finding new sources of respect, and a strong identity—based on fatherhood, on newfound work status, and/or in a relationship.<sup>5</sup> An affirmative alternative is necessary to replace their previous peer involvement.

The ability for fatherhood to act as a significant turning point appears to be heavily mediated by changes in peer relationships and social networks. Warr (1998) reported similar findings regarding the relationship between marriage (though not fatherhood) and desistance. It is important to understand the mechanisms by which fatherhood may influence desistance, such as in this peer effect. Fatherhood’s effect on desistance may not always be direct, but rather mediated through shifts in peers, relationships with girlfriends, or involvement in work, education, or other social institutions. But these shifts may never have come about, and certainly not when they did, if not for the (generally unplanned) fact of fatherhood. Thus, the importance of fatherhood for enabling desistance, though far from guaranteed and often indirect, should not be underestimated. It can be the small but significant nudge that makes all the difference in these men’s life-course trajectories, a trigger that allows for new possibilities.

## Conclusion

A number of comparative lessons can be learned from this analysis. In the U.K., scholars have long resisted examining youth group dynamics in the context of “gangs,” preferring instead to focus on youth subculture where crime is one of a number of key areas of investigation (Aldridge et al. 2008; Campbell and Muncer 1989; Sanders 2002). The U.K. had no tradition of “gangbanging” with claims of territory and violent rivalries like the U.S, and for some British youth the gangster image would only bring unwanted attention from authorities (Sanders 2002).

Such a gang label serves only to further mark, isolate, and exclude groups of young people who by their very place in the social structure, are already marginalized. The media’s negative gangster portrayals of young Bengali men had a negative impact in East London as the community, often unintentionally, further contributed to these young men being categorized as dangerous (Alexander 2000). Bullock and Tilley (2008) similarly found the “gang” problematic as practitioners in Manchester faced difficulties in identifying who exactly was a gang member and feared such references would not only stigmatize youth but also lead to the expected gangster identity. Moreover, youth and parents resisted the gang label. This resistance is indeed instructive to American gang research. As we illustrated here, the impact of such labels are difficult, but not impossible, to overcome.

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of the limits of the “knifing off” concept, see Maruna and Roy (2007).

Fatherhood itself introduces a new label to the identity of a young gang member. With the new identity conferred following the birth of a child, new motivations and opportunities arose. Many were innovative in their strategies to get their needs met and become more responsible. Low earning capacity and an inability to hold jobs conflicted with and threatened these gang-involved fathers' masculine identities as breadwinners, leaving other masculine traits of the streets, such as aggression, dominance, and hustling as measures of masculinity. Illegal income sources became normalized strategies for obtaining success and status. Most gang fathers combined a variety of resources for their monthly income, legitimate and illegitimate, a choice that could backfire, and lead to incarceration.

But for some men, fatherhood appears to have triggered important and long-lasting changes, enabling them to desist from criminal activities, reduce their risky practices and shift to a more sustainable life-course trajectory. For fatherhood to serve as this turning point, a variety of factors, structural and subjective, needed to come together. The ability for fatherhood to lead to desistance hinges on structural or material transformations in their lives—in which they move from the streets and gangs/delinquent peers to the home and workplace—but also on subjective or identity-based changes—in which fatherhood initiates a transformation in priorities, outlook, and affect. Becoming a father does not automatically lead to lasting changes and the men's own agency and decisions are essential. Yet, neither is this a situation of unfettered agency, for the real structural and material barriers that limit the men's abilities to fully invest in their new father identities and desist from crime are ever-present and immense.

The precariousness of new fatherhood as a potential turning point marks it as an important moment for possible intervention efforts and efforts should focus on understanding the appropriate timing for assistance. Rungay (2004) argues that “for an opportunity for desistance to be seized it not only must present itself to the offender but also must be both recognized and valued as such—successful desistance from crime may be rooted in recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, desired, and socially approved identity” (p. 405). Gang members may have been previously uninterested in intervention and treatment; with fatherhood comes a change in outlook and priorities -returning to school, entering the legal workforce, and engaging in conventional activities. This may be a particularly opportune moment for intervention. Fatherhood may give them just the “alternative, desired, and socially approved identity” to enable them to successfully desist.

But these motivational issues are not enough—it is also necessary for the men to be able to competently enact this role. This competency is tied to the ability to successfully earn a supportive wage in the legal economy—made difficult by their low education and training and criminal records--and this is likely to grow worse in these times of global economic crises. Training and job programs may be helpful at this point but with the caution that employment means more than just a job. Job quality is a bigger determinant of criminal and non-criminal practices than is income, job stability, or education (Wadsworth 2006). Our respondents expressed frustration with un-meaningful service jobs that provide little satisfaction or competence, which may be necessary for work-involvement to replace gang-involvement.

Employment programs typically have a positive effect on desistance for older but not for younger men (Uggen 2000). But, perhaps for young *fathers* this age effect is modified—for even quite young fathers may perceive benefits from these programs in ways that other young men, without parenting responsibilities, do not. In common discussions of the effect of early parenthood, there is the idea that this causes the young parents to “grow up too fast,” to take on adult roles before they are ready. Analyses of early parenting focus on the role that this may play in tragically disrupting the life-course trajectories of young parents. But what about for those whose life-course trajectories were previously less than bright? Is disruption in *these* trajectories unambiguously negative? If age and maturation are so strongly associated with

desistance, then perhaps in the cases of those already heavily involved in criminal and other risky practices, the speed-up of social age can have positive effects too. We are not suggesting that early fatherhood among young gang men is something to be celebrated, promoted, or encouraged. But in the none-too-rare occasions of its occurrence, those interested in intervention, desistance, and prevention should be alert to this group as both more open to and needing of support than generally acknowledged.

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