INTRODUCTION

The challenges of young fatherhood are likely to be magnified for young men who have spent time in the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Young offender fathers represent some of the most vulnerable young men in our society. They are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds; to have experienced poverty, volatile relationships, mental health problems, lack of social support and low educational attainment (Buston et al 2012). They may struggle to maintain contact with their children in and beyond the secure estate (Meek 2007). Upon resettlement, having a criminal record may compound the practical problems of finding employment and stable housing; and cast doubt on the fatherhood reputations and credentials of these young men.

In this study we sought to understand the lived experiences of a small sample of young offender fathers, and to discern what helps or hinders in their efforts to contribute to their children’s lives. Our analysis is based on interviews with 5 young offender fathers, three of whom were part of our longitudinal sample of 31 young men, and two others who were recruited for their offender experience. We also draw on selected interviews with CJS practitioners. The paper explores the axiom of young offender fathers as inherently ‘risky’, and considers the utility of an alternative ‘redemption’ ethos, based on a dynamic, life course approach to criminal policy and practice.

RISK, RESOURCE, REDEMPTION?

It is commonly assumed that young fathers are irresponsible and likely to engage in risky behaviour. This view is reinforced for young offender fathers, who are routinely perceived as a risk to, rather than a resource for, their children (Featherstone 2013).

An ethos of surveillance pervades professional responses to these young men but it is also subject to critique:

“There are some young men … who are dangerous … but they are a real minority … What tends to happen is young fathers get excluded, especially if they’re considered risky. … It needs to be seen that they’re just as important as mothers. Someone needs to try and understand them and work with them. Yes they might end up being too risky, but then it’s actually safer to identify who they are and work out what the issues are than just ignore them” (Staff Nurse, Health Education Lead, Secure Training Centre).

This alternative, ‘redemptionist’ ethos seeks to work with and nurture the parenting identities and capabilities of young fathers. Re-interpreting past lives and forging new future aspirations can help to foster non-criminal identities and pathways (Maruna 2001, Farrall et al 2011).

Factors influencing these processes include economic and structural conditions, local environments, peer group pressure, and family and interpersonal relationships. The application of these ideas to young offender fathers has been pioneered by Meek (2007:2011). She highlights the utility of professional input to help young men develop their parental skills and identities in custodial settings.

REDEMPTION SCRIPTS

The majority of the young men in our study described risk-taking, and, in some cases, criminal activity prior to becoming a parent. Fatherhood provided a strong rationale to modify their behaviour, a necessary part of the transition into responsible adulthood. Professional mentoring for young fathers, received by approximately half of the full sample, and delivered through the local educational authority, was beneficial in preventing a drift into crime:

“… Well if I didn’t have our [son] like, I always say I’d either be doing proper bad drugs and stuff like that or I’d be in prison at least” (Darren, aged 21, wave 1).

“I could be out robbing, selling drugs, doing whatever. Because I didn’t have emotional sort of boundaries that - I couldn’t care less about anything. … Tim [learning mentor] … he actually helped me a lot emotionally … to get things off my chest. With Tim, it helped me sort of stabilize myself and achieve what I can achieve reasonably” (Adam, aged 18, wave 4).

Among the 5 young offender fathers there was a strong drive to ‘do good’ as parents and citizens, and to learn from past mistakes. Fatherhood status and family influences, particularly from their own mothers and the mothers of their children, provided a strong influence:

KEY FINDINGS

• Young offender fathers represent some of the most vulnerable young men in our society. They are likely to face considerable challenges in securing a role and identity as a parent.

• In policy and professional practice young offender fathers are commonly perceived as a ‘risk’ to their children, but an alternative, ‘redemption’ ethos seeks to support their parenting efforts and foster a parental identity to replace their criminal identity.

• Professional input based on an ethos of redemption is vital to support young offender fathers in their efforts to ‘do good’. Effective input is tailored to the needs of young fathers, delivered as early as possible in their offending and parenthood journeys, and sustained over time through and beyond the custodial estate.

• The transition to parenthood can create a strong incentive to ‘do good’ and desist from crime. But there may be a gap between ideals and practice: becoming a parent is not a ‘quick fix’ to desistance from crime.
"Back then I used to get in trouble. I was selling drugs and stuff. … And my mum started saying, 'when you gonna stop?'... and I just thought, I shouldn’t put so much pressure on her ... And then turning my life around, with getting locked up ... I tried to make my own path. ... Elevated myself really. ... See, after me having my kids it opened up a better side to me ... I was getting into like training schemes, football, college, and stuff like that" (Tarrell, aged 21, wave 1).

"One of the biggest challenges for me was, like, staying away from my mates ... My partner would go mad [otherwise] ... I had to [stop] for myself and for [my daughter]. I didn’t ... want to go back to jail ... I just wanted to stop, like altogether ... stop being ... a f**king idiot basically, do you know what I mean? See, there’s a time to grow up, isn’t there?" (Jax, aged 19, wave 2).

These are archetypal redemption scripts, wrought through the arrival of a child and the power of family relationships. (Maruna 2001).

RE-OFFENDING

While young fathers may be strongly motivated to replace a criminal identity with a parental one, translating these ideals into practice may be more difficult, at least in the short term.

The young offender fathers in this study described slippery, protracted journeys towards an ideal future self (Farrall et al 2011). Relapses into offending behaviour, which the fathers described with regret, were most often attributed to relationship problems and difficulties in finding work, an adequate income, and a stable home. Selling drugs was the most commonly reported activity, part of a widespread drug culture in depressed communities.

Ironically, the imperative to provide for their children could engender criminal activity among these young men. During our study, for example, Tarrell found himself on a downward path in terms of employment and relationship problems. He resorted once again to selling drugs and spent over a year in custody.

Re-offending may or be premeditated but occur where young men, preoccupied with day to day survival, live 'in the moment'. This was the case for Jason, who had anger management problems fuelled by alcohol. At the first interview he reflected back on his custodial sentence at the age of 17:

"And I just ... I’m so glad that I went to jail. I regretted it at the time like, but I’m glad now because it’s just changed me. Not as much as being a father has changed me. But it’s stopped me like fighting over silly things ... and getting wrecked all the time. ... That’s not a good father because I’m blowing all that money ... [and] when he gets older it’s not a good example to set. ... What I’ve done in past, before he was born, I can’t alter that ... [but] now I’ve got [my son] if someone came up to me throwing punches ... I’d put my hand away ... ‘cause if I went to jail, and I spent every day missing my son, it’s definitely not worth it" (Jason, aged 22/23, waves 1/2).

A year later, following a 'heat of the moment' brawl in a pub, Jason received a second custodial sentence:

"It were horrible not seeing my son ... knowing I was missing the most important part of his life where he’s ... learning how to talk and walk. ... I just felt I’d let him down big time ... I’ve let [the mother] down because she’s had to cope with him for fifteen months. ... When I got out we didn’t have a bond. ... That’s the price I paid for being an idiot. ... It just makes me realise that I should never commit a crime again ... not on purpose ... Well I hope not ... cause I know I’ve still got stupid tendencies" (Jason, aged 24, wave 3).

Near the close of our study, Jason had been arrested for sending a threatening text message to his former partner when she blocked contact between Jason and his son. Given his past 'risky' record, this resulted in a restraining order in relation to his children, which was a source of great anguish to Jason.
PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORT

Professional input can make a significant impact on young offender fathers, facilitating their contact with their children in prison, their skills in becoming a parent, and their life chances upon release. The young men felt ambivalent about maintaining contact with their children while in custody. Conditions for such visits were far from ideal:

“If you got to see [your child] ... like in a playroom ... that’d be good 'cause you’re not bonding, sat on a seat with a table and a drink. ... He’s not looking forward to coming and sitting at a table for two hours. He gets bored and restless. Where, maybe, if we were ... playing toys together and having a laugh, then maybe we would [have bonded]” (Jason, aged 24, wave 3).

Informal play facilities were available in this custodial setting, but the overriding risk ethos meant that Jason was not eligible:

“I tried my hardest to get enhanced [visits] ... and then the week before the visit, security came and said I weren’t allowed to go ...” (Jason, aged 24, wave 3).

The young men often preferred indirect contact by phone or letter. Tarrell, Jason and Steven had all made and sent video books to their children as part of the Story Book Dads scheme:

“It’s excellent being a dad, but not a dad on the inside 'cause you can’t do much. ... It hurts people more when they get visits, 'cause when the visitors are gone it’s back to square one. ... As long as you get your phone call and see everyone’s alright at home, that would make you feel good in the day. ... I made my little girl a CD storybook ... It’d make me feel good ... like I’m still with them even though I’m not there” (Tarrell, aged 24, wave 3).

Two young fathers had benefitted from fatherhood skills programmes - a generic programme run by Safe Ground, and a tailored programme for young fathers developed in a Secure Training Centre:

“Everyone had different views which it were sort of good ... I did learn quite a lot, to be honest ... just your, your children’s needs really. The needs that, you know ... money can’t buy. ... There’s being there, being able to listen. ... I’d prefer now to ... not make as much money, but be able to spend more time with me kids. ... It’s sorta ...given me the drive to ... better myself for them. Give them the things I didn’t have” (Steven, aged 26, life history interview).

“When [there is] a pregnancy ...they care a lot about it. ... [The course is] basically about taking care of yourself in order to care for your child and have a good relationship with the child’s mother ...It’s just to get them to ... think about the fact that being a good parent, either now or in the future, is about developing your own life in a positive way” (Staff Nurse, Health Education Lead, Secure Training Centre).

“I felt worthless ... Like, my baby’s mother, she was upset.  And I explained to her, ‘I’m gonna come out as a better person’.  I did my part from in there. ... The first fatherhood group, it was amazing. It literally taught me a lot of things. ... If it wasn’t for prison I wouldn’t be a father. I would not be the dad I am today ... If you’ve got your children out there, but you’re in and out of prison, how does that work?... It can’t work!  Me being a father should be a privilege” (Raymond, aged 20, life history interview).
It was this course that shaped Raymond’s fatherhood identity and commitment:

**POST CUSTODIAL SUPPORT**
Upon release, 4 of the young men received support with their parenting efforts. Raymond, for example, was referred to a local charity for young parents, where he was helped to find steady work.

Jax, under the care of the Intensive Supervision Surveillance Unit, was required to be at his mother’s house but allowed to stay with his partner and new-born baby. He was very appreciative of this support.

Steven had spent 7 years of his life in custody and described theft as his way of surviving on the streets:

“When I came out of prison … I were just, sort of … doing my own thing. Trying to survive on me own … I’ve never found any help from probation or owt like that … it were just, ‘yeah, you’re alright, go on, get yerself off’. … Apart from now … Probation is really good … supporting me to move, looking for another house which, which I’ve never really done before … [He’s] supporting me with me court case to see me daughter and all that … He’s quite a good man” (Steven, aged 26, life history interview).

Jason, in contrast, was not offered any support as a parent or any advice on how to pursue contact with his child. He was sent on a course for Violent Impulsive Angry Drinkers that seemed to reinforce his criminal identity, rather than facilitate his efforts to redefine himself.

Our findings challenge the axiom that young offender fathers are inherently ‘risky’, suggesting instead the value of a dynamic, life course approach to criminal policy and practice, which recognises the fluidity of life journeys and brings ideas of redemption more centrally into the picture.

A redemption ethos can be a powerful way to foster the parental identities of young offender fathers in and beyond the CJS, creating a strong incentive to ‘do good’ and desist from crime. However, becoming a parent is not a ‘quick fix’ to desistance from crime; a parental identity takes time to foster and requires sustained support and encouragement from practitioners.

Professional support for young offender fathers is likely to be most effective where it is tailored to the needs of fathers, or prospective young fathers, delivered as early as possible in their offending and parenthood journeys, and sustained over time through custody and into resettlement.

It is not clear how widespread a redemption ethos is within the CJS, nor how it might be incorporated into professional practice to temper a risk framework. While fatherhood programmes have been implemented in young offender institutions there is no systematic provision or centralized budget; services are provided in piecemeal fashion by individual charities and ‘local champions’ of young fathers.

Developing a framework in the CJS within which ideas of redemption can be more fully articulated would offer a tangible way forward in supporting young fathers to ‘do good’ in their lives.
REFERENCES


NOTES


3. The Following Young Fathers Research Team: Professor Bren Neale, Dr. Carmen Lau Clayton, Dr. Laura Davies, Linzi Ladlow, and Dr. Ruth Patrick. For further information about this briefing paper contact Bren Neale (b.neale@leeds.ac.uk) or Linzi Ladlow (l.ladlow@leeds.ac.uk)

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5. The Following Young Fathers Briefing Paper Series: edited by Carmen Lau Clayton and Bren Neale; designed and produced by Jamie Knipe. The full series is available on the project website: www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk